

## Bankrupt and Irrelevant: the Presidential Debates and Four Recent Studies on Pentagon Spending

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Counterpunch, AUGUST 30, 2019



*F-35s. Photo: US Air Force.*

In the almost 12 hours of Democratic Party presidential primary debates on June 26-27 and July 30-31, the words “Pentagon budget” or “defense spending” were not uttered, except for a fleeting, unanswered comment from Senator Bernie Sanders. Nor did any of the cable news moderators ask a single question about the more than [\\$1.25 trillion dollars](#) spent in 2019 for national security.

This is sad but unsurprising. Despite the parade of scandals and the billions of dollars wasted on [poorly performing, schedule busting, cost exploding weapons systems](#), the [dismal failure of the Department of Defense’s \(DOD\) audit](#), the grossly [overpriced spare parts](#), the [ethically challenged senior](#) leaders and the widely reported collapse in [training and readiness](#), the issue of Pentagon spending and a decaying defense has been steadfastly shunned by both the candidates and the debate moderators.

Many people are quite happy about that. They wear star decorated uniforms in headquarters around the globe and expensive suits in corporate board rooms, congressional hangouts on Capitol Hill and wood-paneled offices on the E-ring of

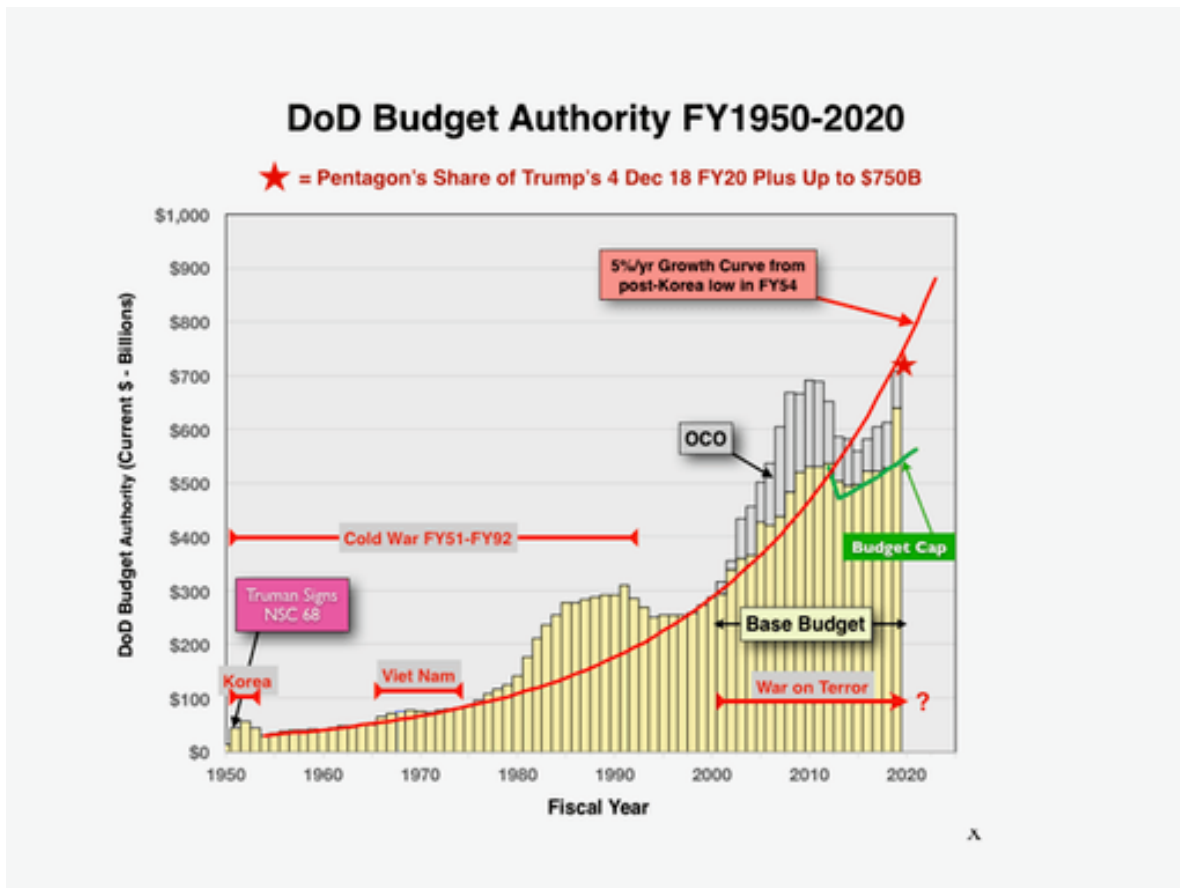
the Pentagon. The brass and the suits are well aware that candidate interest in their stewardship could get more than a little embarrassing.

