

---

# PAST Organizational Problems

By DAVID C. JONES

[Editor's Note: In 1981, General Jones attempted to initiate an internal reorganization of the joint system. After meeting substantial resistance in the Pentagon, he began to speak out publicly in early 1982. His call for reform resulted in a five-year examination by Congress of the need for defense reorganization that eventually led to the Goldwater-Nichols Act.

After retiring, Jones published an article in The New York Times Magazine that outlined problems in defense organization. An edited, abridged version of that piece appears here. Reading it today conveys a sense of how dysfunctional the joint system was at the time and how far jointness has progressed since the enactment of Goldwater-Nichols.]

---

**General David C. Jones, USAF (Ret.), served as both Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (1978–82) and chief of staff, U.S. Air Force (1974–78).**

**D**uring a late-afternoon meeting at the White House a few months ago, President Reagan, who had just returned from horseback riding at Quantico, turned to me in jest but with a touch of nostalgia and asked, “Isn’t there some way we can bring back the horse cavalry?” My reply was: “Just wait, Mr. President. We are starting by resurrecting battleships.”

Below the surface of this lighthearted exchange lie two pervasive problems within DOD. First, we are too comfortable with the past. Second, we

**each service rests on imbuing its members with pride in its mission, its doctrine, and its customs**

do not make a sufficiently rigorous examination of defense requirements and alternatives.

By their very nature, large organizations have a built-in resistance to change. As the largest organization in the free world, our defense establishment has most of the problems of a large corporation but lacks an easily calculated “bottom line” to force needed change. At the core are the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force: institutions that find it difficult to adapt to changing conditions because of understandable attachments to the past. The very foundation of

each service rests on imbuing its members with pride in its mission, its doctrine, and its customs and discipline—all of which are steeped in traditions. While these deep-seated service distinctions are important in fostering a fighting spirit, cultivating them engenders tendencies to look inward and to insulate the institutions against outside challenges.

The history of our services includes striking examples of ideas and inventions whose time had come, but which were resisted because they did not fit into existing service concepts. The Navy kept building sailing ships long after the advent of steam power. Machine guns and tanks were developed in the United States, but the Army rejected them until long after they were accepted in Europe. The horse cavalry survived essentially unchanged right up until World War II despite evidence that its utility was greatly diminished decades earlier. Even Army Air Corps officers were required to wear spurs until the late 1930s.

But the Armed Forces are only part of the problem. DOD has evolved into a grouping of large, rigid bureaucracies—services, agencies, staffs, boards, and committees—which embrace the past and adapt new technology to fit traditional missions and methods. There is no doubt that the cavalry leaders would have quickly adopted a horse

which went farther and faster—a high-technology stallion. The result of this rigidity has been an ever-widening gap between the need to adapt to changing conditions and our ability to do so. Over the last two to three years the American public has become increasingly concerned over our deteriorating position in military power and convinced that we must devote more to our defenses than we did in the 1960s and 1970s. But after serving on the Joint Chiefs longer than anyone else in history and under more Presidents and Secretaries of Defense (four of each), and being a student of military history and organizations, I am convinced that fundamental defense deficiencies cannot be solved with dollars alone—no matter how much they are needed.

We do not think through defense problems adequately, and we are getting less capability than we should from our increased defense budgets. There is reason to believe that, faced with a contingency requiring a major joint operation, our performance would be below the level we should expect or need.

No one element of our defense establishment is singularly responsible for our problems. Those I will identify have existed too long to be the fault of any particular administration or of particular personalities in or out of uniform.

History books for the most part glorify our military accomplishments, but a closer examination reveals a disconcerting pattern:

- unpreparedness at the onset of each new crisis or war
- initial failures
- reorganizing while fighting
- building our defenses as we cranked up our industrial base
- prevailing by wearing down the enemy—by being bigger, not smarter.

We could do things poorly at the start of past wars and still recover because time was on our side.

The North during the Civil War was a striking example of a bureaucratized military establishment. Initially, the South had better leadership, was far more flexible, and was able to do a

great deal more with its limited resources and forces. The North suffered early defeats and encountered many leadership problems but finally won by virtue of overwhelming industrial output and military manpower.

We also had serious organizational problems during the Cuban campaign in the Spanish-American War. The interservice wrangling had been so great that the Army commander refused to let the Navy be represented at the formal surrender. Unfortunately, this was not the last case of split responsibilities and interservice conflicts obstructing our conduct of a war.

