

# HAS IT WORKED? THE GOLDWATER-NICHOLS REORGANISATION ACT

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Organisation has traditionally been a weak element of the American system of national defence. For the nation's first 150 years, the public actually favoured a fractured military; so inattention to organisational issues has historical roots. The United States entered World War II with the Departments of War and Navy that were organisationally backward and "virtually autonomous."<sup>1</sup> Observing American inexperience and lack of multi-Service coordination at the war's start, a British general wrote to London, "The whole organisation belongs to the days of George Washington."<sup>2</sup> Army-navy disputes complicated finding more appropriate war-time arrangements. The navy entered the war embracing its cherished concepts of independent command at sea and decentralised organisations relying on cooperation and coordination. The army's shortcomings in the Spanish-American War and its mobilisation challenges during World War I had pushed that Service in the direction of centralised authority and control.

The army and the navy were not able to solve their differences during World War II. Afterward, Congress settled the dispute in terms broadly favourable to

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1. Vernon E. Davis, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II: Organisational Development*, vol. 1, *Origin of the Joint and Combined Chiefs of Staff* (Washington, DC.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1972), p. xi.
2. Eric Larrabee, *Commander-in-Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants, and Their War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 17.

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the navy's concepts—ones that preserved navy and marine corps independence more than they met the requirements of modern warfare. Despite repeated operational setbacks over the next forty years, subsequent reorganisation efforts offered only slight improvements. Such was the setting for the mid-1980s battle that produced the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defence Reorganisation Act of 1986. That bitter battle lasted for four years and 241 days—a period longer than the US' involvement in World War II—and it pitted two former allies, Congress

and the Services, against each other.

In this article, we will examine the changes mandated by the Goldwater-Nichols Act and assess whether they have worked. We will begin by reviewing briefly the history of the defence organisation and then, with that as background, outline the organisation problems of the mid-1980s. Then we will turn our attention to the Goldwater-Nichols Act itself—first outlining its key objectives and various provisions, and then assessing its effectiveness and results. Finally—as if the first four headings will not be controversial enough—we will address the unfinished business of Goldwater-Nichols and organisational steps for the future.

## **DEFENCE ORGANISATION**

Many of the problems of defence organisation the United States experienced in 1986 had their origins early in the nation's history, at the beginning of the republic. It would be possible, however, to begin an analysis at the Spanish-American War, when Americans first realised that they needed a centralised authority in both the War and Navy Departments and also some mechanism for cooperation between those two departments. But for our purposes, we need go back only to World War II.



The United States entered World War II with an archaic organisation that was incapable of coordinating land, sea, and air activities across the two military departments, or even of harmonising business (procurement, logistics, construction, transportation, etc) efforts within the departments themselves. In February 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created by executive direction the Joint Chiefs of Staff (or JCS), primarily to work with the British, who had a combined Chiefs of Staff organisation. The Joint Chiefs of Staff assumed an enormous role. Next to the president, they were the most powerful Americans in the war effort. They not only had major military responsibilities but also collectively played crucial roles in political, intelligence, and even economic decisions. The American public's outcry over Pearl Harbour prompted the creation of unified theatre commanders, like General Dwight D. Eisenhower in Europe. Service politics and jealousies prevented unifying the Pacific theatre; it was divided into two commands—one led by General Douglas MacArthur, the other by Admiral Chester Nimitz.

This joint centralisation was paralleled by the creation of effective central authority within the War and Navy Departments, necessitated by the war effort, especially the enormous logistical tasks involved.

However, the contributions of the JCS were lessened by its adoption on its own of the principle of reaching unanimous agreement before speaking *ex cathedra*. Accordingly, the war-time Joint Chiefs—General Hap Arnold, the commanding general of the army air forces; General George Marshall, the chief of staff of the army; Admiral William Leahy, the chief of staff to the commander-in-chief (that is, President Roosevelt); and Admiral Ernest King, the chief of naval operations—had essentially to operate by cooperation.

A vivid example of the limitations on the ability of the JCS to do their work arose in connection with material allocations. The British had recommended that steel be diverted from the construction of battleships and heavy cruisers to convoy escorts and landing craft. Admiral Leahy, who had just joined the JCS, "remarked that it looked to him as though 'the vote is three to one.' [Admiral] King replied coldly that as far as he was concerned, the Joint Chiefs was not a voting organisation on any matter in which the

interests of the Navy were involved.”<sup>3</sup> Essentially, he demanded veto power. For the most part, the joint chiefs operated upon that principle throughout the war (and, in fact, until 1986). Things would proceed when the chiefs could come to unanimous agreement—which often required watering down their collective advice.

Often, however, they could not agree. There was a fair amount of inter-Service rivalry during World War II, both in Washington and in the field. A British air marshal once said, “The violence of inter-service rivalry in the United States had to be seen to be believed and was an appreciable handicap to their war effort.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, in 1943, the army attempted to create a single military department, in place of the War (that is, the army and army air forces) and Navy Departments, because it had become convinced that the current arrangement was too inefficient. However, disputes between the army and the navy were so severe that the idea of unifying the two military departments had to be put off until after the war, when President Harry Truman supported the War Department proposals for a single department, with a single chief of staff and assistant secretaries for land, sea, and air. Truman, who had been an artillery captain

during World War I and had stayed in the National Guard until 1940, rising to the rank of colonel, was very sympathetic to the army’s ideas on organisation.