Clearly, the Democratic candidates think they have good reasons for their silence on defense spending. [Political gurus](#) urge them to avoid serious, fundamental criticism of the military services. After all, such criticism can get costly—both in unkind media fault-finding and vanishing campaign donations. There’s a long history of Pentagon-critical politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, trashed by the warhawk media and the corporate shills for being “[anti-defense](#)” and [not “supporting the troops.”](#)

Being literally non-existent, this year’s defense debate is every bit as bankrupt as ever.

Obviously, real scrutiny is badly needed. Tinkering with defense budget cuts here and there won’t do. Instead, changes must be based on a deep understanding of why we are now spending more in inflation adjusted dollars than at any time [in post-World War II history, excepting Obama’s 2010 spending peak](#)—and why we now have the smallest, most problem-riddled forces as well.

We need to start with the simple fact that defense spending since the Korean war has never fallen below a long term 5% growth curve (in current dollars), quite independently of strategy, worldwide threats or changing alliances. As shown in the figure below from a [new analysis](#) tracking annual appropriations, the American political-military-industrial system has developed a safeguard system to perpetually increase the money flow.



In other words, for 65 years the military budget's inexorable expansion has not been controlled by the dramatic changes in America's actual national security needs but by political and independent cash flow demands from inside the Pentagon, Congress, industry, and think tanks.

Secondly, we need to recognize that this inexorable money growth [has shrunk our forces and weakened their capabilities](#) so dramatically that today we would be utterly unready for and incapable of supporting—much less winning—Korean or Vietnam war sized campaigns. War with Iran [would be disastrous](#) according to [insightful current military assessments](#).

There are underlying pathologies that connect rising spending with decaying force effectiveness. This naturally leads to the idea that we can have a better defense for less money, but only if the proposed budget changes—along with other reforms—address those pathologies. Without doing so, the big spenders in the Department of Defense, the White House and the Congress as well as the campaign-donating greasers in defense corporations, Wall Street and K Street will happily cherry pick the line item changes they like and trash the rest. Business as usual in the Pentagon will march on; the soul-destroying American wars will continue, and trillions will be wasted on perpetuating the decay of our defenses.

Without bearing directly on these basic pathologies, how can any analysis be relevant?

Four recent national security studies by respected Washington think tanks and issue organizations address the current defense spending problem. They each cut DOD programs and change policies to save money. The 25 authors (some with decades of experience and for whom we have real appreciation) have written over 50 recommendations supported by considerable details. That the Democratic candidates have publically ignored them all does not speak to the studies' quality. Instead, it speaks to the candidates' unwillingness to pick a fight with the horde of big spending advocates in both parties who will sling Pentagon- and corporation-written slick rebuttals, but certainly not campaign contributions, at any proposed reduction. Nonetheless, the studies warrant close examination as they exemplify the character of today's inside-the-beltway Pentagon criticism.

Taken together, the four studies have three common themes:

+ The US wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Somalia and elsewhere—initiated or perpetuated by Presidents Bush, Obama and Trump—have “[failed](#)” and “[have made the world more dangerous](#),” and something should be done. The ‘something’ varies from study to study.

+ The massive nuclear programs initiated by President Obama and expanded by President Trump should be partially reduced or eliminated—again, the recommendations vary.

+ A long list of conventional weapons, basing infrastructure and Pentagon military and civilian personnel programs should be cancelled or reduced. The four cut lists have many common elements, several of them sourced from the Congressional Budget Office’s “[Budget Options](#)” book, an annual publication which in the past has generally been ignored except by a small pockets in Congress and a few think tanks and issue organizations. Each study differs, however, on details and how much money to save.

