

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

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Essay 4

“Congressional Oversight: Willing and Able or Willing to Enable?”

by Winslow T. Wheeler

Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. wrote about congressional oversight:

“The Founding Fathers supposed that the Legislative branch would play its part in preserving the balance of the Constitution through its possession of three vital powers: the power to authorize war; the power of the purse; and the power of investigation.”¹

Congressional investigation, or oversight, is the art of uncovering what is, or has been, going on—why things happened the way they did. With oversight you can –

- understand an issue so legislation can be written with a solution that connects to the nature of the problem, and
- expose mischief in the executive branch, by the opposing party in Congress, or that some other malefactor may be up to, in order to stop or reverse it.

A result of effective oversight might not just be a new law but perhaps an official’s resignation, a Justice Department investigation, a program cancellation or the retardation—or advance—of war policy.² In successful examples, there is a recurring pattern: facts; that is, previously unknown and important ones, rather than retreads of conventional wisdom, are exposed.

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Roger Burns, eds., *Congress Investigates 1792-1974*, (Chelsea House Publishers, 1975); from “Introduction” by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., 11-12.

² Find a description of the failure of Congress to exercise meaningful oversight on the vital question of going to war in “The Week of Shame: Congress Wilts as the President Demands an Unclogged Road to War,” Winslow T. Wheeler, Center for Defense Information, January 2003, <http://www.cdi.org/pdfs/WeekOfShame.pdf>.

Mere words, in the form of prognostications at congressional hearings may catch the momentary eye—and the evening news—but their impact on policy, and history, vary from transitory to nonexistent. Beyond that, poorly informed questions, prosecuted ineffectually at a congressional hearing do little more than help us identify which politicians are the lightweights.

I saw exemplar oversight shortly after I started work in 1971 for my first Senate employer, Jacob K. Javits, a liberal Republican from New York. He was a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, then chaired by J. William Fulbright, D – Ark., who held frequent hearings on the disastrous war of that era, Indochina. The hearing I remember was with the secretary of state, William P. Rogers. Fulbright’s staff had reported privately to him some U.S. ground combat operations in Laos that violated the Nixon administration’s promise to do no such thing. During the hearing, Fulbright repeatedly refuted Rogers’ factual assertions about the war, correcting him with information Rogers clearly assumed Fulbright didn’t have.

At the time, I was so junior in Javits’ office that I had to sit in the public gallery of the hearing room, behind Rogers and his staff. The part I will never forget occurred as Rogers left the room, visibly—but silently—fuming. As he and his unhappy entourage swept past me, one of them growled to an underling, “Find out how those bastards found that out.”

Therein find a key initial test for whether any real oversight occurs at a congressional hearing. Are the witnesses leaving smiling, happy to have avoided being put on the hot seat? Clearly, no oversight there. Were they angry and cursing? Well done!

Mixed Record

For recurring negative examples of oversight, I strongly recommend the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC). From the end of World War II until recent times, the members of the committee and its staff were notorious for being little more than mouthpieces for the Pentagon, being wholly dependent on it for information, advice and direction.³ There were legitimately autonomous

³ Sometimes, the seeming independence of the SASC has been fraudulent. When he was a member of the committee in the 1950s, future president Lyndon Johnson, D – Texas, issued seemingly revealing reports, but according to one biographer, they were whitewashes and shams. See chapters 13 and 14 of the biography of Johnson’s Senate career, Robert Caro, *The Master of the Senate, The Years of Lyndon Johnson, Vol. 3* (Vintage Books, 2002). For a short summary, see also “Cheap Imitator” in chapter 1 of Winslow T. Wheeler and Lawrence J. Korb, *Military Reform: An Uneven History and an Uncertain Future* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 8-10.

members and staffers on the SASC, but they were quite rare. One of the very few I recall were Sen. Harold Hughes, D – Iowa, and a staffer, Charles Stevenson, who were active in the 1970s on exposure of bombing operations in Indochina the Nixon administration said were not occurring. Since that time, the SASC has changed its image to seem a more independent voice, but the absence of any true oversight makes the reality mostly unchanged.

