

THE
PENTAGON LABYRINTH:
10 SHORT ESSAYS TO HELP YOU
THROUGH IT



FROM 10 PENTAGON INSIDERS,
RETIRED MILITARY OFFICERS AND SPECIALISTS
WITH OVER 400 YEARS OF DEFENSE EXPERIENCE

STRAUS MILITARY REFORM PROJECT
CENTER FOR DEFENSE INFORMATION

The Pentagon Labyrinth

10 Short Essays to Help You Through It

From 10 Pentagon Insiders, Retired Military Officers and Specialists
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Essay 2

“Penetrating the Pentagon”

by George C. Wilson

The marching orders Executive Editor Benjamin C. Bradlee of *The Washington Post* gave me back in 1966 when he hired me to cover national defense for his newspaper are even more important for editors, reporters, congressional staffers, lawmakers, the secretary of defense and his deputies, and even the president of the United States to follow today than they were then:

“The Pentagon spends all our f----- money but we never get a story out of there. Go break some loose. Find out where all that money is going.”

Following the money pays dividends not only to editors and reporters, which was Bradlee’s interest, but to officials in Congress, the Pentagon, the White House, the defense industry and think tanks scattered around the country. Counting the money going for homeland defense and nuclear weapons, the total amount the president spends each year to protect Americans at home and pursue foreign policy objectives abroad with military force, is more than \$1 trillion. Yet we spend much more today than during the Cold War with the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact, which compelled us to buy and deploy forces roughly twice the size of today’s. Two wars the United States is fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan are against foes with no standing army, no navy worth worrying about and no air forces.

Where is all that taxpayer money going and why? Those are questions that persons in the news media, Congress, the Pentagon and White House should be asking every day. Sadly, Congress has all but forfeited its powers written in Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution to “provide for the common defense” and “to declare war.” Not since Congress declared war in 1941 in response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor have the lawmakers, hired hands of voters living in their states and Congressional districts after all, exercised those Constitutional powers. The legislative branch since 1941 has allowed the executive branch, in the person of both Democratic and Republican presidents, to send young American men and women into battles abroad where many tens of thousands have been killed and wounded. Congress passed the War Powers Act in 1973 in hopes of getting back some of the powers it foolishly gave away to the president. But this has not happened. In my view, the lawmakers are

guilty of malfeasance or nonfeasance, but few in the government or media are demanding accountability.

Few Americans realize that the United States has military forces in 150 different countries around the world. The Pentagon puts out a press release every year disclosing this far-flung presence and the number of service people in each country. But only a few Pentagon watchers notice this global reach of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps. Even fewer question, challenge or think about the implications of this extensive American military presence abroad. And I doubt if the Pentagon's press release on foreign deployments includes American commandos in uniform and the CIA's hired guns who are all around the world assassinating suspected terrorists and hostile tribal leaders. It is only a matter of time in my view before these raids on the ground and from the air provoke retaliatory attacks on the American homeland. If this indeed happens, Americans will find themselves with less freedom of movement and will probably have to carry identification papers with them at all times.

One lawmaker who has indeed thought and worried about our extended American military presence abroad is Chairman Bob Filner, D – Calif., of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs in the 111th Congress. This is what he is worried about, as recorded in an interview I had with him in his Washington office in 2010:

“I was trained in ancient history, and I taught a lot of ancient history. The Athenian Empire always struck me as a parallel to our situation today. They started off as a democracy and because they expanded and took over other countries, what happened at home killed them. They ended up losing everything.”

