



The Bunker: When Common Sense is Blasphemy

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This week in *The Bunker*: applying the same somber label to troop and Pentagon procurement casualties; let's keep weapons simple, stupid; tracking the risks associated with overseas arms sales; and more.

THE VALLEYS OF DEATH

A grim term for two challenges

For those who fought the Taliban inside Afghanistan, a deep slash inside Kunar province became known as the “Valley of Death” following the loss of **42 U.S. troops**.

But those addressing the Pentagon’s ponderous procurement system from their desks have applied this harrowing term to a far more bureaucratic concern. For them the “Valley of Death” is that two-year gap between creation of a promising new technology and it becoming what the Defense Department calls a “program of record” with real money to build it. “Let's say that some great California startup develops a dazzling way to better integrate our capabilities,” Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin **said last month**. “All too often, that company is going to struggle to take its idea from inception to prototype to adoption by the department. We call this syndrome the Valley of Death.”

Heidi Shyu, the Pentagon’s **chief engineer**, claimed on January 13 that the Valley of Death doesn’t affect big Pentagon contractors (in fact, *The Bunker* avers, they have a vested interest against such outside innovations). “I have been engaging with small companies because they’re the guys that are suffering the Valley of Death,” she **said** ([PDF](#)). The Pentagon, she added, is **exploring different options** to bring promising programs to life. But killing the Valley of Death is challenging. “It’s still there,” she added in a wonderfully-mixed metaphor, “alive and well.”

The U.S. gave up on the other Valley of Death—officially the Korengal valley—more than a decade before it gave up on the war in Afghanistan. “The last American soldier left here Wednesday, abandoning a base surrounded by tall cedar trees and high mountains, in a place that came to be called the Valley of Death,” the *New York Times* **reported** in April 2010.

“The Korengal valley is six miles long, with one way in and one way out, the **U.S. Army reported** as its troops pulled out. “And the enemy owns the high ground.” Speaking of mixed metaphors, one could argue that the enemies holding the high ground back in Washington are those big defense contractors determined to hang on to their ever-growing slice of the Pentagon pie. So just remember: which Valley of Death you’re stranded in depends on which end of the gun you’re facing.

FIGHTING FETISH

Why does the U.S. military embrace best as better?

There have **long been calls** for developing “good enough” weapons—let’s call them “iron bullets”—rather than the gold-plated silver bullets, like **this**, **this**, and **this**, that the Pentagon lusts for. While President Biden may have Build Back Better, *The Bunker* has Build Better Bang: procuring simpler weapons so they cost less and work more often (unlike the Pentagon’s current strategy, which buys more costly, and therefore fewer, weapons that work **only about half the time**).

So it’s nice to see that some corners of the Pentagon may be getting the message. Navy Secretary **Carlos Del Toro** recently warned that his service **shouldn’t rush to buy a new class of destroyers** until it’s sure it works. He cited the failed Advanced Gun System (AGS) on the new three-ship *Zumwalt* class of destroyers as the wrong way to buy military hardware. The Navy translated its wishful thinking into “some pretty broad leaps” that doomed the AGS, as *The Bunker* **detailed three years ago**. Del Toro knows destroyers: the Cuban native commanded one after graduating from the U.S. Naval Academy. The Navy, he said, has “got to make sure that the technologies that we employ on these platforms actually work before we actually put them on there.” In the real world, that’s called common sense; at the Pentagon, it’s blasphemy.

Further evidence of such Pentagon perfidy is contained in a recently declassified report, written a year ago, that warned that the Afghan air force would collapse because it was too reliant on U.S. contractors. Between 2010 and 2019, the U.S. spent **\$8.5 billion** to build it up. “The Afghan Air Force became even more reliant on contractor maintenance after U.S. lawmakers pushed the Pentagon to supply Afghanistan with UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters instead of easier-to-maintain Russian-made M-17s,” *Defense One* **reported** January 18.

The Bunker warned about **this precise peril** nearly four years ago. “If the U.S. were serious about winning its 17-year war in Afghanistan, it wouldn’t be forcing the fledgling Afghan air force out of its simple and cheap Russian helicopters into costly and complicated American ones,” it noted. Afghans could do about 80% of the maintenance on their Russian-built choppers, but only 20% on the Connecticut-built birds forced on them by Washington and the Nutmeg State’s congressional delegation. “Decisions about which weapon to use can be subjective,” *The*

Bunker said back then. “But logic has its own requirements, and once it’s ignored you start down a slippery slope that too often ends in disaster.” Yet that Afghan disaster may be Ukraine’s bonanza: the U.S. reportedly is **shipping some of those easier-to-fix-and-fly choppers** to Ukraine to help it counter Russia’s invasion threat.

