

# The scale of Pentagon waste boggles the mind, but Congress keeps giving them more

[intrepidreport.com/archives/22394](https://intrepidreport.com/archives/22394)

By Harry  
Blain

October 16, 2017

Everyone hates government waste. President Trump [believes](#) it is “our moral duty to the taxpayer” to “make our government leaner and more accountable,” and his political opponents [seem to agree](#).

And yet, when called to vote on [an extra \\$80 billion a year](#) for the most profligate public agency in the country, the overwhelming majority of U.S. senators asked no questions. The Pentagon not only escaped serious budget cuts while everything from [national parks](#) to [Meals on Wheels](#) has been squeezed, but it actually almost got *more* than it asked for in the spending bill the Senate approved on September 18.

The Pentagon’s latest increase alone—never mind its base budget, which runs hundreds of billions higher—is a sum large enough to make [public colleges free](#) across the country, and by itself is worth well [over 80 percent](#) of Russia’s entire military budget.

It’s worth asking: Where does the money go?

## “We’re the largest bureaucracy in the world”

Consider the reaction if the Environmental Protection Agency buried evidence of \$125 billion in bureaucratic waste. At the very least, we would see congressional inquiries with Republicans foaming at the mouth and Democrats solemnly stating their commitment to safeguarding your tax dollars. At most, we would hear calls for some kind of criminal investigation.

This whole situation is mathematically impossible for the EPA, with [its annual budget of around \\$8 billion](#), but not for the Department of Defense. In 2015, it both [found and hid](#) \$125 billion of wasteful spending.

As a *Washington Post* investigation revealed, the Pentagon did not like the findings of its internal spending review. Its own investigators found that a quarter of the annual budget was spent on overheads like human resources and logistics. It counted over a million desk jobs, and nearly 200,000 full-time contractors in the Army alone. That exceeds “the combined civil workforce for the Departments of State, Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Energy, and Housing and Urban Development,” the Post notes—all with the fewest number of active troops on duty since 1940.

## “We’ll never recover a dollar”

If “inefficiency” is a suitable word for the Pentagon bureaucracy at home, it doesn’t come close to describing how military money is spent abroad.

In the six years from 2009 to 2015, the [Special Inspector General for Reconstruction in Afghanistan](#) tallied around [\\$17 billion](#) in “questionable spending” throughout the country by the Pentagon, the State Department, and USAID, while the comparable office for Iraq suggested that [\\$8-\\$10 billion](#) (of \$60 billion total) in reconstruction money was wasted as a result of corruption and mismanagement.

Although these numbers clearly matter, specific cases convey the depth of the absurdity. A few examples:

- In June, the IG for Afghanistan [reported](#) that the Pentagon “may have spent up to \$28 million more than needed to procure camouflage uniforms that may be inappropriate for the Afghan environment.” The Afghan defense minister wanted expensive forest-camouflage uniforms—even though forests only cover 2.1 percent

of the country—“in the name of fashion, because the defense minister thought that that pattern was pretty,” [the inspector general, John Sopko, said](#). “My concern is what if the minister of defense liked purple, or liked pink? Are we going to buy pink uniforms for soldiers and not ask questions?”

- A recent audit [concluded](#) that officials at the Pentagon cannot account for \$700 million spent on ammunition for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces through 2015 and 2016.
- The Pentagon spent just under half a million dollars on 20 refurbished cargo planes for the Afghan Air Force in 2008, only to find that they were so poorly equipped that they were not fit for use. “Sixteen of the planes were sold as scrap for the grand sum of \$32,000,” [ProPublica notes](#).
- In 2007, the Government Accountability Office [told Congress](#) that the Pentagon “cannot fully account for” 190,000 weapons “reported as issued to Iraqi forces as of September 22 2005.” A 2016 audit suggested that the total price of lost American weapons in Iraq [amounted to around \\$1 billion](#).

This is a small sample. When asked about the Pentagon’s Task Force for Business and Stability Operations in Afghanistan, which was [effectively dismantled in 2011](#), Inspector General Sopko told *Defense News* that “the money has basically been wasted.” “In all likelihood,” he [continued](#), “we’ll never recover a dollar.”

### **The outsourcing illusion**

For some officials and commentators, the solution is outsourcing. The Center for a New American Security’s Daniel Straub [even argues in a recent article](#) that “private contractors can help win the war in Afghanistan,” because “profit is incentive to do a job right.” Contractors, he suggests, can bring flexibility and efficiency, perhaps saving the taxpayer as much as \$35 billion.

The evidence from the Pentagon’s great outsourcing experiments suggests the complete opposite: Profit is an incentive to overcharge, mislead, and defraud.

The bipartisan Commission on Wartime Contracting provided the most comprehensive assessment of this in 2011. It [concluded](#) that “at least \$31 billion, and possibly as much as \$60 billion, has been lost to contract waste and fraud in America’s contingency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

The Justice Department sued the contractor [Kellogg, Brown, and Root](#) (KBR) for overcharging in 2012; Custer Battles was [found guilty](#) of \$3 million worth of fraud in Iraq as early as 2006; and although DynCorp was accused in federal court of [knowingly inflating costs](#) throughout a four-year contract for the State Department in Iraq, it maintains its Pentagon contract for “[training and mentoring](#)” the Afghan National Police and Interior Ministry.

### **Forever immune?**

Much of the Pentagon’s new handout will go where it usually goes: into the pockets of military contractors, or else get lost altogether.

Most Americans won’t discover this, and it’s hard to blame them. Their political leaders are united in their determination to protect the world’s largest bureaucracy from serious scrutiny.

However, as Afghanistan war veterans [watch their children](#) go off to fight the same war they began fighting 16 years ago, the Pentagon won’t be immune forever. Then, it will have a heavy account to settle.

*This article originally appeared on [Foreign Policy in Focus](#).*

*Harry Blain is a PhD student in political science at the Graduate Center, CUNY (City University of New York).*