From
Military Industrial Complex
to
Prison Industrial Complex

Dr. Ruth Wilson Gilmore
in conversation with Trevor Paglen

The phrase "Prison Industrial Complex" recalls the phrase "Military Industrial Complex." As far as I know, President Dwight D. Eisenhower coined the term "Military Industrial Complex" in 1961 during his farewell speech as he was leaving office. In that speech, Eisenhower warned the country of a rising Military Industrial Complex, which he described as being a great danger to the country. Can you tell us a little bit about this "Military Industrial Complex?"

Eisenhower was a general in the Army for his entire adult career, other than his eight years as President, so he had a deep sense of the relationship between the military and politics. He could see that in the aftermath of World War II, the military had become extremely powerful in American politics.

Whenever I reflect on this, I'm surprised that the military's newfound political power worried him so much, but it did. It worried him for a few reasons. First, he saw that the national economy was becoming guided by big military contractors. This also meant that the Pentagon was only going to rise with its power relative to other agencies. Remember that Eisenhower was a Republican, he wasn't a big-government kind of guy. He believed in free-enterprise. It wasn't that he was worried about what the Pentagon was doing in terms of squeezing the welfare state to death. Instead, Eisenhower was worried that the combination of the welfare state and the Pentagon would kill the entrepreneurial

When He Left Office, Eisenhower Warned the Country of a Rising Military Industrial Complex

spirit that he thought made America great. He worried that our society and economy would become dependent on these huge amounts of government and military spending.

By the time Eisenhower delivered his farewell speech, the military was already receiving a huge chunk of the government's annual budget. Because of that, it had become responsible for a large part of the nation's economy. In Eisenhower's view, that meant that the broad range of possibilities that he imagined (however sentimentally) made America great would be restricted. He worried that this transformation of our society and economy meant the loss of a certain kind of freedom, as he imagined it.

I don't get romantic about Dwight Eisenhower, but it's interesting that a guy who made his life going to war with everyone still imagined freedom in terms of "freedom to" rather than "freedom from." Being free meant more than being free "from communism" or being free "from totalitarianism." At the end of the day, he seemed worried that the freedom to try something new - and fail - would disappear. That's what worried him about the Military Industrial Complex.

In the first ten or fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, there was also a huge amount of paranoia in American politics. There were the McCarthy Hearings, the "bomber gaps" and "missile gaps." There was widespread paranoia about communism and the Soviet Union. The nuclear arms race was also going forward at an incredible rate. The threat of

nuclear war was very much a part of everyday life. Do you think that Eisenhower was also concerned about an environment that combined paranoia and fear with nuclear weapons?

Eisenhower was very afraid of the nuclear age: he couldn't even say the word "nuclear age." Because, for him, it meant that warfare from then on would be something that he didn't know about. I think it is true that Eisenhower had some concern about the kinds of political power that the military had. He was dismayed about the growth and stabilization of the Pentagon in the postwar years as its own agency. The Pentagon did not exist before 1947. That's one of the hardest things to get people in United States to understand these days. The Pentagon and the Defense Department as we know are relatively new things in American history.

On the other hand, I don't want to seem to be nostalgic for the "good old days" of hand-to-hand combat or something. War-making in the United States was increasingly industrialized in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. Long before the nuclear age, questions like "how can we kill more people with fewer shooters?" and "how can we make weapons more efficiently?" were constantly asked. If you study the Civil War for 15 minutes, you see that the fortunes of the post-bellum robber barons came from the Civil War. They made money off the Union, selling everything from boots to guns. They even sold things that the union never took delivery of. And that's how they got their start. If you look back earlier in the 19th Century, certain innovations like the manufacture of steel came into existence because the British government threw a lot of money into innovations in steel production. They wanted to clad the hulls of their boats, or lay the rails for trains. Over the entire history of the modern world, the relationships between capitalism, innovation, and war-making are tightly connected. In a sense, when Eisenhower sings his lament in 1961,
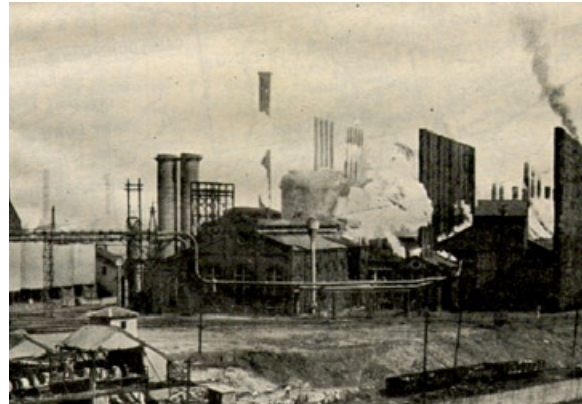
World War I - Era Steel Factory Near Birmingham Alambama