Ever since Sept. 11, the United States has been in what some defense specialists term “The Long War” against terrorists and terrorism. Retired Army Col. Andrew J. Bacevich, a professor at Boston University and author of several books decrying our overextended military, is representative of those who believe the United States is shooting itself in the foot. On the other hand, John O. Brennan, President Obama's counterterrorism advisor, is among those who contend the United States as a matter of self-defense must go after terrorists wherever they show themselves. The poles of their argument:

Bacevich. “For the United States after 9/11,” wrote the soldier-scholar in *The Limits of Power*,¹ “war became a seemingly permanent condition. By and large Americans were slow to grasp the implications

¹ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (Metropolitan Books, 2008). See also Bacevich's new *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*.

of a global war with no exits and no deadlines. The United States is ill prepared to wage a global war of no exits and no deadlines. The sole superpower lacks the resources—economic, political and military—to support a large scale, protracted conflict without, at the very least, inflicting severe economic damage on itself. . . . Seven years into its confrontation with radical Islam, the United States finds itself with too much war for too few warriors—and with no prospect of producing the additional soldiers needed to close the gap. In effect, Americans now confront a looming military crisis to go along with the economic and political crises that they have labored so earnestly to ignore.”

Brennan. In a little noted speech cleared by the White House and presented at the Center for Strategic and International Studies on May 26, 2010, said this: “The United States of America is at war. We are at war against al Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates. . . . We will not merely respond after the fact—after an attack has been attempted. Instead, the United States will disrupt, dismantle and ensure a lasting defeat on al Qaeda and violent extremist affiliates. We will deny al Qaeda and its affiliates safe haven. . . . To deny al Qaeda and its affiliates safe haven, we will take the fight to al Qaeda and its extremist affiliates wherever they plot and train. . . . We often need to use a scalpel not a hammer. When we know of terrorists who are plotting attacks against us, we have a responsibility to take action to defend ourselves, and we will do so.”² (The scalpel reference, according to military officials, includes assassinations from the air by armed unmanned aircraft, as well as by commando teams on the ground striking suspected terrorists at night.)

Bacevich sees the American part of the global war on terror as a bridge too far while Brennan is determined to cross it, no matter what the cost nor for how many years this “Long War” must be fought. These conflicting views will surely split the American government and body politic in the years ahead and perhaps the U.S. military as well.

The challenge for the media, members of Congress, their staffs and committees, is to see these cracks as they develop and describe them and their implications to the American public. There is a huge elephant in America’s living room. Feeling and explaining its various parts accurately and clearly will be a challenge.

What follows are suggestions from a veteran defense reporter on how to learn about this new elephant in the American living room and explain what damage it

² Find these comments at the White House Web site at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-assistant-president-homeland-security-and-counterterrorism-john-brennan-csi>.

could do to our country. Even if you support the “permanent war” as now being conducted, examining it and its likely consequences will be enlightening.

Understanding Congress

Staffers. There are more than 40 congressional committees and subcommittees that delve into some facet of Pentagon business. Each of those committees and subcommittees has a staff whose members should—but don’t always—know more than the chairman and ranking member. Nevertheless, Washington is a top-down bureaucracy, and it behooves the would-be investigator of the defense establishment to tell the chairman and ranking member that you would like to talk his or her staff on background (meaning not putting the staffers’ names in print) to learn the nitty-gritty of an issue. The typical chairman and ranking member will breathe a sigh of relief for not being questioned themselves, and pass the word that his or her staff should talk to the investigating individual.

Once the chairman or ranking member has blessed the inquiry, committee and subcommittee staffers will usually feel free to share their insights about the issue at hand, especially if you spend face time with them. Committees and subcommittees have separate staffs to serve the majority and minority members. So be sure to talk to both sides.

One of many advantages of doing this on Capitol Hill is that politicians by nature are vocal while bureaucrats in the Pentagon are by nature close-mouthed. Internal Pentagon studies you hear about but are not released can often be obtained through the good offices of a representative or senator.

Congressional hearing transcripts. For the patient but hopefully speedy reader there are nuggets of information to be found here. Most newspaper and TV reporters who attend hearings or breeze through their transcripts are looking for exchanges that advance the military story of the moment, not provide insight on strategy nor obscurely described flaws in expensive weapons. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for example, at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing spelled out the Bush administration strategy for Iraq – “clear, hold and build.” The mainstream press in its hurry to find a fight or forecast allowed this attributed quote to lie dormant for days before putting it in print.