At the SASC’s House counterpart, the House Armed Services Committee (HASC), the record is at least mixed. A very notable example of quality oversight on a technically difficult subject was the work of a special subcommittee appointed to investigate the combat record of the M-16 rifle in Vietnam in the 1960s. After several months of investigation—including interviews of troops in the field—the special subcommittee’s chairman, Richard Ichord, D – Mo., produced a withering explanation of the jamming failures of the M-16 in Vietnam costing an unknown, but significant, number of U.S. troops their lives. The cause was traced to behavior by Army officials characterized by the official subcommittee report as “unbelievable” and “borders on criminal.”⁴ In full knowledge of the catastrophic effects on the rifle, the Army changed the ammunition powder, the direct cause of the jamming, and failed to train and equip soldiers and Marines to cope with the ill-effects. When the jamming failures were reported to Army leadership, it failed to take any action until forced to do so by public exposure, and even then the changes made to the rifle failed to address the fundamental problems. (Since that time, M-16 lethality has been further reduced by more Army modifications, and the jamming problem never went entirely away.) The only criticism of the Ichord report that in retrospect seems appropriate is the failure of the subcommittee to call for criminal investigations or resignations.

No Oversight in Sight

Go to any SASC hearing or select any of the archived Web casts at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/hearings.cfm>. The one I selected in real time occurred on June 15 and 16, 2010. Described at the committee’s Web site with the typical oversight title “on the situation in Afghanistan,” the hearing came at an especially important point in the controversial war: a major operation in a locality known as Marja was showing signs of falling apart, another for the city of Kandahar had been postponed, and the Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, had been reported to have lost faith in U.S. policy.

⁴ See pp. 5370-5371 of this exemplar report (“Report of the Special Subcommittee on the M-16 Rifle Program of the Committee on Armed Services,” House of Representatives, 90th Congress, First Session, October 19, 1967) in two parts at <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/star/images/256/2560131001a.pdf> and <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/star/images/256/2560131001b.pdf>.

The first sign of non-oversight was the witness list. Invited to testify were the U.S. regional commander for the war, General David H. Petraeus, and a top ranking Pentagon official, Under Secretary for Policy Michele Flournoy. No other witnesses were to be heard; not any authors of independent reports, such as from GAO or a recent, widely reported study about Pakistan's intelligence service undermining the U.S. war effort.⁵

I observed various typical SASC hearing behaviors, including the following.

Dissing the Chairman's Inquiry: SASC Chairman Carl Levin, D – Mich., had a longstanding, public position before the hearing: the Afghan security forces should take on more responsibility for the war. In his opening statement, Levin cited his position at length, and his first question directed at Petraeus was how many Afghan army troops would participate in the upcoming offensive in Kandahar.

Petraeus' answer was short and simple; he didn't know. He made no effort to turn to his staff behind him to give him the data or to—quick—go get it. Instead, he said he would provide the information later, “for the record” of the hearing.

How strange. The committee chairman had a well-known concern; the general and his staff fail to anticipate the obvious inquiry and then basically discount the chairman's inquiry, saying they'll get him something on that later.

Levin showed no sign of being perturbed and asked no follow up question on the matter. Nor did he remind General Petraeus the next day when the hearing continued that he wanted the missing information. The whole exercise seemed to have no point whatsoever.

It would have been simple for Levin and his staff to be much better prepared for his line of questioning. They might have warned Petraeus' staff about the chairman's interest, perhaps even sharing the specific question; so that it was sure to be answered. Had Levin and his staff been really on their toes, they also would have independently researched the answer to their question before the hearing. (Senator Javits once lectured me never to have him ask a question in a hearing I didn't know the answer to.) That way, when they got Petraeus' nothing response, they could say what the data were, point out that the Afghans were not pulling their weight, and drive home the point.

⁵ Matt Waldman, “The Sun in the Sky: The Relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents,” Discussion Paper 18, Crisis States Research Center, June 2010, <http://www.crisisstates.com/Publications/dp/dp18.htm>.

It also would have made quite clear that the chairman was not to be toyed with. This would put the witnesses on warning that they better answer fully and accurately, setting the tone for the rest of the hearing.

That's how it should have been. That's what Fulbright and Ichord would have done. Instead, there occurred a non-exchange of information, and the marker was laid down by Petraeus, not Levin, that he would control what information, if any, was divulged in this hearing.