he's suggesting that we've arrived at a certain break, but it's hard to see exactly what the break was other than the fact that we'd arrived at nuclear capability.

People still talk about the Military Industrial Complex. Where is it now, how has it changed, and how important is it to the U.S.?

There are a couple of things that I'd like to talk about a little bit. One is that when Eisenhower lamented the development of this complex, he focused his attention on two areas: he was talking about the government on one hand, and a certain faction of big business on the other. After that speech a lot of people, from the sixties to the nineties, analyzed what the other components of the Military Industrial Complex were. Because, obviously, those two institutions, however powerful they may seem, couldn't have that kind of power if there weren't other forces enabling them.

The Military Industrial Complex (MIC) really consisted of a whole shift in a relationship between a certain part of the federal state and a certain faction of capitalists. But it also represented a change in the fiscal and political relationship between the Northeast, on one hand, and the former "hinterlands," the Southwest, on the other. One of the major achievements of the MIC was to push a whole lot of capital out of the Northeast and spread it across the South, the Southeast, and the West. It had never been there before, and that money shifted the political balance of the country. It shifted a lot of political power away from the Northeast.

There's a reason why all of the presidents in your lifetime have come from the South. And that is related to the MIC. There was a big investment of money into the South, and this also meant a huge influx of people to these areas out of the Northeast and Midwest. The rise

of the MIC also shifted the political makeup and class and education of the regions into which the new people moved. It displaced a whole lot of people, black and not black, and at the end of the day, turned the country into the place from which Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, the Bushes and so forth could rise.

Taking a step back and looking at the MIC, it's important to see it as the "complex" that it is. It's not just the business and military interests. We have all the people who are dependent on these expenditures of public money for the military. This includes all the people in all the towns that got the military bases and people who work at the bases. All the people in the academy who get federal grants and contracts to do classified and unclassified research and development. All of the intellectuals in the quasi-public non-profits like the RAND Corporation that write reports for the military. Of course, you also have people like Lockheed, Boeing, the generals and Joint-Chiefs of Staff and so forth. All of those people make up the Military Industrial Complex. The MIC seems at first to be something that's really between the Pentagon and the corporations, but it's much more. It's a complicated process, hence the word "complex." And people depend on the MIC from local levels all the way through the central state.

The MIC has had a huge cultural effect on this country. I do think – and I absolutely believe this – is that one of the key cultural effects of the MIC has been to constantly refresh, renew, and reinvogate the cultural violence that holds this country together. There's an assumption in this country that says "when in doubt, attack." That's how people live their everyday lives. We have a permanent warfare mentality. We assume that our neighbor is threatening us and that we should harm them if they come over the fence. People in the US talk about self-defense as "I ought to kill someone who I think is threatening me" and then we say "that's just human nature." It's not human nature – it's American culture. We also say that we ought to kill people who have harmed other people. Our society is constantly chanting "kill, kill, kill, kill, kill."

The Military Industrial Complex, on top of having certain kinds of political and economic effects, renews, reinvigorates, and refreshes a culture of violence that presumes that people ought to kill one another all the time, whether or not war is declared. To have this kind of MIC, you have to justify it by having a society that always imagines itself at war with someone else.

