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THE CASE FOR LIMITED REFORM OF THE JCS

by

BRUCE PALMER, JR.

In researching this essay, I looked back to recall my experience in the joint system for a period of roughly 20 years from 1954 to 1974. It involved various positions such as Commander US Forces, Dominican Republic, 1965; Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, US Army; Vice Chief of Staff and Acting Chief of Staff, US Army, between Generals Westmoreland and Abrams; and Commander US Readiness Command, a unified command.

During this period, I was associated with five Chairmen of the JCS and their special assistants; eight Directors of the Joint Staff (three Navy, three Army, two Air Force); four Army Chiefs of Staff; three CNOs; four Air Force Chiefs of Staff; and three Commandants of the Marine Corps; not to mention their Vice Chiefs and Operations Deputies. In all, a lot of outstanding people—the best of their respective services.

In reflecting on this joint experience, I was struck by the influence of the personalities involved, not only of the military men concerned, but even more importantly of the top civilian leaders, starting with the President and his Secretary of Defense. Their attitudes make a great difference on how well the JCS system works.

President Eisenhower liked the services but held them at arm's length, bending over backward not to show any preferential treatment, especially toward the Army. It was an unhappy period for the Army because the CJCS, Admiral Radford, visualized only a minor job for the Army in the nuclear age. General Taylor, the Army Chief of Staff, was frustrated and after his retirement wrote a

book, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, that describes his dissatisfaction during this period.

President Kennedy was a very warm person who had a deep concern and affection for the military, perhaps as a result of his World War II service in the Navy. The Bay of Pigs fiasco, however, had left him with a lack of confidence in the senior military officers, the JCS, which had to be overcome. I first met him when he visited the 82d Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in the fall of 1961—he made a deep impression on all of us. His death was a great loss to the nation and was felt especially in the armed forces.

With the abrupt end of the Camelot years, President Johnson's advent came as a distinct shock. He did not care much for the military and generally showed it. He treated me personally very well because of our successful mission accomplishment in the Dominican Republic, but he basically distrusted the military and saw it as a threat to his plans for the Great Society. I recall one meeting he had with the Chiefs, who rather timidly broached the subject of a pay raise. His response was to knock their heads together verbally and say, "You people have been nipping on the bottle too much."

The President's attitude was shared by his Secretary of Defense. McNamara expressed his philosophy at a meeting with the JCS during the same period with the comment that compensation for the military must not be as attractive as compensation in the private sector, as it was important to ensure that the higher quality people remain in the civilian society. When Admiral Moorer, then

CNO, asked whether the Secretary considered the armed forces as second-class citizens, McNamara replied, "If you want to interpret it that way, yes." McNamara did his best to dominate, if not intimidate, the Chiefs. His successor, Clark Clifford, was a smooth operator who had no real interest in the job nor in the problems facing our armed forces.

President Nixon respected the armed forces and at times seemed a little awed by senior military officers. He was a little reticent with the Chiefs but in talking directly with a field commander could be quite lively, explicit, and effective in getting across his desires. Nixon's Secretary of Defense Laird was a wise, skillful politician and bureaucrat. The problem the JCS had with him, and with some subsequent Secretaries, was in understanding and interpreting what his real views were. He could be oblique and indirect, and he was a master at spinning his own programs (scarcely resembling the official ones submitted to the Congress) through informal contacts with key members of the Congress. He did not always see eye-to-eye with the President, and an adversarial relationship developed as a result.

Secretary of Defense Richardson was a fast learner and a gentleman, and he sincerely liked the armed services. He was not happy when he had to leave the job after only a few months.

Secretary of Defense Schlesinger did not suffer fools easily and terrified even senior people at times. He had strong views that he did not hesitate to express, and he could be bitterly intolerant of the JCS. Yet, I found him easy to talk to and get along with.

The personalities of the Chiefs themselves, especially the Chairmen, also had a large influence on their effectiveness as a collegial body. I recall the rather unpleasant feeling that existed between General Taylor, the CJCS, and General LeMay, Chief of Staff, US Air Force. They each had hearing difficulties and unfortunately had to sit next to each other at JCS meetings with their bad ears side by side. The hearing problem compounded a natural distaste for each other, and the meeting could well end suddenly with General Taylor slamming his

briefing book shut, adjourning the seminar, and stalking out of the room.

