

## Decapitating Defense

By: Christopher Holshek – February 28, 2013

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It's not only *Zero Dark Thirty* that had a disappointing showing at the Academy Awards. The whole idea that we can simply kill our way out of the problem of international terrorism, using drones or SEAL teams to decapitate al Qaeda franchises by targeting their leadership, has had at best mixed results. Sure, that approach has to a large extent incapacitated them; but like loosely connected hydras, every time we chop the head off one strand, new ones pop up in places like Mali and Nigeria. They just keep proliferating, now sponsoring websites in English, French, Swahili, and not just Arabic to broaden their base of support and sympathy. One reason for their resilience is mainly because they've already been doing what most 21st century global corporations are also figuring out by flattening management structures, maintaining low overhead, working off multiple networks, and, above all, being more adaptive.

Wouldn't it be great if we could get the Department of Defense to do more of that?

Lots of talk has also been popping up about sequestration's impact on defense and the military, including a *New York Times* piece that rightly points out that, despite DoD's saber-rattling about a *Gotterdammerung* brought on by a sudden drop of \$43-billion in funding, "the truth is that the military budget not only can be cut, but should be cut, though not with this kind of political machete and not in the way the service chiefs say they plan to wield it." The Cato Institute and *Foreign Policy* go a bit farther, making the case that taking defense to the budget-shredder will not at all imperil the safety of Americans.

People like yours truly have been pointing out for months that the demise of defense is an historic opportunity as well as an inevitability. Managed the right way, it could lead to better peace and security, for example, by breaking us of our habit of seeing everything as threats and throwing money at them. The whole polemic about peace, national security, and defense needs a fresh approach, not just because our *modus operandi* hasn't really worked very well as of late -- we simply can't afford it anymore.

Indeed, the new willingness of Republicans to throw DoD under the ideological bus may be opening up that window of opportunity. In a strange role-reversal, Texas Senator John Cornyn is also challenging the assertion that the blunt sequester cuts will be that

devastating to national security, noting that the overall amount of defense spending will actually still rise. Or, as the Cato Institute explains:

Military spending will remain at roughly 2006 levels - \$603-billion, higher than peak U.S. spending during the Cold War. Meanwhile, we live in a safer world. The Soviet Union has been dead for more than two decades; no other nation, or combination of nations, has emerged since that can pose a comparable threat. We should have a defense budget that reflects this reality.

Still, the buzz inside the Beltway is about looking inside the box rather than at the box itself. Talk centers mostly around weapons programs, operations and maintenance, or training, and not the obvious -- organizational reform overdue by at least two decades, which at the end of the day would be the greatest way to make sure the taxpayers are getting what they pay for.

The defense establishment is an organizational and command and control structure based on a 20th century industrial-era understanding of warfare, which the military industrial complex perpetuates through the incestuous relationship between DoD, the defense industries, and Congressional committees known as the "Iron Triangle." As a result, much of that establishment is, in Pentagon parlance, the "self-licking ice cream cone." It's based on the underlying notion constantly reinforced since World War II that the United States can look to win its wars, deter its adversaries, and encourage its allies through material and technological superiority based on cheap resources, among them finances.

We should have realized this party was over when the Berlin Wall came down. Instead, DoD remains among the most bloated of federal bureaucracies. Every SecDef since the Reagan presidency has made the perfunctory pronouncement about organizational obesity, but not much else has happened. We have less than half the force structure since then and you still can't find a parking spot at the Pentagon. The World's Largest Office Building has more annexes than a theater campaign plan.

One result is a force that punches below its weight and is mismanaged. A 2010 McKinsey study concluded that the U.S. "tooth-to-tail" ratio was worse than 27 of 28 countries it surveyed, including China and Russia. Only one out of every eight or so of those in uniform we laud for facing danger under fire actually serve in combat assignments. The Defense Business Board, in turn, concluded that 40 percent of our active duty forces were "never deployed."

More bucks, less bang.

It gets worse as you go up. We had less than 600 general (or flag) officers to oversee a force of more than 10-million serving in Europe and the Pacific theaters of operation in 1945 - long before automation, satellite communications, and the internet. Today, there

are more than 1,200 generals to manage a force less than one-fifth that size. Anyone who has served knows that general officers are a government work creation act - they must be constantly briefed and informed by their staffs, driven by an insatiable appetite for information and jealously guarding their equities. Much the same is true for senior DoD civilians and their fleets of deputies.

More chiefs, fewer braves.

It's understood that all this top-heaviness reflects the fact that the U.S. military has been playing away games with long logistical lines for the last century and a half. Yet, at a time of the "strategic corporal" requiring junior leaders like company commanders to think in more complex, strategic terms while acting tactically, the hierarchical management structure of a bygone age now diminishes rather than enhances the effectiveness of the troops, stifling them with much of the same kind of micromanagement, check-the-block program requirements, and risk aversion that began in the "zero-defects" days of the 1990s. Nevertheless, there are just about enough generals in Afghanistan to make each one of them a potential company commander. It's just, well, OTT.

Worse yet, as Tom Ricks has noted, "as our wars wind down, the errors of our generals continue to escape public investigation, or even much internal review. As the Vietnam War drew to an end, the Army carried out a soul-searching study of the state of its officer corps. To my knowledge, no such no-holds-barred examination is under way now." And even under the Obama administration, outspoken senior military leaders are not exactly embraced. As the dismissal of CENTCOM Commander Marine General James Mattis seems to suggest, all is still not well with America's civil-military relationship.

*Time* blogger and Afghan war veteran Rajiv Srinivasan explains the increasing inability of the Defense Department to reform itself on another level:

The military used to be at the forefront of progress -- the U.S. Armed forces were racially integrated five years before the landmark court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* -- but in the last two decades, I wonder if policy is influencing front lines or simply following suit decades later? The institutional problem here is that those charged with shaping military social welfare are rendering themselves moot by affirming or removing policies decades after the operational force has already taken the initiative to do so. We need our government to lead these cultural shifts, not simply follow with paperwork behind the decisions we make on the ground. Especially because those of us in the fight move quickly, it's in the best interests of our higher authorities to match their decision-making with the nature of the modern military force.

The sequester and the turning of political tides are signifying the end of defense as we know it. Moreover, it is exposing the longstanding mismatch between our military organization and the threats, challenges, and opportunities of our times. When the center of gravity is too high, as every motorcyclist knows, you can't take especially the

unexpected curves you encounter, and you crash. DoD needs to continue to learn from our enemies and become leaner, meaner, and lower to the ground, lest our forces wind up looking like the Roman Legions versus the Visigoths.

The Defense Department has already started by removing a couple hundred Senior Executive Service posts and a few general officer slots created during the last decade. But simply cutting a few positions and programs here and there, closing a few more bases, deactivating a few units, and pulling back the throttle on operations tempo will not do it. We need the kind of wholesale overhaul of our national security apparatus that the now-defunct Project on National Security Reform advocated.

Last time, we were looking at defense reductions, DoD conducted a "Bottom-Up Review." This time, they also need to take it from the top. A little decapitation, it seems, could go a long way.