Our Man From Boeing
Has the Arms Industry Captured Trump's Pentagon?

BY MANDY SMITHBERGER AND WILLIAM D. HARTUNG

Since this article’s publication on TomDispatch.com, the Pentagon inspector general has opened an investigation into whether Acting Secretary Shanahan violated federal conflict of interest laws.

The way personnel spin through Washington’s infamous revolving door between the Pentagon and the arms industry is nothing new. That door, however, is moving ever faster with the appointment of Patrick Shanahan, who spent 30 years at Boeing, the Pentagon’s second largest contractor, as the Trump administration’s acting secretary of defense.

Shanahan had previously been deputy secretary of defense, a typical position in recent years for someone with a significant arms industry background. William Lynn, President Obama’s first deputy secretary of defense, had been a Raytheon lobbyist. Ashton Carter, his successor, was a consultant for the same company. One of President George W. Bush’s deputies, Gordon England, had been president of the General Dynamics Fort Worth Aircraft Company (later sold to Lockheed Martin).

But Shanahan is unique. No secretary of defense in recent memory has had such a long career in the arms industry and so little experience in government or the military. For most of that career, in fact, his main focus was winning defense contracts for Boeing, not crafting effective defense policies. While the Pentagon should be focused on protecting the country, the arms industry operates in the pursuit of profit, even when that means selling weapons systems to countries working against American national security interests.

The closest analogues to Shanahan were Charlie Wilson, head of General Motors, whom President Dwight Eisenhower appointed to lead the
Department of Defense (DoD) more than 60 years ago and John F. Kennedy’s first defense secretary, Robert McNamara, who ran the Ford Motor Company before joining the administration. Eisenhower’s choice of Wilson, whose firm manufactured military vehicles, raised concerns at the time about conflicts of interest—but not in Wilson’s mind. He famously claimed that, “for years I thought what was good for the country was good for General Motors and vice versa.”

Shanahan’s new role raises questions about whether what is in the best interest of Boeing—bigger defense budgets and giant contracts for unaffordable and ineffective weaponry or aircraft—is what’s in the best interest of the public.

RAMPANT CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Unlike Wilson, Shanahan has at least implicitly acknowledged the potential for conflicts of interest in his new role by agreeing to recuse himself from decisions involving his former employer. But were he truly to adhere to such a position, he would have to avoid many of the Pentagon’s most significant management and financial decisions. Last year, after all, Boeing received nearly $30 billion in DoD contracts for working on everything from combat, refueling, training, and radar planes to bombs, drones, missile-defense systems, ballistic missiles, and military satellites. If Shanahan were to step back from deliberations related to all of these, he would, at best, be a part-time steward of the Pentagon, unable even to oversee whether Boeing and related companies delivered what our military asked for.

There is already evidence, however, that he will do anything but refrain from overseeing, and so promoting, his old firm. Take Boeing’s F-15X, for example. Against the wishes of the Air Force, the Pentagon decided to invest at least $1.2 billion in that fighter aircraft, an upgraded version of the Boeing F-15C/D, which had been supplanted by Lockheed Martin’s questionable new F-35. There have been reports that Shanahan has already trashed Lockheed, Boeing’s top competitor, in discussions inside the Pentagon. According to Bloomberg News, the decision to invest in the F-15X was due, in part at least, to “prodding” from him, when he was still deputy secretary of defense.

And that’s just one of a slew of major contracts scooped up by Boeing in the past year. Others include a $9.2 billion program for a new training aircraft for the Air Force, an $805 million contract for an aerial refueling drone for the Navy, two new presidential Air Force One planes at a price tag of at least $3.9 billion, and significant new funding for the KC-46 refueling tanker, a troubled plane the Air Force has cleared for full production despite major defects still to be addressed.

While there is as yet no evidence that Shanahan himself sought to tip the scales in Boeing’s favor on any of these systems, it doesn’t look good. As defense secretary, he’s bound to be called on to referee major problems that will arise with one or more of these programs, at which point the question of bias towards Boeing will come directly into play.

