

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  
With Over 400 Years of Defense Experience

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## Essay 3

# “Learning About Defense”

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The layman who wants to make sense of some aspect of defense will find a number of obstacles in his way. In particular, he will encounter problems of language, culture and pecuniary interest. These obstacles are daunting, but not insurmountable. Indeed, with a little bit of effort and a reasonable amount of background information, a young professional, even an ordinary citizen, can gain a sufficient understanding of any given corner of the defense establishment to determine whether a particular decision, idea or project is in the public interest.

The purpose of this essay is to give the layman, whether journalist, congressional staffer or interested citizen, a way to make sense of the vast defense establishment that has rooted itself in the American body politic in the last century or so. It does this by using the simile of the island of New Guinea. Like New Guinea, the defense establishment is both obvious and mysterious, a place with both a thoroughly mapped coastline and an unexplored interior. Similarly, both the defense establishment and New Guinea are home to a large variety of tribes, each of which has its own language and culture, and each of which interacts with other tribes in a variety of ways.<sup>1</sup>

New Guinea is home to more than a thousand distinct dialects, the vast majority of which are peculiar to the mountainous interior of the island. As is often the case in places of such linguistic diversity, most of the inhabitants of the New Guinea highlands are bilingual. When dealing with outsiders, a New Guinea highlander uses a *lingua franca*, a common language of trade and travel. Within his own tribe, however, he speaks a tongue that is often completely unintelligible to people who live but a few miles away.

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<sup>1</sup>The idea that the defense establishment is made of several distinct cultures is elegantly laid out in Carl Builder, *Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). However, while Builder deals with the organizational cultures of each of the armed services – the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force – this essay lays out the proposition that smaller entities within the uniformed services, as well as private corporations and civilian agencies, also have peculiar cultures of their own.

In the defense establishment, the counterparts of the tribal languages of New Guinea are the jargon-filled, acronym-intensive dialects spoken within particular branches, commands and occupational fields. Some features of these “tribal” dialects are the result of deliberate action on the part of authorities. The United States Marine Corps, for example, devotes hundreds of thousands of man-hours each year to ensure that new recruits use new words (such as “bulkheads,” “hatches” and “ladderwells”) for things that already have perfectly good names in standard American English (“walls,” “doors” and “staircases”). For the most part, however, the dialects of the defense establishment have evolved as all languages do. That is, new words are created, imported or repurposed to fill new needs, while words that fail to find regular employment are quickly forgotten.

Most of the new words coined for use by various communities within the defense establishment are acronyms. The practice of assembling new words out of the most conspicuous fragments of existing words is nearly as old as the alphabets that make it possible. Thus, acronyms have long played a part in the language of a wide variety of human communities. Few other realms, however, can compete with the American defense establishment when it comes to the number, variety and pervasiveness of such synthetic words. Indeed, we have reached a point where there are communities within the defense establishment that use acronyms made up of other acronyms. Thus, the acronym for the School of Marine Air-Ground Task Force Logistics is not, as one might imagine, “SMAGTFL.” Rather, because “Marine Air-Ground Task Force” is an acronym in its own right (MAGTF), the school is universally known as “SOML.” (The shorter acronym is pronounced “saw-muhl,” and thus not nearly as much fun to say as “smag-tah-full.”)

One reason for the popularity of acronyms within the defense establishment is the ease with which they can be coined. Unfortunately, things that are easy to make are also easy to discard, and so the shelf life of most acronyms tends to be rather short. This, in turn, increases the difficulties that face a person who is trying to learn the dialect of a particular community. In particular, the rapid turnover of acronyms reduces the utility of the lists of acronyms that are compiled from time to time. It also means that there are many people within defense communities who cannot spell, let alone identify the component words of, the acronyms that they use on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup>

To further complicate matters, different communities sometimes use the same acronym to mean entirely different things. Some tribes use “IW” to mean “information warfare.” Others use the same pair of initials to mean “irregular

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<sup>2</sup>Some of the larger communities within the defense establishment will periodically publish glossaries of acronyms and other terms of art. Many of these, including the mother of them all (*Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*), are available online.

warfare.” Moreover, even when the component words of an acronym are the same, the meaning can be different. Thus, for example, an Air Force “FAC” (“forward air controller”) is a person in an airplane, while a Marine Corps “FAC” (also “forward air controller”) is a man on the ground.<sup>3</sup>

The obstacles to communication created by acronyms and other terms of art are as daunting to people within the defense establishment as they are to those outside of it. Because of this, communication between communities is usually conducted in the same *lingua franca* that is used for communications with the outside world. Indeed, when a person within the defense establishment uses plain English, it is usually a sign that he is attempting to communicate with outsiders of one sort or the other. (The other explanation is that he is one of those brave souls who have taken it upon themselves to resist the irresistible tide of linguistic diversity.)

