

**Written Testimony of Colonel Lawrence B. Wilkerson, US Army (Retired)
submitted to the**

**UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES**

SUBCOMMITTEE ON PERSONNEL

for a hearing on

Public Integrity and Anti-Corruption Laws at the Department of Defense

Wednesday, April 26, 2023 – 3:00 p.m.

In late August of 1993, I was helping Colin Powell move into his new home in McLean, Virginia. We were admiring a beautiful over-and-under shotgun that Mikhail Gorbachev had given Powell when he was Ronald Reagan's final national security advisor, and at the same time we were resting momentarily in the lobby of the spacious new house, having unloaded quite a few items to that point. I took the moment to ask Powell an important question -- for both of us.

"What's next for you, boss?"

He looked at me with that enigmatic, slight smile of his and said he didn't know. I followed up with a matter-of-fact statement that he could emulate one of his heroes, George Marshall, and shoot for a cabinet position, SecDef or SecState.

He answered with words that stunned me somewhat and that I will never forget.

"I'd need several millions of dollars to do that. You can't go after a cabinet position such as those without lots of money -- particularly if you're a Black man with 300 Jamaican cousins, at least."

Again he smiled -- more widely -- as I logged that trenchant thought without comment on what it meant, if true, for our democracy, both in terms of millionaire cabinet officers and the feeling that Blacks needed more insurance-for-the-future than Whites.

Then he followed up with a statement that did not stun me and with which I completely agreed and about which I felt similar disgust.

"One thing's for certain", he said. "I won't be a beltway bandit."

I knew precisely what he meant.

Powell and I had had several pithy conversations over the previous four and a half years about flag officers who departed the Pentagon, or other high perches in the military, and went almost directly to defense contractors or similar corporate entities and traded their "rolodex's" for six-figure salaries and perks. Rather than rolodex, today the term would be "cellphone contact list".

We both knew why they were hired by the likes of Lockheed, Grumman, Raytheon, Boeing, Booze Allen, SAIC, CACI, United Technologies (now merged with Raytheon), and so on. They were hired for the high-level people they knew and could influence, from their contemporaries still on active duty to the key people in other government departments and agencies, to the Saudi, Japanese, Korean, European, Israeli and other potentates and near-potentates, in uniform and in mufti, with whom they had worked during active service. Those related to Saudi Arabia seemed particularly egregious and compromised, partly if not largely because so much money, both above-board and "dark", could be in play.

Both Powell and I held such flag officers (and not a few Colonels/Navy Captains) in some disdain.

We both knew that the lives to which they had become accustomed were difficult to shed, both from a power perspective and a standard of living point of view. But we also believed there were several other ways to provide for a rough continuation of such lifestyles rather than prostrating oneself and one's honor to the beltway bandits, which is precisely what we both labeled them -- and not just in humor.

One could contend that we also knew there might be one or two officers who could go, say, to Lockheed, accept a position that paid six or seven times what they had earned in the military, and still make sound decisions and give sound advice and not put national interests in jeopardy. Adding in a very robust flag officer retired pay, they were, as we described it, sitting pretty -- and maintaining their honor and dignity. But -- and it's a huge "but" -- we both thought we could count such officers on one hand.

Call it a deterioration of ethics in the military officer corps, the lure of filthy lucre, the lifestyle preferences, the elixir of continued power and influence, call it what you will, we knew that the Army did not usually produce many giants of integrity, as sometimes the American people seemed to think. We knew too that Hamilton and Madison had been right when they said men were no angels -- and that's why governments were instituted and the rule of law established.

And we often talked about how the process had become just too easy, that what had begun to be called the "revolving door" was well-lubricated and passing through it took almost no effort and carried little stigma at all. And, usually, came with quite a few perks.

Later, when we both were growing old, we had occasion to comment on one particularly egregious example that appalled us both. Powell opened his criticism with a blow to the solar plexus of the general officer involved, because he had been a staff member for Powell when Powell was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

This officer, in 2002 and 2003 and later, was not only working for a media outlet and being paid, he was also advising the boards of one or two of the defense contractors in position to benefit enormously from the 2003 Iraq War.

From his media perch, he advocated strenuously for the war and for its positive progress after "the statue came down" (the apparent end of combat). It was very hard to believe this particular officer actually thought the war would be a cakewalk, and certainly not the post-hostilities phase because we all knew there were simply too few troops for the war and far too few for the war's aftermath. Indeed, Powell had even discussed such matters with the officer in question earlier as well as with the Commander of Central Command, General Franks.

