Call it a colossal victory for a Pentagon that hasn’t won a war in this century, but not for the rest of us. Congress only recently passed and the president approved one of the largest Pentagon budgets ever. It will surpass spending at the peaks of both the Korean and Vietnam wars. As last year ended, as if to highlight the strangeness of all this, the Washington Post broke a story about a “confidential trove of government documents”—interviews with key figures involved in the Afghan War by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction—revealing the degree to which senior Pentagon leaders and military commanders understood that the war was failing. Yet, year after year, they provided “rosy pronouncements they knew to be false,” while “hiding unmiss takable evidence that the war had become unwinnable.”

However, as the latest Pentagon budget shows, no matter the revelations, there will be no reckoning when it comes to this country’s endless wars or its military establishment—not at a moment when President Donald Trump is sending yet more U.S. military personnel into the Middle East and has picked a new fight with Iran. No less troubling: how few in either party in Congress are willing to hold the president and the Pentagon accountable for runaway defense spending or the poor performance that has gone with it.

Given the way the Pentagon has sunk taxpayer dollars into those endless wars, in a more reasonable world
that institution would be overdue for a comprehensive audit of all its programs and a reevaluation of its expenditures. (It has, by the way, never actually passed an audit.) According to Brown University’s Costs of War Project, Washington has already spent at least $2 trillion on its war in Afghanistan alone and, as the Post made clear, the corruption, waste, and failure associated with those expenditures was (or at least should have been) mindboggling.

Of course, little of this was news to people who had read the damning reports released by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction in previous years. They included evidence, for instance, that somewhere between $10 million and $43 million had been spent constructing a single gas station in the middle of nowhere, that $150 million had gone into luxury private villas for Americans who were supposed to be helping strengthen Afghanistan’s economy, and that tens of millions more were wasted on failed programs to improve Afghan industries focused on extracting more of the country’s minerals, oil, and natural gas reserves.

In the face of all this, rather than curtailing Pentagon spending, Congress continued to increase its budget, while also supporting a Department of Defense slush fund for war spending to keep the efforts going. Still, the special inspector general’s reports did manage to rankle American military commanders (unable to find successful combat strategies in Afghanistan) enough to launch what, in effect, would be a public-relations war to try to undermine that watchdog’s findings.

All of this, in turn, reflected the “unwarranted influence” of the military-industrial complex that President (and former five-star General) Dwight Eisenhower warned Americans about in his memorable 1961 farewell address. That complex only continues to thrive and grow almost six decades later, as contractor profits are endlessly prioritized over what might be considered the national security interests of the citizenry.

The infamous “revolving door” that regularly ushers senior Pentagon officials into defense-industry posts and senior defense-industry figures into key positions at the Pentagon (and in the rest of the national security state) just adds to the endless public-relations offensives that accompany this country’s forever wars. After all, the retired generals and other officials the media regularly looks to for expertise are often essentially paid shills for the defense industry. The lack of public disclosure and media discussion about such obvious conflicts of interest only further corrupts public debate on both the wars and the funding of the military, while giving the arms industry the biggest seat at the table when decisions are made on how much to spend on war and preparations for the same.

**MEDIA ANALYSIS BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE ARMS INDUSTRY**

That lack of disclosure regarding potential conflicts of interest recently came into fresh relief as industry boosters beat the media drums for war with Iran. Unfortunately, it’s a story we’ve seen many times before. Back in 2008, for instance, in a Pulitzer Prize-winning series, the New York Times revealed that the Pentagon had launched a program to cultivate a coterie of retired-military-officers-turned-pundits in support of its already disastrous war in Iraq. Seeing such figures on TV or reading their comments in the press, the public may have assumed that they were just speaking their minds. However, the Times investigation showed that, while widely cited in the media and regularly featured on the TV news, they never disclosed that they received special Pentagon access and that, collectively, they had financial ties to more than 150 Pentagon contractors.

Given such financial interests, it was nearly impossible for them to be “objective” when it came to this country’s failing war in Iraq. After all, they needed to secure more contracts for their defense-industry employers. A subsequent analysis by the Government Accountability Office found that the Pentagon’s program raised “legitimate questions” about how its public propaganda efforts were tied to the weaponry it bought, highlighting “the possibility of compromised procurements resulting from potential competitive advantages” for those who helped them.

While the program was discontinued that same year, a similar effort was revealed in 2013 during a debate over whether the U.S. should attack Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian regime. You probably won’t be surprised to discover that most of the former military
figures and officials used as analysts at the time supported action against Syria. A review of their commentary by the Public Accountability Initiative found a number of them also had undisclosed ties to the arms industry. In fact, of 111 appearances in major media outlets by 22 commentators, only 13 of them disclosed any aspect of their potential conflicts of interest that might lead them to promote war.

The same pattern is now being repeated in the debate over the Trump administration’s decision to assassinate by drone Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani and other Iran-related issues. While Soleimani clearly opposed the United States and many of its national security interests, his killing risked pushing Washington into another endless war in the Middle East. And in a distinctly recognizable pattern, the Intercept has already found that the air waves were subsequently flooded by defense-industry pundits praising the strike. Unsurprisingly, news of a potential war also promptly boosted defense industry stocks. Northrop Grumman’s, Raytheon’s, and Lockheed Martin’s all started 2020 with an uptick.

Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Representative Jackie Speier (D-CA) have offered legislation that could shut down that revolving door between the major weapons makers and Washington for good, but it has met concerted resistance from Pentagon officials and others still in Congress who stand to benefit from preserving the system as is. Even if that revolving door wasn’t shut down, transparency about just who was going through it would help the public better understand what former officials and military commanders are really advocating for when they speak positively of the necessity for yet another war in the Middle East.

**COSTLY WEAPONS (AND WELL-PAID LOBBYISTS)**

Here’s what we already know about how it all now works: weapon systems produced by the big defense firms with all those retired generals, former administration officials, and one-time congressional representatives on their boards (or lobbying for or consulting for them behind the scenes) regularly come in overpriced, are often delivered behind schedule, and repeatedly fail to have the capabilities advertised. Take, for instance, the new Ford class aircraft carriers, produced by Huntington Ingalls Industries, the sort of ships that have traditionally been used to show strength globally. In this case, however, the program’s development has been stifled by problems with its weapons elevators and the systems used to launch and recover its aircraft. Those problems have been costly enough to send costs for the program tripled over initial estimates and, according to Defense News, the Navy is already considering decommissioning four of the new ships next year as a cost-saving measure. It’s not the first time that program has been threatened with the budget axe. In the past, however, pork-barrel politics spearheaded by Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Richard Shelby (R-AL), in whose states those boats were being built, kept the program afloat.

The Air Force’s new bomber, the B-21, being built by Northrup Grumman, has been on a similar trajectory.

Lockheed Martin’s F-35 jet fighter, the most expensive weapons system in Pentagon history, has an abysmal rate of combat readiness and currently comes in at more than $100 million per aircraft.
Despite significant pressure from then-Senator John McCain (R-AZ), the Air Force refused in 2017 to make public or agree upon a contract price for the program. (It was a “cost-plus,” not a “fixed price” contract, after all.) It did, however, release the names of the companies providing components to the program, ensuring that relevant congressional representatives would support it, no matter the predictably spiraling costs to come.

Recent polling indicates that such pork-barrel politics isn’t backed by the public, even when they might benefit from it. Asked whether congressional representatives should use the Pentagon’s budget to generate jobs in their districts, 77% of respondents rejected the notion. Two-thirds favored shifting such funds to sectors like healthcare, infrastructure, and clean energy that would, in fact, create significantly more jobs.

And keep in mind that, in this big-time system of profiteering, hardware costs, however staggering, are just a modest part of the equation. The Pentagon spends about as much on what it calls “services” as it does on the weaponry itself and those service contracts are another major source of profits. For example, it’s estimated that the F-35 program will cost $1.5 trillion over the lifetime of the plane, but a trillion dollars of those costs will be for support and maintenance of the aircraft.

Increasingly, this means contractors are able to hold the Pentagon hostage over a weapon’s lifetime, which means overcharges of just about every imaginable sort, including for labor. The Project On Government Oversight (where I work) has, for instance, been uncovering overcharges in spare parts since our founding, including an infamous $435 hammer back in 1983. I’m sad to report that what, in the 1980s, was a seemingly outrageous $640 plastic toilet-seat cover for military airplanes now costs an eye-popping $10,000. A number of factors help explain such otherwise unimaginable prices, including the way contractors often retain intellectual property rights to many of the systems taxpayers funded to develop, legal loopholes that make it difficult for the government to challenge wild charges, and a system largely beholden to the interests of defense companies.

The most recent and notorious case may be TransDigm, a company that has purchased other companies with a monopoly on providing spare parts for a number of weapon systems. That, in turn, gave it power to increase the prices of parts with little fear of losing business—once, receiving 9,400% in excess profits for a single half-inch metal pin. An investigation by the House Oversight and Reform Committee found that TransDigm’s employees had been coached to resist providing cost or pricing information to the government, lest such overcharges be challenged.

In one case, for instance, a subsidiary of TransDigm resisted providing such information until the government, desperate for parts for weapons to be used in Iraq and Afghanistan, was forced to capitulate or risk putting troops’ lives on the line. TransDigm did later repay the government $16 million for certain overcharges, but only after the House Oversight and Reform Committee held a hearing on the subject that shamed the company. As it happens, TransDigm’s behavior isn’t an outlier. It’s typical of many defense-related companies doing business with the government—about 20 major industry players, according to a former Pentagon pricing czar.

**A RECIPE FOR DISASTER**

For too long Congress has largely abdicated its responsibilities when it comes to holding the Pentagon accountable. You won’t be surprised to learn that most of the “acquisition reforms” it’s passed in recent years, which affect how the Department of Defense buys goods and services, have placed just about all real negotiating power in the hands of the big defense contractors. To add insult to injury, both parties of Congress continue to vote in near unanimity for increases in the Pentagon budget, despite 18-plus years of losing wars, the never-ending gross mismanagement of weapons programs, and a continued failure to pass a basic audit. If any other federal agency (or the contractors it dealt with) had a similar track record, you can only begin to imagine the hubbub that would ensue. But not the Pentagon. Never the Pentagon.