So, how did the term "Prison Industrial Complex" come out of this idea of the Military Industrial Complex?

The person who gets credit for coining the phrase "Prison Industrial Complex" is Mike Davis, who published an article in the mid 1990s with "Prison Industrial Complex" in the title [link to this article]. But all through the 1900s, people were throwing around variations on that phrase.

Testing Range for Combat Drones
*Mojave Desert, CA*

In the 1980s and 1990s, the U.S. prison system hit record high after record high, year after year. More and more states and counties built more and more prisons, passed more and more mandatory minimum sentencing laws, and these massive prison systems and severe sentencing laws became totally normal. At that point a lot of people were able to see that it had all of the complexities of the Military Industrial Complex, and began talking about a Prison Industrial Complex (PIC).

What I find useful in terms of thinking about the Prison Industrial Complex, is that like the Military Industrial Complex, there are all

sorts of people and places that are tied in, or want to be tied in, to that complex. There are people who are dependent on the PIC voluntarily, and people dependent on it involuntary. As with the MIC, there are boosters who want to build prisons, and there are all kinds of employees – uniformed and not. There are all the intellectuals – I'm on of them – who make a living off it, most of whom want to make it either bigger or better. Most want to make it better, these are the reformists. There are people who are politically dependent on its growth.

To this day, it doesn't matter what anybody says in any poll, no matter what the soccer-moms say, or what any "likely voters" say, every politician will say "I can't be soft on crime." It doesn't matter what anyone in the public says. So we're making a segue here from the political and economic to that kind of cultural dimension that the PIC has created, or has recreated I should say. The PIC has shifted folk's conceptions of problems and what the solutions to problems should be.

Our society has completely normalized extreme-punishment through torturous circumstances, which is what putting people in cages is. Criminalization produces an endless supply of enemies, like the "threat of communism" used to, and "radical Islam" does now. The MIC and PIC are very similar - you can go point by point and show the ways that they line up with each
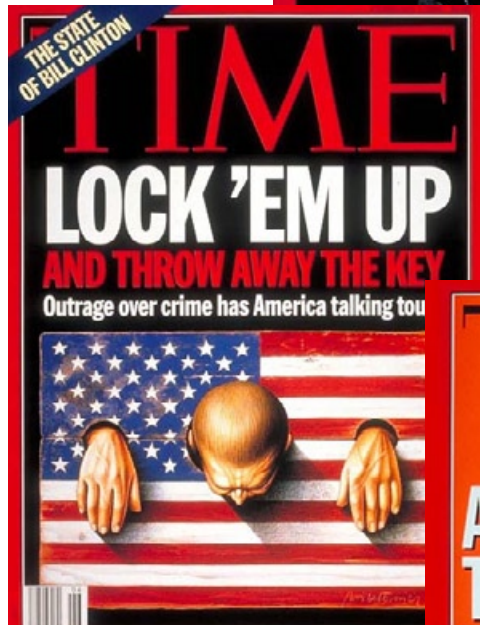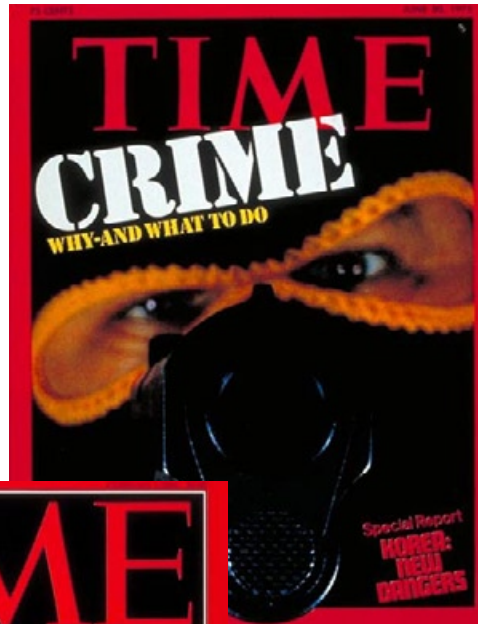
other. There's also an actual material connection between what General Electric, for example, does with developing its products for warfare, and what it does with developing technologies for surveillance and control. One of the big ironies is that when communism fell, a lot of people on the Left were saying that we could take all that money from the MIC and convert it to peacetime uses like "fighting crime." That sort of mentality made me very sad at the time.