When General Abrams became the Army Chief and I served briefly as his Vice Chief, he told me that he planned to send General Haig, slated to succeed me, to all JCS meetings in his stead. We finally talked him out of it, pointing out that this was his primary duty under the law and that it would be unfair to the Chairman and the other Chiefs, not to mention the Army. Abrams nevertheless remained hostile to the joint system and much preferred to work directly with another Chief, particularly General Ryan, the Air Force Chief, who was not enamored of the joint system either. In fact, the two of them got together on many matters so often, particularly in the doctrinal area, that they somewhat usurped REDCOM, whose primary job was to see that the Army and Air Force trained together and exercised the joint interfaces between the two services.

The reform of the JCS organization and system is a perennial and favorite topic for the critics of the Department of Defense. Unfortunately, many of the highly vocal commentators have had little, if any, actual experience with the JCS. The JCS are

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often unjustly blamed for shortcomings that are quite beyond their control and are inherent in the legal underpinnings of the organization of the Department of Defense. Thus, it seems fundamental that any discussion of JCS reform should be preceded with at least a brief reminder of how the Department of Defense and JCS came into being. Moreover, it is important to recognize how the very nature of the organization of the DOD affects the role of the military, in particular the JCS.

Many people have forgotten the highly charged, often bitter, debate that surrounded the passage of the National Security Act of 1947 not long after the end of World War II, not to mention subsequent debates when significant amendments to the act were legislated in 1953 and 1958, changes that continue to have a major effect on the way the DOD functions today. There were truly head-on struggles between the advocates of strong central direction of a more unified military structure and the champions of a loose confederation of separate military departments and services. In the initial debate, the Army, which at that time included the land-based air forces, generally supported the more centralized solution while its air element was primarily interested in breaking away from the Army and becoming a separate service. The Navy and the Marine Corps, on the other hand, have always strongly opposed any real unification, pointing out very properly that they already had an army (Marine Corps), navy, and air element, and were therefore unified—why break up a going team? This is a persuasive argument, and if I were in the Navy I would probably support it.

In any event, the confederationists won the first battle, and in effect, with the birth of the Air Force, we had triplication rather than unification of the services. However, the confederationists over time have lost ground while the authority of the Secretary of Defense over DOD has become absolute, at least as spelled out in the law. The role of the Chairman, JCS, likewise has become more powerful both by law and practice, although

he still functions as the first among equals. In the process the service secretaries have been downgraded to below cabinet rank and the military departments or services have been, at least theoretically, removed from any operational authority or responsibilities.

The significant point, however, is that the basic confederate or committee nature of the JCS organization has remained essentially unchanged while the Office of the Secretary of Defense from the beginning has functioned as an entity under the control and direction of one person, the Secretary. As an institution the JCS cannot function in a manner divorced from the interests of the several services, and so there is a built-in conflict of interest that is inherent, unavoidable and, indeed, was intended by the legislative framers of the laws dealing with DOD.

A second significant point is that Congress has not shown any inclination over the years to change the basic organization of DOD. Most members of the Congress seem to have liked it that way, although this consensus might be changing. Nevertheless, the current organization gives each individual member more clout because he or she can deal separately with each service and department, as well as OSD. This fact permits members to play both ends against the middle, one service against another, thus increasing the influence of individual members and committees in defense matters. The present DOD organization also allows each member direct access to more groups of constituents with common interests, and thus more political power. Another factor in the past has been the strong antipathy of the Congress toward anything suggesting a single chief of staff or one general staff.

But the most important reason of all has been that most members of the Congress sincerely believed that the nation's security is enhanced, if not safeguarded, by having competing groups share in the shaping of our national security policy, especially when it comes to overall strategic concepts and interrelated basic defense policies. I share this general notion. Furthermore, the above circumstances lead me to believe that fun-

damental changes in the structure of the DOD are probably not in the cards and that the only practical course of action, if one has JCS reform in mind, is to work within the present arrangement. This is not to say, however, that there is no room for improvement. I believe that major improvements can be achieved in the effectiveness of the JCS system, even though some changes may require relatively minor amendments of current statutes.

It is not difficult to understand why the frequent panels and studies on reorganization have not gotten very far in the past. At least one such effort has occurred during the tenure of every Secretary of Defense since the last major legislative change of 1958: some initiated by the Administration, some by the Congress, and others on the part of private research groups and think tanks, both private and quasi-governmental. The pace of such efforts to effect change seems to have accelerated in recent years. Indeed, they have spawned specific legislative proposals from the Congress that have in turn compelled the current JCS to respond with their own proposals. On top of all this, self-proclaimed defense experts, some serving in influential positions on congressional staffs and others writing as private citizens, have come forward with solutions of their own that are sometimes half-baked and infeasible.