The four studies’ recommended cuts vary from \$1.25 trillion to \$3.5 trillion over ten years. Two of the studies state they want to spend the savings on domestic programs; the other two do not commit themselves.

### **Beware the Caveats**

Inspected closely, many of the recommendations have caveats, not all of them stated clearly.

The most ambitious of the studies is the [Center of International Policy’s “Sustainable Defense: More Security, Less Spending.”](#) It credits 16 authors, some of them also involved in the other papers. It calls for an end to “endless wars” but also [allows for](#)

“a small, short-lived train and assist role.” We have been training and assisting in Iraq, Afghanistan and many of the rest for decades, all costing scores of billions of dollars. The training and assist deployments are already smaller than before. What is to be achieved with a “small, short-lived” presence is unclear. Moreover, there is no mention of pulling back the thousands of very expensive US contractor personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere who are [doing the same training and support, and more, and who in Afghanistan, for example, significantly outnumber US Armed Forces personnel](#). The study does separately recommend reducing overall DOD contract personnel, but it does not specify where, and it cites the reduction as only a cost saving measure, not a war-reduction measure. This is not a plan to end the US role in these wars but to continue it, pointlessly but at a reduced level that is to be “short-lived.” When was it not to be that?

A different study from the Institute for Policy Studies and allied organizations, the [“Poor People’s Moral Budget,”](#) has 10 authors. They clearly recommend “bring home the troops” without any “train and assist” caveat. However, they do not mention the thousands of US civilian contractors, their “train and assist” involvement in the wars nor their high cost.

“[The Agenda](#)” for the National Priorities Project study, [“People Over Pentagon”](#) does not list the author(s) of its “Agenda,” and it does not say what it wants to do about the troops and contractors deployed in the various wars. It does state, “The U.S. should never again go to war without congressional authorization, and Congress should not authorize military action without identifying revenue to pay for current and future costs, including taking care of injured veterans.” And further on — “Examples of illegal wars include the conflicts in Yemen, Somalia, Libya and Syria” — an assertion that lawyers for Presidents Obama and Trump have consistently ignored as they exploit Congress’ expansive mandate, the post-9/11 Authorization for Use of Military Force.

“The Agenda” cites a [“Guide to Cuts.”](#) This is the Project On Government Oversight’s (POGO) study, [“Spending Smarter, Spending Less: Opportunities to Reduce Excessive Pentagon Spending,”](#) which POGO also lists at its own website. The text is silent on Iraq; for Afghanistan the recommendation is to reduce the troop presence by half. In-theater contractors are not mentioned. Elsewhere, like the Sustainable Defense report, POGO urges a non-specific 15% cut in service contractors. Again, the stated reason is to save money rather than to address the wars.

In sum, the four studies appear to recommend continuing, at some level, the US troop and/or contractor role in these wars—with the possible exception of the “Poor People’s Moral Budget,” which may want to bring home the US contractors without actually saying so.

Each of the studies calls for [“eliminating”](#) the Pentagon’s special Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) account ([“slush fund”](#)), an account that was deliberately exempted from statutory budget caps on the basis that it was just to pay for the various wars. Not quite: for more than a decade the Pentagon and the

Congress have been stuffing in extra and ever growing non-war billions. Sadly, the studies have no advice on how to eliminate this slush fund. Exhort the Pentagon and the defense committees in Congress to stop abusing the account? Good luck with that. Effective action would be to simply repeal the provisions of the 1990 Budget Enforcement Act that permit money designated “emergency” by Congress and the President to be exempted from discretionary spending caps. In 1991 the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) tried to rein in the slush by releasing a directive restricting this spending to what was “[necessary, sudden, urgent, unforeseen, and not permanent.](#)” Congress and Presidents Clinton, Bush, Obama and Trump (and subsequently OMB itself) have made an unholy mockery of that directive. It’s obviously time to just repeal the exemption and return to the traditional, pre-1990, budget supplemental process when emergencies arise. Otherwise, this cap-dodging charade will simply persist.

