

The Military's Leadership Problem

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Leadership, not technology failures, are at the root of most wasteful Pentagon programs

By: [Dan Grazier](#) & [Elizabeth "Liz" Hempowicz](#) | September 5, 2017



Former US Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh (right) shakes hands with his son during his retirement ceremony at Joint Base Andrews, MD, June 24, 2016. Northrop Grumman elected Welsh to its board six months later. (Photo: Tech. Sgt. Joshua L. DeMotts / [US Air Force](#))

News about the F-35 nearly always focuses on technical issues: what is working or not at that particular time. Constant reporting along those lines sets the narrative that at the most fundamental level, the F-35 program's faults are the result of deeply flawed technologies. Longtime readers know the Project On Government Oversight and its Center for Defense Information is [as guilty of this as anyone](#). But that reporting leaves out the real fundamental issue: a leadership problem closely tied to the infamous "revolving door" between the military's senior ranks and defense contractor boardrooms.

The Revolving Door

Why do senior Pentagon leaders demonstrate such poor leadership? The culture of the senior ranks certainly plays a big part. National security journalist Thomas Ricks wrote about this in his book, [The Generals](#). He described how most senior officers today aspire to be viewed as "good guys." Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army colonel and historian, [described the type this way](#):

"The good guy projects the right attitude, strikes the right pose, and recites all the right clichés. Good guys are team players. They don't rock the boat. They get ahead by going along. In practical terms, demonstrated adherence to orthodoxy becomes the premier qualification for admission. Heretics need not apply."

Perhaps the fastest way for an officer [to be ostracized](#) from this exclusive fraternity is to do anything to interrupt the

smooth transfer of taxpayer dollars from the Treasury through the Pentagon into the coffers of a defense contractor—say by raising questions about the need for or the efficacy of a Service’s new pet weapons program. An officer doing so would doubtlessly offend his team-playing superiors within the Service, risking promotions and desirable assignments. An officer who did so would also find few defense contractors willing to offer lucrative sinecures upon his or her retirement. Air Force Colonel Jim Burton, of *Pentagon Wars* fame, [is the most famous example](#) of what happens to an officer who violates the code of silence.

Because of course it is only a coincidence that Raytheon elected retired Marine General James Cartwright to its board [six months after he retired](#) and a mere two years after [he came to the rescue](#) of the Raytheon-built JLENS, the failed \$2.7 billion balloon-based radar system [that famously went for an off-the-leash joyride](#) over Pennsylvania in October 2015. This program consumed 17 years’ worth of time, effort, and money with little to show for it other than the amusing headlines. The Army [deactivated the unit](#) in June 2017.

And clearly it’s also coincidence that Northrop Grumman elected former Air Force Chief of Staff Mark Welsh to its board six months after he had retired and only [a little more than a year](#) after the Air Force selected Northrop Grumman for the B-21 bomber [\\$55 billion contract](#).

These are only two of the most recent and well-known examples of the Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex’s “[revolving door](#).” This is where retired generals and admirals take highly paid positions in the defense industry. Their status as retired flag officers lends credibility and access to the companies.

As POGO reported in 2004 in [The Politics of Contracting](#):

“The revolving door is a story of money, information, influence, and access—access that ensures that phone calls get through to policymakers and meetings get scheduled. The American taxpayer is left with a system that sometimes compromises the way the government buys goods and services from its contractors.”

Senior officers used to consider behavior like this to be deeply shameful. Following World War II, the most senior Army generals—George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, Hap Arnold, and Omar Bradley—all turned down many lucrative offers in the defense industry. Upon retiring after serving as Secretary of State and Defense, Marshall led the Red Cross. Eisenhower became President of the United States, but before that led Columbia University. Arnold created a think tank and wrote his memoirs. Bradley served on the board of the Bulova Watch Company. Even the imperious MacArthur went to work for a typewriter manufacturer.

Alas, those days are long gone.

