

A Tribute to Ernie Fitzgerald

[Prepared Remarks by Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa](#), Wednesday, February 6, 2019

[VIDEO](#)

Mr. President, I come to the floor today to pay tribute to an extraordinary American. I stand here today to pay my respects to a World War Two veteran who dedicated his life to public service.

After serving his country in uniform in the Navy, this gentleman from Alabama served the American people as a civil servant.

For more than four decades, he was a tenacious watchdog, chasing down fraud, waste and abuse at the Pentagon.

A hero for taxpayers and a warrior against waste, Ernie Fitzgerald, recently passed away at age 92.

Today I would like to sing the unsung praises of this remarkable champion of whistleblowers.

He was a fiercely independent watchdog.

He was among the rarest of breeds.

He brought uncommon devotion to his work.

He prevailed despite the muzzles that many of his handlers, whom he called his “over-dogs,” used to try and silence him.

It didn’t work.

Because when Ernie sniffed wrongdoing, he would sink in his teeth and never let go.

He was a bull dog.

His superiors squirreled him away in a far-flung cubbyhole at the Pentagon.

They basically exiled him to the attic.

The big dogs at the Pentagon didn’t want this watchdog’s work seeing the light of day.

As Americans, we are blessed to have constitutional protections for freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

These beacons of liberty worked to Ernie’s advantage.

And our system of checks and balances also helped make sure wrongdoing wasn't swept under the rug.

Throughout my own public service, I pay close attention when I get a whiff of wrongdoing.

I've learned a pervasive stench is often not far behind. As a lifelong Iowa farmer, I know what a load of manure smells like.

So when I ran into a bit of institutional gridlock in my efforts to freeze the defense budget back in the early 80s, I wanted to talk to a pair of analysts at the Pentagon.

Their efforts exposed the federal money hose showering unbridled tax dollars over bloated defense contracts.

Ernie Fitzgerald and a fellow named Chuck Spinney aren't household names, but their crusade to fix the fiscal mess at the Department of Defense inspired this senator to conduct robust oversight for the last four decades.

Ernie's body of work helped me to derail the Pentagon's gravy train.

Remember the \$450 hammers, \$640 toilet seats and \$7,600 coffee pots?

Those price tags for spare parts gave taxpayers sticker shock for good reason.

Americans know the price of everyday household items.

They sure know what a hammer or a toilet seat costs at their local hardware store.

As Ernie explained, Americans aren't expected to know what a B-1 Bomber or F-15 Fighter should cost.

But when you add it all up together, you get a boondoggle of "over-priced spare parts flying in close formation."

Ernie's fiscal forensics uncovered mountains of mismatched receipts and invoice gaps that left taxpayers footing the tab for rampant waste and unchecked spending sprees.

Ernie was a sleuth for the truth.

His quest gave Pentagon officials heart burn.

His work gave me the leverage I needed in Congress to enact an across-the-board spending freeze.

But I'm getting a bit ahead of Ernie's story.

For the record, Arthur Ernest Fitzgerald is a patriot, a whistleblower and a watchdog.

He had a heart of gold but was as tough as nails.

He outmaneuvered top military brass by getting down to brass tacks.

He was a gentleman's gentleman with a big Southern drawl and a bone-deep, genetic allegiance to the truth.

In fact, his allegiance to the truth was a big bone of contention between him and those on the highest rungs of power in the U.S. government.

From the President of the United States to the most highly decorated brass in the U.S. military.

Ernie had uncommon courage to stand up for the truth at great expense to his career.

He put integrity and pride above saving his own hide.

He spoke truth to the powers-that-be. And he lost his job for it.

As I mentioned, our acquaintance started during my first term in the Senate.

I was a bit wet behind the ears, a dyed-in-the-wool fiscal conservative, cutting my teeth as a congressional watchdog.

He was on a short leash at the Pentagon, having been re-hired, under court order, after being fired for blowing the whistle on fiscal mismanagement at the Pentagon.