Both Powell and I, with some expressed disgust, concluded this officer was shilling for the war to increase share prices -- which subsequently rose dramatically -- as well as fulfill and secure his well-compensated media role.

This is only one example, perhaps one of the most egregious, but only one.

For instance, both Powell and I discussed the number of USAF officers who pushed for the F-35 while in uniform and then went to work in some way for one of the several contractors involved. What troubled us most was that on the inside, so to speak, they knew of the cost overruns, the shoddy performance, the outright lies being offered about the logistics package and the associated costs, but they went right out and took positions with the contractors and became an integral part of the deceit.

Likewise as the mission of Close Air Support (CAS) arose with regard to the F-35. These officers knew well that the USAF would never risk such an expensive aircraft supporting soldiers on the ground; yet they joined the chorus asserting the F-35 would perform CAS missions, perform them well, and thus the very best airframe for that purpose, the A-10 Warthog, could be retired. That made us furious. We also knew that even if the F-35 were somehow committed to CAS, it would perform the mission atrociously, risking unnecessarily soldiers' lives. Both Powell and I had discussed the "Roles and Missions" debate numerous times -- including going over the Key West Agreement as one of our first actions upon Powell's assuming the position of CJCS; so, we knew the history of the debates and how often CAS had fared very poorly in them since WWII. For both of us, this was a sacred matter of soldiers' lives on the ground.

Both Powell and I realized how having partisan flag officers, more interested in making money and securing their futures than in the very best defense of sound policies and procedures, was putting not only vast resources at risk but more substantially, lives on the battlefield.

Let me provide an example of how this revolving door situation actually confronted me.

As a colonel, I had only a couple of offers from contractors as I departed the Army with 31 years of service. I believe this was largely because to the contractor empire I became a lost entity, so to speak. After Powell's four-year chairmanship, I was asked by the Marine Corps Commandant, General Charles Krulak, to go to Quantico, VA and "make his new war college joint." Having served with Marines before -- and truly revering them -- and having been on the faculty of the Naval War College in Newport, RI, as well as being a graduate of both that school's junior and senior courses, I knew the Navy and its Marine Corps very well. I accepted the Commandant's offer and served at Quantico for four years and was "ceremoniously" retired from the Marine Corps at Quantico and administratively, with no fanfare, retired from the Army at Ft. Myers (I wasn't even present).

And to their credit, the two contractors that did discover me at Quantico followed all the rules in making me an offer, i.e., they made it post-both retirements.

Later, when I became Secretary of State Powell's chief of staff, I was approached -- illegally -- while I was still in office and propositioned. Twice.

Actually, in both instances the individual who was supposed to make me an offer, tried to do so but in both cases I cut him off, cited the rules, and politely asked him to leave my office. With some obvious embarrassment, both gentlemen did so with no debate. From their countenances and parting apologies, however, I could tell my actions were wholly unexpected.

I relate this personal story simply to demonstrate how widespread such a recruiting practice is and how eager the defense industry is to get its hands on you if you are serving in high places. An acquaintance of mine, a West Point graduate and Army colonel upon his retirement, eventually accepted an offer not too dissimilar to one of those made to me and wound up serving his "security contractor" -- headed by a retired US Army four-star flag officer -- in the Ministry of Defense in Tbilisi, Georgia and making hundreds of thousands of dollars as a consequence. His wealth at this stage vastly exceeds my own.

The practice of stepping through the revolving door is well in place. It is, in my view, pernicious, corrupting, and damaging to the interests of the country.

There is an indirect aspect of this revolving door story that needs mentioning too because it is at the least contributory to the problem. Powell and I discussed this issue several times as well.

The issue is there are too many flag officers.

The "bloat of flags", as we used to call it, is frankly incredible.

One statistical indicator, which I find overwhelmingly convincing, is a simple set of ratios: in WWII, with roughly 12 million Americans in service, the ratio of flag officers to "the ranks" was one to six thousand. Today, with all Service components comprising roughly two million Americans (and one must be careful here in writing "Americans" because a recruiting procedure today enlists non-Americans with a promise of eventual citizenship), the ratio of flag officers to "the ranks" is one to fourteen hundred. A dramatic difference.

Today we have brigadier generals performing tasks, exercising authority and managing roles that in the past majors and lieutenant colonels performed quite well.