Was It a Question or a Speech? The third senator to engage General Petraeus was Joe Lieberman, D – Conn. Rather than ask any question, he gave a speech articulating his position on the war as “vital to the national security interests” of the United States. At the end of it all, he gave General Petraeus an opportunity to say pretty much anything he cared to. This is a common tactic at SASC hearings. It is not oversight; it is speech making. Lieberman's exchange of bromides with Petraeus was a classic example.

Do You Want an Answer, Senator? Sens. Mark Udall, D – Colo., Scott Brown, R – Mass., and Kay Hagen, D – N.C., provided other examples of how not to ask questions.

Udall started out saying he would cue up two separate questions and listen to the answers—much like bashful callers on radio talk shows. He got a vague answer to his inquiry about Afghan President Karzai that amounted to little more than Petraeus' saying Karzai had a tough job, and he was told that a study rehashing decades old information about minerals in Afghanistan was the new product of a U.S. bureaucrat who did “phenomenal work.” Udall said nothing to indicate he had the slightest disappointment with the useless, even misdirecting, responses.

Brown made it clear Petraeus had nothing to fear by saying he was leaving the hearing soon but wanted to know about contracting and “warlord-ism” in Afghanistan and about Pakistan's counter-Taliban operations (all important issues). Petraeus gave short answers that can be summarized by saying “I'm working on it,” and did not even mention that controversial study about Pakistan continuing to help some factions of the Taliban. Incredibly, Brown concluded by thanking Petraeus for his “very thorough answer.”⁶

⁶ Interestingly, the warlord-ism and corruption issue that Senator Brown professed his interest in was the subject of an important report right after the hearing. On June 22, 2010, Congressman John Tierney, D – Mass., released an investigatory report from the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on the corruption of warlords and others in Afghanistan in contracting for the transport of U.S. supplies, an operation that had the effect of funneling millions of dollars to the Taliban. Senator Brown, his own staff, and that of the committee clearly had no clue this report was about to be released, let alone of the contents.

Hagen read off from notes presenting a jumble of concerns and ultimately a question about reconciliation between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Petraeus suggested, at least to me, the possibility that it was a question planted by Petraeus or his staff by praising the “nuance” of the question. My notes show no new information transpiring.

And so it went: Mostly bilious questions that weren’t really questions and responses that certainly weren’t answers. Basically, it was a hearing run by General Petraeus. It wasn’t oversight; it was poor theater.

Hearings at the SASC on technical issues, such as a weapon program, are no different. The senators are abysmally informed,⁷ don’t react when they are being fed pabulum, use the hearing as an opportunity to posture on an issue rather than understand it, and seek out the approbation of the senior military witnesses to show their good standing as pro-defense politicians and, frequently, to ensure DOD’s cooperation with the member’s pork requests.

Oversight Rules

Oversight is like making your way through a poorly lit maze. Some precautions can help you through.

Precaution #1: The “People Issues” Are the Most Important. Effective oversight is not patty-cake; it will not win you easy friends, fast job offers or fancy retirement parties. However, if the people you investigate try to get you fired, you are probably doing your job well. Expect a stressful experience. If you find that likelihood demoralizing, you are better off doing something else.

Next, consider the member of Congress you are working for. Is he/she in the same political party as the presidential administration you plan to investigate? If so, what is being planned, a whitewash of the political ally’s program, or is the member you work for going off the reservation? Just like Senator Fulbright who

⁷ An example I found particularly sad occurred on March 11, 2010 in a hearing on the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter with Under Secretary for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Ashton Carter and others. Carter had addressed the unit procurement cost of the aircraft but did not include the development cost (over \$50 billion), and he had done so in “base year,” not contemporaneous dollars. Using old dollars and incomplete program costs, he was clearly understating the cost of the aircraft. Senator Claire McCaskill, D – Mo., brashly announced in a confident tone of voice that she wanted the costs for the “entire program.” But she missed the key points and only asked for the quite minor military construction costs. When the DOD witnesses said they “[didn’t] have that number,” McCaskill proceeded to lecture them on bringing more complete cost estimates to a hearing, remaining oblivious to what she was missing.

started opposing the Indochina War during his fellow Democrat Lyndon Johnson's administration, there can be intra-party oversight. It can be tricky, but it can and has been done.