The most recent such effort is a book, *The Pentagon and the Art of War*, written by Edward Luttwak. In this book, which was a best-seller, Luttwak makes certain observations about the DOD that are quite valid although much of his criticism is overdrawn and inaccurate. Unfortunately his solution is narrowly focused on the JCS, ignoring the many other problem areas in the DOD but proposing a drastic plan that would abolish the JCS, reduce the power and stature of the service Chiefs, and establish an elite central military staff under a five-star officer, composed of "national-defense officers" divorced completely from their original parent services. Not satisfied with this sweeping proposal, Luttwak would have all

unified commands commanded by these new national defense officers with the staffs of the unified commands made up of such officers as well. I suspect that his proposal has little, if any, chance of being considered seriously by responsible officials in either the Department of Defense or in the Congress. It certainly does not appeal to me.

Returning to the basic differences between the JCS and OSD, perhaps the most significant has been that the Joint Chiefs have been unable to participate effectively in key defense program and budget decisions which drive the force structure of each service and thus have a profound influence on the strategic concepts pursued by the United States. This has come about not necessarily because civilians want to dominate or denigrate the military. Rather, it has stemmed from the fact that the Joint Chiefs have been reluctant to insert themselves into this process and prefer to articulate overall views as to the force and weapon system requirements of the services. Unfortunately, these requirements invariably exceed what the Administration is willing to support for defense and thus are of little practical value to the Secretary of Defense.

Given reasonable time and the pressure created by a major crisis, the JCS system can provide sound, coherent, timely advice, but it is usually in response to a specific situation. It should be remembered, however, that many other agencies—State, OSD, CIA, and the National Security Advisor—contribute to national security decisions, and that the JCS views on matters of strategic importance are only one source. Nevertheless, JCS views with respect to major issues, for example the Panama Canal Treaty and the SALT II Treaty, can have a very large influence on their acceptance or rejection. But on questions of force structure, programs, and budgets, the joint system, because of its basic nature and built-in internal conflicts, has had little influence on OSD decisions. Instead, the Secretary of Defense and his civilian staff have been left with a clear field to formulate the options and surface fresh ideas without a

coherent, nationally oriented input from the JCS that transcends service biases. Clearly this is not a healthy state of affairs, but one that has come about by default, because of the basic inhibitions inherent in the joint system, and is further aggravated by the way the system functions.

With respect to the forces in the field and the control of operations, the Joint Chiefs play an important role but, in some ways, only a nominal role. Neither the JCS nor the services are formally in the chain of command to the unified commanders, although the JCS by OSD directive generally act as a conduit for the Secretary of Defense who *is* in the direct chain of command running from the President as Commander in Chief to the unified commanders. But the unified commanders, who have operational control of all US combat forces, have had no formal military boss, and until recently no one outside those commands reviewed their plans or the effectiveness of their control, training, and operational supervision of their assigned forces. Recent statutory changes, however, are beginning to bring about an improvement in that respect. Nevertheless, the most damaging aspect of the relatively weak relationship between the JCS and the unified commanders has been the tendency to avoid involvement in issues deemed to be the province of a single service even when the issues may have an adverse effect on the operational forces.

At this juncture it may be helpful to recall the basic roles and missions of the services as prescribed by statute. Each service is charged individually with being organized, trained, and equipped for prompt and sustained combat operations in its respective environment—land, sea, or air. Moreover, each is assigned primary interest in all operations in its own medium, with specific exceptions spelled out in the pertinent statute. Although the services technically are confined to administrative and logistic matters, in reality it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to divorce them completely from so-called operational matters.

How does one separate organization, training, weapons, and equipment from the operations they are designed to carry out? This is particularly difficult for the Navy and its Marine component, as well as for the Air Force, because these services possess strategic mobility by virtue of their own strategic lift. How can the Navy ignore the operational aspects inherently involved in the constant presence of US warships on the high seas? If an incident occurs at sea, the Secretary of Defense, not to mention the President, will look to the Secretary of the Navy and the CNO, as well as the unified commander involved and the JCS, for information, advice, and recommendations. It is inescapable, and I see no alternative for the Navy but to keep a close operational overwatch of its ships and fleets at sea. Likewise, the Air Force constantly has aircraft in the air all over the world and cannot divest itself of a certain amount of responsibility for its people no matter where they may find themselves. The Army and the Marine Corps inherently have the same kind of responsibility for their soldiers and Marines, but to a lesser extent because they are strategic hitchhikers who generally do not have their own means of strategic lift.