A significantly reduced budget would undoubtedly increase that institution’s effectiveness by curbing its urge to throw ever more money at problems. Instead, an often bought-and-paid-for Congress continues to enable bad decision-making about what to buy and how to buy it. And let’s face it, a Congress that allows endless wars, terrible spending practices, and multiplying conflicts of interest is, as the history of the twenty-first century has shown us, a recipe for disaster.
U.S. national security spending has never been a more target-rich environment. POGO’s Center for Defense Information has launched The Bunker, a precision-guided e-newsletter targeting your inbox most every week.

Written by POGO national security analyst Mark Thompson, The Bunker is both pro-troop and pro-taxpayer; skeptical but never cynical.

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America needs a strong military that can defend our country, not a Pentagon beholden to defense contractors.

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The Army’s Lousy Tracked Record

Buying a new fighting vehicle has become C.Y.A (Cover Your Armor)

It doesn’t fly. It doesn’t float. It fights firmly situated on the ground. And get this: It isn’t even a tank. So why does the Army keep spinning its treads in its efforts to buy an armored fighting vehicle to ferry soldiers to the front lines? All told, some $24 billion has evaporated in three different efforts to replace the Bradley Fighting Vehicle. Plainly, three strikes and you’re not out in today’s Army.

What’s bizarre is that the only thing defeating the Army here is its refusal to be realistic. “The Army asked for a great deal of capability on a very aggressive schedule,” Bruce Jette, the Army’s top weapons buyer, said after the latest snafu. “It is clear a combination of requirements and schedule overwhelmed industry’s ability to respond within the Army’s timeline,” even though the effort involved close cooperation between the Army and its contracting partners.

But why the rush? By reaching for the stars, the Army keeps crashing and burning. Aren’t the civilians running the Pentagon supposed to know when they’re being sold a bill of goods, and refuse to go along? Isn’t that supposed to be the best thing about the revolving door that spins the brains of the military-industrial complex between the Pentagon and the defense contractors? So they’ll know when soldiers, never mind taxpayers, are being screwed?

Apparently not.

Unlike shiny aircraft and huge warships, Army armor is relatively small potatoes, and doesn’t get the attention it deserves. But it should. And we’d be remiss not to note that since the Cold War’s end, the service also has wasted almost $7 billion failing to produce its next-gen RAH-66 Comanche helicopter, and about $2 billion on its Crusader self-propelled howitzer.

But it’s tough to learn from the past when it keeps getting erased. For example, curious taxpayers seeking to learn what their billions got for the failed Future Combat Systems will click on what used to be the Army webpage singing its praises and end up on a dead page.

That’s a $20 billion dead end.

And official military photographs of the vehicles are elusive, too, for an obvious reason. “The Army decided to replace Bradley Fighting Vehicles 17 years and $22b ago,” the headline of a recent NBC opinion piece reads. “They still don’t have a prototype.” So the service publishes photos like this, showing how the Bradley has been new and improved over the decades:

Armor, like many of us, has always had a love-hate relationship with weight. More weight means more protection for soldiers, something that has become sacred in recent wars. During World War II, 2,501 American troops died storming the Normandy beaches on D-Day, well beyond the 1,899 U.S. troops killed in action during more than 18 years of war in Afghanistan. But weight also has disadvantages: It takes longer to get to the fight, it’s slower once it gets there, and it requires more maintenance and fuel. And weight hampers armor’s mobility along narrow streets and across rickety bridges.

But maybe only by looking back at how the Army has repeatedly screwed
up can we look forward and try to avoid the same mistakes the fourth time around.

THE BRADLEY FIGHTING VEHICLE
The 25-ton M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle arrived in 1981, in the early heady days of the Reagan defense buildup. It was designed to replace the venerable M113 armored personnel carrier. The M2 and its three-member crew were designed to deliver up to seven soldiers to Germany’s Fulda Gap, where they would duel feared Soviet BMP infantry fighting vehicles. Less than half the weight of its war-fighting partner, the M-1 tank, it was outfitted with a 25 mm cannon that has led many to mistake it for a tank.

But its original aluminum armor proved insufficient, to put it gently. It led to the storied conflict between the Army and Jim Burton, an Air Force officer serving as a Pentagon weapons tester. The contretemps led to wholesale changes in the Bradley and in weapons testing. It also spawned that rarest of Hollywood offerings, the Pentagon procurement farce.

THE FUTURE COMBAT SYSTEMS
Following the Bradley’s unfortunate moment in the spotlight, the Army began looking for a replacement. In 1999, it opted to make it a part of the Army’s Future Combat Systems (WARNING: BEARE OF PENTAGON PROGRAM PLURALS), envisioned as a networked $340 billion fleet of lightweight electrified vehicles. “The Army has been granted a lot of latitude to carry out a large program like FCS [Future Combat Systems] this far into development with relatively little demonstrated knowledge,” the Government Accountability Office warned in a 2007 report. “To date, the FCS program has spent about $8 billion despite having significantly less knowledge—and less assurance of success—than required by best practices or DOD policy.”

