

Generals Marshall and  
Eisenhower, 1943.

# Defense Secretariat REFORM

By ULDRIC L. FIORE, JR.

**T**he immediate post-World War II period was a turning point for the defense establishment. A confluence of circumstances propelled transformations that will continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The National Security Act of 1947 began a process of unification. President Harry Truman named General George Marshall to be Secretary of Defense and upheld civil supremacy over the military by relieving General Douglas MacArthur. And the onset of the Cold War initiated the evolution of the multilayered defense bureaucracy which still thrives today.

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Fifty years later, however, there is a consensus that additional reform is needed to ensure national security. The Commission on Roles and Missions, Quadrennial Defense Review, Defense Reform Initiative, and National Defense Panel called for revamping the Department of Defense. This article argues that reform must extend to the defense and service secretariats, that is, to the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the subcabinet level offices of the three service secretaries. Such reform is not only advisable for fiscal reasons, it is the next step in the process of unification that began in 1947. It is critical for maintaining civilian supremacy and reversing the deterioration of this traditional role into the modern and less efficient concept of civilian control.



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General MacArthur  
during Inchon landings.

Naval Historical Center

### The Tradition

Civil supremacy is not merely civilian control but rather military subordination to the people through their elected officials, Congress and the President. This tradition emerged in England when the Bill of Rights of 1689 prohibited standing armies in peacetime without the absolute consent of Parliament. The Constitution of the United States reinforced this ideal by granting to Congress, not the President, the power to raise, support, and regulate the military, and naming the President as Commander in Chief only of those forces which Congress provides.

Notwithstanding an inherent suspicion of standing armies and emphasis on subordination to civil authority, Presidents have often had considerable military experience. George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, William Harrison, Ulysses Grant, and Theodore Roosevelt all led units in combat. That experience was not perceived as a threat to civil supremacy and, because they were duly elected officials, Congress retained its constitutional role.

The Army has been favored by some uniquely powerful leaders, none of whom defied civil supremacy. Washington publicly resigned as commander in chief following the British surrender at Yorktown, ensuring civil governance. But Washington was elected President and later

named commander in chief of the Army by Thomas Jefferson. Winfield Scott, who served commanding general of the Army from 1841 to 1861, was a candidate for the Whig Party nomination in 1852. George McClellan openly prepared for a presidential campaign while on active duty and ran against Abraham Lincoln in 1864 after resigning. Leonard Wood campaigned for a nomination in 1920 while Douglas MacArthur, a general officer for 33 years and one of the most powerful officers in U.S. history, accepted relief from command by President Truman and also flirted with thoughts of running for the presidency.

Many secretaries of war had served as Army officers, starting with the first, Henry Knox, and including Henry Dearborn, Jefferson Davis, William Sherman, and John Schofield. None of them considered their military status a threat to civil supremacy.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this record, when Truman asked Congress in 1950 for a waiver to name General of the Army George Marshall as Secretary of Defense, it had been 30 years since any military officer had served in this civil arena.<sup>2</sup> Although Marshall was highly respected by Congress, a serious, principled, and nonpartisan debate on civil supremacy ensued in both chambers. The vote on the waiver passed by only a bare majority in the House and a plurality in the Senate. After further debate, the Senate confirmed Marshall in a less than overwhelming vote.

Congressional discomfort was short-lived. Less than seven months later Truman relieved MacArthur from command in Korea. As unpopular as that decision was, the President's authority was unquestioned, least of all by MacArthur, and represented a reaffirmation of civil supremacy.<sup>3</sup> MacArthur addressed a joint session of Congress, and true to his words, did "just fade away."

It was well that Congress resolved its concerns. Within a year, the slogan "I like Ike" was a resonating political theme, and within two years General of the Army Dwight Eisenhower, after resigning his commission, would take the oath of office as President—and Commander in Chief.

Events through the end of the Truman administration confirmed the nature of civil supremacy.<sup>4</sup> It is a tradition of the military being "subject to the President, the Congress, and the will of the people"—to elected civil authority.

