

A VIEW FROM THE WOODS

How About Some Football?

Back in September 2013, Stanford came east to play West Point at Michie Stadium. At the time, the Stanford football team was nationally ranked, but even though the Cadets lost, they gave the Cardinal a harder time than anticipated, and the game was closer than the fourteen point difference in the final score indicated.

The halftime show was an infomercial from several armament manufacturers who were clearly eager to show off their wares. The presenters were several retired officers who had become corporate executives. Their video showed a number of vehicles in action, portrayed as being able to crush any obstacle or enemy in sight, and the watching audience cheered its approval.

No one objected when the presenters suggested to the Corps of Cadets that if they played their cards right, they too could retire, hire out to arms makers, and get rich. And so the cadets' love of country, idealism, and willingness to sacrifice was reduced to a business proposition.

Things have pretty much stayed the same since then, as they had been for years well before the 2013 game. It's quite common for ex-officers to become executives in defense firms and then to buy stock in the companies which employ them. And so it should come as no surprise that they lobby as hard and effectively as they can for ever increasing military spending, with the largest chunk of that spending going to their firms. As it turns out, half our current military budget goes that way, whether or not it's needed for national defense.

The most famous current case is Mark Esper, West Point '86, an outstanding member of that class. After he retired from the Army and before he became Secretary of the Army and then Secretary of Defense, he was Raytheon's top lobbyist. When Senator Elizabeth Warren asked him if he would refrain from lobbying for four years after stepping down as Secretary of Defense, he said no.

Even if one grants benefit of doubt for patriotism's sake, the conflict of interest involved should be obvious enough, since the lobbyists in question often have their own material interests at stake. But given the power the military-industrial complex has enjoyed over the nation's way of thinking, few seem to mind, and a large majority in Congress habitually goes along.

This is how decadence works.

The question now is whether we can stop it in its tracks and turn it around before it becomes incurable. For some months now, the Poor People's Campaign and its allied organizations have been offering an answer which is well worth studying.

November is coming. Election Day this year should be interesting, along with its aftermath.