Sometimes, oversight is planned to attack political opponents; sometimes it is for reasons of conscience; in either case you have an opportunity to conduct a competent, even fair and objective, investigation. However, if there turns out to be no legitimate basis for pursuing the investigation, you will have to be prepared to tell your political masters that the cupboard of evidence is bare. In the event that they want to proceed nonetheless, you have a legitimate ethical problem on your hands and will have to decide if you want a career as a political hack or a professional.

Next, consider the staff you are working with, and yourself. Is anyone interested in working in a senior position in the Pentagon? In the defense industry? Members of Congress and committee staff directors beware! If you wish to perform defense oversight but if any of your staff is interested in working in the Pentagon or for the defense industry, you should reassign, or better yet fire, them. Their career ambitions will mean they will undermine your investigation by bad mouthing it to others, slow rolling your efforts, declaring the information you want unobtainable, and generally working more for the targets of your investigation than with you.

If it is you who wants a job in the Pentagon or defense industry, you need to resolve your moral quandary. Typically, a Hill staffer will try to have it both ways, but if you have gotten this far in this handbook, you should know you need to make some decisions. If your intent is to be a sell out, everyone will benefit if you do so sooner rather than later.

Genuine staff blood lust for an investigation is necessary but insufficient. Have you or your staff done a successful investigation before? By "successful" I mean, someone was indicted, a program was killed, a manager was fired or resigned, or at least a witness left the hearing very, very unhappy. Certainly, staffers who have limited experience can learn, but it improves your chances for success to have someone around who has already demonstrated skill. The Project on Government Oversight (POGO) offers an entire course on the conduct of oversight. Find a link for this useful opportunity at <http://www.pogo.org/cots/>.

Last, consider the background expertise you or someone working with you needs. It would be nice to have a retired military pilot, for example, conduct an investigation on a military aircraft, but it is not essential. It is much better to score high on the factors above (willingness and skill) and have a military pilot or aircraft designer source to talk to.

Staffers for the congressional defense committees and for the individual members on those committees frequently score poorly on the most important staff quality measures discussed above. Although they may have technical knowledge, they frequently yearn for jobs in the Pentagon, or as temporary detailees (“military fellows”) from the Pentagon, already have them.⁸ Many others shun standard oversight ideas, such as inviting witnesses to hearings who have contrary knowledge or points of view; case in point, the Petraeus hearing described above.

In sum, in the defense world on Capitol Hill, you are working in a hostile environment. Hold your enemies close; hold your friends closer.⁹

Precaution #2: The Least Important Issue May Be the Subject of Your Investigation. As they say, DOD is a “target rich environment.” Almost any subject you select will command millions or billions of dollars and/or hold American lives at stake. No subject is too mundane. Major scandals have occurred on the subject of travel vouchers, credit cards, and the proverbial DOD hammer and coffemaker. The key is to follow the matter to its origin. That a hammer cost \$400 dollars in the 1980s made for some excited press articles, but explaining how that came to be (and complied with DOD purchasing regulations) reveal important insights about the nature of the Pentagon problem.

Pick a subject that you, better your member of Congress, are interested in, but remember: how effectively you chase down the origin of the problem, rather than how glitzy you describe the horror story you uncover, is the key.

Precaution # 3: Your Evidence Is Your Armor: You must be able to rely on your evidence and, just as importantly, know its limitations. Your enemies will attack you at every opportunity; the slightest chink in your data-armor can cause your downfall, especially if that chink is unknown to you. While evidence that has no compromise in its quality is to be desired; it is also rare.

Approach the presentation of your evidence with the expectation of a hostile audience. You need to convince the unconvinced and the skeptical, not those already on your side. The case you build up to sway the unconvinced will automatically appeal to those inclined to side with you, and it will fortify your relationship with your staff director or member of Congress. When they see you

⁸ Act with extreme caution toward any of these “military fellows;” expect your every word and action to be reported back to their colleagues and superiors in the Pentagon.

⁹ For a description of the hostility toward oversight in Congress’ defense committees, see an example of a courageous staffer working for Sen. William V. Roth, R – Del., in Chapter 1 (“One Staffer, Two Senators, and an Investigation”) of Winslow T. Wheeler, *The Wastrels of Defense: How Congress Sabotages U.S. Security* (U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2004), 3-8.

have nailed the case, even when you show them the arguments against you, they can gain the confidence that they can press ahead with no ugly surprises.