I want to remind my colleagues and the American people where Ernie's earnestness for the truth landed him.

The 37th President of the United States referred to Ernie Fitzgerald on the infamous Watergate tapes.

He said, and I quote: "Get rid of that S.O.B." Unquote.

Those marching orders were delivered after Ernie spilled the beans at a Joint Economic Committee hearing on November 13, 1968.

He testified before Senator Proxmire's panel that taxpayers were on the hook for a \$2 BILLION cost over-run for the C-5 aircraft.

For this transgression of truth-telling, he was fired by the Air Force.

Let's be clear.

Ernie Fitzgerald lost his job for committing the truth.

And that reveals the big-time risk that whistleblowers face when they step forward to expose wrongdoing.

Thanks to his characteristic resilience, sheer determination and our system of checks and balances, Ernie got his job back.

He filed a lawsuit that made its way up through the courts.

It took a dozen years.

But on June 15, 1982, Ernie returned to work at the Pentagon.

That's 14 years after he testified about the C-5 and its \$2 billion cost over-run.

Although Ernie held a very senior position in the Air Force, with the job title of "Management Systems Deputy," he was kept at arm's length.

His job description was spelled out in a court order, but he was never allowed to do it.

He was treated as an outcast, snubbed by his superiors and left to his own devices to make a difference.

Once again, the genius of our system of checks and balances came into play.

Ernie was not snubbed by this U.S. Senator.

In fact, we discovered we shared a bone-deep, genetic aversion to waste.

Like many Midwesterners, I don't like to waste time or money.

That's why as a United States Senator, I try to keep a tight-fisted grip on the federal purse strings.

It is why, as a taxpayer watchdog, I take oversight work very seriously.

Every member of Congress has a constitutional duty to conduct oversight.

We need the eyes and ears of whistleblowers to root out the truth.

That's why I want to hear what they have to say.

As a new senator in a Republican administration, I previously mentioned my proposal to enact a yearly across-the-board budget freeze.

An across-the-board spending freeze guarantees shared sacrifice.

But I wanted to make sure it could be done without harming national security.

So, I needed answers from people who would tell the truth.

I called the Secretary of Defense and asked if I could talk to a Pentagon budget analyst named Chuck Spinney.

I was told yes, he could come to my office.

But it turns out, the Pentagon didn't want him briefing me.

So I jumped in my orange Chevette and drove from the Capitol over to the Pentagon.

Even then, Chuck Spinney wasn't allowed to see me.

As I watched the Pentagon disappear in my rear view mirror, I thought the Pentagon was making a mistake, thought I didn't realize the publicity blunder it would turn out to be.

What I did know, is that one way or another, I was going to talk to Mr. Spinney.

Six weeks later, Chuck Spinney testified before a standing room only joint hearing of the Senate Budget and Armed Services Committees.

It was held in the ornate Russell Caucus Room.

He exposed the mismanaged fiscal mess at the Department of Defense.

The Pentagon was front-loading the budget, effectively stuffing ten pounds of manure in a five pound sack.

The following Monday, his photo was on the cover of TIME magazine.

The next time I wanted more answers about ongoing fiscal mismanagement at the Defense Department, I took a second road trip in my orange Chevette to the Pentagon.

This time, I wanted Mr. Ernie Fitzgerald to testify before my subcommittee. Needless to say, the Pentagon didn't roll out the red carpet for me.

But there were about 50 members of the press crammed into Ernie's attic cubbyhole to witness this U.S. senator hand Ernie a subpoena.

Courageous truth-tellers can make all the difference.

Ernie's evidence showed that contracting waste was bloating defense budgets and not beefing up military readiness.

Instead, they were padding contractor profits at taxpayer expense.

Ernie's pursuit for the truth is one of the primary reasons I also work to strengthen whistleblower protections.

What I like to call committing the truth often comes with a steep price.

Whistleblowers, like Ernie, put their jobs, livelihoods and reputations on the line.