In the aftermath of the 1898 war the services, particularly the Army, instituted some organizational reforms. Despite a great deal of opposition, a chief of staff of the Army was created in 1903 and a chief of naval operations was established in 1916. But the War Department (the precursor of the Department of the Army and the Department of the Air Force) and the Navy Department continued to be riddled

### amendments to the National Security Act did little to alter the relative influence of the joint system

with semi-autonomous, often intractable fiefdoms, branches, corps, departments, bureaus, and so forth.

World War I was the most tragic example of trying to win a war through mass and attrition. Thousands of young men gave their lives to advance a few yards over enemy trenches, only to be thrown back the next day at an equal cost to the enemy.

The emergence of the airplane as a major military asset during World War I should have alerted us to the need to adjust our doctrines and organizations to changing realities. The continued development of airpower could not help but blur the traditional distinction between land and naval warfare, but the Nation reacted to this phenomenon in a traditionally bureaucratic manner: each service developed its own airpower (today there are *four* airpower entities) and protected it with artificial barriers to obscure costly duplications. One barrier, established in

1938 (later rescinded), prohibited any Army Air Corps airplane from flying more than 100 miles out to sea.

The Army and Navy began World War II with authority and responsibility diffused. Each still had many semi-autonomous agencies with little coordination below the chief of service level. Soon after Pearl Harbor, General George C. Marshall, Army chief of staff, streamlined the Army by reducing the number of officers with direct access to him from 61 to 6. The Navy also made some adjustments. (The services have since slipped back into their old patterns. The number of officers having direct access to service chiefs—especially when the joint system is considered—is again very high.)

The Joint Chiefs were established early in 1942 as a counterpart to the British Chiefs of Staff Committee. Although the wartime chiefs addressed certain priority issues, to a great extent World War II was fought along service lines. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his United States (as distinct from his Allied) role, reported to Marshall.

In the Pacific, the difficulties of integrating the operations of the services resulted in the establishment of two separate theaters: the Southwest Pacific Area, with

General Douglas MacArthur reporting to Marshall, and the Pacific Ocean Area, with Admiral Chester W. Nimitz reporting to Admiral Ernest J. King, chief of naval operations. Split authority and responsibility in the Pacific was a continuing problem and nearly caused a disaster during the battle of Leyte Gulf. Today the Pacific has been joined into one command and our combat commanders now report directly to the Secretary of Defense rather than to their service chiefs. But the Army, Navy, Marine, and Air Force components of our combat commands report both to their chiefs and combat commanders, and the service chiefs still have the greatest influence over their actions. Furthermore, many fundamental problems of the World War II joint system still exist below the surface.



DOD (Frank Hall)

**Gen Jones (center) with the chiefs, 1979 (from left): GEN Edward C. Meyer, chief of staff, U.S. Army; ADM Thomas B. Hayward, chief of naval operations; Gen Lew Allen, Jr., chief of staff of the Air Force; and Gen Robert H. Barrow, commandant of the Marine Corps.**

We won World War II despite our organizational handicaps, not because we were smarter, but once again because we and our allies were bigger. We had the time and geographic isolation to mobilize American industry and a superb code-breaking effort to aid our intelligence gathering.

As the war drew to a close, an exhaustive debate ensued on how to organize the postwar military. The Army favored a highly integrated system, but the Navy and others were strongly opposed, some fearing that the Army would dominate any integrated system. The Air Force, then still a part of the Army, supported integration but was primarily interested in becoming a separate service.

Those opposed to integration were backed by stronger constituencies, including powerful forces in Congress, than were the advocates of unification. Arguments that unification threatened civilian control over the military soon dominated the debate.

So after nearly two years of studies, debate, and political maneuverings, the National Security Act of 1947 emerged with a compromise military establishment: a loose confederation of large, rigid service bureaucracies—now four rather than three—with a Secretary powerless against them.

Amendments to the National Security Act in 1949, 1953, and 1958 strengthened the Secretary's authority and expanded the size and purview of his staff but did little to alter the relative influence of the joint military system and services.

President Eisenhower had recommended a much stronger joint system in 1953 and 1958, and his wisdom was borne out by our conduct of the Vietnam War—perhaps our worst example of confused objectives and unclear responsibilities both in Washington and in the field. Each service, instead of integrating efforts with the others, considered Vietnam its own war and sought to carve out a large mission for itself. For example, each fought its own air war, agreeing only to limited measures for a coordinated effort. “Body count” and “tons dropped” became the measures of merit. Lack of integration persisted right through the 1975 evacuation of Saigon—when responsibility was split between two separate commands, one on land and one at sea. Each of these set a different “H-hour,” which caused confusion and delays.