Congressional Research Service. Bright people write CRS reports after weeks and often months of research. Their work is screened by their bureaucratic bosses who do not want to offend anybody. The authors of these reports have to stand by while their bosses pull out the sharpest teeth. Still, the work is substantive and provides insights for serious students of the military-industrial-political-intelligence complex. Many of the CRS analysts have been around for

years, a relationship of trust with them can earn you what did not show up in the final version of the report. Perhaps a trusting researcher will alert you to, or even give you if the bond is strong enough, a penetrating but enlightening, unclassified report which a bureaucrat hid from public view.

Government Accountability Office. GAO is a creature of Congress and does studies for it which constitute the most accessible and quotable bean-counting reports on Pentagon spending available to lawmakers, staffers, pressure groups, Pentagon bureaucrats, generals, admirals and interested citizens. GAO procedures require its auditors to obtain comment on their findings from the Pentagon before releasing them to the public, often defeating GAO's attempts to be timely. As with CRS reports, the findings are often ground down to mere hints of scandalous misuse of taxpayer dollars. Sometimes a friendly GAO insider will slip you the draft report with the teeth intact.

To get the full story of a horrendous cost overrun on a weapon, you will have to dig up the various pieces from contract award to flawed final product to arrest the attention of the lawmaker, the Pentagon or the public. Good contacts at CRS and GAO will help you do that.

Ambushing Senators and Representatives. If you need a quote in a hurry for a story or report, the best way is to set up an ambush of the lawmaker rather than go through the bevy of young blonde press secretaries in today's congressional offices who can be decidedly unhelpful. Productive ambush positions for senators are the escalators just above the Senate subway under the Capitol building. House members can be ambushed near their subway, too, but many walk outside and find other ways to elude an ambush. If you have press credentials, you can fill out a card asking the senator or representative to leave his or her desk and talk to you in the lobby outside the Senate or House chamber. I confess to missing the old days when a senator or representative whom you called off the floor trusted a reporter enough to speak in his native tongue, knowing you would leave out his swear words in writing up his remarks.

One of the most direct senators was Sen. Barry Goldwater, R – Ariz. If he trusted you, he would tell you what he really thought about an issue or a person, sprinkling his responses with four letter words. Former Deputy Defense Secretary John Hamre told me that when he was a staffer on the Senate Armed Services Committee he and others there drafted a letter for Goldwater only to sense he was unhappy with it. "It doesn't sound like me," Goldwater complained. "Throw some s---s and f---s in there and it'll be all right."

I called Rep. L. Mendel Rivers, D – S.C., off the House floor one day to ask the senior member of the House Armed Services Committee how he had persuaded liberal Representatives from New York to vote for money for weapons they had publicly opposed. "What you're really asking me, Jawrge, is how I got the wops

and Jews to vote for my bill. I told them if they didn't vote for it, I'd go into their home districts and campaign for 'em."

Luncheon or evening meetings. These are where lawmakers give speeches and answer questions. Members of the mainstream press seldom attend these events, but they can be fruitful, especially the unrehearsed and unvetted question and answer periods. Among the places where such appearances are listed have been *CongressDaily* and *Congressional Quarterly*. You can usually get face time with lawmakers who during the day are protected by horse-holders.

The Essential Field

By far the best place to learn about the American military is not inside the Pentagon but out in the field where soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines train or fight. A credentialed news reporter or congressional staffer can get that learning experience by asking the heads of Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps information offices in the Pentagon to let him or her see our military forces in action, including in combat if the newspaper, magazine or TV station will sponsor the news person and pay the bills. Congressional staffers can ask the military liaison officers on Capitol Hill to arrange similar forays.

