**Power to the people**

Leonard C Goodman

Saturday, Nov 12, 2022

A recent poll conducted by the Quincy Institute found that 57 per cent of likely voters strongly or somewhat support the US pursuing diplomatic negotiations as soon as possible to end the war in Ukraine, even if it requires Ukraine making compromises with Russia.

Despite relentless pro-war propaganda, a majority of Americans are not on board with their government’s strategy of pouring endless weapons into Ukraine’s war with its nuclear-armed neighbor and hoping for the best. They are concerned about the costs of this war – more than 60 billion taxpayer dollars have already been spent, with much of that money filling the coffers of US arms manufacturers.

Americans are also concerned about the growing risk of nuclear Armageddon. In 2019, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists kept the Doomsday Clock set to two minutes before midnight following the United States’ unilateral withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Then on January 20, 2022, as tensions escalated between Russia and Ukraine, and also between the US and China, the clock was reset to 100 seconds from midnight – on ‘doom’s doorstep’.

Unfortunately, as numerous academic studies have shown – such as the 2017 study by political scientists Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens – the concerns of “ordinary Americans [have] little or no impact” on federal government policy, which is directed by economic elites and by organized groups representing business interests.

The most influential business groups directing foreign policy are the US arms manufacturers. Bomb makers like Raytheon require zones of active conflict to meet Wall Street’s profit expectations. Manufacturers of big-ticket items require hostile relations with larger nations like Russia and China to justify new sales of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, F-35 fighter jets, and new generations of nuclear bombs. The mineral extracting industries also exert great influence, demanding an empire of at least 750 military bases in 80 countries to crush the will of local people who might oppose foreign exploitation of their resources.

I have seen firsthand how the wealthy shape government policy to favor their business interests through lobbying, think tanks, political action committees, and of course bundled campaign contribution checks to both Democrats and Republicans and especially to the Congressional lawmakers on the key committees and appropriations subcommittees.

In short, wealthy people demand that their servants in government act decisively to assure a high rate of return on their investment capital. And the politicians reliably deliver the goods. So much so that, in the eyes of the wealthy, government leaders are competent and highly responsive. Whereas working people often see federal officials as useless at best, and more often as arbitrary and oppressive.

And because Congress exempts itself from any meaningful ethical or conflict-of-interest rules regarding the industries it oversees, its members are permitted to take campaign cash and other financial favors from corporations that profit from war, and simultaneously appropriate taxpayer funds to these same companies.

The conflict in Ukraine has been a bonanza for the arms industry. The runup to the war saw Nato expand east towards Russia’s border, requiring each new Nato state to purchase arms compatible with US weapons systems. The 2014 US-backed coup that ousted Russia-leaning President Viktor Yanukovych opened the door to a policy of arming Ukraine.

Russia’s invasion earlier this year accelerated the profiteering, as US taxpayers were required, without hearings or debate, to purchase billions of dollars’ worth of weapons from U.S. arms makers for shipment to Ukraine. As of the end of October, the US committed $18 billion in arms and other equipment to Ukraine since the war began on February 24.

The voice of the war industry can be heard through its think tanks. A recent analysis in Jacobin Magazine found of the top 50 think tanks with donors disclosed, 79 per cent took arms industry cash. The arms industry spreads its largesse among both conservative outfits like the Heritage Foundation and liberal ones like the Center for American Progress, all of which share a pro-growth attitude toward Pentagon spending.

A recent think tank story in the Guardian by Brookings Institution senior fellow Steven Pifer summarizes the arms industry’s position on the Ukraine war: Russia is losing. The Ukrainian military “has driven Russian forces back in the east and south of the country and appears poised to recover further territory…For Ukraine, seeking negotiations in the current circumstances has zero appeal…Strong continued US financial and material support for Ukraine’s effort to drive the Russian military out thus is central to ending the war on acceptable terms.” Predictably, Pifer’s column does not mention the danger of nuclear war.

Arms industry think tanks also urge less diplomacy and more provocation towards China. A recent opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal by Hudson Institute and Hoover Institution fellow Nadia Schadlow asserts that any cooperation with China is just a ‘fantasy’. Reckless acts, such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s incendiary trip to Taiwan this past summer, are applauded. Others argue that we must spend even more taxpayer dollars on weapons to prepare for simultaneous wars in Asia and Europe.

Think tanks elevate the ideas profitable to industry sponsors. They encourage our leaders to send more weapons into conflict zones, and to shun diplomacy. And they provide the talking points for public officials to spout while they ignore the concerns of their constituents.

The scholarship coming from pro-war, industry-funded think tanks could never carry the day if there were an actual debate. Not to worry. Congress holds no debates or public hearings on vital issues of war and peace, thereby allowing poorly-reasoned arguments for more war and less diplomacy to become official policy. Meanwhile, the mainstream media does its part by excluding anti-war voices from their platforms.

Congress’s need to avoid any public debate over its industry-friendly foreign policy explains why the toothless letter sent October 24 by a group of “progressive” House Democrats, gently suggesting that the Biden administration “pair the military and economic support the United States has provided to Ukraine with a proactive diplomatic push,” was met with such a vicious backlash from party leaders. Unsurprisingly, the so-called progressives immediately folded and withdrew their letter.

Despite populist rhetoric, progressive Democrats are beholden to the donors that finance their party, including Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Boeing and General Dynamics. These donors want the war to continue. And they don’t want any debates about diplomacy or the risk of nuclear war. They don’t care if the Democrats get trounced in the midterm elections or that voters are growing tired of electing representatives who always step up to fund war, but never jobs, housing or health care.

The arms industry owns both of the corporate parties and has nothing to fear if Republicans take over Congress in 2023, notwithstanding warnings by some, like House GOP leader Kevin McCarthy, that there will be no more “blank check” for Ukraine if Republicans win back the House majority. A Republican Congress might cut back some of the aid to Ukraine. But the weapons will continue to flow.

Excerpted: ‘Will the US War-for-Profit System Lead to Nuclear Annihilation?’

Courtesy: Counterpunch.org