The Persistence of Memory

A new film, Why We Fight, chastises Americans for failing to monitor their government’s reasons for entering into conflict.

By MARK DONALDSON
mdonaldson09@amherst.edu

Eugene Jarecki’s documentary Why We Fight draws its inspiration from an insightful, courageous, and startlingly honest political speech. Of course, he had to go back over 45 years to find one of those—back to Dwight D. Eisenhower’s final speech as president. Eisenhower, a five-star general with decades of experience in the military, issued a chilling caution to the American people, warning them of the dangers of what he dubbed the “military-industrial complex,” the combination of military professionals and a vast, permanent arms industry never before seen in American history, but brought about by World War II and the ensuing Cold War. “The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist,” he warned. “We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.”

It was almost as if he peered into the future and envisaged the extensive ties between current and former politicians and the boards of major defense contractors. Charles Lewis from the Center for Public Integrity comments that “the corporate interests that stand to benefit are so intertwined and interwoven with the political forces that the financial elites and the political elites are the same people.” One can continue to follow the money to the halls of Congress, where Representatives desperate to keep the numerous jobs that defense contracts provide find it nearly impossible to vote against them.

In recent decades, Eisenhower’s unholy trinity of military professionals, defense contractors, and Congress has gained a fourth member—Washington think tanks. Think tanks such as the Project for the New American Century, whose directors often represent a broad spectrum of defense contractors and military professionals, write much of our nation’s policy before it is ever discussed on the floor of the Capitol, and with absolutely no accountability to voters. The influence of these think tanks diminishes the role of our elected officials and enables those with financial interests in war to become more directly involved in policy. It’s bad enough that it is such an immensely profitable business, but when those who profit from wars and those who start them are the same people, we must always be especially wary of why we enter a war. And though I’m not cynical enough to say that we invaded Iraq entirely to make Dick Cheney richer, it is hard to deny that the financial incentives tied to war are worryingly high—high enough to affect the way our politicians weigh the costs and benefits of going to war.

Regular people interviewed in the film seemed generally unsure of the reasons for the Iraq War—understandable given its ever-changing justification, morphing from a search for weapons of mass destruction to an accusation of state-terrorist connections to the liberation of the Iraqi people. “We are living in the United States of Amnesia,” writer Gore Vidal comments at one point in Why We Fight. This comment struck me more than anything else in the movie, especially considering numerous utter falsities stated by the Bush administration about which I had forgotten. “There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction,” Dick Cheney said in 2002. Bush attempted to justify the war as a response to 9/11, stating in his 2003 State of the Union that “Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of Al-Qaeda,” only to say in September of that year, “We’ve had no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved in September 11,” denying that such a link was ever implied. The list goes on, yet none of these figures were ever adequately held accountable for their misstatements. Instead, comments like these disappear into the past and the story changes without most people even noticing. With so much controversy over the motives for the war, we should have been especially careful that we only went to war for the best reasons. Reasons that change practically day-to-day are by no means good enough.

In his farewell address, Eisenhower told the American people how to prevent excessive power from falling into the hands of the military-industrial complex: “Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.” Eisenhower would no doubt be appalled by modern America’s political complacency. An alert and knowledgeable citizenry certainly would not have allowed the deceptions about Iraq to go unaccounted for, or allowed the justification for war to change without explanation. Why We Fight is important because it presents Eisenhower’s message to America in a time when many of his predictions have already come true and it is more important than ever for American citizens to heed his warnings. Forty-five years later, it is about time for us to take up Eisenhower’s challenge and ensure that our country only fights those wars that are absolutely necessary while preventing wars from being fought for the sake of those who would profit from them.

Mark Donaldson ’09 is a Layout Editor for The Indicator.