There was a cascade of problems common to armored ground vehicles: The quicker it needed to be sent into the fight, the lighter it had to be. But the lighter it was, the more vulnerable its cargo of young Americans would be to enemy attack. The Army originally wanted the Future Combat Systems’ Manned Combat Vehicle to weigh less than 20 tons so it could be flown into action aboard plentiful C-130 cargo planes.

But that didn’t give troops enough protection. So the Army added armor that boosted its weight by nearly 50%. Yet that meant they’d have to fly to war zones aboard the Air Force’s bigger, but much more scarce, C-17s. “The added weight of the vehicles could have ripple effects for the designs of the engine, suspension, band track, and other subsystems,” the GAO added ominously. But the emphasis on air travel was misplaced: There simply aren’t enough big cargo planes in the military to carry sufficient armor to a major war to make a difference. Armor generally floats, not flies, to combat.

Simply put, the Future Combat Systems program was a pipe dream from the start. “The Army believed that advanced sensor technology would result in total battlefield awareness, permitting the development of less-er-armored combat vehicles and the ability to engage and destroy targets beyond the line-of-sight,” the Congressional Research Service recently noted.

In 2009, then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates killed the too-lightly-armored Future Combat Systems due to cost and complexity, after troops complained of their inadequate “hill-billy armor.” His decision got a kinetic kick from the roadside bombs that were killing hundreds of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Franz Gayl, a Marine veteran and civilian science adviser to the corps, had been pressing for better armor...
for the troops since 2006. While Gayl was initially suspended, reprimanded, and lost security clearances for his effort, Gates shared his concern.

“Every delay of a single day costs one or more of our kids his limbs or his life,” Gates remembers telling the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other Pentagon brass. He was thunderstruck by their inertia, he said in his 2014 memoir, driven in part by the desire not to funnel funds away from their favored future futuristic armored programs to buy need-it-right-now Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicles (MRAPs).

“To my chagrin,” Gates said, “not a single senior official, civilian or military, supported my proposal for a crash program to buy thousands of these vehicles.” So he ordered the Pentagon to build 24,000 MRAPs, costing nearly $50 billion, and ship them off to the wars. (Most have since been scrapped, sold, or mothballed.)

Ambition had gotten in the way of progress, and of keeping troops alive. “There are significant unanswered questions concerning the FCS vehicle design strategy,” Gates said when he killed the program. “Further, I am troubled by the terms of the contract,” he added, “particularly in its very unattractive fee structure that gives the government little leverage to promote cost efficiency.”

Defense News put it more bluntly: “Contributing to the program problems was what is now widely considered a toxic contractor-government constellation: an industry consortium led by Boeing and SAIC was effectively put in charge of overseeing its own performance.” Todd Harrison, a defense-budget guru at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, added that more than money was wasted: “I think this program single-handedly set the Army back a generation in vehicle technology.”

What added even more risk was the use of “other transaction authority,” a mechanism that further decreases transparency and oversight. Not that those risks are impeding the Pentagon, which is likely to spend $12 billion utilizing such relaxed procurement rules this year.

The service had turned into a one-trick pony. “The Army’s new concepts for operating during this period of time were monolithic and without alternatives,” a 2012 Rand Corp. autopsy of the program concluded. “Concepts such as strategic and operational maneuverability—‘see first, decide first, act first’—which led to a tradeoff of armor protection for intelligence and decision-making, suggest that the Army did not have a clear grasp of which technologies were feasible and necessary and satisfactory to meet the needs of the future.”

THE GROUND COMBAT VEHICLE

After Gates put the Future Combat System out of its misery, the Army began work on the Ground Combat Vehicle (GCV) to replace the Bradley. It “would be relevant across the entire spectrum of Army operations and would incorporate combat lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan,” the Congressional Research Service said in a 2014 report.

But, in prototypical Army fashion, the Army overreacted to the FCS fiasco by proposing a 56-ton GCV. It would be the Swiss Army knife of Army armor: The Ground Combat Vehicle would “have greater lethality and ballistic protection than a Bradley, greater IED and mine protection than an MRAP and the cross-country mobility of an [M1] Abrams,” the Army pledged in 2010.

Yet outsiders had their doubts. “It would rival the M1 Abrams tank in size and weight and be twice as heavy as the Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle, the current infantry fighting vehicle,” the Congressional Budget Office said in a 2012 report. Some versions would tip the scales at 84 tons. “Even at that weight,” it added, “the GCV would still need to employ new electromechanical active protection systems to meet the Army’s survivability goal.”

New lighter armor is the holy grail for armor architects, but money has to be traded for weight. Ceramic and other exotic forms of armor could be used to strip eight tons off the GCV, but that would cost nearly $1 million. Per ton. Per vehicle.

The Army was also having trouble figuring out what kind of war it would fight, which made it impossible to buy armor. “The history of Army acquisition over the last twenty plus years is littered with failed attempts to define, develop and build new armored fighting vehicles and tanks,” Dan Gouré of the Lexington Institute wrote in January 2014. The problem, he suggested, is its fuzzy focus on what its next war will look like. “The Army,” he said, “has radically changed its views on land warfare at least three times over the past decade.”

Ceramic and other exotic forms of armor could be used to strip eight tons off the GCV, but that would cost nearly $1 million. Per ton. Per vehicle.
Then-Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel put the Ground Combat Vehicle out of its misery a month later. The one-time Army sergeant, who received two Purple Hearts in Vietnam, said it “had become too heavy and needed an infusion of new technology.”