So the Prison Industrial Complex and the Military Industrial Complex are related to each other in some very strong ways. Prisons have been around for about 200 years, but "prisons" and the "Prison Industrial Complex" are not necessarily the same thing. Can you speak a little bit about the origins of the Prison Industrial Complex?

In the 1950s and through the 1960s and 70s, you had a huge number of revolutions going on. Colonized peoples were kicking the French out of Algeria, the U.S. out of Vietnam, and so forth, all over the world. Here at home, there were also the beginnings of a revolution: everything from the civil rights movement to the anti-war movement to groups like the Black Panthers getting together and saying "we're not going to take this any more." People around the world were trying to liberate themselves from the institutions of colonialism, racism, and capitalist oppression. In my view, the origins of the modern PIC emerge out of the contexts of those struggles. More

specifically, I think that the origins of the modern PIC are in what we might call the counter-revolution: the reaction to these struggles.

I find it hard to accept arguments that suggest a lot of guys woke up one morning and said "hey, I have an idea, let's be mean to black people," and got all their friends on the phone and went into a smoke-filled room and got busy. And that black people were just walking around minding their own business and then all of the sudden they got snapped up in the dragnet. Especially because, the morning before, these guys were already being mean to black people.

I like to think about it this way: in the 1950s and 60s, there really were people struggling on radical and reformist fronts, struggling for example to get rid of American apartheid. People were fighting really, really, hard and dying a lot in this struggle. The problem that the U.S. faced was that even though they could demonize this or that little group, there was enough of a positive response to anti-racist or anti-colonialist struggle that the state couldn't really contain it. They really didn't know where it was going to go. There really was disorder in the streets – and not all of it was following a political agenda, not all of it was fleshed-out in many years of study groups. Some of it was spontaneous and erratic and some of it was spontaneous and really great. And so the state's response was "what do we have? We lost Jim Crow. Culturally, we still have racism, so we don't have to worry about it too much, but legally Jim Crow is no longer a weapon. What do we have left in the arsenal? Well, we have all the lawmaking that we can do. And we do have the cultural idea that there's something wrong with 'those people': the colonized or the victims of apartheid." During this time, we saw the conversation around race change from "they're just not smart enough" to "they're not honest enough." "Crime" became the all-purpose explanation for the struggles and disorder that were going on.

These efforts to explain political struggles and anti-state sentiments

as "crime" didn't work overnight, it took some time. Even when the Rockefeller drug laws came in 1973, people around the country were taken aback. Even in Texas, a notoriously bad place to get caught with drugs, people were saying "look at New York, those people are really crazy. They're going to send people away for life for this kind of bullshit."

A lot of people explained these new, very extreme, anti-drug laws by saying that Rockefeller wanted to be President and that these drug laws were his last hurrah. By later in the 1970s, you see that the shift was working. The moment of openness in the late 60s to the early 70s was over. People in general could not engage or empathize with activists any more. I think it had to do with the fall of Saigon and the long depression of the 1970s. There were a lot of events that narrowed people's willingness to understand the things that were going

Black Panthers Outside Alameda County Courthouse, 1968

on in the 60's. There were real conditions that allowed the strategy of criminalization to work. By the late 1970s, the idea that poor people, brown people, and activist people were "criminals" had pretty much solidified.