The F-35 Case Study



(Photo: Samuel King Jr. / [US Air Force](#))

The F-35 was conceived to be a multi-mission aircraft that would meet the very different requirements of three separate services. Add to that the needs of [eight partner countries](#) and various foreign military sales customers, and no one should be surprised by the results. In attempting to be all things to all people, the F-35 [can't perform any single mission](#) particularly well, and the entire thing ends up costing a fortune.

The problems with creating a one-size-fits-all aircraft should have been well known to the decision-makers at the time. The Pentagon tried to do the same thing in the 1960s [with the F-111 program](#), when then-Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara converted the Air Force's single mission F-111 nuclear bomber project into a multi-mission, multi-Service aircraft for the Air Force and Navy (note that McNamara never conceived the F-111, just as SecDef Les Aspin didn't conceive the F-35 in 1993—he simply approved turning it into a multi-Service plane). The results pleased no one and the Navy dropped out of the program entirely before it went into production. The Air Force cut short the number of F-111s it bought and quickly initiated a single mission air-to-air fighter that became the F-15 program.

The technical shortcomings of the F-111 were secondary to the main shortcoming of the program: the leadership's decision to build a one-size-fits-all aircraft. When they came up with the idea, at least those in charge then might not have known better because they did not have a glaring historical failure staring them down as they made their decision; the DoD political appointees and the general officers in charge of acquisition at the inception of the F-35 have no such cover. They had the clear example of the F-111 that most of them had lived through (specifically, Les Aspin and all the generals and admirals), but they chose to push ahead with an acquisition concept they should have known was flawed, anyway.

Leadership, or the lack thereof, is the most serious factor in what is perhaps the most pervasive and expensive of all flawed acquisition strategies, concurrency. This is the term for the deliberate overlap of development, testing, and production. The F-35 will likely go down in history as one of the most egregious examples of this form of "acquisition malpractice." At the current rate, the services will likely have nearly 800 deficiency-laden F-35s in production before the fixes have been completed and fully tested.

Senior leaders knew this was a bad idea.

Concurrency, as a RAND Corporation analyst explained in testimony before the House Committee on Government Reform on May 10, 2000, is rooted "in the politics of the acquisition process." This practice serves to limit the available political options for restructuring programs experiencing significant test failures or cost overruns. When the Pentagon makes substantial procurement commitments well before development or testing is complete, it severely increases the political costs of cancelling the program due to all the money already invested and all the jobs already created.

What makes this even worse is that these production commitments are made at the point in the process when the programs are most likely to need revision or restructuring due to unanticipated technical problems. During the phase of the development process when prototypes are being tested, "the data almost always is going to contradict the optimism of early assessments." This means the airplane, tank, ship, or other weapon system may well not be performing up to the level promised when votes were being solicited to get the program off the ground. And it is precisely at this point that Congress and the taxpayer are stymied from exercising the reasonable options of either cancelling the buy or slowing down the program to implement fixes. Instead, they are forced to continue buying the early production units of the airplane or tank or ship, exactly the ones that invariably have the highest price tags. As Air Force cost analyst and whistleblower A. Ernest Fitzgerald often bemoaned, "It's either too early to tell, or too late to do anything about it."



US Navy Sailors from the USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) prepare to launch a “dead-load” from the ship’s Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS). (Photo: Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Joshua J. Wahl / [US Navy](#))

Another example of this is the [USS Ford aircraft carrier](#). In order to secure significant new funding, the Navy promised the new design would outperform existing carriers and save money in the long-term. Both claims remain dubious. The Service scrapped the long-proven technology of steam-powered catapults and hydraulic arresting gear and replaced them with the brand new and wholly untested EMALS and “water twister” arresting-gear technology. Those two systems, in turn, required an all-new ship design to support their radically different space and electrical requirements. Because of the massive electrical charge and the reduced steam supply the EMALS requires, the *Ford*-class ships needed a newly designed nuclear reactor, new turbine generators, and a new electrical distribution system. And the water twister arresting gear required the entire aft end of the carrier to be reconfigured. In the event

of failure, neither the EMALS nor the water twister can be replaced by their steam or hydraulic predecessors without tearing the entire carrier apart. But the Navy committed to all of that while EMALS and the water twister were still only engineering sketches. The Service took an enormous gamble by building a \$13 billion ship around technology that had never been demonstrated.

