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Can Ashton Carter rein in a Pentagon out of control?

By [Fareed Zakaria](#)

Chuck Hagel may not have been able to work with the ever more powerful [National Security Council staff](#), but this [discussion of personalities](#) misses the point. The key to success for a defense secretary today is the ability to manage not White House aides but rather the Pentagon, which is [the world's most complicated and most dysfunctional bureaucracy](#). [Ashton Carter](#), the president's presumed choice as the next secretary, is a brilliant man and perhaps has made some friends at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. But by far the best quality he has going for him is that he seems to understand [the need to rein in a Pentagon](#) now so out of control that it is difficult to fully comprehend or explain.

Republicans worry a great deal about dysfunction in government. They launch investigations to find out why a few hundred million dollars were wasted and insist that departments do more with less. Except for the largest government bureaucracy in the world, the Defense Department, which spends about [\\$600 billion a year](#) — more than [the entire GDP of Poland](#) — and employs [1.4 million men and women in uniform](#), [700,000 civilians](#) and [700,000 full-time contractors](#). The Pentagon's accounts are so vast and byzantine that it is probably impossible to do a thorough audit of them.

Still, a recent [Government Accountability Office report](#) made a valiant effort, concluding that the total budget overruns for current weapons systems stands at [nearly \\$500 billion](#). The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program alone is now around [\\$160 billion over budget](#). In other words, the cost overruns on one weapons system are more than the total defense budgets of Britain and France combined. A [new presidential helicopter fleet](#) was scrapped after the cost for a single chopper neared that of a Boeing 747 jumbo jet. And on and on.

In 1961, [Dwight Eisenhower warned](#) against the “unwarranted influence” of the “military-industrial complex.” Fifty years later, on Dec. 15, 2011 — to mark the anniversary of Eisenhower's address — a renowned defense expert argued that things had gotten much worse and far more corrupt. Congress had itself been captured by the system, he said, which should now be called “the military-industrial-congressional complex.” The expert spoke of the rampant use of earmarks, “congressional pet projects, unwanted by the administration but amounting to billions of dollars annually that . . . waste taxpayer resources for years and sometimes decades.” He decried the revolving door between Pentagon senior brass and Beltway lobbyists, and the uncompetitive, non-market method of buying weapons systems. “Over the last decade or so,” the expert concluded, “what I have described here has resulted in a massive windfall for industry. But for the taxpayer and the warfighter, it has been an absolute recipe for disaster.”

This radical critique of the Pentagon came from Republican [Sen. John McCain](#) (Ariz.). He is joined in many of his views by former defense secretary Robert Gates, who in [his recent memoir](#) describes the Pentagon as a “gargantuan, labyrinthine bureaucracy” on which he had “declared war” to get results. Forty percent of Pentagon spending goes to overhead, Gates points out in [the book](#), and as many as 30 layers of staff sit between the secretary and an action officer.

And then there is the Pentagon pension program, which is almost unique in its generosity. After 20 years of service, one can retire with a full pension, indexed to inflation, and lifetime high-quality health care, for which a family pays [about \\$550 a year](#). So someone who served in uniform could retire at age 38, then take a new job, and for the rest of his or her life receive generous government benefits. In 2012, the cost of military retiree and survivor-benefit outlays [totaled \\$52 billion](#). That’s more than the entire budget of the [State Department](#).

The Pentagon resembles nothing so much as some kind of gigantic socialist enterprise, run according to its own principles, shielded from market discipline and accountable to no one. How does it continue to function and perform? The way socialist bureaucracies usually do. If you throw enough money and talented, energetic and determined people at it, things can work, until the money runs out. Among the 15 countries with the highest military expenditure in 2013, the United States ranked first and spent more on defense than [the next eight nations](#) — including China and Russia — put together. What does it get for this massive investment? By any normal yardstick, the Pentagon’s performance — its output compared with its input — would surely be deemed a failure.

The good news is that Carter has already been a reformer and, as deputy defense secretary, attempted to untangle the procurement process. [McCain](#) will soon be the [chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee](#). And [Rep. Mac Thornberry](#) (R-Tex.), who will lead the House equivalent, [also appears to have a reformist bent](#). The problem is so immense, however, that it is too much to hope for more than tiny victories. Defense secretaries will come and go, but the military-industrial-congressional complex will live on.

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