One of the many dividends to embedding in an active duty military outfit is the mutual defrosting that will occur, especially if the embedded person stays overnight and is otherwise living with the troops. Officers will see for themselves that the news person or congressional staffer is trying to learn their business, not trap them into saying something that will get them fired as happened to Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal after hosting a *Rolling Stone* reporter. I do not know what the ground rules were, but generals and their deputies often criticize politicians if they believe the senator, representative, congressional staffer or embedded reporter will not attribute their critical remarks to them by name.

Also, winning a military officer's trust and respect in the field will give the reporter or staffer a knowledgeable person to telephone, e-mail or visit months later in Washington when you are trying to understand a problem or unravel a scandal or figure out why cost overruns on weapons are so high. Such post-visit contacts are usually more enlightening if the military person's views are set forth without using his or her name. Anyone who tries to penetrate the military-industrial-political-intelligence complex needs a board of advisors who have been there, done that.

I found in the almost 50 years that I covered the American military that much of what they did and thought, and why, was fascinating. I wrote six books on the human side of the military while covering it as a reporter, mostly for *The*

Washington Post. In that time I humped around with combat troops in Vietnam, Bosnia, Panama, the Middle East and Iraq; sailed in warships and submarines, deployed seven and a half months on the aircraft carrier *John F. Kennedy* and flew as a side- or back-seater in every plane on her deck. The education about the military one gets in the field can be monumental and invaluable.

Inside the Pentagon

Secretaries of defense who open new vistas during an interview are rare. Defense Secretary William Perry was one who did; Harold Brown could do so if he felt like it. I think Defense Secretary Robert Gates talks a better game than he plays. He did not cancel the \$350 million per copy F-22 fighter program, for example, just the last few on order. He has written and spoken about the excesses in the Pentagon he is supposed to rule. But he has said repeatedly that what he would like to do and what Congress would let him do are two very different things. As a result, nothing can happen. When all is said and done, a defense secretary works for the president and cannot go beyond his wishes on major issues like canceling a weapons program.

The secretary's deputies vary in their willingness to open the kimono to you on strategy or even what they are working on at any moment. Heretics inside the Pentagon bureaucracy can be found and interviewed much more productively but usually do not like to be quoted by name.

E-mail can be a useful weapon for a reporter or congressional staffer. Getting into electronic conversations with knowledgeable people inside the Pentagon can be enlightening, especially if they understand their names will not show up in your article or report and they know they can trust you on that. A contact list full of e-mail addresses is better than a little black book full of telephone numbers nowadays. Queries to generals, once you have their e-mail addresses, can be especially productive.

Occasionally, someone really senior, like a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, will figure it is in his interest to establish a dialogue with a member of the press or congressional staffer. When I was covering the Pentagon for *The Washington Post*, I had breakfast monthly with a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and could usually get in to see its chairman. It was helpful seeing issues facing the armed services and the country through his end of the telescope.

One chairman of the Joint Chiefs unburdened himself to me about the folly of spending billions on missile defense when a lone terrorist on a cruise boat circling Manhattan could kill hundreds and perhaps thousands of New Yorkers at lunch time just by lobbing a mortar or two with poison gas or bacteria-germs in them into the crowded streets. "The terrorist could just board the boat with the

mortar tube under his coat, set up the mortar on the rear deck in seconds, launch the mortars and then throw the tube overboard,” the four-star general told me. You can get more insight from such relationships.

Information officers can be useful but vary greatly in willingness to be enlightening, or even really helpful. The top information officer is usually more informative than his deputies, so it can be productive to build bridges to him or her. Navy Capt. Jay Coupe when he was top information officer for Adm. William J. Crowe Jr. in the mid-1980s could be informative, funny and savage on policy and people by turns. But he had the friendship and trust of Crowe to a degree spokesmen before and after could not duplicate, only envy. Most spokesmen for the chairman try to glorify him rather than be informative on the issues before the Joint Chiefs.

Think Tanks and Scientists

Reporters and staffers who keep in touch at least by telephone or e-mail with both the hawks and doves who roost in Washington think tanks, foundations and universities are well served. During the reign of Robert S. McNamara as secretary of defense, I broke the story on page 1 of *The Washington Post* on Jan. 29, 1967 that the United States had perfected the technique of packing several nuclear bombs into the nose of one missile and sending each of them to cities hundreds of miles apart.