Our soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen have acted bravely throughout our history. With few exceptions, our forces have performed well at the unit level. And there have been bright moments at the higher levels also. The landing at Normandy, Patton's charge

across France, the battle of Midway, and the landing at Inchon were brilliant strategic conceptions, valiantly executed. But these peaks in martial performance followed valleys in which the Nation found itself poorly prepared, poorly organized, and imperiled by inadequacies in Washington. In the past, we had time to overcome our mistakes. Our allies often bore the initial brunt, and we had the industrial capacity for a quick buildup in the military capacity needed to turn the tide. Today we can expect no such respite. Our allies could not delay the Soviet Union while we prepared, and our industrial base has fallen into a state of disrepair. Nuclear weapons have added new dimensions which make constant readiness even more critical. If we are to deter another conflict, or to succeed if one be thrust upon us, we must be prepared to do things right on the battlefield the first time.

A sound defense posture should begin with sound long-term planning, a means to measure progress, and authoritative direction and control to insure that all elements contribute to a well-defined objective. On the surface, our system appears to provide such an orderly approach. The process starts with a *Defense Guidance* document prepared by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, based on administration policy and fiscal guidance and on inputs from field commanders, services, Joint Chiefs, the OSD staff, and other relevant sources. The ser-



Joint Chiefs of Staff,  
February 1950.

DOD

vices build their annual programs on the basis of the *Defense Guidance's* objectives and budget targets and then submit them to the Secretary of Defense. The Secretary convenes a committee to review the documents and recommend changes to bring the service programs into conformance with the Nation's priorities. After being submitted to the President and Congress for approval, the budgets are administered by the services and agencies assigned to DOD.

But this process starts to break down at the very beginning because the military strategy contained in the *Defense Guidance* always demands greater force capabilities than the budget constraints will allow. Some administrations have attempted to limit the requirements by calling for the capability to fight "one and a half" or "two and a half" wars, while others have proposed preparing for global war almost without limits. In any case, the guidance almost invariably leads to what the Joint Chiefs have long called the "strategy-force mismatch" as requirements outpace capabilities.

Current guidance is so demanding that developing truly coherent programs to carry it out is impossible even under the most optimistic budget assumptions. There is simply not enough

money in the projected defense budgets to fulfill all stated requirements, but the *Defense Guidance* does little to set meaningful priorities or mandate a search for new directions to maintain our security. This is not a problem unique to this administration.

Since requirements exceed resources, the services invariably allocate resources among their traditional missions and seek ways to justify a greater share of the budget. But additional funds are likely to come only from another service's share, so each attempts to outgame the

others without sufficient regard for cross-service programs.

The vast array of service programs is then submitted to the defense committee. The name and composition of the committee may vary from administration to administration, but its function remains the same. Currently it is called the Defense Resources Board and is chaired by either the Secretary or Deputy Secretary and includes the service secretaries, Assistant Secretaries of Defense, and Chairman. The service chiefs attend as observers.

### chiefs are judged by their services on their success in obtaining funding and on protecting service interests

Week after week, the board meets in an attempt to examine major issues, but the focus is primarily on service programs, which include many hundreds of items deemed essential by their advocates. The board fusses over marginal changes in programs, but it is literally impossible for it to address them in sufficient depth or to focus on the most critical cross-service issues.

The Joint Chiefs and Joint Staff are assigned a role in this process, but each service usually wants the Joint Staff merely to echo its views. Since

four of the five members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are also service chiefs, a negotiated amalgam of service views almost invariably prevails when inputs are finally proposed by the Joint Staff. The Chairman is the only military member of the Defense Resources Board and can offer independent opinions, but he has only five people working directly for him to sift through the various issues. (The Joint Staff belongs to the JCS corporate body, not the Chairman.) Consequently, Chairmen traditionally focus on a few critical items. In my case, they were readiness, command and control, and mobility.

The result of this tedious process is a defense budget derived primarily from the disparate desires of the individual services rather than from a well-integrated plan based on a serious examination of alternatives by the civilian and military leadership working together. Inevitably, a Secretary of Defense either supports a total program that is roughly the sum of the service inputs (limited by fiscal guidance) or resorts to forcing changes, knowing that advocates of disapproved programs will continue the opposition into the congressional hearings.

But resource allocation by the board is only the beginning of the problem. The optimism expressed in program proposals seldom comes true. The chairman of the Defense Science Board, Norman Augustine, has written that over the last thirty years our major weapons systems have met performance goals 70 percent of the time (not bad) but have met schedules only 15 percent of the time and cost estimates only 10 percent of the time even after accounting for inflation.