The four studies contain various recommendations that look like they should not be controversial: reduce contract personnel especially those that are outsourcing jobs DOD civilians can and should perform at lower cost, close excess DOD bases and DOE nuclear facilities, and eliminate at least some parts of the ten year, [\\$494 billion](#) nuclear weapons “modernization” program launched by President Obama and augmented by President Trump – a program whose stated costs are assuredly understated and whose lifetime burden will easily exceed \$1 Trillion.

Again, however, there are caveats. The Sustainable Defense and POGO reports urge elimination or reduction of several of the nuclear programs. The former recommends the elimination of the nuclear triad’s land leg and cancelling the new Obama/Trump ICBM program — but indirectly supports going ahead, in reduced numbers, with the new Columbia ballistic missile submarine program (SSBN).

POGO also recommends cancellation of the new ICBM program, but retains the triad’s existing Minuteman ICBMs and the existing Trident SSBNs—both in reduced numbers. This triad advocacy overlooks the serious analyses—including [one from GAO](#) from as long ago as 1993 as well as a 2009 study in [The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists](#)—both recommending a non-ICBM “dyad” because it made no economic, military or deterrent sense to retain the ICBM force. (GAO also found the nuclear strategists’ declaration of dangerous “ICBM vulnerability” to a “disarming” Soviet/Russian first strike to be unsupported by the data and wantonly overstated.)

As with the call to eliminate the OCO slush fund, all the base closing (BRAC) recommendations fail to specify any useful action. Presidents and the military services have recommended closings for years. A previously cooperative, even if reluctant, Congress has simply refused ever since Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld crafted a BRAC that actually raised costs—thereby presenting Congress with a handy excuse to reject all future base closing proposals. The four studies provide no hint of any practical step for overcoming Congress’ dedication to the pork that prevents the needed cooperation. Clearly, suggestions for creative new legislative (or executive) tactics are needed, not just high-minded recommendations.

## Playing into Pentagon Pathologies?

From the perspective of doing something about ingrained DOD pathologies, the most problematic of the various study recommendations are those on weapon systems and force structure. We will cite just two examples, but there are many more.

The [Sustainable Defense report](#) makes recommendations to reduce active Army end strength by 13%—specifying explicit reductions in brigade combat teams, combat support and “infrastructure personnel,” but it doesn’t examine the Army’s and the other services’ massive [bloat in field grade officers](#) and [headquarters personnel](#). It would also reduce the Navy from the current 297 to 264 ships, reducing carriers from 11 to nine—without specifying whether to stop buying failure-ridden [\\$14 billion Ford class carriers](#) to replace older, far more reliable carriers. Completely unmentioned is the extreme vulnerability of aircraft carriers to the world’s stockpiles of cheap carrier-sinking weapons: mines, diesel-electric submarines and sea-skimming anti-ship missiles. Even more fundamentally, the report leaves unaddressed the central naval question: can we or should we rely on carriers as the centerpiece of American intervention for the indefinite future?

For the rest of the surface fleet, the report recommends building 36 new frigates to be based not on the disastrously failed Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) design, but on “existing, reliable frigate designs.” Left unanalyzed is the [\\$1 billion-or-more cost](#) imposed on the frigate by out of control Navy requirements and the ship’s unsuitability for actual littoral control, just like its LCS predecessor. Also recommended is building 10 more nuclear-powered attack submarines, with new “payload modules” and larger launch tubes, without examination of the added cost or the utility of the add-on features.

The Sustainable Defense report would also reduce the active Air Force inventory from 1,200 fighters and attack aircraft to 1,050. Using somewhat vague language, it recommends “reducing demand” for F-35A purchases by eliminating six “squadron equivalents,” which the report calculates to be 170 aircraft in both combat and non-combat units: in other words, a token 10% reduction of the Air Force’s planned 1,763. This is without considering the F-35A’s extreme [limitations in close support and in maneuvering air combat](#), among a host of [additional problems](#). The study also mentions an unspecified reduction of the 260 planned Navy F-35Cs, but no cut in the 420 Marines’ F-35Bs despite this version’s even poorer close support capability, higher cost and complexity, lesser range and payload, higher vulnerability and [abysmal reliability](#).