The pressure to "go along to get along" is entrenched in American culture in both the public and private sectors.

It's a way of life in the Pentagon.

In the late 1990s, I borrowed Ernie for a couple years to work in my Senate office.

He was assigned as an Air Force representative and expert who worked side-by-side with my staff.

Together, we investigated vendor payments and bookkeeping, in particular the Defense Finance and Accounting Service's accounts payable operations.

It was tedious and time-consuming work.

But Ernie's unwavering work ethic was up to the task to restore the public trust.

Ernie didn't mince words.

He attributed lax procurement rules and cronyism to fleecing taxpayers.

And he was bound and determined to stop the shenanigans.

As Ernie once said, Quote: "Government officials, from the majestic office of the president to the lowest, sleaziest procurement office, lie routinely and with impunity in defense of the system." Unquote.

In 1998, Ernie testified at a congressional hearing I conducted to examine two audits freshly prepared by what was then called the General Accounting Office.

The hearing was called "License to Steal: Administrative Oversight of Financial Controls at the Department of Defense."

The audits revealed nonexistent internal financial controls.

Basically, the Defense Department's bookkeeping system was on autopilot.

It allowed for a free-wheeling spending spree

The absence of basic financial controls fostered fraud, outright theft, and mismanagement of tax dollars.

It was a story on rinse and repeat.

Costly accounting errors were masked by a fundamentally flawed payment system that can't be audited.

Working from within this bureaucratic behemoth, Ernie devoted his life to exposing the abuse of power within the military-industrial complex.

Outsized but not outmatched, Ernie Fitzgerald evokes the image of David versus Goliath.

At the height of the Cold War, he helped freeze the galactic defense build-up and shielded taxpayers from massive, unaccountable expenditures.

America owes a debt of gratitude to Ernie Fitzgerald and to the brave work of whistleblowers who will follow in his legendary footsteps.

These courageous truth tellers risk everything to shed light on wrongdoing.

Ever since I met Ernie and came to know the bureaucratic stonewalling he was up against, I have worked to empower and protect whistleblowers. Transparency brings accountability.

Since passage of the bipartisan Grassley-Berman updates to the False Claims Act in 1986, the Abraham Lincoln-era anti-fraud tool is credited with recovering nearly \$60 billion to the Federal Treasury. And counting.

The Department of Justice has called it the government's single most effective anti-fraud weapon in its arsenal.

I'm told my amendments effectively deter hundreds of billions of dollars of fraudulent activity.

As long as I'm in the United States Senate, I will continue working to keep the False Claims Act razor sharp and to strengthen whistleblower protections. I'll always remember the good work of Ernie Fitzgerald, and others like him, who kept their nose to the grindstone to do what is right.

Ernie's long march for the truth teaches us that it requires constant vigilance to weed out a deep-rooted culture of cronyism.

From the military-industrial complex, to Big Pharma – and elsewhere. As co-founder of the Senate Whistleblower Protection Caucus, I will work to see that the mission of truth tellers is protected for generations to come.

I will continue working to strengthen sunshine laws, whistleblower protections and enforcement of the Inspectors General Act.

The Inspector General of the Justice Department called whistleblowers the “lifeblood” of his organization's work.

I couldn't agree more.

Mr. President, I will long remember the genteel Southern drawl and charm of my friend, Ernie Fitzgerald.

I am glad I was able to visit him in person at the Sunrise Nursing Home in Falls Church, Virginia.

He leaves behind a legacy of truth that ought to encourage every American to stand up for what's right and just.

Like many whistleblowers, Ernie took the road less traveled by.

And in the words of Robert Frost, “that has made all the difference.”

In closing, Barbara and I extend our condolences to Ernie’s peers, friends and family members.

I bid this faithful public servant a fond farewell with a scripture message he shared with me from time to time.

He understood that when the going got tough, the tough got going.

To my departed brother in Christ, may the words of John, Chapter 8, Verse 32 carry him to life everlasting. “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”