At any rate, it seems clear that the very nature of the joint system and the very existence of separate services have tended to inhibit the role and voice of the military. It follows then that if the military wants to counterbalance the evergrowing ascendancy of OSD, it can only do so by changing the nature of the JCS organization. Indeed, it seems imperative at this point that the current body of Chiefs not only be willing to accept change, but also take the initiative and recommend specific revisions in order to contain the pace of such change and influence its direction.

Let us now turn to specific proposals that might be considered within the outlines I have briefly discussed. I will try to confine my thoughts to those proposals where, in my opinion, a clear case can be made. My listing is not necessarily in any order of importance or priority.

Status of Senior Chiefs. I do not support the idea of replacing the JCS with a council of advisers, but rather support the dual role of the senior Chiefs.

The Chain of Command. Present statutes are currently interpreted to mean that the chain of command shall run from the President as Commander in Chief to the Secretary of Defense to the unified commanders in the field, and that the JCS are confined to an off-line advisory position. I use the word "interpreted" because the pertinent statutes (Title 10—Armed Forces, Sub Title A—General, Part I—Organization and General Military Powers) are not entirely clear on the matter. At any rate, past and present Secretaries of Defense have seen fit to place the JCS in the chain of command between the Secretary and the unified commanders by means of an OSD directive. In my view this command arrangement is seriously flawed. I accept entirely the necessity to give the Secretary all the peacetime authority he needs to raise, train, equip, and budget for the armed forces, but I do not believe that he should be made responsible for their performance in battle. Our experiences in Vietnam—when at times our commander in the field, as well as the CJCS, received conflicting orders from the President and Secretary of Defense—convinced me that in time of crisis, emergency, or war, the operational chain of command must go from the President directly to the JCS and thence to the unified commanders. Conflicting instructions were issued regarding at least two operations during the Vietnam War: the ground attack against NVA sanctuaries in Cambodia and the Linebacker II bombing campaign. The Secretary of Defense must not be in a position to override or amend Presidential operational decisions involving orders to the combatant forces. There can be only one Commander in Chief!

Therefore, I believe that present statutes should be amended to make it clear that operational orders from the President functioning as the Commander in Chief relating to strategy, tactics, and operations will normally be issued to the combatant

commanders through the JCS. In order not to limit the flexibility of the President, the law should provide an escape clause that would allow the Commander in Chief to give deputized authority to the Secretary of Defense for specific times and purposes. The intent of such legislative changes would be to avoid formally placing the Secretary of Defense in the *regular military chain* of command, handling operational matters, except under extraordinary circumstances expressly authorized by the President.

Chairman, JCS, and the NSC. The CJCS should be made a statutory member of the National Security Council, not just an advisor—as is his current status. All too often he is excluded from the high councils of the government, some of which may be considerably smaller and more informal than full-scale NSC meetings but nevertheless carry much weight. During the first four days of the Dominican Republic crisis that began on 25 April 1965, President Johnson met almost continuously in the White House with his closest personal advisors and the Secretaries of State and Defense, but without the CJCS, General Wheeler, who was not invited until 29 April after numerous significant decisions already had been made. Other examples of such exclusion were commonplace during the Vietnam War. Making the Chairman an NSC member is not a guarantee that he will always be invited to the high-level councils handling national security affairs, but it should serve to inhibit any tendency to exclude deliberately a military voice.

Civil-Military Relations. During the Vietnam War, especially during the Johnson Administration, there was ample evidence of poor civil-military relations at the highest levels in Washington. The overriding need for close civil-military relations in wartime is, in my opinion, one of the most important lessons to be remembered from that tragic experience. To carry out his functions as Commander in Chief, the President must have direct and frequent access to the JCS, collectively and individually. If he neglects them or allows his Secretary of Defense to isolate the Chiefs, he does so at the nation's

peril. The position taken by the Secretary of Defense is fundamental to the question of good civil-military relations. All too frequently Secretaries have shut off access to the President and blocked JCS recommendations from reaching the President. Indeed, by always insisting on being present when the President meets with his Chiefs, a Secretary can effectively inhibit any frank exchange of views and suppress the discussion of dissenting views, a situation which could prove disastrous in wartime. Perhaps the ever-present threat of nuclear warfare will deter any total war for survival in the future, but as the Vietnam War has demonstrated, the United States can lose big even in a relatively small limited war.