The Sustainable Defense study sums up saying, “[Although smaller than today’s military, this armed force would remain the most powerful on earth, well equipped for current and emerging security challenges.](#)” In fact, it says it would protect “[the United States and its allies more effectively at a lower budgetary cost.](#)” (Emphasis added.) Taken together, with the retirement of older systems and ‘modernizing’ with smaller numbers of more complex and much more expensive new systems, the

Sustainable Defense authors are recommending a smaller, higher tech, supposedly cheaper force.

We have tried that before. As some of us have been pointing out for decades, this really means a smaller, older on average, more expensive, less effective force. [Details abound](#) and [have for years](#). DOD's version of the high tech route to modernization has been shrinking US forces for 65 years. That has proved more expensive, not cheaper. Combat capabilities have diminished, and we are forced to keep old weapons far longer than ever.

In 1968 the Air Force had 15,476 aircraft (all types); by 2010 that dwindled to 5,900, a force reduction of 62%. Similarly, the Navy shrank from 932 battlefleet ships to 288, a 69% reduction, in the same period. Army manpower went down 63% from 1,512,000 to 566,000. That was in the face of a budget that grew 34%—from \$566 billion to \$757 billion, adjusted for inflation—using DOD's own cooked deflator numbers that overstate weapons cost inflation to reduce the appearance of steep spending increases. Since 2010 these same trends have continued, excepting a marginal Navy ship increase to 297 on the strength of massive spending add-ons. As always, the smaller “new” force is actually older; the average age of both the Air Force's fighter and attack fleet and the Navy's tactical fighters is steadily growing and is now over 25 years per aircraft. The same is happening to ships; the smaller fleet is today older per ship than ever before.

Sustainable Defense's seemingly sensible, money saving recommendation to use existing hull designs, even if one from abroad is selected, for a new frigate is another case in point. Unfortunately, the study never considers that we may need hundreds of small fast boats for coastal control far more than we need a handful of larger-than-World War II-cruiser frigates, which [the Navy is working toward](#). Moreover, the frigate recommendation omits how to ensure a successful, more-effective-and-cheaper-than-LCS product once the Navy and its contractors get their hands on the existing design, foreign or domestic. Without implementing specific barriers to our Navy's cost-maximizing business-as-usual practices, nothing will prevent another LCS, DDG-1000 or Ford Carrier disaster. In fact, adding 36 of the billion-dollar-or-more frigates to the budget without insisting on the needed precautions guarantees exactly that outcome.

The inexorable pathology of Pentagon acquisition has been explained many times. In summary, without practical and fundamental reforms, the following outcomes are assured:

- + There will be either no competition between contending contractors or phony ones like the F-35's—or both phony and ignored like the LCS's.

- + Testing will be unrealistically rigged for success and scheduled to not finish until years after production is paid for and well underway, thus locking in both the Pentagon and Congress. Test failures may well remain uncorrected, even unreported, until some peacetime or combat disaster years later.



+ Unit cost of new hardware will be multiples of the initial promises—and even larger multiples of the cost of the weapons being replaced. The replacements will be so expensive that they can replace only a fraction of the previous force, thus necessitating repeated life extensions of the legacy systems. Inevitably, the inventory will shrink and its average age will increase.

+ New weapons will fail to live up to effectiveness promises and in all too many cases will underperform the system being replaced. The feckless effort to replace A-10s with F-35s for close support to troops in combat is a classic example. Remarkably, none of the four studies mention the A-10 nor the continuing attempts of the Air Force and the defense big spenders to get rid of it. Keeping combat-proven A-10s for close support instead of replacing them with hopelessly limited, \$150 million F-35s is a perfect example of more defense for vastly less cost.

+ The new weapons will invariably be delivered years late – at ever growing cost for development and production. Costs will not be accurately tracked and will remain permanently un-auditable. Cost estimates for future buys will be cooked to look lower by playing with inflation numbers, promising production savings that never materialize, and other budget sleight-of-hand.