Defenders of Shanahan’s appointment suggest that key Boeing decisions won’t even reach his desk. That, however, is a deeply flawed argument for a number of reasons. To start, when making such decisions, lower-level managers will be aware of their boss’s lifetime connection to
Boeing—especially since Shanahan has reportedly sung the praises of his former firm at the Pentagon. He has insisted, for example, that the massive F-35 program would have had none of the serious problems now plaguing it had it been run by Boeing.

In addition, Shanahan will be developing policies and programs sure to directly affect that company’s bottom line. Among them, he’ll be setting the DoD’s priorities when it comes to addressing perceived threats. His initial message on his first day as acting secretary, for instance, was summarized as “China, China, China.” Will he then prime the pump for expensive weapon systems like Boeing’s P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft designed specifically to monitor Chinese military activities?

He has similarly been the Pentagon’s staunchest advocate when it comes to the development of a new Space Force. He’s advocated, for example, giving the Space Development Agency, the body that will be charged with developing military space assets, authority “on steroids” to shove ever more contracts out the door. As a producer of military satellites, Boeing is a major potential beneficiary of just such a development.

Then there’s missile defense, another new presidential favorite. Shanahan presided over Boeing’s missile defense division at a time when one of the systems being developed was the Airborne Laser, meant to zap launched nuclear missiles with lasers installed on Boeing 747 aircraft. The project, a dismal failure, was cancelled after more than $5 billion in taxpayer funds had been sunk into it. The Pentagon’s latest “Star Wars”-style anti-missile technology, whose development was just announced by President Trump, calls for a major investment in an equally impractical set of technologies at a price that Joseph Cirincione of the Ploughshares Fund suggests could reach $1 trillion in the decades to come.

Among Boeing’s current missile-defense programs is the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense System, an array of land-based interceptor missiles that has already failed the majority of its tests. It’s unlikely that it will ever function effectively in a situation in which incoming warheads would be accompanied by large numbers of decoys. The Congressional Budget Office has identified the cancellation of the program as one obvious decision that could save significant sums. But what chance is there that Shanahan would support such a decision, given all those years in which he advocated for that missile-defense system at Boeing?

Or take nuclear policy. His former company is one of two finalists to build a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Critics of such weapons systems like Clinton administration Secretary of Defense William Perry point out that ICBMs are the most dangerous and unnecessary leg of the U.S. nuclear triad, since in a potential war they might need to be launched on only minutes’ notice, lest they be lost to incoming enemy nukes. Even some of their supporters have questioned the need for a brand-new ICBM when older ones could be upgraded. Nuclear hawks might eventually be persuaded to adopt such a position, too, since the cost of the Pentagon’s across-the-board $1.5 trillion “modernization” of the U.S. nuclear arsenal (including the production of new nuclear bombers, missiles, and warheads) will otherwise begin to impinge on department priorities elsewhere. But how likely is Shanahan to seriously entertain even such modest critiques when they threaten to eliminate a huge potential payday for Boeing?

Finally, there is the issue of U.S. support for the brutal war launched by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Yemen nearly four years ago. Boeing’s combat planes, bombs, and attack helicopters have played a central role in that conflict, which has killed tens of thousands of civilians, while a Saudi blockade of the country has put millions more at risk of famine. In addition, Boeing continues to benefit from a $480 million contract to service the F-15s it has supplied to the Royal Saudi Air Force.

Before his resignation, Secretary of Defense James Mattis was regularly called upon to comment on the Saudi war and help craft U.S. policy towards both that country and the UAE. Where will Shanahan stand on a war significantly fueled by the products of his former company?

There is, in fact, a grim precedent for Shanahan’s present situation. The Intercept and the Wall Street Journal have both reported that State Department Acting Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs Charles Faulkner, a former lobbyist for Raytheon, advocated giving Saudi Arabia a clean bill of health on its efforts to avoid hitting civilians in its air strikes in Yemen, lest Raytheon lose a lucrative bomb deal.
So much for draining the swamp.