In this connection, it is comforting to hear that President Reagan is meeting regularly with the Chairman and the other Chiefs.

The JCS and Force Structure, Program, and Budget Issues. This is one of the thorniest problems of all: how to get the JCS system intermeshed with the decision-making process in OSD that determines the force structure, program, and budget for each service. One solution, which would greatly increase the power of the Chairman, would be to charge the CJCS, in consultation with the other Chiefs, but not necessarily with their individual or collective consent, with the responsibility of providing advice to the Secretary on force structure, program, and budget issues. In this role, the Chairman would be supported by the Joint Staff or OSD staff as appropriate. Admittedly this is a contentious proposal but it is the kind of bold proposal that the JCS must consider if they are to stay in the defense ball game.

The Joint Staff. Frequently new ideas are put forth to improve the expertise, professionalism, objectivity, and the like of the Joint Staff. My impression of the Joint Staff during my service was that it was an experienced, professional, and dedicated group. Nevertheless, efforts to improve the quality of the Joint Staff should have worthwhile payoffs. However, to achieve the goal of developing people that are both well grounded and experienced in their parent service and in the joint arena will require, in

my opinion, a drastic change in the current concept of what constitutes a full military career. Thirty years of service for colonels and 35 years for most general and flag officers are the present limits for career officers. These are simply inadequate periods of time to acquire truly professional standards of excellence in a wide range of command and staff jobs in the individual's parent service and, additionally, in joint positions of important responsibility.

Before I conclude, I would like to point out that there are numerous problem areas within the DOD that are *very probably far more serious* than the JCS problem, if there is a critical one on that score. I might point out just a few:

A bloated bureaucracy exists in the Pentagon, especially with respect to the OSD staff and the staff secretariats of the service Secretaries. The proliferation of interminable layers of review within the DOD stifles initiative, consumes an enormous amount of time and energy, and constitutes a major source of discontent and low morale among the staff "troops" in Washington. Indeed, the services probably lose more outstanding officers because of this intolerable situation than for any other single reason. I feel certain that given the will and direction from the Secretary of Defense, far-reaching improvements in the way the DOD does its business could result.

There are also too many officers (field grade and above) in each service and there are far too many on duty in Washington. I am familiar with the historical reasons for these conditions, but they do not excuse inaction. It will take a lot of courage for the DOD and the Congress to tackle this one, but it is a situation that must be confronted and dealt with because it is potentially ruinous to the good name of the armed services. On the other hand, the benefit of correcting these weaknesses would be enormous for the nation as well as the DOD.

Finally, I have two gratuitous suggestions for the JCS:

First, there is a perception in some quarters that our armed forces can handle in a commendable manner a large crisis or

emergency if given plenty of strategic warning and allowed sufficient time for planning, mobilization if indicated, and the like, but that they are ill-prepared to handle a sudden, small problem that requires swift, decisive action. It strikes me that in today's world of unexpected hostile acts to our people abroad we need a different arrangement outside the normal unified command structure to cope with such threats. I sincerely hope that our Chiefs are addressing this problem as a matter of urgency.

Second, today the DOD is essentially geared to a peacetime mission of deterring hostilities and preparing for possible war, but it would have immense difficulties in going to war. This is admittedly my perception, but I strongly believe that the present superstructure of the DOD would soon collapse in a major emergency or conflict, and that drastic surgery would be required to achieve a streamlined organization that could get

things done in an effective way and in the least amount of time. Again, it is my hope that the Chiefs have a small group quietly looking at the situation with a view to having some drastic reorganization proposals ready, if and when the occasion should arise.

In summary, I have tried to give some historical background and context to the question of JCS reform and have concluded that only evolutionary change is possible in time of peace. Wartime might be an entirely different horse race. I have also indicated that the inevitable trend seems to be toward more centralized authority within the DOD and that the JCS should recognize this by taking the initiative and possibly preempting less-desirable proposals. And, finally, I would underscore that some other problem areas appear to me to have far more potentially damaging aspects than any that exist within the joint system.