+ The new weapons will be so complex, unreliable and hard to fix that they frequently will fail to show up for combat—or for essential peacetime training—when needed. They will be saddled with unprecedented high operating costs, vastly more expensive than the unacceptably old, allegedly hard-to-maintain systems kept in the force. Promises for future operating costs will remain unaudited and questionable, even when they seem adequately high. Many new systems will be on hand for combat less than half as often as the seeming antiques they are supposed to replace. Consider the recent operational tests that showed F-35Bs could only fly in combat about once every three days, even with unrealistically high levels of support. In contrast, A-10s have flown three times a day from austere bases in actual combat.

+ Utterly crucial mission areas—invariably ones that involve cheap, unglamorous platforms or weapons—remain permanently neglected and underfunded, despite knowing their neglect has caused failed combat operations or tragic friendly casualties in wartime. Egregious examples include close support of troops, mine sweeping, coastal and shallow water patrol/combat craft and emergency forward area airlift. Not coincidentally, these neglected missions are precisely where cheaper weapons are notably more effective than expensive ones. \$20 million dollar A-10s are vastly more capable in close support than \$150 million F-35s; \$180 million mine sweepers to counter mines are much more reliable than \$650 million LCSs; \$25 million missile patrol boats can control coastal waters in which \$1 billion-plus frigates are hopelessly ineffective; and \$40 million C-27Js can resupply forward troops inaccessible to \$145 million C-130Js. Opting for the cheaper-and-better platform in each of these neglected missions will dramatically reverse the shrinking and aging forces problem.

These pathologies have been driving up the Pentagon's procurement and operating budgets for 65 years while perpetually failing to replace on hand inventories or to keep fleets operating at anything near acceptable rates.

Still worse, the ever growing procurement and maintenance budgets squeeze what's available for training: currently our pilots, sailors, and soldiers have lower training rates than ever recorded before, lower even than some banana republics. Congress makes it all worse by annually raiding O&M readiness accounts to pay for [hundreds of earmarks \(that is, pork\)—which Congress pretends don't exist—costing billions.](#)

It's easy to recommend buying reliable, affordable new frigates, but not insisting on the acquisition changes needed has a long, lurid history of achieving just the opposite.

A rather different problem arises in [POGO's "Spending Smarter, Spending Less."](#) Its recommendation #14 is to retire the F-22—a fine recommendation. The F-22 is [highly disappointing](#), perpetually unready and outrageously expensive—with its endlessly ongoing fixes and “upgrades”, it is nearing half a billion dollars per fighter. But the rationale POGO offers is strange: “...designed for air-to-air fighting against a sophisticated enemy like China or Russia. *The United States is unlikely, however, to ever engage in such an armed conflict.*” (Emphasis added.) POGO references this recommendation and its cost savings to the [Congressional Budget Office's "Budget Options"](#) report. The cost is indeed in the CBO report. The prognostication is not. The wording suggests someone at POGO imposing an attractively catchy but foolhardy phrase. It's not that shutting down the F-22 is a bad idea—it's the confident prediction that those wars are unlikely to happen again, “ever.” Good to know. We now can unload lots more heavy weaponry and save far bigger money.

#### **Note the Silence on ....**

There is no oversight of this broken system. For example, no one knows exactly what is done with the money DOD gets from Congress. Despite the Constitution's requirement that [“a regular Statement and Account of the Receipts and Expenditures of all public Money shall be published from time to time,”](#) DOD remains the only federal department that has never complied. In the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, Congress passed a requirement for all agencies to be audited. After decades of delay and repeatedly busted administrative deadlines, the Pentagon attempted to audit its spending in 2018. As [reported by the DOD Inspector General](#), the exercise was a dismal failure. In boring auditor-ese on page 11, the IG report tells us the audit declared a “disclaimer of opinion” (I.E. un-auditable) for 56% of DOD agencies and 90% of the money. DOD literally does not know and can only estimate what happens to 90% of its money. Nor is it good news for the 10% they could audit, which was mostly a “Statement of Budgetary Resources,” in essence a balancing of the checkbook. For the 10% the auditors could track, they only know that the contractor, for example, got the contracted money—not whether the money was spent without fraud or abuse. Finding any of that would require audits of contractor overhead including political contributions and subcontract payments, or

better yet of all budget expenditures for Major Defense Acquisition Programs. Don't hold your breath for that to happen.