THE REVOLVING DOOR SPINS BOTH WAYS

Shanahan and Faulkner are far from the only former defense executives or lobbyists to populate the Trump administration. Ellen Lord, who heads procurement at the Pentagon, worked at Textron, a producer of bombs and military helicopters. Secretary of the Army Mark Esper was once a top lobbyist at Raytheon. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy John Rood was a senior vice president at Lockheed Martin. And the latest addition to the club is Charles Kupperman, who has been tapped as deputy national security advisor. His career includes stints at both Boeing and Lockheed Martin.

All of the above, including Patrick Shanahan, spun through that famed revolving door into government posts, but so many former DoD officials and top-level military officers have long spun in the opposite direction. In 1969, for example, Wisconsin Democratic Senator William Proxmire, a legendary Pentagon watchdog, was already describing the problem this way:

“The easy movement of high-ranking military officers into jobs with major defense contractors and the reverse movement of top executives in major defense contractors into high Pentagon jobs is solid evidence of the military-industrial complex in operation. It is a real threat to the public interest because it increases the chances of abuse... How hard a bargain will officers involved in procurement planning or specifications drive when they are one or two years from retirement and have the example to look at of over 2,000 fellow officers doing well on the outside after retirement?”

As a 1983 internal Air Force memo, put it, “If a colonel or a general stands up and makes a fuss about high cost and poor quality, no nice man will come to see him when he retires.”

As a presidential candidate, Donald Trump appeared to recognize the obvious problem of the revolving door and proposed a five-point ethics reform plan to slow it down, if not shut it down entirely. Unfortunately, the ethics executive order he put in place once in office fell wildly short of his campaign ambitions, leaving that revolving door spinning madly. A new report from the Project On Government Oversight has documented 645 cases in 2018 alone in which former government officials held jobs at the top 20 Pentagon contractors. The leader among them? Boeing, with 84 such hires.

Retired Vice Admiral Jeffrey Wierenga, who led the Pentagon’s arms sales office, is a case in point. In that role, he helped promote sales of U.S. weaponry globally. Perhaps as a result, he “earned” himself a position as president for global services and support at Boeing less than a year after he retired. He’s far from alone. Retired Rear Admiral Donald Gaddis, a program officer for Navy air systems, also joined the company, as did retired Air Force Major General Jack Catton, Jr., who was the director of requirements for the Air Combat Command. Retired Vice Admiral Mark Harnitchek, the former head of the Defense Logistics Agency, charged with managing $35 billion in goods and services across the DoD annually, similarly became a vice president at Boeing.

SLOWING THE REVOLVING DOOR

Candidate Donald Trump saw the revolving door between government and industry as a problem. “I think anybody that gives out these big contracts should never ever, during their lifetime, be allowed to work for a defense company, for a company that makes that product,” he said. As the continuing flow of officials through it suggests, however, as president, he’s done anything but drain that swamp.

In order to do so, he would, as a start, have to focus his administration on closing the many loopholes in current federal ethics laws, which, however imperfectly, seek to limit conflicts of interest on the part of government officials who move to jobs in industry. Under current law, lobbying restrictions on such former officials can be circumvented if they label themselves “consultants” or “business development executives.” Similarly, former Pentagon officials can go to work for an arms maker they once awarded a contract to as long as they’re hired by a different division of that company. In addition, while Congress requires that the Pentagon track whoever’s moving through that revolving door, the database that does so is both incomplete and not available for public viewing.

Candidate Trump was onto something. However, rather than curbing the blatant conflicts inherent in the revolving door—the ultimate symbol of the military-industrial complex in action—President Trump is actually accelerating them.

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Panel of Defense Lobbyists and Revolving Door Doyens Calls for More Defense Spending

BY DAN GRAZIER

It is nearly impossible to imagine anyone within the national security space was surprised that a panel of defense experts with decades of uniform and civilian government service between them, many with deep ties to the defense industry, wrote a report saying the United States needs to spend more on defense. And it’s doubtful that many people outside the Beltway were surprised by this either.