As costs increase, programs are stretched out. Weapons are usually ordered in numbers well below efficient production rates, to the detriment of the "industrial base." This only leads to further cost increases, the cycle repeats itself, and we find ourselves trapped in a catch-22 situation. Tough decisions are not made, so the financial "bow wave" that always spills

ahead is magnified. Attempts to improve efficiency, such as the administration's multiyear procurement contracts, are very helpful but do not get to the fundamental problems of planning and resources.

The lack of discipline in the budget system prevents making the very tough choices of what to do and what not to do. Instead, strong constituencies in the Pentagon, Congress, and industry support individual programs, while the need for overall defense effectiveness and efficiency is not adequately addressed.

Pentagon leadership finds it virtually impossible to find the time necessary to impose discipline on the budget process. Cycles overlap and, as this year, we usually find Congress considering a last-minute multibillion-dollar supplemental appropriation at the end of one fiscal year and unable to agree on the budget before the start of the next fiscal year. At the same time, the Pentagon is struggling with the next five-year defense plan and the subsequent budget submission. This immerses the leadership constantly in confusing external struggles for public and congressional support and bewildering internal disputes over resources and turf.

The same pressures burden the service leaders as they attempt to cope with managing procurement programs, recruiting and training the forces, and maintaining discipline and esprit. Chiefs are judged by their peers and services on their success in obtaining funding for their own major systems and on protecting service interests in the three afternoons a week they spend in meetings of the Joint Chiefs. Furthermore, a service chief, who is a service advocate in one hat and supposedly an impartial judge of competing requirements in his other hat as a member of the Joint Chiefs, has a fundamental conflict of interest.

To sum up, our defense establishment suffers serious deficiencies, including the following:

- strategy is so all-encompassing as to mean all things to all men
- leaders are inevitably captives of the urgent, and long-range planning is too often neglected

- authority and responsibility are badly diffused
- rigorous examination of requirements and alternatives is not made
- discipline is lacking in the budget process
- tough decisions are avoided
- accountability for decisions or performance is woefully inadequate
- leadership, often inexperienced, is forced to spend too much time on refereeing an intramural scramble for resources
- a serious conflict of interest faces our senior military leaders
- the combat effectiveness of the fighting force—the end product—does not receive enough attention.

Before too much criticism is heaped on the current administration, let me point out that these problems have been with us for decades and there are no easy solutions.

What all this adds up to is that it is an uphill struggle for anyone—including a Secretary of Defense—to gain real control of our defense establishment. One study on defense organization stated that everyone was responsible for everything and no one was specifically responsible for anything. The top leadership is too often at the mercy of long-entrenched bureaucracies. It is ironic that the services have, with considerable help from outside constituencies, been able to defeat attempts to bring order out of chaos by arguing that a source of alternative military advice for the President and Secretary of Defense runs the risk of undermining civilian control.

There has for some time been an imbalance in the degree of control that our civilian leadership exercises over operational and other defense matters. In operational matters, it is pervasive. An order cannot go out of Washington to move a ship or other combat unit or to take any other specific operational action without the specific approval and initialing of the directive by the Secretary of Defense. At times, Secretaries and their staffs have been involved in the most minute details of operations.

In other areas, civilian influence is more often apparent than real. Secretaries of Defense are given very little comprehensive advice on alternative strategies or systems. In an attempt to fill the void, they have often turned to

civilian analysts for such advice. These consultants can provide a useful service, but they cannot make up for the absence of alternative advice from experienced, serving military officers. That the Joint Chiefs, a committee beholden to the interests of the services, has not been able to provide such advice during its existence is amply documented in scores of studies over many years.

Civilian accountability in DOD is undermined further by the rapid turnover or inexperience in the senior leadership. In the 35 years since it was founded, there have been 15 Secretaries of Defense, and there have been 19 Deputy Secretaries in the 33 years since the establishment of that position. A recent study revealed that civilian policymakers in DOD stay on the job an average of only 28 months.

Little of what I have said is new. Reams of paper have been used since World War II to describe these deficiencies. President Eisenhower, who knew both sides of the civilian-military equation well, tried to resolve the basic problem, but the effects of his efforts were limited. Others have also tried but with even less success. Bureaucratic resistance to change is enormous and is reinforced by many allies of the services—in Congress and elsewhere—who are bent on keeping the past enthroned. Civilian defense leaders have been reluctant to push hard for changes, either because they thought they could not succeed or because they did not want to expend the necessary political capital which they believed was better spent on gaining support for the defense budget. Many have feared that raising basic organizational issues might distract attention from the budget and give ammunition to opponents, who would use admissions of organizational inefficiency to argue for further budget cuts. Yet, since the public already believes that all is not right with DOD, bold reforms would not only increase our effectiveness but strengthen public support as well.