The Constitution charges Congress with overseeing the "Statement and Account" of expenditures and, indeed, of all Pentagon activities. Tune in to any House or Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on oversight. Watch as those Members who are present frequently look down at their papers as they ask a question, assuming it is a real question and not a speech. [They are reading staff](#)-prepared questions. The DOD witness will politely answer, often misleadingly. Then the Member will glance at the paper and read off the next question. A follow-up question to probe further would require a uniquely prescient staff memo or actual and thorough preparation for the hearing by the Member. [Other Members will harangue the DOD witness](#), often in a very convincing manner—and after the hearing do nothing.

All of the above pathologies are facilitated by congressional staffers and Pentagon acquisition managers who come from or go to the same defense corporations that get the contracts the staffers and managers are supposed to oversee. Or, they rotate through the investment firms, lobbying shops and think tanks that profit by pressing for those same contracts. POGO has been reporting on this for decades and, in [an excellent 2018 report](#), has documented hundreds of high ranking military and civilian passengers on this gravy train. They more or less run the Pentagon and are overseen by congressional staffers who ride the same non-stop express.

It is a system that is not just broken, but corrupt.

## **What to Do**

None of the recommendations below are new; none of them are complicated, but they all require advocates with guts and informed insight to make them happen:

+ One More Time, Fix DOD Operational Testing: Against a mountain of resistance from DOD and its go-fers in Congress, in 1983 military reformers in Congress passed a law creating an independent Director of Operational Test and Evaluation (DOT&E) to oversee service testing with explicit authorities to end rigged testing and biased test reporting. The Pentagon promptly hobbled the reform by installing almost universally weak or industry-complicit Directors, until George Bush and then Barack Obama happened to appoint two Directors who proved to be excellent, tough and uncompromising. The subsequent Trump appointee has returned to hasty, non-rigorous testing and incomplete reporting. When the new President is elected, interested parties should find and press upon him or her a new Bush-Obama-like DOT&E, possibly a reappointment of Dr. Michael Gilmore, the courageous Obama appointee or one of his more forthright assistants.

+ End Acquisition Malpractice: [The basics of acquiring less expensive, more combat-effective weapons quickly is not as hard or complicated as DOD](#) would have you believe. Following four simple rules will get you there: a) set design effectiveness requirements based on actual combat history and stringent cost limits; b) require

competitive selection of combat-ready prototypes, effectiveness-tested in a combat-like “fly-off” overseen by DOT&E and cost-estimated by an independent group of “should cost” experts; c) require successful completion of stringent developmental testing before starting combat-realistic operational testing of production-representative samples; and d) require completion of operational tests before approving any money for full production. Specifically, this means not allowing the flim-flam of producing hundreds of units labelled “low-rate, initial production” long before testing is complete, as in the egregious example of the F-35. Make a negative of these four rules and you will understand the Pentagon’s process for buying the F-35, the Ford carrier, the V-22 Osprey and many more of our acquisition disasters.

+ Exterminate the Loopholes: Congress, helpfully advised by the Pentagon and the contractors, routinely writes gaping loopholes into acquisition laws. The Pentagon then makes sure these loopholes don’t gather cobwebs. As [GAO recently noted](#), the much touted Weapon System Acquisition Reform Act of 2009 made acquisition abuses worse rather than better by allowing DOD to waive each of the Act’s core reforms. The [laws do not so much need to be changed as they need to be](#) enforced without waivers by a secretary of defense and senior acquisition managers who put the needs of troops and taxpayers before corporations and careers.

+ Stop Revolving Door Corruption: To eliminate acquisition malpractice, Congress needs to legislate—without adding loopholes—the [complete set of recommendations POGO has drafted](#) to shut down the revolving door. As long as the executive branch selects and the Senate confirms as senior defense managers lobbyists, corporate marketeers, politicians and other industry skills, the troops and the taxpayers will continue to be ill-served. The Constitution was not commissioning elected rubber stamps when it empowered Senators to disapprove unqualified or tainted presidential appointees. But the Congress’ responsibilities go much further: once in office, high officials must be held accountable for unethical actions or decisions. The flip side of the coin is that acquisition managers of conscience will need strong support from reform-minded Members; the upright will find themselves under tremendous pressure from those who don’t want an honest system.