So, in a stunningly unsurprising development, the National Defense Strategy Commission released a report, “Providing for the Common Defense,” on November 13, 2018, concluding that the United States is on the brink of losing its military-technological advantage over Russia and China, a trend that can only be reversed with a massive infusion of money. The report stands on the shaky premise that great powers can fight conventional wars and that such (theoretically impossible) conflicts can be won primarily through superior technology. Appropriately enough, the release of this report coincided with the anything-but-unexpected news that the Pentagon failed its first-ever audit.

Defense budgets are already hovering near record levels and, even prior to the report’s release, many in Congress were discussing pushing spending levels even higher. Department of Defense contracts topped $321 billion in 2017, an increase of more than $20 billion over the year before.

Conspicuously absent from the Commission’s report—which, if Congress follows its recommendations, would almost certainly result in even more of a windfall for defense contractors—is any mention of the many ties the majority of the Commission members have to the defense industry. In addition to their previous government service, these Commission members have the following industry ties:

- Eric Edelman, one of the Commission’s co-chairs, works as a counselor at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a defense policy think-tank that receives funding from BAE Systems, Boeing, Huntington Ingalls Industries, Lockheed Martin, and others. He is also an advisory board member for the defense-lobbying firm Beacon Global Strategies, whose clients are “primarily defense contractors” but are not made public due to nondisclosure agreements.
- Gary Roughead, the other co-chair of the panel, sits on Northrop Grumman’s board of directors, where he has made over $1.6 million since joining in 2012.
- Kathleen Hicks is a senior vice president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which receives plenty of defense industry money, from Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, and other major defense contractors.
- Jack Keane served on the board of General Dynamics, a top-five Department of Defense contractor with approximately $15.2 billion worth of contracts, from 2004 to early 2018. He currently serves on the board of AM General.
- Andrew Krepinevich heads a small defense consulting firm, Solarium LLC, and is an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for New American Security, another defense-policy think tank receiving defense industry contributions from firms such as Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, Boeing, and others.
- Senator Jon Kyl worked for Covington & Burling—with Northrop Grumman and Raytheon among his clients.
- Thomas Mahnken heads the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.
- Michael Morell, former deputy director of the CIA, is a senior
Roger Zakheim worked, until recently, for the lobbying firm Covington & Burling, with Northrop Grumman, Bombardier Inc, and BAE Systems among his clients. They all declined to comment for this article. The Commission members attempt to make the case that the United States is in the midst of a twenty-first-century arms race reminiscent of the Cold War, with the roles reversed. The idea behind the Reagan military buildup of the 1980s was to bait the Soviets into spending more of their increasingly scant resources to keep up with American military technology, with the ultimate goal of bankrupting the Soviet Union. The Commission’s report claims that the United States is now on the losing end—and that our potential adversaries have a considerable head start. They are preparing to overtake the United States, argues the Commission, while only spending a fraction on their military forces. To follow the Commission’s logic: we would have to spend ourselves into even deeper deficits just to keep pace.

The Commission conveniently inflated the threat posed by peer adversaries—this, of course, helps justify the most lucrative defense contracts. They warn of “the proliferation of advanced technology,” including ballistic and cruise missiles, precision-strike assets, and advanced air defenses, where, “in some cases, we are behind, or falling behind.” While the report does reference terrorism and the sort of conflicts against low-tech adversaries the United States is most likely to continue facing, the overwhelming majority of the report focuses on the kind of conventional conflict that, for all intents and purposes, is not even theoretically possible. Many scholars have written about the impossibility of two nuclear powers fighting a conventional war. Some military leaders arrived at the same conclusion after mock battles last year showed belligerents repeatedly resorting to nuclear weapons when the situation turned against them.