You may not want to start with collecting documents. You might better start with building human contacts and sources. There are legions of people inside the Pentagon who know more about the subject matter than you will ever hope to; some of them will do everything they can to hinder and oppose you; a small number might help you. Seek the latter out; they are the key to many successful investigations of the Pentagon.

You will need to establish a two-way relationship of trust with these human sources. They will be suspicious of you, and you must be wary of them. Your Pentagon sources will worry that you will carelessly expose them, threatening their jobs or working relationships, and they will worry that you are a wimp who will take their information but do nothing meaningful with it. You should worry that your sources might be advocates and may not give you the full story, and that their own data or analysis might be weak, vulnerable to attack or incomplete. Until you can establish trust, or at least recognize the limitations to the relationship, proceed with all sensors fully on.

With the help and advice of these inside sources, start collecting data. Your sources can give you materials and will tell you what other materials you need. In the 1980s, Congressman Denny Smith, R – Wash., and his staff were led to a testing report on how effective the Navy’s Aegis air defense system was, or rather was not, and when the report was finally provided by the Navy, the inside sources helped Congressman Smith identify the missing pages.¹⁰

You will meet resistance in your data collection. You may have to subpoena documents, and if you can prove you have that power, threaten subpoenas. Many committees require the minority party to co-approve a subpoena. That can be a serious problem, but just as likely is resistance from a senator of your own party who is shilling for the Pentagon. Find out what real powers you have to obtain documents that your target does not want you to get.

If you have no practical subpoena power, you will need to find “work arounds”: if the Air Force will not give you that sexy document about the cost of their fighter, perhaps the Navy will; try other sources (perhaps lower in the bureaucracy or in a different but parallel bureaucracy) who are willing to talk; work through GAO which sometimes can be insistent in obtaining documents, or travel to other locations to discuss the same matter with people outside

¹⁰ Such examples can be literally unending. One ally, Dina Rasor, started a career by finding “closet patriots” to leak to her unclassified but revealing documents on the M-1 tank, many other weapons, and an unending litany of spare parts horror stories that included the infamous hammer, coffee pot and toilet seat.

Washington. Consider kicking the matter upstairs: Sometimes what you can't get from the assistant secretary, your chairman can get from the secretary. Consider also making a public stink about the document denial.

At some point, you will be offered a compromise: either a chance to review sections of the documents you need or permission for some member of Congress to look at the document, but not you. Resist these smelly deals; they are nothing more than an attempt to feign cooperation while denying you the information you want. Do you really think they will leave key evidence in a redacted document? Also, almost without exception, members of Congress, even staff directors, will be too poorly informed or too busy to understand all the implications of a sensitive document they are shown, usually only for a brief period, rather than to you.

Is there a decent GAO, CBO, CRS or other outside team to work with? Be careful. The quality of the investigators and researchers at these congressional agencies varies greatly. During my nine years at GAO, I found some people there were skilled and aggressive at looking into DOD programs, but I found many who were neither.¹¹ It is also important to know what different research agencies are good at and what they aren't. While CBO might be helpful on cost issues, it will be less able to help you on technology. Some at GAO might be good on fraud and abuse but not on understanding combat history. The best evidence of the quality of a GAO, CBO or CRS team is its reports. Before you commit to working with any team, read their reports.

Precaution #4: Presentation Matters: There are many ways the results of your investigation can be presented; a hearing is just one. Controlling factors include the nature of your committee and the member you work for. A hearing format may be either a good or a bad idea. Another obvious possibility is the public release of a report in a press conference, or a leak to the press. An exclusive leak to a major newspaper can do the job nicely—if they write the story.

In either case, the release of the material must include the evidence to make it clear to anyone that your case is strong. Don't skimp. At the outset, you do not know what part of your evidence will later prove key in deflating whatever case your enemies try to pump up. There is no such thing as too much support for serious, controversial conclusions and recommendations.

Conversely, it also must be easily digested by short attention span staff and members, and by journalists being hassled by their editors to get a quick story

¹¹ For a discussion of the quality of GAO's defense work, see chapter 8, Winslow T. Wheeler, "Lapdog and Clouded Lens," *The Wastrels of Defense: How Congress Sabotages U.S. Security* (U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2004).

out. A good, readable executive summary can be crucial, but don't make it so vague that it inadvertently implies the investigation is weak.