There were some real problems in the 1960s and 1970s, as there are now. Racism and oppression, economic insecurity and depression, for example. People wanted those problems solved. The state didn't say "we're going to solve this problem by giving income guarantees

to everyone in low-income communities." Instead, it said "we're going to solve this problem by putting everyone in prison for part or all of their lives for doing things that we didn't use to put people in prison for." In the 1970s, the state started coming in an re-arranging social relations. Pretty quickly, it became normal that more and more people were taken away and punished. But people also started demanding those kinds of surveillance and control in their own neighborhoods. It's kind of astonishing to imagine the huge shift that had taken place since the 1960s. There used to be a whole lot of suspicion about what cops and courts were up to – Jim Crow was dead in its grave, but not cold yet. By the early 1980s, community organizations were saying "we really want more police here."

So during this time period society went from being suspicious of the police and the courts to placing all their trust in them. At the same time, the numbers of people in prison started going through the roof, and "crime" became a

"Neighborhood Watch"

national concern. Before the 1970s, crime had been a local issue. "Crime" became a national obsession. Now, we're at the point where it seems completely natural to have massive prisons and huge numbers of people in them. These ideas about "crime" and prisons that were very new in the 1970s have become common-sense. In only a few years, it has become very hard to imagine a society without mass-incarceration.

I'll use myself as the universal anecdote. I didn't grow up in a family that was deeply hostile to cops, but no one would even think of calling the cops for any reason. I mean, there was a motorcycle cop who sat on the street looking for people driving through stop signs,

and we used to go over there and chat with the cop, so it wasn't like "don't go over there, the antichrist is over there" or something. But no one would ever, ever, ever, call the police, and if you saw a policeman going to someone's house, you'd assume that the policeman was there to tell them that someone was dead. That's what they were good for: bringing very bad news. It's just amazing how the prison system has changed the traditional ways that people would check each other.

In my generation, there were always old ladies hanging out on the block looking out of windows and if they saw you messing up, they'd tell your grandmother. And they would do it; it would never occur to them not to. So you'd get in trouble and you wouldn't do it again, or you'd do it more stealthily the next time. Some people will say "you can't blame the PIC for the breakdown of traditional relationships of sociability and responsibility, because this generation is different - they have guns." Well, there are more guns. And the guns are easier to conceal, and are more lethal, and are harder to evade. But when I grew up everyone had guns as well. My dad had a rifle and I think he had a pistol as well, but I didn't know where it was. I guess there's the whole "crack epidemic" but I really wish that I'd be alive a hundred years from now to see what they say about it in the future. I'd like to know that. In the 1950s and 1960s people had plenty of legal drugs – mostly alcohol – that caused plenty of lethal behavior. People who say that the difference between now and then has to do with drugs don't really convince me because alcohol was always plentiful. In every situation where someone I know of died horribly (if it wasn't a car-crash), it was alcohol related, someone got drunk and beat his wife to death of whatever. What's different now?

One thing that's happened culturally over the last 20 years is that everyone is taught from childhood "don't talk to your neighbors, talk to the cops," or "don't talk to your parents, talk to the teacher who will talk to the cops." People are taught to get as quickly as they can

to someone in uniform. We're taught that doing so is the only safe way to deal with problems. And people believe it. They don't know what else to believe. Everyone is so saturated with police-culture and the culture of incarceration that they don't think to do anything else. And if someone like me says "why don't you talk to your neighbor?" the answer is "because I don't want to get shot."

So, if all of these cultural and economic changes related to the rise of the PIC are new, then are prisons the same thing now that they used to be? What's the same and what's different between a state prison in the 19th Century and a prison in the 21st Century?

Well, if you're taking a bunch of men and a smaller number of women and putting them in cages for some or all of their lives, then you're doing the same thing. But what's different comes from the middle term in the phrase "Prison Industrial Complex." All aspects of punishment have been industrialized in more recent history, and only punishment has been industrialized. The idea of "correction" is out the window. All that's left is punishment. What's different between 1949 and 1989 is that by 1989 in California prisons, the buildings were designed to make punishment efficient as possible. That's it. That's what it says in the law starting in 1977, effective in 1978.