Yet as bad as this news was, by another measure it counted as progress: It took the Pentagon a decade to kill the Future Combat System, but only five years to kill the Ground Combat Vehicle.

A Pentagon review fingered all the usual suspects. The Ground Combat Vehicle “relied on too many immature technologies, had too many performance requirements, and was required by Army leadership to have too many capabilities to make it affordable,” a Congressional Research Service summary of the internal inquiry said.

THE OPTIONALLY MANNED FIGHTING VEHICLE

In June 2018 the Army launched the Next Generation Combat Vehicle, which it renamed the Optionally Manned Fighting Vehicle four months later (the Next Generation Combat Vehicle name stuck to an expanded program that included the OMFV as well as four other new combat vehicles). Confused yet?

But contractors complained that the Army’s desire for an existing—but modified—vehicle with about a hundred requirements could not be finished by the Army’s 15-month deadline. First, contractor BAE Systems declared in June 2019 that the Army scheme “did not align with our current focus or developmental priorities.”

Four months later, the Army disqualified a Raytheon candidate because the company failed to get a prototype to Maryland’s Aberdeen Proving Grounds in time for tests. That left General Dynamics Land Systems as the lone candidate. But even the sole contender couldn’t meet the Army requirement to squeeze a pair of vehicles on to one of the Air Force’s hulking C-17 cargo planes.

Given all these challenges, the Army did what it knows how to do best: It canceled the $45 billion program on January 16, after less than two years of work. “If you fail,” Army undersecretary Ryan McCarthy said back in 2018, “we’d like you to fail early and fail cheap.” He’s now the Army’s No. 1 civilian.

Even Wall Street, which tends to embrace dubious defense programs, grumbled. “The Army went into this latest competition demanding a future-proof vehicle eventually capable of driving autonomously, while on a breakneck schedule that would see the winner in the field as early as 2026,” the Motley Fool investors’ website commented.

Today the Bradleys are getting increasingly creepy. “By some accounts, M-2 Bradleys during OIF [Operation Iraqi Freedom] routinely had to turn off certain electronic systems to gain enough power for anti-roadside-bomb jammers,” the Congressional Research Service warned in a recent report. Armor seems to have reached a point of diminishing returns, CRS added, warning that a new vehicle could be “just a costly marginal improvement over the current system.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

By now, the Army is running out of names for its Bradley replacement. “Combat,” used. “Fighting,” used. “Manned,” used. “Optionally manned,” used. So it has simply retooled its Optionally Manned Fighting Vehicle program. Let’s call it OMFV 2.0. On February 7, the Army issued guidelines (instead of requirements) for the resurrected OMFV. It has agreed to shift more of the revamped program’s costs from contractors to—surprise!—taxpayers.

“In the prior approach, there was a much deeper dependency on the industry’s cost sharing,” Jette, the Army weapons czar, told reporters as the service unveiled its latest procurement plan in early February. This time around, “generally we’ll be funding the development of the vehicle.” The original 2026 fielding deadline has disappeared, as has the requirement to squeeze a pair of vehicles into a C-17.

But after nearly a half-century, the bottom line is obvious: All this armor isn’t designed to protect engines, treads, or ammo. It’s designed to protect the soldiers inside. Even the Army gets that. “Robots have the potential to revolutionize the way we conduct ground combat operations,” Army Brigadier General Ross Coffman said when the service awarded a pair of contracts to develop smaller “Robotic Combat Vehicles” in January. “We envision these vehicles providing commanders more time and space for decisions,” Coffman said, “and reducing risk to Soldiers.”

Speaking of time and space for decisions, the Army begins meeting with contractors in March to start drafting blueprints for its latest Bradley replacement.

Maybe the fourth time will be the charm.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: The Military-Industrial Circus is a regular column by Pulitzer prize-winning National Security Analyst Mark Thompson for the Center for Defense Information at POGO.
A new document obtained by the Project On Government Oversight (POGO) shows that the F-35 program office has made little progress in fixing the fighter jet’s hundreds of design flaws, and continues to discover more of them. The Joint Strike Fighter Program Office’s Deficiency Report Metrics document, dated February 28, 2020, shows the program is currently dealing with 883 unresolved design flaws—and has no plan for correcting over 160 of them.

More than half, 448 deficiencies, remain “open, in dispute.” This means pilots or engineers believed they found a problem, but the contractors tasked with fixing the problems are claiming no problem exists. Multiple sources inside the F-35 program told POGO that the default response from the program’s prime contractor, Lockheed Martin, to any identified shortcoming is to say that the company’s design meets contract specifications, and that any further changes can only be made with a contract modification. In other words, the contractors will not fix the design flaws until the government pays for the changes. More worrying are the 162 deficiencies listed as “open, no planned correction.”

According to the document, officials are waiting to correct 10 design flaws until future modernization projects. The document also shows that engineers have identified solutions for 273 flaws, but they remain open either because more funds are needed to fix them or more testing is required to make sure the corrections worked.