As is so often the case with the languages of trade and travel, the *lingua franca* of the defense establishment is also the language of prestige. Thus, the plainer the English spoken by a person within that world of defense, the greater the chances that he is near the top of the local hierarchy. Because of this, the many schools that serve to groom people for senior leadership within the defense establishment place a great deal of emphasis on the ability of their graduates to read, speak and write standard American English. However, as this effort rarely results in complete fluency, many of the documents produced for intertribal and external consumption are the work of professional scribes.

A few of the professional scribes who produce plain-English documents for communities within the defense establishment are fully conversant with one or more of the tribal dialects. Most, however, are journalists, editors and academics with roots outside of the defense establishment. Thus, they are often as innocent as any other outsider of the actual goings-on in the communities they write about. This innocence, in turn, creates what might be called the “first paradox of defense information” – *the more accessible a document is, the less likely it is to reflect what is really taking place in a particular community.*

In New Guinea, some tribes are more eager than others to greet explorers, explain their customs to anthropologists and tell their stories to journalists. As might be expected, the outside world is more likely to take notice of these tribes and, what is often more important, look at local issues from their points of view. What is true for the tribes of New Guinea is also true for the component communities of the defense establishment. Communities that value engagement

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<sup>3</sup>Marines refer to their counterpart of an Air Force “FAC” as a “FAC-A,” which stands for “forward air controller (airborne).” The Air Force refers to its version of a Marine “FAC” as a “JTAC.” Pronounced “jay-tack,” this stands for “joint tactical air controller.”

with outsiders are more visible than those that shun contact, and are also more likely to influence the way that outsiders think.

The communities within the defense establishment that are most open to outsiders are the ones that lay people are most likely to have heard of. They are the ones that are featured in feature stories, documented in documentaries, celebrated in films, and described in loving detail in Tom Clancy books. They are also the ones that encourage their members to talk to reporters, thereby garnering a lopsided share of press coverage. At the same time, the communities that are less well known are not necessarily those that are cloaked in secrecy. Rather, they have simply developed an institutional culture that places little value on outreach of various kinds.

The fact that some communities are more eager than others to engage the outside world is often a good thing. To begin with, those tribes that are more open to outsiders provide lay people who wish to learn about the defense establishment with a comfortable place to begin their journey. Openness to the outside world, moreover, is not just a virtue where public relations is concerned, but a useful counterweight to the natural tendency of human organizations to focus exclusively on internal matters. At the same time, there is no necessary connection between the amount of publicity a given community enjoys and the role it plays in the grand scheme of things. This, indeed, leads to the “second paradox of defense information” – *the amount of information available about a given community within the defense establishment is independent of its importance.*

Unlike the tribes of New Guinea, the various communities within the defense establishment often engage in advertising of one sort or another. In some cases, such as the glossy pages handed out at military trade shows, the advertising is easily identifiable as such. In other cases, it is harder to distinguish the advertising from information of the other sort. Many of the articles in military trade journals, for example, are based entirely upon information provided by a private company or a government agency. In many cases, moreover, these same organizations provide subsidies of various sorts, whether the purchase of advertising, the provision of office space or donations to related professional associations, for the journals in question.

One of the most interesting things about advertisements related to the world of defense, are peripheral to the words and pictures on the page. For example, the recent proliferation of posters featuring various weapons in Metrorail stations in Washington, D.C. suggests that the makers of such devices are trying to send a message to the thousands of office workers involved in the details of the procurement process. Whether military personnel, civil servants or congressional staffers, none of these people will ever have the power of life or death over the ship, plane or tank in question. Every day, however, one or more

of them will choose illustrations for a PowerPoint presentation, type up the agenda items for a meeting or schedule an appointment. Thus we have the “third paradox of defense information” – *some of the most useful information about the defense establishment can be found by studying the context of advertisements.*

The point of this essay is not to make readers cynical. Like a project to study a particular portion of the interior of New Guinea, the task of making sense of a specific community within the defense establishment is difficult, but far from hopeless. Those who undertake such a quest will have to have to learn new dialects, move beyond the information that is most readily available, and master the art of reading between the lines. In doing this, they can comfort themselves with the “fourth paradox of defense information” – *each community within the defense establishment is often as mysterious to members of other such tribes as it is to people from the outside world.*

*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.