### Defense Unification

Throughout World War II the defense establishment was comprised of the War and Navy Departments. These coequal, cabinet-level bodies

### Truman asked Congress for a waiver to name Marshall as Secretary of Defense

Secretary Aspin and General Powell, 1993.



competed for influence with the President and for resources before Congress. The services achieved the necessary cooperation through an ad hoc Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The National Security Act of 1947 consolidated the defense establishment under a cabinet-level Secretary of Defense and loosely subordinated the three military departments: Army, Navy, and Air Force. This law also created the National Security Council and Joint Chiefs of Staff, with a rotating chairman as a first among equals.

Reorganization was not without controversy, especially among the services, which stood to lose autonomy and status, and members of Congress, who would be denied access and influence. The result was a less efficient structure and a weak Secretary of Defense with more autonomous service secretaries than initially proposed. For example, service secretaries retained cabinet-level rank and became full voting members of the National Security Council. The effort to combine two cabinet departments into one yielded four.

Congress twice amended the National Security Act to strengthen the role of the Secretary of Defense vis-à-vis the service secretaries. The amendments of 1949 removed the service secretaries from the National Security Council, reduced them to subcabinet rank, clarified their subordination to the Secretary of Defense, and established the position of Chairman of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff, though without any command authority or vote within the Joint Chiefs. In subordinating military departments to the “direction” of the Secretary of Defense, Congress nevertheless stipulated that they would be separately administered and not merged.

The DOD Reorganization Act of 1958 further refined relationships. Military departments would be separately organized rather than administered and put under the “direction, authority, and control” of the Secretary of Defense. In addition, the law explicitly granted the Secretary authority to reorganize departments and defined the chain of command as passing from the President through the Secretary and Chairman to theater commanders. Thus Congress settled the authority of the Secretary in law if not in practice—law that would remain essentially unchanged for 25 years.

### Goldwater-Nichols

The next significant reform was the Goldwater-Nichols DOD Reorganization Act of 1986. Much of the debate over the impact of this legislation fails to recognize that it was not an event unto itself, but rather a continuation of the unification process which began after World War II.<sup>5</sup>



Secretary of the Navy  
Danzig at Pentagon  
briefing.



DOD (Helene C. Stikkel)

The intent of Congress was to enhance the ability to command on the part of the Secretary. Moreover, the Goldwater-Nichols Act bolstered the roles of the Chairman, Joint Staff, and unified commanders “to improve the military advice

In addition, while operational authority is more central, civil supremacy over the military is not degraded. The civilian authority of the Secretary of Defense is enhanced. Even civilian control is not lessened. It has simply been shifted to the defense secretariat from service secretariats.

### **Goldwater-Nichols achieved a more centralized defense secretariat, strengthened the Joint Staff, and fostered jointness among the services**

given to the President, Secretary of Defense, and the National Security Council.”

General Colin Powell, the first Chairman to serve a full term in the Goldwater-Nichols era, applied his talents to take full advantage of the authority granted to him and the Joint Chiefs under this law. Although the purpose of Congress was to strengthen civilian authority, the enhancement of the Chairman’s role and authority, along with Powell’s exploitation of it, have been assailed as “the collapse of civilian control over the military.”<sup>6</sup>

But there is general agreement that the law achieved a more centralized defense secretariat, strengthened the Joint Staff, and fostered jointness among the services. Officers receive more joint education. Moreover, because assignments rotate between joint and service tours every few years, there is little entrenchment, and each cohort of new officers gains a better joint perspective.

### **From Supremacy to Control**

Much criticism of Goldwater-Nichols is focused on its impact on civilian control. The law followed unprecedented growth of the secretariats (Defense, Army, Navy, and Air Force) as well as the defense agencies, Joint Staff, and service staffs. Secretariats—small oversight and coordination entities before the 1950s—blossomed during the Cold War, which for the first time justified a large peacetime military. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his whiz kids brought corporate style management to the Pentagon, while increased resources required to support the arms race and space programs, superpower competition, and the Vietnam War sustained multilayered defense and service bureaucracies. These factors simply brought more civil authority over daily activities.

