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Rebecca U. Thorpe, *The American Warfare State: The Domestic Politics of Military Spending*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014. Pp. ix, 245. ISBN 978-0-226-12407-0.

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In *The American Warfare State*, Rebecca Thorpe (Univ. of Washington) examines the role that economic reliance on military spending has played in sustaining support for expansive executive war powers in the United States since World War II. Her book makes an especially successful and important contribution to the large literature on the “military-industrial complex” dating back to even before President Dwight Eisenhower coined the term in his 1961 Farewell Address.

Thorpe begins with the US Constitution’s division of war powers between the executive and legislative branches. The framers understood that the executive would be largely responsible for the conduct of foreign policy and that presidents would have an incentive to maximize their authority in this area. They hoped to check this tendency by giving Congress the authority to raise and support armies and navies.

The representative structure of Congress would prevent members from raising armies during peacetime. Arguments made in support of ratification relayed the themes of legislative control over resources and dependence on the people, which would presumably prevent the executive usurpation that their opponents feared. In order for the executive to use military force or employ coercion, the legislature must raise troops and appropriate resources, which would require widespread public sacrifices. (32)

This institutional design reflected the founders’ experience during the Revolutionary War, when congressional support for Washington’s army was often grudging and tardy (26–27). In effect, they were counting on this reluctance to devote resources to the military to prevent the executive from involving the country in wars that did not reflect widely shared national interests. Thorpe presents substantial evidence from the debates over ratification that those involved attached great value to the power of the purse in controlling the executive use of the military. She also shows that the institutional check worked as intended for over a century. Presidents sometimes used the military resources on hand in ways that Congress opposed, but the American military was too small to permit major wars without additional congressional action.

World War II undermined the Constitutional arrangements in a way the founders would have found difficult to imagine. The United States mobilized for the war at an unprecedented level. Nearly 40 percent of the economy was devoted to the war effort. Military production spread into relatively rural areas of the country that had seen little other manufacturing activity. Thorpe notes that the impetus for this development came from the government’s Plant Site Board rather than from military manufacturers, who preferred to locate in or near cities and use existing facilities (53). The subsequent Cold War saw sustained military production in rural, economically less diverse areas. Using data on contracting in the aircraft industry, Thorpe demonstrates that this pattern persisted and may even have intensified through the early 2000s. Politically, its most important result was that representatives from these areas felt pressure to maintain high military expenditures in the interests of their constituents, rather than to cut them back, as the framers of the Constitution had supposed.

Thorpe presents statistical evidence of this pattern in congressional voting on military spending. Members from rural districts reliant on military contracts provided a crucial margin of support for maintaining a consistently large military force. There was no sweeping demobilization after the wars in Korea and Vietnam, or even after the Cold War. Equally importantly, members of Congress from these rural districts were more likely to support military actions undertaken by presidents of the opposite party. The maintenance of a large and capable military force and the unwillingness of a crucial segment of Congress to question presidential military action expanded executive power in a way that the separation of powers was supposed to prevent.

The military-industrial complex has, of course, received substantial scholarly attention in the past. Two critical features set Thorpe's account apart. The first is her focus on the role of military spending in relatively homogenous rural economies that lacked economic alternatives. Her statistical analysis, like her predecessors', tests for a relationship between the role of the military in a given area's economy and the voting record of its representatives. Most scholars have found little or no correlation between military spending in a local economy and congressional voting.¹ This result belies the many specific instances where qualitative, historical research has found that distributive politics made a difference.² Thorpe's contribution is to make sense of these apparently contradictory sets of evidence. She finds no simple connection between military spending and congressional voting, but rather one mediated by the nature of the congressional districts. Defense workers in economically diverse urban areas can more easily move to other jobs if there are cut-backs, and their representatives can build a reelection constituency in various ways. Military contracting is not politically important in these areas. By contrast, in rural regions with a significant number of defense facilities, both workers and their representatives have fewer choices. In Thorpe's terms, they are "reliant" on military spending. She backs this claim with new data on subcontracting, which determines where most military production actually occurs. Previous research has focused mainly on prime contracts, which overstate the share of spending at or near the headquarters of the largest defense contractors. Overall, her cogent argument and high quality data make her account of the political effects of military spending more persuasive than that found in most previous research.