+ Get the DOD Audited, ASAP: Place the highest possible priority on auditing both the overall Pentagon budget and all major defense acquisition programs. Since it is clear that the Pentagon has been slow-rolling this process for 28 years, impose some pain on the un-auditable and the unwilling, to motivate speedier auditing success. To do that, re-enact the quite successful [Renegotiation Board](#) statute of the past to require an audit of all major contracts and a return to the Treasury of any excess corporate profits. In doing so, do not re-legislate the progressively weaker versions of the Renegotiation Board that Congress and industry passed, in increments, during the Cold War. Also, consider strengthening [legislation](#) such as the Audit the Pentagon Act that allows imposing percentage financial penalties on the Pentagon until it can pass an overall audit. Increase those current percentages and, most importantly, ensure the penalties are actually imposed (which so far has never happened).

+ Try a Little Oversight: Getting better oversight out of think tanks and [Congress will not be easy](#). Revealing the source of all financing should be mandatory for any think tank or advocacy organization; it certainly should be a requirement for any donation to be tax deductible. [POGO policy](#) is a good model. Getting Congress to legislate reform of its own dearth of oversight will be tough. Nevertheless, an important step towards de-politicizing defense could be made by requiring all staff for any national security related committee or subcommittee to be hired and fired only by joint action of both the chairman and ranking member. Exactly that has been done in the past. As for committee members who want to politicize their defense agendas, including with earmarks, they can readily use their personal rather than committee staff for that. As an equally important step, no committee staff should be hired without a commitment to refuse work for any defense corporation for a period no less than two years, and preferably four. That commitment also must include not going to work in the Pentagon; the Constitution's separation of powers needs to be real.

The status quo pundits will say none of this can be done. It is simply too extreme. Instead, we must try incremental steps, such as the loophole-riddled, history-denying, caveat-sprinkled program tinkering that have been published time and time again in the past, and recommended all too frequently in the above studies.

### **Relevant?**

The sponsors of the four studies surely want to see their recommendations implemented, but so far all the Democratic candidates have ignored them. Despite the Pentagon's being a sinkhole of over-cost, under-performing, force effectiveness-decaying, ethically challenged, unaudited programs, none of the candidates have shown any serious interest, not even in the simple cut lists and media-friendly policy nostrums offered up. Moreover, should any of the candidates actually tout any of those cuts, predictably the Republican and "mainstream" Democratic more-money-is-good whores will pounce as they always do, blustering about being weak on defense and not supporting the troops. It will be, of course, nauseating hogwash—a debate of the brain-dead, equating stronger defense with more billions in the budget.

Should any of the Democratic candidates actually read and rely on any of the studies' claims of better defense for less money, they will be helpless to present any examples of cheaper-and-better weapons. Nor will they be armed to explain why if a few F-35s are a good idea, then skies—or rather hangars full—of them isn't an even better idea. If asked how to fix the Pentagon's underlying problems, any candidate who's read the studies can only respond with a brief deer-in-the-headlights stare before falling back on the old saw about "eliminating waste, fraud and abuse." And if asked how to do that, a most unlikely follow-up, there will be an even longer pause before he or she comes up with a yet emptier sound-bite.

Even if the studies are embraced and every one of their recommendations adopted, today's underlying problems will remain—thereby ensuring business as usual before, during and after implementation by the DOD bureaucracy.

Why? The studies don't identify the Pentagon's basic problems and the recommendations do nothing to solve them.

## **Conclusion**

The nation badly needs a better national security debate than this.

Arguing over spending differences of just a few percentage points or contending cut lists has proven to be mere background noise to an ever increasing budget, shrinking forces, and a vast readiness crisis across the American armed forces.

Instead, the debate needs to be about ethics, knowing where the money goes, buying weapons that serve the troops well without abusing the taxpayer, testing those weapons honestly and, most importantly, appointing people to oversee all this who are not itching to cash in with corporations and Wall Street when they change jobs.

Let the money grubbers argue they are against any of that.

*Altogether Sprey, Spinney and Wheeler have approximately 120 years of full time work experience in the Pentagon, military service, defense industry, Congress, think tanks and the Government Accountability Office. Additional writing and biographical material about each of them can be found [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).*