Congress was a willing accomplice in this bureaucratic expansion. “Since 1947,” explains David Smith, “[Congress] added not only the civilian Secretary of Defense but also a host of other civilian appointed officials within the office of the Secretary of Defense [and service secretariats].”<sup>7</sup> Each assistant secretary acquired a large

staff, portfolio, agenda, and congressional constituency. Members of Congress and their staffs enjoyed more access, wielded greater influence through political appointees, and tasked secretariats for more frequent and detailed reports.

The current structure results in duplication, overlapping functions and authority, limited accountability, and parochialism. Between 1987 and 1994, while overall military strength declined by 25 percent, presidential appointees increased by 40 percent. During that period, overall civilian strength decreased by 20 percent, but senior level employees (GS 12–15) increased by 20 percent.<sup>8</sup> The average tenure of appointees, however, is less than two years, and military personnel rotate almost as often, with general and flag officers averaging two years and less senior officers two to three years. By contrast to political appointees and military officers, senior civil employees often spend decades in a secretariat without required rotations.

Those who call for increased jointness must recognize that one of its greatest impediments is multilayered entrenched secretariat bureaucracies. This structure is a legacy of the compromises made in 1947 and management systems prevalent in the corporate world throughout the Cold War and introduced by McNamara to the Pentagon. Since the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act threats to national security have become less apocalyptic and less defined. The Armed Forces have undergone drastic reductions in personnel while adopting business management practices that have created flatter organizations and promoted increased outsourcing. But such reforms have not made a significant impact on the defense or service secretariats, whose organization charts have retained their overall breadth and depth. These secretariats remain full-blown, multilayered bureaucracies with agendas as parochial as those of the service staffs.

The headquarters of the Department of Defense still includes some 30,000 personnel which suggests that:

*It is time to streamline the management structure of the military departments by eliminating duplication, layering, and redundant operations and personnel. This would simplify the decisionmaking process, providing clearer accountability for performance, and improve the efficiency of the policymaking machinery of defense management.<sup>9</sup>*

### Reform versus Control

The civilian oriented secretariat structure is larger than that required to maintain civil supremacy. According to one critic, "The Office of

the Secretary of Defense is more than capable of exercising civilian control of the military. . . . You could do away with [service secretaries] tomorrow, and no one would miss them."<sup>10</sup>

Those who oppose proposals to reform, streamline, or otherwise reduce the size, scope, or authority of the secretariats argue that these organizations are essential to ensuring civilian control over a highly centralized military establishment. They claim that civilian control is a fundamental principle. There is some truth in this assertion. Centralized authority in the Secretary of Defense, Chairman, Joint Staff, and unified commanders, in combination with the inevitable drawdown of the defense establishment, may reduce the quantity of civilian management. But the advocates of civil control also have it wrong. While essential to maintaining civil supremacy, civilian control is not an equivalent. Rather it is a product of the Cold War without constitutional basis.

Neither the Goldwater-Nichols centralization of operational authority nor a centralization of secretariat authority through reduction and reform jeopardizes the traditional and constitutional civil supremacy exercised by Congress or the President as Commander in Chief. Reduced control is no threat to civil supremacy and therefore should be no obstacle to secretariat reform.

In urging combined service secretariats and staffs, the *Report of the Commission on Roles, Missions and Functions of the Armed Forces of the United States* issued in May 1995 concluded that the disadvantages are outweighed by the advantages. As one observer asked: "Considering both the downsizing of the Armed Forces and the loss of responsibility and authority of the service secretaries and military chiefs of staff, do we need both levels and their large staffs. . . ?"<sup>11</sup> He concluded that "service secretaries and their separate staffs . . . represent unnecessary layering that is no longer needed within DOD."