I did not meet a pre-Deepthroat official on a dump at midnight to get that story. I listened instead to arms control scientists at one of their annual meetings in New York City where they said an adversary could overwhelm any missile defense the United States constructed with real and dummy warheads. The smarter and cheaper alternative to a missile defense was to build a missile offense which could fling so many warheads at the enemy that the enemy could not stop every one of them. Such an offense would inspire both American and Soviet leaders to rely on what became known as Mutual Assured Destruction, or “MAD.” Both superpowers ended up on relying on this “I won’t if you won’t” form of deterrence rather than wipe each other off the face of the earth with nuclear bombs during the coldest part of the Cold War.

As I listened to the exchanges between scientists, I sensed the urgency about the need to learn how to pack several nuclear bombs into the nose of one missile rather than keep digging holes for single warhead missiles in the American West. I learned at the same unclassified scientific meeting that the desired technology was called MIRV for multiple-independently-targetable re-entry vehicle.

Back at *The Washington Post* after the meeting in New York, I called the arms controllers and scientists I knew and got a nugget here and there which advanced my knowledge of what was then to become the great MIRV race between the United States and Soviet Union.

I wrote a news story about everything I had learned about MIRV and showed it to *The Washington Post* editors J. Russell Wiggins and Bradlee. I knew printing such a sensitive story about secret technology would trigger howls of protest from McNamara and other Pentagon leaders. Wiggins and Bradlee debated in my presence whether to print the MIRV story or not. "It's your country, too, Ben," Wiggins lectured Bradlee at one point. Wiggins insisted I brief Pentagon leaders on my MIRV findings to obtain their reaction and arguments against printing it. Bradlee reluctantly went along. His mantra was "the name of the game is impact." And the MIRV story I had written would indeed have impact.

My first stop at the Pentagon with the story in hand was Arthur Sylvester, head of the Department of Defense information directorate in 1967. Sylvester read my MIRV story and immediately got on the telephone line which rang directly on McNamara's desk. "I've got George Wilson in my office and I just read the story he gave me," Sylvester told McNamara. "It's got a lot of MIRV in it." Sylvester told me that McNamara had replied, "You know as well as I that any story discussing MIRV would be harmful. Have George talk to Harold Brown" who at the time was the Pentagon director of defense research and engineering.

Brown told me that "we would rather have you print no story at all." But he added that if *The Post* insisted on printing some kind of MIRV story, it would be much less harmful to the national interest if our paper left out the fact that the United States had perfected the technique of having a single missile independently drop one nuclear warhead on Soviet cities hundreds of miles apart as its "bus" flew along. The Soviets already knew, Brown said, that the United States could pack several warheads into one missile and drop them shotgun pattern on a single target area, not a series of them hundreds of miles apart.

Back at *The Post* I passed on to my editors the objections of McNamara and Brown. I felt then and now that the real breakthrough MIRV had achieved was obviating the need to keep on digging more and more missile silos. Shortly after John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960, McNamara himself called reporters into the defense secretary's office complex and said on background that the "missile gap" Kennedy had accused the Eisenhower administration of opening up did not exist at all. It was a devastating story to Kennedy at the time. I argued before Wiggins and Bradlee that the MIRV breakthrough was all the more reason to stop digging missile silos because the missile gap alleged by Kennedy was a fraud. We had to describe high up in the story that one U. S. missile in a silo or inside a submarine could destroy a number of Soviet cities hundreds of miles apart because of MIRV. I leaned the Pentagon's way by

leaving out of the final draft of my MIRV story several technical details about MIRV that might help the Russians better understand the system. My lead on the MIRV story was: “The United States knows how to use a single missile to destroy several different cities or military bases spaced hundreds of miles apart.”