Let's look at a particular building. In 1949, the purpose of San Quentin was allegedly to figure out ways to help the men and women in prison become self-reliant. It was to make them literate and to give them the things that they need to make it on the outside. Now, we know that this "correction" went to different people in different ways, based on how much the wardens liked them, what color their skin was, where they were from, and so forth. But allegedly, the building was for "corrections." Same building, same cages as now, but a whole lot of employees time was taken up on behalf of prisoners. I don't want to make it seem like there were some "good old days" for prisoners, because I don't believe that, but the system wasn't completely and efficiently devoted to pure punishment, and nobody minded. Nowadays, it's all about punishment, there's very little in the way of "cor-

rections."

It's obvious to everyone that the prison system is racist. It would be hard to find a single person, even within the government, to say that that isn't true. This might seem like a naïve question, but how and why is race such a huge factor in this system?

Here's the way it works, I think. If we look at prisons in United States over time, we'll always find that black people are disproportionably represented in prisons in the Southeast. Almost anywhere where there are black people, there are more black people in prison than they are as a percentage of the population. Same thing goes for Latinos and Latinas in the South and Southwest, and so forth.

Up until the early 1870s, prison was a place for white, working class guys to go. That's also true before the civil war – prison wasn't a place where you wasted scarce public resources punishing or correcting some black person, or brown person, or red person. You sent white people there, so they would learn in the words of the original words of the New Jersey state prison, "fear of the law, and [how to] be useful." There were other ways to deal with people of color. In thinking about the Prison Industrial Complex today, a lot of people will compare it to the convict lease system in the South, which was created after the Civil War.

In the South after the Civil War, starting around the 1870s, the industrialists of the South were really worried. They were worried about having a labor shortage, because now that the slaves were free, there was really no incentive for the former slaves to work, and a lot of them didn't like the industrialists and they wouldn't work for them unless they were compelled to. The 13th Amendment had outlawed slavery, but fortunately for the industrialists there was an exception in the amendment: slavery was abolished "except as a punishment for a crime." Well, the industrialists got together and said "could we please have some crimes – turn these people into criminals so that we can have them back in our clutches and put them back to

work?"

After the civil war, we see the proliferation of laws controlling the movement of people – first there were a series of laws passed to control the movement of black people called the 'black codes,' but then there were laws passed that didn't have 'race' in the wording of them, but which had the same effect. So, in the 1870s and 1880s, it was illegal to move around and it was illegal to stand still. You were either a vagrant or you were loitering. Either way, they could grab your ass, put you in chains, and lease you out to the industrialists.

Through these kinds of conspiracies, the white planters produced a whole system in the late 19th and early 20th century that criminalized all kinds of people, but predominantly black men. By criminalizing black men and throwing them into prisons, the men could be made to work in mines, fields, railroads, and so forth – for no pay. The only cost to the industrialist was the lease that they paid to the state and the horrible food that they fed to their prisoner/slaves. It was really a death-sentence, because lots and lots of those prisoners died. The convict lease system was a racist system designed to compel people who had labored without compensation under slavery to keep laboring without compensation.

The convict lease system actually ended because working-class white people got tired of competing with criminalized black people for jobs. Around that time, Jim Crow emerged from the South as a way to control black people, while allowing working-class white people to participate in local government and a local economy. Jim Crow laws started slowly and then took off like wild fire.

If we fast-forward to the last part of the 20th Century, what's the same and what's different? Well, what's marginally the same is that a lot of the people who are arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced are people of color. And everyone who's not a person of color is a poor white person. At the time of conviction, about half of prisoners were working steadily, which means half were not. These are people with

rocky employment records. Maybe half are literate, half are not. We're talking about modestly-educated men and women who work in jobs making, moving, growing, and taking care of things. That's who gets taken to prison. But unlike the convict lease system, the difference between the latter half of the 19th Century system and the latter half of the 20th Century is that there isn't a huge demand for their labor. We don't have a place that just went through the destruction of a Civil War. We don't have the complete rejigging of the economy from, in the case

The Convict Lease System

of the South, slavery to capitalism. So that doesn't explain why all these people are going to prison.