### A Concept for Reform

Three objectives must guide secretariat reform: maintaining civil supremacy, incorporating organizational and management systems to accommodate innovation, and eliminating duplication and unnecessary layering. Although clearly the priority, civil supremacy is not at risk in secretariat reform. Since the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the Secretary of Defense, supported by the Chairman, has the authority to maintain civil supremacy in almost any reform scenario that does not regress to stronger, independent service secretaries. Nor is civilian control in danger. With 7,000 personnel, even if Defense Reform Initiative reductions are implemented or service secretaries and secretariats were eliminated altogether, there

would be enough civilian appointees in the Office of the Secretary of Defense to retain authority.

Reform must be flexible enough for secretaries to incorporate modern organizational and management systems and 21<sup>st</sup> century innova-

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management systems**

tions. Legislation that overly specifies organizational structure would limit the department's ability to adapt, whether in warfare or business practices. Nevertheless, reform must eliminate

redundancy. Lack of legislative guidance in this area would invite innovative initiatives to maintain the status quo. Secretariat reform thus must balance the flexibility to prepare for the future with addressing present organizational and management flaws.



Secretary Cohen and  
General Shelton, 1998.

DOD (Helene C. Stikkel)

Despite the potential for duplication and inefficiency, service secretaries should be retained. Their traditional roles are important. Moreover, their specific and at times parochial perspectives are essential to policy debate within DOD. While service secretaries are no longer essential to civil supremacy itself, the Secretary of Defense needs their varied perspectives and competing visions to formulate national military strategy and defense policy.

The service secretariats could be consolidated into the defense secretariat by function. The secretaries could be retained to perform traditional and statutory functions but with modest personal staffs, relying otherwise on service staffs and chiefs to act as true chiefs of staff. Liberated from secretariat bureaucracies, service secretaries could evolve into dual roles: their traditional role and a cross-service role as under secretaries of defense for land, sea, or aerospace forces (or similar titles and portfolios).

In their traditional role, the secretaries would have direct access to the Secretary of Defense on behalf of their respective departments as well as supervisory authority over service chiefs and staffs. Their joint role would add DOD-wide staff coordination authority within their cross-service areas of responsibility (land, sea, or aerospace) to coordinate policy, acquisition, and the allocation of resources. For example, it would be appropriate for the Secretary of the Army in a capacity as under secretary of defense for land forces to become involved in issues affecting the Marine Corps and Air Force relating to common doctrine, equipment, and training. Similarly, an under secretary of defense for aerospace forces would have legitimate interests in naval as well as Army aviation and space issues.

Given functional consolidation, service assistant secretaries would report to the appropriate under secretary or assistant secretary of defense or a new element if a like function does not exist. The Office of Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, for example, would be folded into the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

After consolidation is completed the defense secretariat should be reorganized to eliminate duplication and overlapping as well as reduce personnel to the minimum level required for assigned functions. The goal should be a flat, streamlined organization that has functional integrity within each defense secretariat element or subdivision. Jurisdictional overlap and unneeded layers must be eliminated. An organizational study similar to those used to contract out government operations would be essential to ensure the benefits are realized. To bring about personnel savings, the process must specify endstate ceilings for civilian and military positions as well as grade ratios that do not exceed current grade distributions.

Some estimate that overall savings could be equal to current manpower levels in the service secretariats: 1,000 personnel with an annual payroll of \$125 million or more. More importantly, the synergy of reform could produce intangible benefits. A consolidated defense secretariat would be joint, with each staff element including



deputy under secretaries or deputy assistant secretaries representing land, sea, and aerospace forces.

Integrating service secretariats and staffs would further advance jointness and the evolution of service secretaries into dual roles. New titles would underscore both traditional and joint roles; for example, an under secretary of defense for land forces who is also the Secretary of the Army. Cross-service involvement would not be to the exclusion of parent service responsibilities, but rather would offer complementary perspectives. Nor would their involvement across the defense secretariat reduce the authority of the Secretary of Defense.