I thought then and now that *The Post* had acted responsibly. It had heard out the objections of Pentagon leaders to the MIRV story before printing it, considered their objections along with the need to enlighten its readers on the significance of the technological breakthrough and left out technical details that might help the Russians develop their MIRV.

But McNamara soon displayed his pettiness by pretending his own MIRV story was brand new in an interview with *Life Magazine* printed on Sept. 29, 1967 and by ignoring the pains *The Post* editors took to act responsibly in publishing a story he himself had said was sensitive. This is what McNamara told the *Life* interviewer months after my MIRV story had run on page one of *The Post*:

“We’re capitalizing on a major new technological advance. We can now equip our boosters with many warheads, each of which can be aimed at a separate target. We call this MIRV – Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicles.

“Q. Does the public know about MIRV?

“A. There have been allusions to it in the press, but it has not been described publicly...”

The so-called “allusions” McNamara referred to was a column one story in *The Post* which ran in about 1 million Sunday newspapers printed eight months before his *Life* magazine interview was published.

I found during my years at *Aviation Week & Space Technology* magazine and later at *The Post* that magazines and newspapers who act responsibly on sensitive stories usually end up getting bitten by the very same government officials whom they sounded out before leaping into print. But despite being burned by McNamara, I still think responsible newspapers, television stations and internet outlets have an obligation before printing sensitive stories to ask relevant government officials what is the worst that would happen if the story at issue were published or televised.

I discovered during my five years at *Aviation Week* that the defense industry is an under used source of informative and often exclusive stories. One reason many reporters do not develop sources within the defense industry is that they are self-conscious about their shallow understanding of how complicated

weapons work. Almost every news person has covered politics at the local, county, state or federal level, but few similarly go inside defense plants where engineers can explain, often with models, what they are working on and why.

The trick is to simply tell information officers at these companies that you want to better understand the weapons they have sold and hope to sell to the Pentagon and military services. Most information officers see it in their company's interest to arrange briefings for the reporter with knowledgeable engineers and scientists. *Aviation Week* had refined the process to the point that editors and reporters received three days of elaborately arranged briefings at aerospace firms all over the United States. The vice president in charge of the Washington office of aerospace firms and his team, usually including retired admirals and generals, can be a source of all kinds of enlightening information on what is going on behind closed doors at the Pentagon and in Congress once the reporter or congressional staffer establishes rapport with them.

As I said earlier, there is a giant elephant in America's living room – namely the military-industrial-political-intelligence complex. I think it is out of control. Congress needs to grab back its Constitutional powers to provide the common defense and to declare war. To wrest those powers from the president, the elephant first has to be felt all over by congressional committees, the media and groups worried about where our militarism is going and why. The dangers of this elephant to America's future need to be described clearly, with excessive spending on weapons and provocative military deployments just two of many dangers. If this elephant is not brought under control soon, it will trample all over our beloved and envied democracy.

The Pentagon Labyrinth aims to help both newcomers and seasoned observers learn how to grapple with the problems of national defense. Intended for readers who are frustrated with the superficial nature of the debate on national security, this handbook takes advantage of the insights of ten unique professionals, each with decades of experience in the armed services, the Pentagon bureaucracy, Congress, the intelligence community, military history, journalism and other disciplines. The short but provocative essays will help you to:

- identify the decay—moral, mental and physical—in America’s defenses,
- understand the various “tribes” that run bureaucratic life in the Pentagon,
- appreciate what too many defense journalists are not doing, but should,
- conduct first rate national security oversight instead of second rate theater,
- separate careerists from ethical professionals in senior military and civilian ranks,
- learn to critique strategies, distinguishing the useful from the agenda-driven,
- recognize the pervasive influence of money in defense decision-making,
- unravel the budget games the Pentagon and Congress love to play,
- understand how to sort good weapons from bad—and avoid high cost failures, and
- reform the failed defense procurement system without changing a single law.

The handbook ends with lists of contacts, readings and Web sites carefully selected to facilitate further understanding of the above, and more.