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3. William Frye, *Marshall: Citizen Soldier* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), p. 325.

4. Larrabee, n.2, p. 105.



aviation and land missions; the marine corps, in fact, saw unification as a threat to its survival. The US Army Air Forces had emerged from World War II as a giant; the navy was not certain that it could compete in a unified department with the powerful army air forces, with its atomic mission, and its large parent Service, the army.

Congress was also divided on the unification issue; each Service's view had strong supporters. But Congress ended up opposing Truman's proposals, for two main reasons. One was its own constitutional competition with the executive branch. Members of Congress feared that the executive branch might be able to organise its military affairs so effectively that Congress would be at a disadvantage. The second reason had to do with constituencies—where ships were to be built, where battalions would be posted, where jobs would be created; Congress would have more bargaining leverage vis-a-vis a military establishment in which authority was diffused. Congress came down, then, on the side of the navy and the marine corps, forcing President Truman and the War Department to modify their approach; the National Security Act of 1947 was the ultimate result.

Many people believe that the National Security Act of 1947 created the Department of Defence. It did not. Instead, it created something that was called, strangely, the "National Military Establishment," to be placed on top of the War and Navy Departments. The Act prescribed a weak secretary of defence, with very limited powers and a small staff, and retained the World War II boards to govern the new organisation. It gave legal standing to the Joint Chiefs of Staff but gave the group no chairman. The Act not only continued the powerful secretaries of the military departments as Cabinet members but also made them members of a new National Security Council. The Services soon used their power to erect a Service-dominated system. They emasculated the unified commands, despite the value they had shown in war-time. When the Services were finished, the commands were unified in name only.

In 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, assessing the compromises the original Act reflected between Truman and Congress and between the army and the navy, said: "In that battle, the lessons were lost, tradition won. The three services were but loosely joined. The entire structure... was little more than a

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weak confederation of sovereign military units.”<sup>5</sup> It has been charitably said (by the Office of the Secretary of Defence Historical Office) that the National Security Act of 1947 “confirmed the principle of unification by cooperation and mutual consent.”<sup>6</sup>

Truman and Eisenhower spent much of their energies trying to strengthen the National Security Act. There were revisions in 1949, 1953, and 1958—the latter two under Eisenhower. The 1949 legislation created the Department of Defence. All three sought to

strengthen the secretary of defence. The 1949 revision established the position of chairman of the JCS. (In the beginning, however, the chairman was not given a vote. Interestingly, some of Truman’s early correspondence on the subject spoke of creating a chairman as principal military advisor, specifically to get away from the idea of JCS operation by consensus.) The military departments were downgraded in the various revisions; the secretaries were removed from the Cabinet and from the National Security Council. The 1958 legislation removed the Service secretaries and chiefs from the operational chain of command, in order to strengthen civilian control, as Eisenhower wished. It also gave the unified commanders full operational command of assigned forces. However, those provisions were not effectively implemented. The military departments retained a *de facto* role in the operational chain of command and never complied with the provision strengthening the unified commanders.

From 1958 to 1983, there were no major changes to the defence organisation; the alliance between Congress and the Services was too powerful. Even Eisenhower, a war hero, was unable to overcome this alliance, and that was a salient lesson for subsequent presidents and secretaries of defence. There were continuing calls for

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5. Quoted in Alice C. Cole et al., eds., *The Department of Defense: Documents on Establishment and Organisation, 1944-1978* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defence, 1978), p. 177.
  6. Roger R. Trask and Alfred Goldberg, *The Department of Defense, 1947-1997: Organization and Leaders* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defence, 1997), p. 11.



reform—the Symington Report for John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon’s Blue Ribbon Defence Panel, and the Defence Organisation Studies for Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s.

During this period, the military suffered several operational setbacks: the Vietnam War, the seizure of the USS *Pueblo*, the seizure of the Mayaguez, the failed Iranian rescue mission, the marine barracks bombing in Beirut, and the Grenada incursion. These failures had a number of common denominators—poor military advice to political leaders, lack of unity of command, and inability to operate jointly. The failed Iranian rescue mission exemplified these shortcomings.

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### *Desert One*

In April 1980, the United States conducted a raid to rescue 53 Americans held hostage in Tehran. The military had six months to organise, plan, and train as well as fairly recent experience in conducting such a mission—the Son Tay raid about ten years before. Nonetheless, only six of the eight helicopters involved arrived at the rendezvous point, known as “Desert One,” in the middle of Iran; one of the six that got that far suffered mechanical problems and could not proceed. That did not leave enough helicopter capacity to carry out the mission, and it was aborted. As the rescue force was departing, a helicopter collided with one of the C-130s that were carrying commandos and helicopter fuel; eight Servicemen died. The helicopters, with valuable secret documents, weapons, and communications gear on board, were hastily abandoned.

What were the underlying problems? No existing joint organisation was capable of conducting such a raid. There was no useful contingency plan, no planning staff with the required expertise, no joint doctrine or procedures, and no relevant cross-Service experience. The joint task force commander, Major General James Vaught, an Army Ranger, was a distinguished combat veteran,

but he had no experience in operations with other Services. The participating Service units trained separately; they met for the first time in the desert in Iran, at Desert One. Even there, they did not establish command and control procedures or clear lines of authority. Colonel James Kyle, US Air Force, who was the senior commander at Desert One, would recall that there were “four commanders at the scene without visible identification, incompatible radios, and no agreed-upon plan, not even a designated location for the commander.”<sup>7</sup> How could this state of affairs have possibly arisen? It happened because the Services were so separate and so determined to remain separate.