That the balance of influence within the defense establishment is oriented too much toward the individual services has been a constant theme of

many past studies of defense organization. A special study group of retired senior officers just this April found it necessary to report that “a certain amount of service independence is healthy and desirable, but the balance now favors the parochial interests of the services too much and the larger needs of the Nation’s defenses too little.”

It is commonly accepted that one result of this imbalance is a constant bickering among the services. This is not the case. On the contrary, interactions among the services usually result in “negotiated treaties” which minimize controversy by avoiding challenges to service interests. Such a “truce” has its good points, for it is counterproductive for the services to attack each other. But the lack of adequate questioning by military professionals results in gaps and unwarranted duplications in our defense capabilities. What is lacking is a counterbalancing system involving officers not so beholden to their services who can objec-

### service chiefs almost always have had duty on service staffs but almost never on the Joint Staff

tively examine strategy, roles, missions, weapons systems, war planning, and other contentious issues to offset the influence of the individual services.

President Eisenhower tried to resolve this problem in 1958 by removing the services from the operational chain of command. In essence, two separate lines of authority were created under the Secretary of Defense: an operational line and an administrative line. The operational line runs from the President, through the Secretary of Defense, to the combat commands—those theater or functional commands headed by the Eisenhowers, the Nimitzes, the MacArthurs of the future. The Joint Chiefs are not directly in this line of command but do, through the Joint Staff, provide the Secretary oversight of the combat commands and pass his orders to them. The administrative line runs to the military departments responsible for recruiting, training, procurement, and a myriad of other tasks necessary to develop the forces assigned to the combat commands.

President Eisenhower intended that the operational side would assist the Secretary of Defense in developing strategy, operational plans and weapons, and force-level requirements based on needs of “truly unified commands.” The Joint Chiefs and Joint Staff were to be the *Secretary’s* military staff in this effort. The services would remain the providers of the forces needed by the combatant commands but would not determine *what* to provide or how those forces would be employed. But President Eisenhower did not achieve what he wanted. The scales of influence are still tipped too far in favor of the services and against the combat commanders.

Although the combat commanders now brief the Defense Resources Board and have every opportunity to communicate with the Secretary of Defense and chiefs, virtually their only power is that of persuasion. The services control most of the money and the personnel assignments and promotions of their people wherever assigned, including in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, and unified command staffs. Officers who perform duty outside their own services generally do less well than those assigned to duty in their services, especially when it comes to promotion to general or admiral. The service chiefs almost always have had duty on service staffs in Washington but almost never on the Joint Staff. Few incentives exist for an officer assigned to joint duty to do more than punch his ticket and then get back into a service assignment. I cannot stress this point too strongly: He who controls dollars, promotions, and assignments controls the organization—and the services so control, especially with regard to personnel actions.

Yet it is very difficult to break out of the DOD organizational maze. Many have struggled vainly within the system to improve the balance between the operational and administrative lines. Solutions to some of the basic interservice problems are heralded every few years but to this date have not addressed the fundamental causes. To

provide a balance, the services must share some of their authority, but they have proved to be consistently unwilling to do so. A service chief has a constituency which, if convinced that he is not fighting hard enough for what the service sees as its fair share of defense missions and resources, can destroy the chief’s effectiveness.

Only the Chairman is unconstrained by a service constituency, but he is in a particularly difficult position. His influence stems from his ability to persuade all his colleagues on the Joint Chiefs to agree on a course of action, and any disagreement requires a report to the Secretary by law. A Chairman jeopardizes his effectiveness if, early in his tour, he creates dissension within the corporate body by trying to force the services to share some of their authority.

Congressional action is needed on these organizational issues—the most important defense problem facing the Nation. Additional money is badly needed for defense, but without major realignment we will neither achieve the necessary capability nor spend the money as wisely as we should. The critical question is whether we will show the wisdom to do as the British did with their 1982 reorganization or muddle along as we have in the past until some crisis or disaster awakens us to the need for change.

JFQ

The original version of this article, entitled “What’s Wrong with Our Defence Establishment,” appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* on Sunday, November 7, 1982, pp. 38–39, 41–42, 70, 73–74, 76, 78–83, and is reprinted with the permission of the author.