Understand your operating environment: the people you are working with and against, the time requirements for getting out your story, and what resources and skills you have—or lack—to get your material into the heads of the people you target to receive it. Your own and others' insights into this environment should lead you to useful conclusions about how to get your message out.¹²

Option B

You've finished your investigation with its hot results, but your member of Congress (or chief of staff) is bailing out. He/she got a call from the nice man at Boeing (or the White House or the Defense Department) and the political decision is to bag your work. Not the first time this has happened; not the last. Politics—the hinted offer of contributions (or a public savaging) or a much desired campaign visit from the POTUS—has overruled your work that might save millions of dollars or provide military personnel more effective training or equipment.¹³

You have options, if you have the stomach for them.

First, make an argument to whoever is blocking your report. Perhaps they are not hard over but want to be assured your work can stand up. Perhaps they have a conscience you can appeal to.

If internal argument doesn't work, you did send that report into your bureaucratic superiors electronically, right? Perhaps a few others' addresses were copied on your message. Did you send it also to officials in the Pentagon,

¹² Whatever method you choose to “tell your story,” avoid the cheap gimmicks. As the military reform movement was falling apart in the late 1980s, Sen. William Roth, R – Del., and then-Congresswoman Barbara Boxer, D – Calif., held a press conference on the high cost of DOD spare parts. There was not much new to the already thoroughly covered issue. Boxer and Roth decided to jazz it up by decorating a Christmas tree with the various spare parts as ornaments. The glitzy idea was successful in getting the press conference into the news, but the resort to cheap tricks made it clear that military reform on Capitol Hill was out of airspeed, altitude and good ideas.

¹³ In my case, it was a member of Congress worried at alienating the Defense Department. In 1997, I had traveled to Fort Irwin, California and came back with information about low military readiness for peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. I had sent my report to Sen. Pete Domenici, R – N.M., but his decision was to do nothing. I nonetheless facilitated a leak to a journalist, and it was published on the front page of the *The Washington Times*; see Rowan Scarborough, “Peacekeeping Puts Drag on Army’s Mission,” *The Washington Times*, December 23, 1997, 1.

asking them to check over the facts? Perhaps it also went to a few researchers at CRS, GAO and CBO to check on the quality of your analysis.¹⁴

Get my drift? The electronic age makes it almost impossible to suppress a report once it has passed the electronic portal to a threshold number of people.¹⁵ Wouldn't it be just terrible if it ended up in the hands of some reporter and a front page story was written about your findings?

There will be consequences. For starters, you may lose your job. Politicians and their operatives almost always consider their political comfort more important than your personal fate. There are two possible protections: first, while it is risky, they may see that they are getting some favorable press coverage out of the report; all might be forgiven – perhaps after some finger waving. Or, perhaps you deleted any personal identification from that report that slipped into that reporter's hands and the reporter agreed not to identify you—or anything connected to you—in the article. The report itself should stand on its own legs in terms of data and analysis so mentioning it was a staff report from your office should not be essential.¹⁶

Of course, losing a job in an office that values politics above content may not be a bad thing. When I lost my job in the Senate Budget Committee because Sen. John McCain, R – Ariz., resented my revelations about his own involvement in and enablement of the congressional pork process, I ended up with a job offer and an invitation to write my first book. Some of these stories can have a happy ending.

¹⁴ In distributing these materials, it is essential that they not contain any classified information whatsoever. You have no authority to release it, no matter how legitimately unclassified you might think the material to be and no matter how much you think the public needs to know it.

¹⁵ This phenomenon is not unique to the Internet. In the 1980s, a testing official wrote a devastating report on the performance of an Army air defense system, known as "DIVAD." He distributed 12 copies to his superiors. The head of his office wanted to defend the program and suppress the report; he demanded that all 12 copies be collected and given to him. He received 13. Knowing the gig was up – or rather that the report was being xeroxed – he sent it on to Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger. When Weinberger learned that at least one congressman also had the report, he cancelled the program.

¹⁶ This became my *modus operandi* when I worked at the Senate Budget Committee. I would periodically permit reports I had written to find their way to the press, ultimately using the pseudonym "Spartacus." Find some details on this behavior, and the consequences, in the preface of *The Wastrels of Defense: How Congress Sabotages U.S. Security* (U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2004).