Second, Thorpe offers a nuanced explanation of how military contracting influences policy. She does not contend that parochial stakes in military spending dominate all other considerations. Ideology and partisanship play major roles, especially in shaping how members of Congress regard presidential uses of military force. Members of Congress from the president's party tend to support his military initiatives regardless of the extent of contracting in their districts. Instead of shaping the political behavior of all legislators, military spending tips the balance for a small but crucial group—members of the opposition party from mostly rural districts dependent on such funding. Together with the president's co-partisans, these representatives have formed a coalition strong enough to prevent Congress from effectively constraining even presidents waging unpopular wars. Of course, Thorpe can only test this pattern for presidents who actually took military action. (She examines several cases during the 1990s as well as the Iraq War.) As William Howell and Jon Pevehouse³ have pointed out, presidents are unlikely to launch military operations when Congress seems ready to rebuke them. Thus, the likelihood of congressional opposition might have prevented presidents from acting in some instances. However, Thorpe's research indicates that military spending reduces the number of cases where this constraint comes into play.

The influence of military contracting would not be so decisive if the costs of mobilization and war consistently stimulated political action by countervailing interests. This was part of the mechanism the founders expected to prompt legislative restriction of presidential war powers. But, in fact, the financial costs of war and mobilization are too small and dispersed to produce this effect. Though American military spending has remained historically high as compared to that of other states, it constitutes a steadily declining share of both the economy and the federal budget. The end of the military draft in 1973 also ensured that the human costs of war would fall disproportionately on a small segment of volunteers mostly from less influential strata of American society. Of course, as Thorpe notes, the costs of war also afflict those unlucky enough to live in regions where the United States fights its wars, but these people have no institutional voice in American policy making.

Executives from both major political parties have exploited the failure of the institutional check on their war powers over the last seventy years. Given presidential responsibility for American international

1. See, e.g., James M. Lindsay, "Parochialism, Policy, and Constituency Constraints: Congressional Voting on Strategic Weapons Systems," *American Journal of Political Science* 34 (1991) 936–60, and Kenneth R. Mayer, *The Political Economy of Defense Contracting* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1991).

2. See, e.g., Nick Kotz, *Wild Blue Yonder: Money, Politics, and the B-1 Bomber* (NY: Pantheon, 1988).

3. *While Dangers Gather: Congressional Checks on Presidential War Powers* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2007).

commitments since World War II, as well as domestic demands for foreign policy successes and the prevention of attacks on the United States and its allies, executives' efforts to expand their power and autonomy are not surprising. Indeed, their incentive to seize all available tools to advance their foreign policy goals is precisely why the founders favored congressional checks on executive war powers in the first place.

Thorpe's final chapter describes the efforts of presidents to use secrecy, covert operations, and private military contractors to reduce congressional oversight and further expand their control over foreign policy. Efforts to narrow the purview of such executive agencies as the CIA have led to the employment of other actors not subject to the same limits. Thorpe is less convincing here because of the lack of systematic data on these entities, their budgets, and their activities. Of course, this scarcity of evidence is just what one would expect if secrecy is in fact as pervasive as Thorpe suspects.

This excellent account of the politics of military spending is not the full story of the domestic distributive politics of US foreign policy. Disparate elements of American society have had stakes in both the production and the exercise of military force. The world order underwritten by US American military might, which has fostered trade and investment around the world, has also created winners and losers. These, in turn, have mustered congressional and public support for military spending, intervention, and the like.⁴ In Thorpe's account, as in most of the other research on her subject, such considerations are folded into broader ideological perspectives on American foreign policy. However, opinions about the US role in the world reflect material interests as well as ideas. In this respect, they have much in common with the distributive politics that Thorpe explores, though they are directed at the ends of American foreign policy rather than its means.

Overall, *The American Warfare State* makes a significant step forward in research on the politics of US military spending. Its emphasis on the reliance of some rural areas on defense contracting and the role of distributive politics in furthering executive independence is especially helpful. Although Pentagon budgets are once again entering a period of decline, they are unlikely to fall below post-Korean War levels. After all, even the end of the Cold War was not sufficient to produce such a reduction. The patterns of civil, political, and military relations Rebecca Thorpe has identified so astutely are likely to remain operative for a long time to come.

⁴ See, e.g., Benjamin O. Fordham, "Economic Interests and Congressional Voting on American Foreign Policy," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52 (2008) 623-40.