The Department of Defence—which in this period made no effort to reorganise itself fundamentally—was also suffering all manner of administrative problems. The nation was formulating security strategy unconstrained by realistic estimates of available fiscal resources, because the Services could never agree on a fiscally constrained strategy and the allocation of resources to support it. Communications, refuelling, and other vital systems and devices were not interoperable across the Services. There were modernisation/readiness imbalances, because the all-powerful Services were pushing for more modernisation, while the readiness needs of the weak unified commanders were underrepresented.

There were numerous procurement and spare parts horror stories during this period. A memorable one involved the coffee pots the air force bought for its C-5A Galaxy aircraft at a price of \$ 7,000 each. The pots were so advanced that they could keep brewing in conditions that would kill the crews.

### ***“The System Is Broken”***

The process that led to Goldwater-Nichols began when General David Jones, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, went before the House Armed Services Committee in a closed session on February, 1982, about five months before he was to retire, and said, essentially, “The system is broken. I have tried to reform it from inside, but I cannot. Congress is going to have to mandate necessary

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7. James H. Kyle, *The Guts to Try: The Untold Story of the Iran Hostage Rescue Mission by the On-Scene Desert Commander* (New York: Orion Books, 1990), p. 283.



reforms." General Jones was the catalyst, the most important factor in ultimately bringing about the Goldwater-Nichols Act; the four-year, 241-day battle had begun.

Shortly after General Jones's call for reform, General Edward "Shy" Meyer, the army chief of staff, urged fundamental reorganisation of the JCS. During congressional testimony, a third sitting JCS member, General Lew Allen, the air force chief of staff, also voiced support for reorganisation. The naval Service's JCS members—Admiral Thomas Hayward, chief of naval operations, and General Robert Barrow, commandant of the marine corps—vigorously opposed reform efforts. The 1982 debate—bitterly pitting the army and air force against the navy and marine corps—reenacted the post war disputes over unification.

In the summer of 1982, three Joint Chiefs—Generals Jones and Allen and Admiral Hayward—reached the end of their tenures. General John Vessey, of the army, became the new chairman and adopted an anti-reform stance. The new air force chief of staff, General Charles Gabriel, also showed no interest in JCS reform. Admiral James Watkins, the new chief of naval operations, shared Admiral Hayward's strong anti-reform sentiments. Suddenly, General Meyer was the only joint chief in favour of reorganisation. In late 1982, the JCS, responding to a study request by Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger, recommended against major JCS reorganisation. Secretary Weinberger and President Ronald Reagan supported this recommendation, and the Administration took for the first time an official position in opposition to JCS reform. This stance set the stage for a fierce fight between Congress and the Pentagon.

In the meantime, the House Armed Services Committee—spurred to action by General Jones's reform plea—held extensive hearings and formulated a Bill on JCS reorganisation, which the House of Representatives passed on August 16, 1982. Congressman Richard White (D-Texas), chairman of the Investigations Subcommittee, led the 1982 effort. In 1983, Congressman William Nichols (D-Alabama) assumed the chair of the Investigations Subcommittee and responsibility for pushing the reform legislation.

The Senate did not enter the fray until June 1983, when Senator John Tower (R-Texas), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, launched a major

inquiry on organisation of the entire Department of Defence. At the same time, the last JCS reform supporter—General Meyer—retired. His replacement, General John Wickham, joined the anti-reform ranks. A new marine commandant, General P. X. Kelley, was also appointed that summer. Like his predecessor, General Kelley was a determined opponent of reorganisation. All five joint chiefs were now united in opposition to reorganisation. When Senator Tower manoeuvred to keep his committee in the anti-reform camp, the 1983-84 battle lines had the Pentagon and Senate squaring off against the House of Representatives. This division also reflected party politics. A Republican Administration and Republican-controlled Senate were united in battling a Democratic-controlled House.

In 1985, four events began to shift the balance in favour of reform. Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Arizona) became chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and made defence reorganisation his top priority. He formed a partnership with the committee's top Democrat, Senator Sam Nunn (D-Georgia). The bipartisan partnership of these two defence giants became the second most important factor leading to the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act. The second event in 1985 was the elevation of Congressman Les Aspin (D-Wisconsin) to the chairmanship of the House Armed Services Committee. He was strongly pro-reform and provided important political and intellectual support to Congressman Nichols' efforts.

The other two events occurred in the Administration. Robert McFarlane, the national security advisor, convinced President Reagan to establish a commission—the Packard Commission—to examine defence reorganisation. The commission eventually endorsed reforms being considered by the Senate and House Armed Services Committees. On October 1, 1985, Admiral William Crowe, a supporter of defence reorganisation, became the chairman of the JCS. The Pentagon's official position in opposition constrained his public efforts, but behind the scenes, Admiral Crowe pushed for reorganisation. In 1986, these factors led the Senate and House to enact sweeping reforms despite the continued opposition of the Pentagon.