Additionally, we have unnecessary three- and four-star positions, even in ostensibly leadership and management roles.

But the staff officer ranks are by far the worst in this regard, whether the positions are inside the U.S. or on the increasingly bloated staffs of organizations such as the NATO military alliance.

One Navy Captain, writing in 2019, had this to say:

A cursory examination of the historical record makes clear that the number of flag officers serving in the United States Navy operates independently from either the number of ships in service or the number of personnel in uniform. Today, the number of flag officers seems to be more a political concoction or a runaway administrative outgrowth, but has little to do with the sea or the ability to sustain combat operations on it.

I would agree wholeheartedly and apply the description to each of the other Services in addition to the Navy, with its Marine Corps being somewhat of an exception. I say somewhat because it too has had some inexplicable growth in numbers.

And I am well aware that I keep describing the Marines Corps as if it were an integral part of the Navy and that any one of the present crop of Commandants would likely smack me for that description. The leaders of the Marine Corps today by and large consider the Corps a separate and independent entity in their heart of hearts -- and the Congress has afforded them ample evidence of late to that effect, particularly by adding a Marine four-star to the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- a decision this body might regret in a real war, say, with China. Unity of command has long been a principle of war and what is the Marine Corps divorced from the Navy except another Army?

For a comprehensive look at what violating unity of command does to a military, see the eminent naval historian Dr. Craig Symonds' new book (2022), *Nimitz at War*, which relates the history of the Pacific Theater in WWII. Because Franklin Roosevelt would not intervene with Admiral King, Admiral Nimitz, and General Douglas MacArthur and establish and empower one overall commander in the Pacific, America suffered tens of thousands of casualties needlessly.

Clearly, today's bloat of flag officers contributes to, if nothing else, the sheer number of retired flag officers available to defense and security contractors. I would contend that it also contributes to the less than stellar character of some of these individuals because, as I have earlier intimated, the ranks of solid-character Americans fit for such lofty service are not replete with individuals. There are some flag officers I have known whom I would not follow to a tea party let alone in a war.

I vividly recall Powell's debriefing me on a call he had just received from Senator Chuck Hagel when the Senator was a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The Senator told Powell that he -- the Senator -- was looking over the proposed promotion lists of two-stars to three-stars and three-stars to four-stars.

Hagel, Powell informed me, was angry. He told Powell that there was not a single individual on the prospective four-star list that he would want as a Service Chief, a Unified Command Commander, or a Chairman. Same with the prospective three-star list should any of them be so fortunate to make it to four. "What is wrong?" Hagel asked Powell.

Powell then engaged the Senator in a somewhat lengthy and complex discussion of how the various Service personnel systems were simply not working very well when it came to who did and who did not make flag rank -- and, more seriously, that the crop of prospects was not necessarily the best ever.

Now, I had known Powell and worked for him directly about three years at that juncture of our 12 professional years together and I knew him even at that early stage to be somewhat of a historian when it came to American history, particularly military history.

"In our history," I asked him, "has it ever been any better in decades of no significant war?"

"You've got a point," he responded. "But it's not as if we haven't had plenty of combat practice."

"Yea," I responded. "And we haven't actually won a war in half a century-plus -- except that little fracas in the Gulf in '90-'91, kicking Saddam's Army out of Kuwait." (After all, my mother did not raise a complete fool....).

"So what should I have told the Senator?" Powell asked.

"Precisely what you did tell him -- the truth as you see it. After all, the Constitution assigns the Congress the responsibility to look after the armed forces, the Army in particular, as it's raised as the occasion demands. Since they *provide* for a navy, their diligence perhaps should be more acute in that direction."

"It isn't any better there, and you know it." Powell conjectured.

"So what should we do?" I pleaded. "Pray for a big war?"

"Probably the only thing that would change the situation," he said, sadly.

These are my thoughts and, clearly, I have conveyed some of the thoughts, as expressed to me, of General and Secretary of State Colin Powell as well. We had many conversations about such matters but, other than a real war to cleanse the ranks, we had no real solution -- that is, a politically possible solution -- to offer.

We often remarked on just how many such people, the majority of them flag officers, General George Marshall had to root out and release from service in the late 1930s. The exigencies of a

looming world war demanded it. I would not wish for that solution, but it just might be the only one that would work.

I'm pleased to answer any questions you might have, if I'm able to do so.