The Commission writes, “As the old adage goes, ‘Quantity has a quality all its own,’” saying the United States must grow its military force to meet all of its global commitments. There is an old Yankee saying, “You can’t get there from here,” which is perhaps more appropriate for the situation. Unfortunately for the commissioners, to say nothing of the taxpayers and troops, history shows that the more
we spend on the military, the smaller and more fragile the force actually becomes. Free-flowing defense budgets encourage the Pentagon and defense contractors to indulge their worst instincts. They pursue overly complex weapons programs that end up costing a fortune beyond their originally promised price tags while simultaneously failing to come close to delivering on the lavish promised capabilities used to sell them. As the costs rise, Congress usually offsets the tightening budget by slashing production numbers. That’s how the B-2 bomber program dropped from a planned fleet of 132 to 21 and the F-22 fighter fleet shrank from the originally planned 648 to 187. Simply put, unless the Pentagon stops attempting to purchase the wunderweapon verbatim, the force will to continue to shrink due to budget and political realities.

Were the report’s premise accurate, there should be mass firings in the upper ranks of the military and the civilian defense establishment. And, were it accurate, generations of military and civilian leaders have squandered unfathomable sums of money to no purpose, since our rivals have apparently been able to nibble away at our military edge while spending but a fraction to do so. Defense spending figures vary widely depending on the source and calculation method. But even by the most generous standards, U.S. military spending is more than twice that of Russia and China combined. In 2018, the United States spent $639 billion on defense while China spent $174.5 billion and Russia spent approximately $61 billion.

These figures lay bare the logical fallacy at the core of the Commission’s report. If Russia and China have steadily gained a military advantage over the United States while spending far less, then the problem facing our military is something other than spending levels. Yet the Commission’s key recommendation is to “increase the base defense budget at an average rate of three to five percent above inflation” for at least the next five years.

Raising taxes, cutting other programs, or borrowing more to pay for such an increase are unlikely to be very popular with voters. In true Washington fashion, our elected leaders attempted to dodge responsibility for this sticky problem by appointing a blue-ribbon panel of experts whose most salient qualification is that they do not have to face the voters. The report provides a convenient political alibi for those who cast a vote in favor of increased defense spending. When facing the voters, they can say they didn’t want to raise taxes or cut funding for other government programs but, brandishing a copy of the report, can say they had no choice because the national defense required more money. This was almost certainly why Congress commissioned this study with a provision in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act. Better still, the Commission essentially engages in political blackmail by writing: “Although the resulting tradeoffs will certainly be difficult, anything short of these steps will represent an implicit decision not to provide America with the defense it deserves.”

The military does face readiness and operational challenges. Most can be traced back to decision-makers who operated within precisely the same mindset as the members of the National Defense Strategy Commission. Crafting defense policy around an impossible set of circumstances involving nuclear-armed adversaries and unrealistic weapons development programs created the current state of affairs. Doubling down on that strategy—exact the course of action this report recommends—will accomplish little more than wasting a truly inconceivable amount of money to build a smaller military that, even if it did work as advertised, would be ill-suited for the kind of wars we are likely to keep fighting.

The Commission’s co-chairs touted the members’ broad consensus on the report’s findings. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, the two chairs found most of the Senators broadly agreeing with their findings. But, as General George S. Patton once said, “If everyone is thinking alike, then somebody isn’t thinking.” The next time Congress wants to avoid doing its own dirty work, it should at least look for experts who don’t think exactly like all that came before them.

Free-flowing defense budgets encourage the Pentagon and defense contractors to indulge their worst instincts.
A Tribute to Pentagon Whistleblower Ernie Fitzgerald

When the Pentagon finds itself unprepared for war, it turns on the afterburners to defend itself. That’s how an unready Defense Department ended up spending $50 billion on customized armored vehicles to defend American troops against roadside bombs that only cost a few hundred dollars in the post-9/11 wars. Yet no matter how much money the Pentagon spent, it never had enough to defuse A. Ernest Fitzgerald’s heavy leather satchel.

“Ernie”—that’s what everyone called him—lugged that tactical nuclear briefcase to more than 50 Capitol Hill hearings spread over the course of more than three decades. He’d pluck internal Pentagon documents, and his own calculations, from that battered brown bag to show lawmakers how the Pentagon was wasting billions. But he’d ease the sting of the serious charges inside his civilian rucksack with the supple drawl of his native Alabama, which was occasionally pierced by a cackle that helped keep him sane during trying times.