## PURPOSES AND PROVISIONS

The organisational problems addressed by Goldwater-Nichols had existed for more than four decades. When Congress went to work on the Bill, there were studies on



hand by the JCS and by various commissions for presidents and secretaries of defence dating back to the 1940s; there was a tremendous amount of evidence to make use of. We should note, however, that by 1996, the tenth anniversary of the Act, the JCS chairman, General John Shalikashvili, could say: "The effects of Goldwater-Nichols have been so imbedded in the military that many members of the Armed Forces no longer remember the organisational problems that brought about this law."<sup>8</sup> That is certainly even truer today. In fact, there were really ten fundamental problems in the Defence

Department to which the Congress turned its attention. Their seriousness is evidenced by the fact that Congress—which, as we have seen, had reason to like things the way they were—now collectively acknowledged that it would have to give up prerogatives in the defence area. Many in uniform also recognised the problems, although the Department of Defence and the four Services, as institutions, were dead set against addressing them.

### *The Congressional Perspective*

The number one problem plaguing the Department of Defence was an imbalance between Service and joint interests. The Services absolutely dominated: they had *de facto* vetoes in the JCS, and they had weakened the unified commanders. On issues of major interest to them, the Services aligned in opposition to the secretary of

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8. John M. Shalikashvili [Gen., USA], "A Word from the Chairman," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Autumn 1996, p. 1.

defence. General Jones had assembled a group of retired officers, the Chairman's Special Study Group, to study reform of the joint system; it agreed, "The problem is one of balance. A certain amount of service independence is healthy and desirable, but the balance now favors the parochial interests of the Services too much, and the larger needs of the nation's defence too little."<sup>9</sup>

Second, military advice to the political leadership was inadequate. As before, it was being watered down to the lowest common denominator, so that all of the Services could agree. General Jones said,

"The corporate advice provided by the Joint Chiefs of Staff is not crisp, timely, very useful, or very influential."<sup>10</sup> James Schlesinger, secretary of defence from 1973 to 1975, was even harsher: "The proffered advice is generally irrelevant, normally unread, and almost always disregarded."<sup>11</sup>

Third, military officers serving in joint-duty assignments were insufficiently qualified, by either education or experience. As Congress found, officers did not want to serve in joint assignments; they knew that in such billets they would be monitored for loyalty by their parent Service. In the navy, in the mid-1980s, joint duty was considered the "kiss of death"; it meant that one's career was over. General George Crist of the marine corps, as commander-in-chief of Central Command, testified to Congress that there had not been a single volunteer for any of the thousand billets on his headquarters staff—all of them joint billets. Everyone on his staff had been forced to serve there. Officers unlucky enough to

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9. Chairman's Special Study Group, *The Organization and Functions of the JCS: Report for the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff* (Arlington, Va.: Systems Research and Applications Corp., 1982), p. 54.

10. Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services [HASC], Investigations Subcommittee, Reorganization Proposals/or the Joint Chiefs of Staff Hearings before the Investigations Subcommittee, 97th Cong., 2d sess., 1982, HASC no.97-47, p. 54.

11. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Organisation, Structure, and Decisionmaking Procedures of the Department of Defense: Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, 98th Cong., 1st sess., S. Hrg. 98-375, pt. 5, November 2, 1983, p. 187.



be assigned to joint duty got orders out of it as soon as they could; their tours of duty became dysfunctionally short.

A fourth point, already mentioned, was the imbalance between the responsibility and authority of each unified commander: his responsibilities were vast, his authority weak.

A fifth, related problem was that operational chains of command were confused and cumbersome. The Services challenged the operational role of the secretary of defence. The joint chiefs collectively and the Service chiefs individually were not in the operational chain of command; nonetheless, the JCS often acted as if it were part of the chain, and individual chiefs played operational roles when the unified commanders involved were from their respective Services. Chains of command within a unified command were obstructed by what came to be called "the wall of the component."<sup>12</sup> Unified four-star commanders had difficulty penetrating the "walls" of their Service component commands; three-star or four-star commanders whom the Service chiefs tended to protect, led these components. Accordingly, joint commanders were unable really to pull their commands together to carry out their missions. In 1970, the Blue Ribbon Defence Panel had declared: "'Unification" of either command or of the forces is more cosmetic than substantive."<sup>13</sup> Samuel Huntington in 1984 observed, "Each service continues to exercise great autonomy.... Unified commands are not really commands, and they certainly aren't unified."<sup>14</sup>

Sixth, strategic planning was ineffective.

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12. John H. Cushman, *Command and Control of Theater Forces: The Korea Command and Other Cases* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 5-23.

13. *Blue Ribbon Defense Panel, Report to the President and the Secretary of Defense on the Department of Defense* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Off., 1970), p. 50.

14. Samuel P. Huntington, "Defense Organisation and Military Strategy," *Public Interest*, Spring 1984, p. 24.

been created—the Defence Logistics Agency, the Defence Intelligence Agency—to provide common supply and Service functions for all components, but mechanisms for supervising or controlling them were ineffective. An eighth issue was confusion as to the roles of the Service secretaries; the National Security Act of 1947 had not defined them. The secretary of defence had been placed on top, but his relationships with the Service secretaries had been left unspecified, because addressing them would have been too controversial. Ninth, unnecessary duplication existed in the military department headquarters. Each military department had (as they still do) two headquarters staffs—that of the secretary, and that of the Service chief. The Department of the Navy—comprising two Service chiefs—actually has three headquarters staffs.