The Pentagon breaks down deficiencies into two categories based on their severity and potential impact on safety and mission performance. Category I flaws, the most serious, are those that “may cause death, severe injury, or severe occupational illness; may cause loss or major damage to a weapon system; critically restricts the combat readiness capabilities of the using organization; or result in a production line stoppage.” The document shows there are currently nine Category I flaws. In response to POGO’s request for comment, the program office did not provide any information about solutions the office is pursuing for those flaws.

Minutes from a 2018 F-35 program office Deficiency Review Board meeting showed that the office had been making paperwork changes to reclas-
sify some Category I deficiencies to a lower status rather than actually correcting them.

The number of remaining design flaws is one thing, but the 2019 annual operational test report also highlights their persistent nature. The F-35 entered operational testing in December 2018 with a large “technical debt” of problems that had been identified but not corrected during developmental testing, as the Pentagon’s testing office reported earlier this year. Of the 873 deficiencies identified by the testing office as of November 2019, approximately 576, or 66%, were carried over from the development phase. The program’s technical debt has only grown during operational testing as evaluators keep discovering new flaws, and the testing office’s report cautioned that the unresolved flaws “should be addressed by the program to ensure the SDD [System Development and Demonstration] baseline configuration of software and hardware is stable, prior to introducing a large number of new capabilities to the software in the new hardware configuration associated with Block 4 [future development]."

What the testing office is saying in engineering parlance is that the endlessly patched software controlling all the F-35’s components and mission systems is unstable. The “computer that happens to fly” is a densely integrated network of hardware, software, weapons, and mission data. Making a software change to any one component can, and often does, have unintended negative effects on a seemingly unrelated component. The testing office wants to see the program correct all the existing flaws so the F-35 has a stable base on which to build as designers and engineers add new capabilities in the coming years. Unless this occurs, every time a new function is added, they will likely end up piling new flaws on top of old flaws, which will end up endangering schedules and increase costs.

Despite the triumphant 2018 proclamations that the program had completed its troubled development process, the testing office has reported that development “may take years to complete.” Meanwhile, F-35 pilots today are dealing with the effects that “may be observed from both operational testing and fielded operations.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dan Grazier is the Jack Shanahan Military Fellow at the Center for Defense Information at POGO.
The Chairman of the Revolving Door
Dunford gave Lockheed a crucial F-35B approval. Six years later they gave him a job.

A shorter version of this piece was originally published at The American Conservative.

BY JASON PALADINO

In 2015 things weren’t looking great for the Marine Corps’ F-35B fighter jet. Reports from the Government Accountability Office and Department of Defense inspector general had found dozens of problems with the aircraft. Engine failures, software bugs, supply chain issues, and fundamental design flaws were making headlines regularly. The program was becoming synonymous in the press with “boondoggle.”

Lockheed Martin, the program’s lead contractor, desperately needed a win. The Pentagon was considering cutting the number of F-35s it planned to purchase after Senator John McCain (R-AZ), then the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, questioned if the number was realistic. International customers were growing skeptical of the aircraft as the price ballooned. It is Lockheed Martin’s biggest program, and will cost taxpayers $1.5 trillion over its lifetime. A reduction in purchases, or loss of international customers, could have cost the company billions.

Luckily for Lockheed, it had a powerful ally in the commandant of the Marine Corps, General Joseph Dunford. Five years later, Dunford would be out of the service and ready to collect his first Lockheed Martin paycheck as a member of its board of directors.

Back in 2015, the F-35 program, already years behind schedule, faced a key program milestone. The goal was to have the F-35B ready for a planned July initial operational capability (IOC) declaration, a major step for the program, greenlighting the plane to be used in combat. The declaration is a sign that the aircraft is nearly ready for full deployment, that things are going well, that the contract, awarded in 2006, was finally producing a usable product. The ultimate decision was in Dunford’s hands.

About a week before the declaration, some in the Pentagon expressed serious doubts about the aircraft. The Project On Government Oversight (POGO) obtained a memo through the Freedom of Information Act that revealed the performance of the jets to be poor. The memo, from the Director of Operational Test and Evaluation, called foul on the test that was meant to demonstrate the ability of the F-35B to operate in realistic conditions. “[The test] did not—and could not—demonstrate that the Block 2B F-35B is operationally effective or suitable for use in any type of limited combat operation, or that it was ready for real-world operational deployments, given the way the event was structured,” the testing office concluded.

Dunford, however, said he had “full confidence” in the aircraft’s ability to
support Marines in combat, despite the testing office’s report stating that if the aircraft encountered enemies, it would need to “avoid threat engagement”—in other words, to flee at the first sign of an enemy.

Ignoring the issues raised internally, Dunford signed off on the initial operational capability. Lockheed Martin was thrilled. “Fifty years from now, historians will look back on the success of the F-35 Program and point to Marine Corps IOC as the milestone that ushered in a new era in military aviation,” the company said in a statement.

Lockheed’s CEO was apparently elated, calling it a “huge milestone” that would “send a strong message to everyone that this program is on track.”

Problems continued to plague the “combat ready” aircraft in the months after the declaration. Flaws in the design of the ejection seat meant that pilots under 165 pounds had about a 25% chance of death and certainty of serious neck injury when ejecting. The software system was riddled with bugs that made maintenance a nightmare. The $400,000 helmet was proving to be a mess, with one test pilot complaining that “aft visibility will get the pilot gunned [down] every time.”