Ernie Fitzgerald, described in the pages of the Washington Post as “America’s best-known whistle blower,” was also “the most hated person in the Air Force,” according to Verne Orr, secretary of the Air Force during the Reagan Administration. By the time Fitzgerald died on January 31, 2019, in Falls Church, Virginia, he had also become the patron saint of government whistleblowers. He was 92.

His was an American adventure, but he didn’t ride the current of popular opinion—that more is always better—when it came to defending the nation. He was instead a strong swimmer against the tide of conventional thinking, one who believed that smarter spending would benefit both troops and taxpayers.

Ernie Fitzgerald’s true legacy will be the trail he blazed for those willing to question the status quo and to challenge those in power who have been charmed by its comforts. “Being around people like Ernie Fitzgerald was one of the main reasons I loved working in the Pentagon,” said Chuck Spinney, himself a one-time military malcontent, and one who ended up on the cover of Time Magazine in 1983 questioning President Reagan’s defense buildup. “There is something about military institutions that attracts a very few fun-loving,
brilliant mavericks who love to throw rocks at the institutional boat.”

Fitzgerald was a World War II Navy veteran who earned a degree in industrial engineering from the University of Alabama in 1951. He began his career as a cost-cutter in the aerospace business before joining the Air Force as a civilian “management systems deputy” in 1965. It was such a target-rich environment, he’d say, that he willingly took a $10,000 pay cut, to $23,000 annually, to work for the Pentagon, People magazine later recounted.

In November 1968, he was testifying before a congressional panel after reports surfaced that the projected cost of a fleet of 120 Lockheed C-5As had ballooned from $3 billion to nearly $5 billion. Senator William Proxmire asked him if the program’s estimated cost had really soared by $2 billion. Fitzgerald began by sticking to the Pentagon’s pre-approved script, unspooling rhetoric designed to obfuscate rather than illuminate. But then he quietly rebelled. “Your figure,” he told the Wisconsin Democrat, “could be approximately right.”

His life would never be the same.

Less than a year later, the Air Force said Fitzgerald would be losing his job in January 1970 as part of a wholesale trimming of civilian personnel that had nothing to do with his testimony. Fitzgerald fought his dismissal, and in 1973 won his case before the Civil Service Commission, which ordered him reinstated with $80,000 in back pay. He went back to work, but he grumbled that the Air Force assigned him to minor-league matters. So in 1974 he sued the US government again, this time to regain his original responsibilities, and after eight years he won again, along with $200,000 in legal fees, according to People.

He had made some major-league enemies—like the commander-in-chief—along the way. “I said get rid of that son of a bitch,” President Richard Nixon barked about the meddlesome bean-counter on January 31, 1973, 46 years to the day before Fitzgerald’s death. The words were captured on the same Oval Office taping system that would drive Nixon from the White House the next year. Yet it wasn’t the cruelty of Nixon’s order that stung. Rather it was its logic: “The point was not that he was complaining about the overruns,” Nixon confided to top aide John Ehrlichman, “but that he was doing it in public.”

That was always Ernie’s way. He had an old-fashioned sense that the people who funded the US military, and their elected representatives, had every right to know how their money was being spent. After all, he wasn’t disclosing top-secret war plans; he was disclosing profligate military spending. The fact that the Pentagon couldn’t then—and still can’t—tell the difference was their problem, not his.

So after that Nixon tape became public following his resignation, Fitzgerald sued Nixon for violating Fitzgerald’s constitutional rights. It made Fitzgerald “a folk hero to other whistle blowers,” according to the New York Times. Nixon ended up settling the case for $142,000. (Fitzgerald said he was miffed when Nixon sent him a check. “I thought it would be small bills in a brown paper bag,” he told People magazine in 1985, in the kind of dig that made him an acquired taste for many at the Defense Department.)