Tenth and last was the major problem of congressional micro-management—even as seen from Capitol Hill. Congress was finding itself too often “in the weeds,” immersed in details, not doing its job as the “board of directors,” providing clear, but broad, strategic direction. Senator Nunn spoke of Congress’ preoccupation with trivia: “Last year [1984], Congress changed the number of smoke grenade launchers and muzzle boresights the Army requested. We directed the Navy to pare back its request for parachute flares, practice bombs, and passenger vehicles. Congress specified that the Air Force should cut its request for garbage trucks, street cleaners, and scoop loaders. This is a bit ridiculous.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Striking the Balance*

The overarching objective of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, as it was ultimately formulated was to balance joint and Service interests. It was not to thwart Service prerogatives; the Services were, and would remain, the most important elements of the Department of Defence. They were, and are, the foundations on which everything else had to be constructed. To strike that balance, the drafters of the Goldwater-Nichols Act adopted nine objectives:

- Strengthen civilian authority
- Improve military advice to the president (in his constitutionally specified

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15. Congress, Senate, Senator Nunn of Georgia speaking on congressional oversight of national defence, 99th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record, October 1, 1985, pp. 25350-25354.



capacity as commander-in-chief of the armed forces), secretary of defence, and National Security Council

- Place clear responsibilities on the unified commanders-in-chief for mission accomplishment
- Ensure that a unified commander's authority is commensurate with his responsibilities
- Increase attention to strategy formulation and contingency planning
- Provide for the more efficient use of resources
- Improve joint officer management
- Enhance the effectiveness of military operations
- Improve Defence Department management and administration.

In the past, Congress had tried to limit the authority of the secretary of defence, because, as has been noted, its direct links with the Services, and to the industries that served them, worked to the benefit of members of Congress in local politics. But in the report accompanying the Goldwater-Nichols Act, Congress finally declared: "The secretary of defence has sole and ultimate power within the Department of Defence on any matter on which the secretary chooses to act."<sup>16</sup> That is, no one in the Defence Department, civilian or military, possessed authority that was independent of the secretary. Eisenhower had decreed effectively the same thing in 1953, through an executive directive; only in 1986 was Congress prepared to legislate the point.

To strengthen further civilian authority, Goldwater-Nichols gave the secretary a powerful military ally in the JCS chairman. The chairman was freed from the necessity of negotiating with the Service chiefs, and his institutional perspective was to be similar to that of the secretary. The 1986 legislation also specified the responsibilities of each Service secretary to the defence secretary. Addressing civilian authority at the military department level, it clarified and strengthened the roles of each Service secretary.

To improve military advice, the Act transferred all corporate functions of the JCS to the chairman (in which he was to be assisted by a newly created vice

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16. Congress, House, Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defence Reorganization Act of 1986: Conference Report [to accompany H.R. 3622], 99th Cong., 2d sess., Report 99-824, p. 101.

chairman). Specifically, it designated the chairman of the Joints Chief of Staff as the principal military advisor, with a mandate to provide that advice on the basis of the broadest military perspective. Further, it made the Joint Staff (which supports the Joint Chiefs) responsible exclusively to the chairman, and it made elaborate provisions to improve the quality of officers assigned to the Joint Staff, as well as to the staffs of the unified commanders-in-chief.

It did so by ordering fundamental improvements in joint officer management generally—an arena that became the last battleground in the drafting, passage, and ultimate enactment of the Goldwater-Nichols legislation. The Services saw that if they retained absolute control of promotions and assignments, Congress could pass all the laws it wanted—not much was going to change in the Department of Defence. Congress was equally determined to reward officers who accepted and performed well in billets that were outside of their Services; to that end, it created through Goldwater-Nichols, a joint officer management system. Specifically, a joint career specialty was established, and joint education was much more closely regulated—the Services, for example, had been sending officers to joint schools but had assigned only a few graduates to joint billets.

As for the unified commanders-in-chief, the Act made them clearly responsible to the president and the secretary of defence—constituted collectively as the “national command authority”—for the performance of missions and the preparedness of their commands. Goldwater-Nichols required the assignment of all combat forces to the unified commanders and removed the JCS from the operational chain of command. No longer could the Services move forces in and out of regional commands without the approval, or even the knowledge, of the commanders-in-chief. (An investigation after the 1983 bombing of the marine barracks in Beirut found that 31 units in Beirut had been sent there unbeknownst to the commander-in-chief, US European Command.)

To ensure sufficient authority for the unified commanders, the law essentially gave them all the authority that is traditionally given to a military commander. Unified commanders were empowered to issue authoritative direction on all aspects of operations, joint training, and logistics, to prescribe internal chains of command, to organise commands and forces, and to employ forces. A unified



commander-in-chief could now assign command functions to subordinate commanders and approve certain aspects of administration and support. In addition, unified commanders could now exercise personnel authority: they could select their headquarters staffs and subordinate commanders (matters in which they had had almost no say in the past); they could suspend subordinates; and they could convene courts-martial. As might be imagined, all of this caused heartburn among the Services. But Congress had decided that unified commanders had to have these kinds of authority if they were to be effective.