While the aircraft was barely able to fly half the time, Dunford’s career soared. He was confirmed as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff just a few months after the initial operational capability declaration.

Dunford’s cheerleading of the F-35 didn’t stop there. Dunford downplayed cost overruns and sang the aircraft’s praises at a press event in 2017. When the moderator asked routine questions submitted by the audience (Will the aircraft continue as a program? Is it too expensive to maintain?), Dunford responded by calling the questions loaded and accusing the audience member of having an “agenda.”

**RETIREMENT AND A REWARD**

On September 30, 2019, Dunford, the military’s highest ranked official, stepped down from his position as chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He had served in the Marine Corps since 1977, working his way up to the highest tier of the armed services over 42 years.

Just four months and 11 days later, he joined the Pentagon’s top contractor, Lockheed Martin, as a director on the board.

In announcing Dunford’s hire, a January press release from Lockheed Martin quotes CEO Marillyn Hewson: “General Dunford’s service to the nation at the highest levels of military leadership will bring valuable insight to our board.”

Dunford’s consistent cheerleading of the F-35 and his subsequent hiring at its manufacturer create the perception of a conflict of interest and raised the eyebrows of at least one former senior military official.

“He is being an advocate for it, having pressed it, having pushed for it … and now he’s going to work for the company that makes the aircraft, that just, to me, stinks to high heavens,” retired Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, who served as special assistant to Colin Powell when he led the Joint Chiefs, told POGO. “You are saying, general, that money is more important to you than the perception you are creating by doing what you’re doing.”

Dunford’s Rolodex of Pentagon decision-makers is valuable to defense contractors, and with just over four months to “cool off,” many of those relationships will likely be intact.

Lockheed Martin, which also commands tremendous influence over policy makers, Pentagon officials, and U.S. foreign policy, was the top recipient of Department of Defense dollars in fiscal year 2019, taking in over $48 billion, according to government data. The company spent over $13 million lobbying the federal government in 2019, according to data compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics.

POGO reached out to five former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs but none offered comments for this story.

**THE REVOLVING DOOR SPINS ON**

“I think anybody that gives out these big contracts should never ever, during their lifetime, be allowed to work for a defense company, for a company that makes that product,” then-President-elect Donald Trump said in a December 2016 rally in Louisiana. “I don’t know, it makes sense to me.”

Fast forward more than three years and the revolving door is spinning right along, defense stocks are surging, and Lockheed Martin has a record backlog of unfulfilled contracts. While Trump did issue an ethics executive order for his appointees, it did not include a lifetime ban on lobbying for contractors.

A POGO analysis of the post-government employment of retired chairs of the Joint Chiefs found that only four of the 19 people who previously held the position went immediately to work for a major defense contractor within two years after leaving the government. In addition to Dunford, Admiral William J. Crowe joined General Dynamics, General John Shalikashvili joined the boards of Boeing and L-3, and General Richard Myers joined the boards of Northrop Grumman and United Technologies Corp.

When Myers joined Northrop’s board, the company boasted in its
annual report of his “extensive experience with Department of Defense operations and requirements and in-depth knowledge on issues related to the intelligence community.”

Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs have many lucrative career opportunities that don’t create conflicts, actual or implied. Retired General Martin Dempsey, who held the position before Dunford, went on to teach at Duke University and was elected chairman of USA Basketball. Admiral Michael Mullen, who preceded Dempsey, joined the board of General Motors and later telecom giant Sprint.

According to Wilkerson, then-Chairman Powell was conscious of the appearance of conflicts of interest and instilled in his employees a sensitivity. Wilkerson recalled a conversation he had with Powell right after his retirement. “What’s next, boss?” Wilkerson asked Powell. “Well, it’ll not be some defense contractor or some beltway bandit. That practice is pernicious,” he responded. Powell spoke to various members of Congress about their responsibility to rein in the practice, and tried to raise awareness of how widespread it was becoming, according to Wilkerson.

Current ethics laws include various cooling off periods that limit a former government employee’s job options. These periods range from a few years to a lifetime, depending on how much an individual was personally involved in the decisions to award contracts. This means top officials actually have fewer restrictions than contracting officers that were directly involved in the awards, even though they have more influence and likely more valuable connections. And the restrictions mostly prevent former officials from taking positions that involve representing or lobbying for a contractor, which is why there was no restriction on Dunford joining Lockheed’s board.

The Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told POGO that Dunford “has certain post-government employment restrictions,” but wouldn’t go into more detail. Dunford “at all times complied with his ethics obligations related to post-government employment,” according to the emailed statement. The office would not release the underlying documents laying out the department’s ethics opinions. POGO has filed Freedom of Information Act Requests to learn more about Dunford’s ethical restrictions.

A POGO study of the revolving door in 2018 found that current ethics regulations are insufficient, rely on self-reporting, and are full of loopholes. For example, the current ethics rules do not apply to senior officials who shape requirements, drive policy changes and could influence the award of substantial contracts. In addition, the law does not ban “behind-the-scenes” work, meaning a new hire can help a contractor win contracts as long as they aren’t personally picking up the phone or attending meetings.