If the people who are caught up and sent into prison are not caught up and sent there in order to have their labor exploited – and they're not – then what else do we know about them? Well, for them to be raw material for the PIC, they've got to be as good as dead. You have to have a cultural attitude where people think "black people? They ain't nothing. Muslims? They're all terrorists. Poor white people? They're all speed addicts. Women? They're all welfare queens." And so on.

So there's got to be already something in place, which is to say, the founding racism of this country. You have to have such pervasive racism that you can have 2.2 million people in prison and almost nobody except little rag-tag organizations like Critical Resistance says "wait a minute, this isn't right!" That's what racism does, and it creates the conditions for racism to proceed. In the logic of racism, there is this parasitic category of people – "criminals" – whose relatives and people like them are probably also parasites, so better we relieve ourselves of that burden by locking them away and putting

the kids in foster care so that we can save ourselves.

The whole system wouldn't be possible without racism, but racism has been renovated. It's not the same-old racism, even though it requires white supremacy to work, anti-black racism to work, and it requires thinking and acting on those thoughts. Racism makes it possible to become so detached from another human being that another person with a different skin-color might not even seem human.

It seems that both of these phenomena, the MIC and the PIC really bring up a fundamental question about the role of government or the state. They suggest questions like "what is the purpose of government?"

The one thing we didn't talk about is the relationship between the bureaucratic capacities of the state, and what the state actually does. "What's within the realm of the state in terms of what it can do legitimacy, and what it can do materially?"

Legitimately, the state can raise money. Materially, it can staff an office, or it has an office full of people who can do things with the money it raises. But, can it legitimately raise money for just anything? How does that legitimacy shift from time to time?

For some people, it's always legitimate to claim that the state's pri-

Municipal Finance Company Siebert, Branford, Shank, and Co. Advertises Bonds for the Delano II Prison

mary responsibility is defense. That it's only sometimes legitimate to claim – and what I mean by legitimate is that you can make a political statement and get anywhere with it – that the state equally has a principle responsibility for welfare. If you went out and did a survey on my block tonight, you'd find most people saying that "no, the state doesn't have a responsibility to provide welfare." Those people have never read the first sentence of the declaration of independence, which has welfare in it.

After World War Two, we see a big shift happen around what the legitimate functions of the government are. Before 1947, the Department of War was a relatively marginal part of the government – it only really gained real power during times of war. But after World War Two and the beginning of the Cold War, the newly-formed Department of Defense and the Pentagon become some of the most powerful institutions in the government. In order to achieve that kind of power, the entire society had to be mobilized, culturally and economically, against the "threat" of communism. And so we really see a dramatic change in how our society thinks about the legitimate functions of government. This is what Eisenhower was talking about in his warning about the Military Industrial Complex.

When we get into the 70s and 80s, and the era of the PIC, we see a similar shift. Certain bureaucratic capacities of the state lost legitimacy and others gained new legitimacy. Let me give you and example: the California State Public Works Board was established in 1946 in order to build homes for veterans, hospitals, schools, and other big projects. Until the 1980s, no one even dreamed to use the Public Works Board to build prisons. That's an example of what I mean.

You can also see what I'm talking about in the changes of the internal structures of the Department of Corrections and how it became much bigger and more complicated. The planning department grew

and so did the construction department. They eventually hired an investment banker to figure out how to do everything more cheaply. They hired a guy named Gomez, and he was the first guy who hadn't come up though the prison system. What he brought with him was the ability to deal with large numbers of people effectively.

These shifts in what the state does and how the shifts occur, goes back to that laundry list that we talked about – the questions "What is the MIC?" and "What is the PIC?"

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Recording Carceral Landscapes is an investigation of the United States' enormous prison system by artist/geographer Trevor Paglen. By inquiring into the financial, social, and cultural elements that compose the Prison Industrial Complex, the project shows some of the invisible ways that mass incarceration has been woven into the fabric of our society. More information about this project is available at www.prisonlandscapes.org.