But for those of us lucky enough to tag along on his Pentagon adventures, Fitzgerald spun phrases that regularly surfaced in the news and in congressional hearings. Costly warplanes were “collections of overpriced parts, flying in formation,” he’d chugle. When it came to gold-plated weapons, he’d cite Fitzgerald’s First Law: “There are only two phases of a program. The first is ‘It’s too early to tell.’ The second: ‘It’s too late to stop.’” His jests could make you laugh, but they were bittersweet because they rang true.

Fitzgerald and a handful of colleagues toiled in a cramped office on the Pentagon’s top floor, its file cabinets crammed with reports, and reams of studies and ledgers spilling off desks and shelves. “Frequently, when Ernie had hatched a new scheme to pressure the Air Force into giving up some accounting scam or yet another outrageous giveaway to some overrunning contractor, he’d come by my office to share his latest plot,” recalled...
Pierre Sprey, a civilian Air Force engineer who fought for the light and agile F-16 fighter over the service’s preferred, but lumbering and more costly, F-15. “He always prefaced these gleeful accounts with ‘Pierre, we’re gonna help ‘em do right.’”

Known as the “attic fanatics,” Fitzgerald and his colleagues became a conduit for other disgruntled Pentagon insiders—“closet patriots” who “committed truth,” according to Ernie—to tell what they knew. American taxpayers, they averred, were being hosed by an alliance consisting of the Pentagon, the defense industry, and their allies in Congress. Too often, a revolving door among the key players let them change sides, rarely in the taxpayers’ favor.

Fitzgerald fought that iron triangle by pushing for “should-cost” analyses inside the Pentagon. These tried to wring excessive overhead and other well-marbled fat out of defense contracts that had grown flabby because of a lack of competition, and the chummy overseers eager to trade their Air Force blue uniforms for post-service pinstriped mufti. The price the Pentagon was willing to pay for new weapons too often was based on what over-priced older weapons had cost, compounding inefficiencies generation after generation.

He discovered that so-called “direct labor costs” for a Boeing cruise missile were $14 an hour, but that the Pentagon was paying $114, that People profile noted. His influence only grew when he turned his sights from gigantic programs and their mind-numbing data to simple spare parts. He helped bring to light a 34-cent plastic stool-leg cap that cost the Air Force $916.55, and a simple airplane maintenance tool that cost $11,492. “It took seven engineers a total of 63 hours to design a straight, three-inch piece of wire,” Fitzgerald groused. The Pentagon’s bill: $14,835.

While he could come across as a genial—but quick-witted—white-haired bookkeeper, Fitzgerald could turn into a snarling watchdog when he sniffed mischief. His bites drew blood, especially when amplified through his allies on Capitol Hill and those in the press who relished man-bites-Pentagon stories. He authored The High Priests of Waste, about his early Pentagon years, in 1972, and The Pentagonists: An Insider’s View of Waste, Mismanagement and Fraud in Defense Spending in 1989. His official Air Force biography, including his membership in engineering groups, also noted he was a director of the Fund for Constitutional Government and ex-chairman of the National Taxpayers Union.

“Ernie was the guiding light for the Project on Military Procurement,” recalled Dina Rasor, who in 1981 founded the group that would become the Project On Government Oversight. “Ernie was the guiding light for the Project on Military Procurement,” recalled Dina Rasor, who in 1981 founded the group that would become the Project On Government Oversight in 1990. “No matter how they treated him, he survived with his wicked sense of humor.”

Fitzgerald fought the good fight, but by 1996 he conceded he was losing the war. “Some of the Pentagon scams we once deplored are viewed as virtues,” he said as he received the Paul Douglas Ethics in Government Award. “The unit costs of defense are scandalously high, and going up. Porking-up contracts for political purposes, always present, but formerly stoutly denied, is now a good thing. It makes good jobs.” Senator Chuck Grassley, an Iowa Republican and Fitzgerald ally, echoed those very same concerns just this past July.