KEEP IT SIMPLE, STUPID

The downside of complex weapons

Exhibit A in the challenges posed by too-complicated military hardware is **this inquiry** into a crash of an F-22 fighter, one of the Air Force’s most sophisticated warbirds. The pilot safely ejected; the \$200 million Raptor was destroyed. While the Florida crash occurred in May 2020, the official classified investigation only surfaced January 20 after the *Air Force Times*’s Rachel S. Cohen obtained a redacted copy under the Freedom of Information Act.

According to the Air Force, the crash occurred because:

- There was inadequate supervision of the plane’s required corrosion-reducing monthly wash two days before the mishap. Those cleaning the plane applied, but neglected to remove, a piece of tape needed to protect an air-data sensor in the fuselage. The sensor, which feeds information to the F-22’s computerized flight controls, is critical to its safe operation.
- Pre-flight inspectors missed the tape before takeoff.
- While still on the runway, the pilot ignored a cockpit alert that something was wrong with the flight-control system.
- Two weeks earlier, in an emergency update to the flight manual, the Air Force had told its F-22 pilots to abort a takeoff following such alerts.
- The pilot got the update, but didn’t read it. Pilots (at least at the time of the crash) can accept such updates without reading them.
- An F-22 commander alerted F-22 pilots to the changes via the Slack messaging app. Pilots are not required to read Slack messages (at least at the time of the crash).
- A backup system designed to keep the F-22 under control didn’t work because the F-22 was flying faster, and steeper, than the system was built to handle.
- That less-than-optimum flight profile led the F-22 to automatically shut down one part of its flight-control system.
- That shutdown forced the F-22 to rely on a second flight-control-system—the one relying on the taped-over sensor.

“At this point,” the investigation noted, “it was no longer possible for the [pilot] to recover the aircraft safely.” (You can check out a harrowing Air Force **recreation of the doomed flight here**).

Given all this Air Force folly, it's no wonder the service elected not to conduct the standard, publicly-releasable probe into the crash. Last summer, when it issued a terse outline into what happened, the Air Force cited "**operational concerns**" for its decision. *The Bunker* humbly suggests "embarrassment concern" was the real reason.

ARMS SALESMANSHIP

The collateral damage of peddling weapons

Every year charts are published showing which nations sell the most arms to overseas customers. Depressingly, the U.S. **often ranks #1** (*PDF*) with the bullets. Non-government groups like the **Stockholm International Peace Research Institute** cast a skeptical eye on such commerce (heck, "peace" is in its name). But outsiders sometimes view such rankings like **Combat Chambers of Commerce**, seeing a **high ranking** as good for the seller's economy and its **government's ideology**. Think of it as a second kind of Stockholm syndrome.

Thankfully, the Cato Institute publishes an annual corrective to this arms-sale hype. On January 18, the libertarian think tank published its **fourth annual Arms Sales Risk Index**. "By measuring the factors linked to negative outcomes of arms sales, such as dispersion, diversion, and the misuse of weapons by recipients, the index provides a way to assess the risk involved with selling arms to another nation," authors A. Trevor Thrall and Jordan Cohen write. "This index solely focuses on the risks of weapons sales, something that U.S. administrations routinely downplay."

And who's in charge doesn't seem to make much difference. Since 2009, the U.S. has approved more than \$1 trillion in weapons sales to 167 nations across the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. "In terms of evaluating risk from any sale," Cohen says. "We find that the Biden administration does not substantially differ from the Trump administration."

WHAT WE'RE READING

Here's what has caught *The Bunker's* eye recently

Profoundly dispiriting bombshell

"Effective immediately, the Secretary of Defense shall seize, collect, retain and analyze all machines, equipment, electronically stored information, and material records required for retention... The Secretary of Defense has discretion to determine the interdiction of national critical infrastructure supporting federal elections." This legal-coup proposal was floating around allies of lame-duck President Trump, *Politico* reported January 21.

Broken record

Helicopters lifted Americans to safety from Saigon 47 years ago, just as they did from Kabul last summer. Why doesn't Washington learn from its mistakes, retired Army colonel Andrew Bacevich asked January 23 over at *TomDispatch*.

"Where have all the flowers gone..."

As Moscow's tanks prance along Russia's border with Ukraine, Harvard professor Joseph S. Nye forlornly wonders, in a January 19 post at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, whatever happened to "soft power"—the push to influence other nations by attraction and values rather than armor and coercion.

...gone to hell, everyone...

Given that such belligerence is making a comeback, defense scholar James Kitfield argued January 20 at *Defense One* that governments start "rebuilding the strategic architecture of arms control and verification treaties, confidence-building and de-confliction protocols, and open lines of communication that kept the Cold War from turning hot for decades Time is of the essence."

Changing times

"The Defense Department has quietly begun looking into how it can allow troops whose gender identity is nonbinary to serve openly in the military," Military.com reported January 18.

A special kind of hero

The Air Force decorated three of its own for helping to evacuate 124,334 people from Afghanistan during the U.S. retreat from that country, the service's 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing reported January 10.