That is an incredibly and unnecessarily risky acquisition strategy. There is the question about whether the advertised performance improvement of 25 percent improved sortie rate, which would be marginal at best (it is still an aircraft carrier), is worth the investment. The last *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier cost \$6.9 billion. The Navy claims it will save \$5 billion over the lifetime of the *Ford* due to manpower savings which may never be realized. So the American people are paying upfront an extra \$6 billion before overruns to save an unproven \$5 billion over 50 years.

That is not a technology problem. That is a leadership problem. No admiral and no senior civilian in the acquisition chain of command stood up to put a stop to such a risky scheme or to even raise an objection to the kind of arithmetic that only makes sense to a defense contractor looking for business.

Possible Solutions

A four-star general who retires after 30 years receives a pension of [more than \\$250,000 a year](#) (sometimes earning more than while they were on active duty). They also receive [generous health care benefits](#) through TRICARE, and base privileges that allow them to shop tax-free in the commissaries and base exchanges. These are benefits retired admirals and generals earn for the years of sacrifice and service on behalf of the American people. Doubtless few citizens would seriously take issue with the government rewarding honorable service in such a manner.

However, this does become an issue when retired flag officers cash in on their service by taking highly paid positions with firms attempting to do business with the Pentagon. The problem is not just what they do after they retire. It is obviously disappointing to see someone betray the public trust for their own personal or financial gain. But, the real problem is what they had to do, or not do, while still in uniform to increase their chances of being offered the lucrative post-retirement positions. Again, how likely would a defense contractor be to hire someone who criticized or cancelled a big acquisition program?

The most drastic solution to discourage that kind of behavior in future generations of military leaders would be to strip retired generals and admirals of their rank and/or retirement benefits if they make the choice to travel through the revolving door and accept positions with defense contractors. The idea behind this is not to punish anyone (which it wouldn't anyway—a board membership at Northrop Grumman, for example, is worth an average of [\\$260,621 per year](#) in 2016). This is about combating the possibility of senior officers compromising their integrity while in uniform to position themselves for a big payout after taking off the uniform.

This idea may seem a bit extreme on the surface. But it is less so than others put forward recently. Then President-elect Trump floated a proposal shortly after the election [to permanently bar](#) military procurement officials from ever working for defense contractors. So far that proposal has not received much traction, but something must be done to curb the soft corruption of the revolving door.

Military pensions and retirement benefits are rewards for honorable service. Officers dishonor that service by selling their influence to firms doing business with the Pentagon. Stripping those benefits sends the message in a very tangible way that such behavior is dishonorable. At the very least, this proposal would prevent the American people from subsidizing such behavior.

A less extreme solution would be to suspend rank and retirement benefits during the period of employment with a defense contractor. A precedent does exist [for suspending a service member's pension](#) because of post-retirement work. A retired Marine Major, Stephen Hartnett, went to work for Basil, Inc. in May 1985 to teach "Marine Corps Seamanship Instruction" for the Saudi Naval Forces in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. When investigators looked into the case, they found Mr. Hartnett was really working directly for the Saudi government without the consent of Congress,

a violation of [the emoluments clause](#) in Article I of the U.S. Constitution. He had his retirement pay suspended while employed by the Saudi government. This could serve as a model to combat the revolving door problem domestically.

Either of these solutions would significantly (perhaps completely?) remove the current incentives baked into the revolving door system.

The goal is to reattach the stigma once attached to those who use their rank and position for personal gain. At best, it may remind officers that their first obligation is to the young men and women they are supposed to lead into battle, the same young people who are the very first to be hurt in combat by any bad decisions made in the pursuit of a corner office, say at Raytheon, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, or Lockheed Martin.

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