But Ernie Fitzgerald’s name has been salted throughout Pentagon studies and lore, and in the history books of the US military over the past half-century. His true legacy will be the trail he blazed for those willing to question the status quo and to challenge those in power who have been charmed by its comforts. “Mr. Fitzgerald’s fight to retain his job after blowing the whistle on cost overruns on the C-5 aircraft program was a landmark moment in the effort to protect the rights of whistleblowers,” then-acting Pentagon Inspector General Thomas Gimble said as he presented him with the IG’s Distinguished Civilian Service Medal when Fitzgerald stepped down from his Pentagon job 13 years ago this month.

Fittingly, Fitzgerald’s retirement ceremony following his 42-year Pentagon career didn’t take place inside that building. Instead, it was held on Capitol Hill, beyond the reach of the Pentagon’s guns, as well as its armor.

This article and its sources can be found at: https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2019/02/remembering-ernie-fitzgerald/

ABOUT: The Military-Industrial Circus is a regular column by Pulitzer-prize winning National Security Analyst Mark Thompson for the Center for Defense Information at POGO.
Remembering Walter Jones, Who Fought Endless War

BY DANIELLE BRIAN AND MANDY SMITHBERGER

The last time POGO met with Representative Walter B. Jones Jr. (R-NC), he had asked us to gather to present our findings on how to help him pursue his dying wish. He had called a few weeks earlier and said, “I’m afraid I’m going to die before being able to force the Congress to allow me to exercise my constitutional duty to vote on whether to send our men and women into war.” His fears were well-founded, and he passed away on Sunday.

Declaring war and conducting oversight are core constitutional duties of Congress that Representative Jones took seriously.

It was clear from our first meeting with Representative Jones how tenacious he was about doing what he knew was right. We met him for lunch in the Members’ dining room, and—in a highly unusual step for a Member of Congress—he had brought with him a massive binder with all his documentation. After 19 Marines died in a V-22 Osprey crash in 2000, the Marine Corps said pilot error by Lt. Col. John Brown and Maj. Brooks Gruber was the cause, rather than acknowledge any weakness in the troubled aircraft or in the Marine training program. After doing some digging and uncovering evidence that the pilots were being blamed unfairly, Representative Jones promised the widows he would clear their husbands’ names. The Marine Corps had blamed the wrong people and he wasn’t going to let them get away with it.

He ultimately succeeded, after giving more than 150 speeches on the floor of the House of Representatives on the issue. And he didn’t stop there—a year after the pilots’ names were cleared Representative Jones and the widows filed a lawsuit to uncover why the Marine Corps incorrectly blamed the pilots.

Most people know Representative Jones for his work fighting to end endless wars. His regrets over voting for the Iraq War made him tireless in his efforts to bring the US military home. By his estimate, he signed over 12,000 letters to the families who lost their loved ones in Iraq and Afghanistan. He kept a tribute wall outside his office with photos of all the Marines from his Camp Lejeune district who were killed in the wars. As he told Roll Call, they would not have the chance to become old men because they had given their life for their country.

Declaring war and conducting oversight are core constitutional duties of Congress that Representative Jones took seriously. He understood that respecting the military meant taking generals to the mat when they screwed up. He also took on causes most would shy away from, like defending and fighting for the exoneration of Marines falsely accused of committing war crimes.

Representative Jones’s earnestness could be unsettling to some in Washington. He had a kind of moral clarity about right and wrong that made other politicians uncomfortable, and many misread that clarity as a sign of naiveté.

The ire he drew from the leadership of both his own Republican party and Democratic leadership for having left their party meant that establishment Washington knew no way of categorizing him.

The importance of persistence in oversight is often overlooked. Representative Jones’s tirelessness made him exceptional, and was why he succeeded on causes most would consider unwinnable.

He has left the rest of us with clear marching orders. And we will not forget Representative Walter Jones or his drive to force the Congress to do its job.

The original version of this article and its sources can be found at: https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2019/02/remembering-walter-jones-who-fought-endless-war/

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The Project On Government Oversight (POGO) is a nonpartisan independent watchdog that investigates and exposes waste, corruption, abuse of power, and when the government fails to serve the public or silences those who report wrongdoing. We champion reforms to achieve a more effective, ethical, and accountable federal government that safeguards constitutional principles.

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