Thousands of Pentagon employees who fall under the ethics regulations pass through the revolving door each year. Enforcement of the regulations is rare, with only four people prosecuted for violations in the past 16 years. Because the current system requires voluntary disclosure of employment plans, and because the current laws are vague and complex, prosecutions for violations are unlikely to serve as a deterrent to illegal behavior. It is impossible to know if the low frequency of prosecutions in the current system is due to inadequate enforcement or high compliance with lax laws.

POGO has tracked hundreds of instances of high-level defense officials as they traveled the familiar path from the Department of Defense to a contractor. For the Air Force, Army, and Marine Corps, those ranks include colonel and above; for the Navy, those ranks are captain and above.

Since 2008, POGO found 42 senior defense officials “revolved” into Lockheed within two years of leaving the government. This includes the former head of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), Steven Walker, who joined Lockheed as its chief technology officer shortly after leaving his government position. DARPA is responsible for developing and fielding new technologies for the armed services. Under Walker’s tenure as director, the agency awarded Lockheed Martin over $285 million in contracts, according to government data. Records obtained by POGO indicate that he began talking to his future employer in October 2019, three months before he left DARPA, and disqualified himself from working on anything that would benefit Lockheed Martin, as the law requires. Walker left DARPA on a Friday and started at Lockheed on the following Monday. This move is possible because nothing in the law bars a senior official from immediately working for a defense contractor that benefits from the agency’s contracts, or even from plotting their next career move while in government service.

POGO examined the boards of the top five defense contractors and found that all have at least two sitting former high-ranking military officials. General Dynamics and Raytheon had four each, Lockheed, Boeing and
Northrop Grumman had two each.

The full number of revolvers is difficult to determine. Our database currently contains 408 individuals who either went to work directly with defense contractors that were awarded over $10 million that year or went to work with lobbying firms that list defense industry clients. The POGO database relies on open source information. Another study, by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, found that between 2009 and 2011, 70% of three and four-star generals and admirals who retired took gigs with defense contractors or consultancies.

In 2008, the National Defense Authorization Act required the Department of Defense to maintain its own database to track officials that seek employment with contractors. Multiple inspector general reports have found the department’s record keeping to be spotty and incomplete. A Government Accountability Office study of that data found that in 2006, about 86,000 military and civilian personnel who had left service since 2001 were employed by 52 major defense contractors. The study also found that 1,581 former senior officials were employed by just seven contractors. The office estimated that 422 former officials could have worked on contracts related to their former agencies. Attempts to obtain the database through FOIA have resulted in only highly redacted copies being released.

Wilkerson believes a message is being sent down from the top. “I think people have lost sight of this being any kind of ethical matter at all and it doesn’t help to have a president, a commander in chief, who has pretty much articulated that it doesn’t matter. We’re all in life for profit, we’re all in life to transact,” he said.

FROM 25 HEARINGS IN ONE YEAR, TO NONE IN 60 YEARS
This issue is far from new. In a 1959 House hearing, then-Vice Admiral Hyman G. Rickover put it this way, when asked about the influence of the revolving door: “I myself don’t get pressurized by outsiders, but they do go higher up and get pressure put on me that way. … It is generally in the nature of urging me to undertake new projects which we consider not worthwhile … it is almost subversive not to want to spend Government money.”

That year alone, there were 25 hearings before the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee for Special Investigations on the topic of the revolving door and its malign influences. President Dwight D. Eisenhower gave his famous farewell address warning of the military-industrial complex just two years later.

“I sense there is an odorous aura created by the extensive hiring of retired military personnel. This practice of hiring retired officials smells to the high heavens and races with missiles and aircraft to outer space,” Representative Alfred E. Santangelo (D-NY) said in another hearing on September 1, 1959.

In 1969, Senator William Proxmire (D-WI) warned that the revolving door was “solid evidence of the military industrial-complex in operation” and that it was a “real threat to the public interest because it increases the chances of abuse.” McCain was a more recent critic of the dynamic and quoted Proxmire in a 2011 speech on the Senate floor decrying the corrosive effects of the military industrial complex.

Despite this sort of occasional criticism, an analysis by POGO did not find a congressional hearing explicitly on the issue of the Pentagon revolving door in over 60 years.

When the highest ranked military official in the country joins the board of the largest defense contractor in the world shortly after retirement, this is the very situation that Ike warned against. There is some hope that the law will soon start to catch up. In May of last year, Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Representative Jackie Speier (D-CA) introduced legislation that would, as Warren put it, “[end] the stranglehold of defense contractors.” The legislation would impose a four-year ban on contractors hiring senior officials who managed that company’s contracts, and extend existing bans. It would also require contractors to submit annual reports on the employment of former senior officials and would ban senior officials from owning stock in major defense contractors.

Despite occaisional criticism, we have not seen a congressional hearing explicitly on the issue of the Pentagon revolving door in over 60 years.

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The Project On Government Oversight (POGO) is a nonpartisan independent watchdog that investigates and exposes waste, corruption, abuse of power, and when the government fails to serve the public or silences those who report wrongdoing. We champion reforms to achieve a more effective, ethical, and accountable federal government that safeguards constitutional principles.