Title 10 responsibilities as well as other special functions (inspector general, public affairs, and legislative liaison) could be retained by the service staffs, subject to secretarial authority unless they are merged in the defense secretariat for greater efficiency. Functions such as acquisition and resourcing may be appropriate to divide by assigning long-term duties (research and development, major acquisition development, and resource programming and planning) to the defense secretariat while maintaining smaller acquisitions and the execution phases of system acquisition and fielding, budgeting, and budget execution with service staffs.

Reform of the multi-secretariat defense structure is inevitable given the fifty year process of unification and resource constraints that demand greater efficiencies. This pressure to reform does not threaten traditional civil supremacy. Nor does it restrict civilian control unless one concludes that bureaucratic inefficiencies are its absolute prerequisites.

Reform must be deliberate and flexible. It requires objective, credible organizational study and specific objectives to ensure savings and efficiencies. Yet it must preserve the ability to evolve flexibly within the defense establishment without resorting to Congress for incremental authority.

Functional consolidation of service secretariats into a reorganized defense secretariat would complete the unification process begun over fifty years ago. The result will not only meet the key objectives for secretariat reform—civil supremacy, flexibility, and resource savings—but enhance jointness within the civilian hierarchy.

Dual-roled service secretaries could cross existing lines under their respective land, sea, or aerospace portfolios to enhance commonality and multiservice issues, while consolidated elements of the defense secretariat could draw upon joint expertise without appealing to parochial agendas. In short, service secretariats need not be the third rail of defense reform.

JFQ

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Disputes between commanding generals of the Army and secretaries of war usually were concerned with authority over the headquarters bureaus (similar to elements of service staff today), the location of military headquarters, and the power of a secretary to issue orders directly to field commanders. Winfield Scott was the center of two such controversies. In 1828 he protested the appointment of Alexander Macomb as commanding general by Secretary Peter Porter. Macomb was the same rank as Scott but junior in seniority. In 1854, now commanding general himself, Scott challenged the authority of Secretary Jefferson Davis. The President ruled in favor of his secretary in both matters. Scott continued to serve despite these confrontations, waiting 13 years to succeed Macomb as commanding general and serving in that capacity well beyond his dispute with Davis. Until the reforms sponsored by Secretary Elihu Root, commanding generals usually considered themselves field commanders, with their headquarters away from Washington.

<sup>2</sup> The National Security Act of 1947 stipulated that the Secretary of Defense be selected from civilian life and excluded former officers who had not been retired or discharged for 10 years. By law generals of the army do not retire but retain active status for life. Absent congressional waiver, Marshall was ineligible. This same restriction applies today.

<sup>3</sup> Edward B. Westermann, "Contemporary Civil-Military Relations: Is the Republic in Danger?" *Airpower Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995), p. 76; Geoffrey Perret, *Old Soldiers Never Die* (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 569.

<sup>4</sup> For a well-documented history of the American civil supremacy tradition through 1950, see William R. Tansill, "The Concept of Civil Supremacy in the United States," Public Affairs Bulletin 94 (Washington: Library of Congress Legislative Reference Service, February 1951).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, James R. Locher III, "Taking Stock of Goldwater-Nichols," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 13 (Autumn 1996), pp. 10–16; Robert Previdi, "Goldwater-Nichols: Where Have Ten Years Taken Us?" *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 123, no. 5 (May 1997), pp. 14–16; John E. Greenwood, "Editorial: Goldwater-Nichols," *Marine Corps Gazette* (February 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr., *Unification of the U.S. Armed Forces: Implementing the 1986 Department of Defense Reorganization Act* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1996), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> David A. Smith, "Who Needs the Secretariats," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 121, no. 12 (December 1995), p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> William K. Brehm, "On Revolution, Barriers, and Common Sense," lecture, National Defense University, Washington, December 3, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, "Secretariats," p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> Chuck Vinch, "AF, Army Keep Ticking without Civilian Bosses," *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, March 26, 1998, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, "Secretariats," p. 43.