Goldwater-Nichols addressed the lack of emphasis on high-level planning by requiring the president to submit annually a national security strategy, on the basis of which the chairman was to prepare fiscally constrained strategic plans. (The Pentagon at first had major objections here, but a year's experience with the new process put them to rest.) The secretary of defence was to provide—with the assistance of the under-secretary of defence for policy—guidance to the chairman of the JCS and unified commanders for the preparation and review of contingency plans. Goldwater-Nichols also prescribed a role for the under secretary in assisting the secretary's review of the plans. (These were major advances. Lacking policy and political guidance, the military drafters of contingency plans had been forced to formulate their own assumptions. Also, until then, the JCS had jealously guarded contingency plans, permitting only the secretary—and no other civilian—to see them in completed form.)

In the resource area, the Act called upon the secretary to provide policy guidance for the effective use of resources. He was to address objectives and policies, mission priorities, and resource constraints. Interestingly, Goldwater-Nichols told the military departments, in effect, that their collective role, their entire *raison d'être*, was now to fulfill, as far as practicable, the

**Goldwater-Nichols addressed the lack of emphasis on high-level planning by requiring the president to submit annually a national security strategy, on the basis of which the chairman was to prepare fiscally constrained strategic plans.**

current and future requirements of unified commanders-in-chief. To the same end, the Act strengthened the supervision, budget review, and combat readiness of the growing defence agencies. Congress also assigned ten new resource-related duties to the chairman of the JCS, in the search for the independent joint budget perspective that had been missing.

Many of the above initiatives, taken together, constituted Congress' effort to improve the effectiveness of military operations. That left a final goal, improved management and administration—and here Congress' concerns included excessive spans of control. The Office of the Secretary of Defence and the Service headquarters staffs had grown very large, and organisationally "excessively flat"—42 people reported directly to the secretary of defence, and some Service chiefs directly supervised more than 50. The Goldwater-Nichols drafters moved to reduce these spans of control. Believing that Pentagon Headquarters were too large, they mandated personnel reductions in them. Addressing unnecessary duplication between Service secretariats and military headquarters staffs, Goldwater-Nichols consolidated seven functions in the secretariats. Last, the Act sought to promote a mission orientation in the Pentagon and overcome the excessive focus on functional activities—manpower, research and development, health affairs, and so on.

## RESULTS

How well have the objectives that Goldwater-Nichols set been achieved? Have those objectives been met in terms of the Defence Department's performance?

Some commentators believe they have. Congressman (later secretary of defence) Les Aspin immediately called Goldwater-Nichols "one of the landmark laws of American history ... probably the greatest sea change in the history of the American military since the Continental Congress created the Continental Army in 1775."<sup>17</sup> Admiral William Owens believes it was "the watershed event for the military since the Second World War."<sup>18</sup> William J. Perry, secretary of defence from 1994 to 1997, considers Goldwater-Nichols "perhaps the most important

17. Les Aspin, quoted in House Armed Services Committee, "House-Senate Conference Wraps Up Defense Reorganisation Bill," news release, September 1, 1986.

18. William A. Owens, "'Jointness Is His Job,'" *Government Executive*, April 1995, p. 61.



defence legislation since World War II.”<sup>19</sup>

A few have been more critical. John Lehman, secretary of the navy in the Ronald Reagan years, charged in 1995 that the new joint staff reflected a gradual edging toward the old German general-staff system.<sup>20</sup> Richard Kohn has expressed concern about erosion of civilian control of the military.<sup>21</sup> The drafters of Goldwater-Nichols hoped for a Joint Staff that was as capable as the Office of the Secretary of Defence. Now, unfortunately, the Joint Staff is much more capable than the staff of the secretary of defence, and only partly due to improved quality of the work of the former—the performance of the Office of the Secretary of Defence has been weaker. Others have had similar unease regarding the current viability of civilian control. Professor Mackubin Owens of the Naval War College has argued, “The contributions of the Goldwater-Nichols Act... are marginal at best, and...the unintended consequences of the Act may well create problems in the future that outweigh any current benefits.”<sup>22</sup> Let us review the objectives again, this time in the light of the experience of a decade and a half.

There is no dispute about the stature of the secretary of defence. He clearly is the ultimate authority in the Department of Defence, and his role in the chain of command is clear. He enjoys the independent military advice of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to such an extent that policy disputes are now generally between the secretary and chairman on one side, and the Services on the other; such debates are no longer civil/military in nature, and that is

**Previously, initiatives in the Joint Staff went through five levels of review, in which each Service had, effectively, a veto. Papers tended to be reduced to the lowest common denominator, inoffensive to any Service, even before they reached the chiefs themselves.**

19. William J. Perry, speech honouring Senator Sam Nunn, Pentagon, July 12, 1996.

20. John F. Lehman, “Is the Joint Staff a General Staff?” *Armed Forces Journal International*, August 1995, p. 16.

21. Richard H. Kohn, “The Crisis in Military-Civilian Relations,” *National Interest*, Spring 1994, pp. 3-17.

22. Mackubin T. Owens, Jr., “Goldwater-Nichols: A Ten-Year Retrospective,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 1996, pp. 48-53.

fortunate. The secretary of defence now has well-understood relationships with the Service secretaries, and their internal authority, in turn, has been clarified. There does appear to have been a reluctance on the part of the secretaries of defence to exercise fully their newly won authority. The weaker performance of the Office of the Secretary of Defence—leading to an imbalance between the influence of that office and the Joint Staff—has diminished the civilian voice in decision-making. The Goldwater-Nichols objective of strengthening civilian authority has produced results of a “B-minus,” middling quality; there are problems here. Still, they are manageable ones; the problems that once crippled the secretary’s authority have been overcome.