A Classic Example

In May 1940, before America's entry into World War II, President Roosevelt requested urgent appropriations to pay for America's pre-war build up. As the money flooded into the War and Navy departments, Sen. Harry S. Truman, D – Mo., took it upon himself to visit military facilities to check on how the money was being spent.

Unlike today's regal congressional arrivals at military bases, Truman drove in his own personal car and was not accompanied by a gaggle of military escorts or staffers to arrange his meals and lodging and otherwise pamper him.¹⁷ Truman was horrified at what he found: huge waste everywhere and government officials doing nothing about it. He met privately with President Roosevelt to seek action, but finding no interest in the White House, he delivered a speech in the U.S. Senate chamber and proposed a special committee. The Senate agreed and established a Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense, with Truman as chairman.¹⁸

Truman time and again invested his own time and energy to understand the issues. He ultimately held 432 public and 300 closed door hearings, conducted hundreds of field trips, and wrote 51 reports. The work addressed aluminum shortages and military construction waste; inefficient production of rubber, aircraft, landing barges, farm machinery and ships; war profiteering; fake inspections of steel plate; the comparative merits of rayon or cotton tire cord; the financing of one U.S. senator's swimming pool and payments to another from defense contractors; and—remarkably for a Democratic-controlled committee—inefficiency induced by labor unions.¹⁹

Truman and his staff earned a reputation for independence, professionalism and fairness. The chairman did not badger witnesses, and he eschewed topics beyond his proper reach, such as military strategy and tactics; he even kept the committee out of the politically sensitive domain of the location of defense facilities (pork).

Where it did investigate, the committee pulled few punches. Its reports were full of “Truman-esque” barbs; for example

... most American pursuit planes were inferior to the best British and the best German pursuit planes... Scarcely a week now goes by without some prominent flyer returning to this country and asking why we can't give the boys better pursuit planes.... the Army should ... give less

¹⁷ David McCullough, *Truman* (Simon & Schuster, 1993), 256.

¹⁸ Schlesinger and Roger Burns, *Congress Investigates*, 337.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 335–338.

attention to concocting publicity blurbs intended to emphasize that poor planes are better than none at all.²⁰

So called competitive bidding has often been used as a cover for collusive bidding on Government contracts.²¹

The committee particularly condemns advertising such as the Curtis Helldiver advertising which was intended to give the public the erroneous impression that the Curtis Helldiver was the world's finest dive-bomber and was making a substantial contribution to the war effort when the fact is that no usable plane has yet been produced The fact that such advertising was approved by the Navy and was based upon a speech of a Navy Admiral does not justify it.²²

The overall impact of these and many more frank assertions was not to undermine public confidence in the war effort but to raise it: citizens came to believe the selfish and the inept were being rooted out. One source estimated the committee was responsible for \$15 billion in savings, or in modern dollars \$270 billion.²³ Others assert that figure is exaggerated, but the savings were "enormous and unprecedented" nonetheless.²⁴

Today, the cheap conventional wisdom seems to be that tough oversight over a military at war constitutes questionable patriotism. Truman proves that wrong, even unpatriotic.²⁵

Conclusion

Oversight can be difficult, stressful and often thankless, but also rewarding. You will be performing something that is more important than you or the people you work for. (And, you will be pleasantly surprised how many decent people recognize your efforts.) Most importantly, by making Congress and the public aware of important problems and how they came to be, you are performing one

²⁰ *Congressional Record*, January 15, 1942. The Xerox of these pages provided by the Library of Congress to the author did not include the page numbers.

²¹ *Congressional Record*, March 4, 1944.

²² *Congressional Record*, July 10, 1943.

²³ Schlesinger and Roger Burns, *Congress Investigates*, p. 338.

²⁴ David McCullough, *Truman* (Simon & Schuster, 1993), 288. On the other hand, Senator Truman's work was not without compromises. He did not look into racial discrimination in hiring at defense plants and segregation in the military services.

²⁵ For the details of how Truman did what he did, see the David McCullough biography and *Congress Investigates 1792-1974* by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Roger Burns, referred to above.

of the most important functions of government that our Constitution calls for—
and needs for a democracy to survive.

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.