As for the quality of military advice to the national command authority, recent advisors and advisees have described it as greatly improved. Richard Cheney, as the secretary of defence under President George H. W. Bush, thought it represented “a significant improvement” over the “lowest common denominator.”<sup>23</sup> General Shalikashvili said, “We have been able to provide far better, more focused advice.”<sup>24</sup> Previously, initiatives in the Joint Staff went through five levels of review, in which each Service had, effectively, a veto. Papers tended to be reduced to the lowest common denominator, inoffensive to any Service, even before they reached the chiefs themselves, where the necessity for unanimous agreement caused them to be denatured even further. In the end, the secretary of defence would turn to his own civilian staff for the substantial advice that he could not get from military officers. Goldwater-Nichols freed the JCS from these staffing procedures. The Joint Staff now works for the chairman, and the chairman—though he may consult the Service chiefs and unified commanders—need “coordinate” his advice with no one. Not all observers are impressed; Secretary Lehman believes that making the chairman principal military advisor has “limited not only the scope of military advice available to the political leadership, but also the policy- and priority-setting roles of the

23. “About Fighting and Winning Wars: An Interview with Dick Cheney,” *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, May 1996, p. 33.

24. John M. Shalikashvili [Gen. USA], “Goldwater-Nichols: Ten Years from Now,” remarks, National Defence University Symposium, Washington, DC, December 3, 1996.



service chiefs and civilian service secretaries."<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the overwhelming opinion believes that progress in this part of Goldwater-Nichols merits a grade of A, for tremendous improvement.

It is universally agreed that the same is true regarding clarifying the mission responsibility of the unified commanders-in-chief. Military officers and defence officials have repeatedly cited the benefits of a clear, short operational chain of command. General Norman Schwarzkopf, commander-in-chief of Central Command during Desert Storm found that the clarification of his responsibilities made a tremendous difference: "Goldwater-Nichols established very, very clear lines of command authority and responsibilities for subordinate commanders, and that meant a much more effective fighting force."<sup>26</sup> I would give this an A as well.

Goldwater-Nichols has also effectively made the authority of the unified commanders commensurate with their responsibilities. Overwhelming successes in military operations and peace-time activities have provided visible evidence of the positive results. The Act's provisions have worked out very well because the Goldwater-Nichols drafters had a great model—the authority that the military has traditionally given to a unit commander—to use in assigning command authority to unified commanders. General Shalikashvili has characterised the improvement here in very positive terms: "This act, by providing both the responsibility and the authority needed by the CINCs [commanders-in-chief], had made the combatant commanders vastly more capable of fulfilling their warfighting role."<sup>27</sup> Observers are divided as to whether the unified commanders have too much, or too little, influence in resource issues. Nonetheless, the current state of affairs is probably about right—another grade of A.

Of course, the most conspicuous success for Goldwater-Nichols has been in the realm of military effectiveness; there have been overwhelming operational successes since the law was passed. General Colin Powell observed,

25. John F. Lehman and Harvey Sicherman, "America's Military Problems and How to Fix Them," Foreign Policy Research Institute WIRE: A Catalyst for Ideas, February 9, 2001, on the World Wide Web: [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).

26. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm: Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, 102d Cong., 1st sess., April 24; May 8, 9, 16, 21; and June 4, 12, 20, 1991, p. 318.

27. Shalikashvili, n.24.

"Performance of the Armed Forces in joint operations has improved significantly and Goldwater-Nichols deserves a great deal of the credit."<sup>28</sup> Of US joint war-fighting capabilities, General Shalikashvili said, "No other nation can match our ability to combine forces on the battlefield and fight jointly."<sup>29</sup> Areas of concern might be slow progress on joint doctrine and resistance to the missions of the Joint Forces Command (formerly Atlantic Command) in the training, integration, and provision of joint forces and experimentation with new concepts. Nonetheless, the Department of Defence has clearly been doing "A" work in the Goldwater-Nichols structure to improve operational effectiveness.

World events and regional trends have thrust the unified commanders with geographic responsibilities into broader roles, in which they are seen as representing the US government. Of all government agencies, only the Department of Defence has officials in the field with regionwide responsibilities. The unified commanders have performed well in this role, but to have US security interests represented so powerfully around the world by military officers may, in the long-term, become unacceptable, because the military dimension of national-security interests overseas is decreasing.

In the remaining objective areas, the Goldwater-Nichols experience has been less pleasant. Strategy formulation has improved, but the results are not yet very strong; published strategic documents still betray strong attachment to the past. Contingency plans have been improved tremendously, but there are still barriers between the civilian policy-makers and operational staffs in crisis-action contingency planning. Strategy making and contingency planning under Goldwater-Nichols collectively merits a grade of C—unimpressive.

The effect of Goldwater-Nichols with respect to more efficient use of resources has been barely acceptable, if that—a grade of D. There have been some positives—the Base Force, recommended after the Cold War by General Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to reduce the military by 25 per cent; and the Joint Warfighting Capability Assessments developed in the Joint Staff, largely at the initiative of Admiral Owens. But the Services continue

28. "The Chairman as Principal Military Adviser: An Interview with Colin L. Powell," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Autumn 1996, p. 30.

29. Shalikashvili, "A Word from the Chairman."



to fund Cold War systems, cannot seem to break their attachment to them, and the Joint Requirements Oversight Council has rubber-stamped the Services' choices. As Admiral Owens has argued, the inability of the defence establishment to make some fundamental decisions has squandered the post-Cold War period.<sup>30</sup>

The qualifications of joint officers have improved dramatically—thanks not to the Department of Defence, which has been until recently indifferent in its implementation of the Act's joint officer provisions, but to the initiative of the officers themselves. These officers have come to see joint experience as something that can promote their careers or provide useful skill sets for the future. The department itself, however, still has no concept of its needs for joint officers or of how to prepare and reward them. The officer corps is much smaller now than it was when Goldwater-Nichols was passed; this is no area in which to be adrift. It requires, again, a balance between joint and Service emphasis. Joint officer education can be pushed too far; Service capabilities and perspectives are very important, for instance, and they can be taught only at command-and-staff and war colleges. The bottom-line grade for Goldwater-Nichols' objective of improving joint officer management is a C+.

Finally, the remedies applied by Goldwater-Nichols to defence management and administration have largely been ineffective. They were never a priority for the Act's drafters, and troubling trends remain. Management of the large defence agencies is still weak. The Pentagon, with its large staffs, including two (or three) headquarters staffs in each military department, is choking on bureaucracy. The division of work among the major components is blurred. The orientation to mission in business activities is still weak, and management doctrine, so to speak, is a relic of the 1960s. The Defence Department under Goldwater-Nichols gets a D here—barely getting by.

The overall report card, then, is mixed. In the areas that the original sponsors of the Goldwater-Nichols Act considered most pressing—military advice, the

**The remedies applied by Goldwater-Nichols to defence management and administration have largely been ineffective.**

30. Bill Owens with Ed Offley, *Lifting the Fog of War* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), p. 207.

**The “business” reforms of Goldwater-Nichols, however, have not worked. These concerns, which may have been secondary 15 years ago, are urgent now.**

unified commanders, contingency planning, joint officer management, and military operations—the Department of Defence has made gratifying, sometimes striking, progress. That is, the Act has been very successful in improving the operational dimension of the Department of Defence.

The “business” reforms of Goldwater-Nichols, however, have not worked. These concerns, which may have been secondary 15 years ago, are urgent now.

### **YESTERDAY’S WINNING FORMULA**

The unfinished business of Goldwater-Nichols cannot be resolved from the bottom up; the Department of Defence is too large, and the rate of change it confronts is too rapid. The process will have to be driven from the top, by leadership with vision and communication skills. In 1997, Secretary of Defence William S. Cohen sought to stimulate a “revolution in business affairs” in the Defence Department—the office of the secretary, the military departments, “business activities,” and the defence agencies. He wanted to “bring to the department management techniques and business practices that have restored American corporations to leadership in the marketplace.”<sup>31</sup> The effort needs to be accelerated tremendously—in a Defence Department with a culture that is markedly change resistant.

Resistance to change is a natural tendency of both humans and large organisations, but in a world characterised by accelerating change, it is a strategic liability. As two business scholars observed, “Yesterday’s winning formula ossifies into today’s conventional wisdom before petrifying into tomorrow’s tablets of stone.”<sup>32</sup> The world is moving very rapidly—and the US Department of Defence is too attached to the past.

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31. William S. Cohen, “Message from the Secretary,” in *Defense Reform Initiative: The Business Strategy for Defense in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Department of Defence, 1997), p. i.

32. Sumantra Ghoshal and Christopher A. Bartlett, “Changing the Role of Top Management: Beyond Structure to Processes,” *Harvard Business Review*, January–February 1995, p. 94.



The dual headquarters at the top of each of the military departments must be combined into one; the current arrangement is far too inefficient for a fast-paced world, and it consumes far too much manpower. The defence agencies—which now expend more money than the Department of the

Army—should be collected into a “fourth department,” for support of the entire Defence Department—under an executive, a director of defence support, who can impose high-quality management techniques in this vital area. In the operational area, standing joint task force headquarters should be established in each regional unified command, despite the personnel and resource commitment that will involve; as it is, the military assembles forces for operations as if it were picking teams in a neighbourhood basketball game. Joint Forces Command needs—in fact, all joint activities should have—a budget and authority to buy systems unique to joint operations. The present dependence on service executive agents gives the Services too much control over progress in joint activities.

**Joint Forces Command needs—in fact, all joint activities should have—a budget and authority to buy systems unique to joint operations.**

The Goldwater-Nichols story offers, in my view, two key lessons. First, defence organisation is important; it deserves continuous and innovative attention. Congress came to the department’s rescue in 1986, but today the Pentagon’s organisational problems are again stacking up, and at an ever faster pace. Second, Goldwater-Nichols brings to the fore the struggle of each officer to find that balance between loyalty to the Service and devotion to the larger needs of the nation. All who work in elements of large organisations face a similar challenge. The natural impulse is to defend that element—to protect it against marauders, to be sure it gets its fair share, to demonstrate that its contributions are more vital than those of others, and, when necessary, to fight against its evil foes. Such impulses have their time and place, but increasingly, America will need officers who can resist them when the nation’s security demands something more.