

The Chairman's Dilemma

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Captain Bill Jones, U.S. Navy, fidgeted as he sat in the well-appointed waiting room of the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). A recent graduate of the Naval War College (NWC), he had felt well prepared to handle his duties in J-5 in helping develop national military strategy. Most of his service life had been spent on ships and major naval staffs, but he was confident that he had a good grasp of the larger security issues that confronted the Joint Staff. He had been taken aback by the phone call directing him to a one-on-one meeting with the new chairman. Bill was more than a little daunted as he was ushered across the hall and into the chairman's office.

The chairman, well known for his no-nonsense personality, came right to the point. "Bill, as you know I'm new here and I've got a problem. For the first time in my professional life, I feel like I'm in an organization that has lost the confidence of its rank and file." Captain Jones was shocked by the general's candor and more than a little uncomfortable with his revelation. What had caused the chairman to say that, and where was he headed?

"Bill," the chairman continued, "Have you read the piece in the September issue of the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* that took some hard shots at the previous chairman and Joint Chiefs over their 1998 testimony to Congress on readiness? The author, a bit sanctimoniously I might add, tore into the chiefs for not highlighting our readiness problems until they were forced to by Congress.¹ But his article is similar to what I've seen in a lot of the major newspapers. Now, I just read a news article that Army officers are turning down command at the battalion and brigade level at record levels. It said the number of lieutenant colonels declining command had gone from 15 in 1997 to 32 in 1999 and the number of colonels had gone from 4 in 1997 to 23 in 1999.² I've asked the Army chief of staff to provide me some information about the reasons those officers have declined command. Added to all of that is the continuing refusal of officers and enlisted to take the anthrax vaccination because they don't feel the chain of command has been leveling with them about the real risks. I know the numbers are relatively small, but I can't remember the last time this number of troops have refused a direct order over a single issue. The feedback from our recent congressional testimony clearly indicates that many of our troops believe we were less than candid in our portrayal of readiness and funding levels."

"You know Bill," the chairman continued, "I started my career during the Vietnam War and experienced the frustrations of having to execute a military strategy that my superiors knew was fatally flawed. Yet, they still acquiesced to political pressure to continue a defective strategy. I vowed then that I would never do the same if I were in put in a similar position."

I've just read a survey taken at one of the war colleges where mid-grade officers stated senior leaders today would throw their subordinates under a bus to protect or advance their careers. They also asserted the service chiefs should resign rather than accept the inadequate military budgets they're being given.³

"Bill, this situation is simply unacceptable. I am one of those joint chiefs the troops are referring to! The time has come to do something to restore the faith and trust that we at the top have lost. But, maybe I've been away from the troops too long to really understand what's at the core of this disenchantment with the officers who run this outfit. So that's why I asked you in here.

"Captain, my task for you is not easy. In fact, it's going to be tough. Simply put, what do I need to do to get our people back behind the senior leadership? If I can't solve this problem, I doubt I can be effective in taking this military where it needs to go during my term as chairman. I know you're just coming out of the field and that's why I want your thoughts about how I might proceed. Get on my schedule first thing tomorrow. See you in the morning."

As he walked down the corridor, Bill had to chuckle at the irony of his tasking. He had been one of those officers at the Naval War College who had railed loudest about the Joint Chiefs' congressional testimony. He felt strongly that they had not been forthright in the past about just how bad readiness was in the fleet, particularly in naval aviation. He recalled the Navy Inspector General's report, which had been made public just three days prior to the Joint Chiefs' congressional testimony in 1998. It had detailed how personnel shortages and spare parts cannibalization had placed naval aviation safety "on the ragged edge." But even more telling were the Sailors' comments that showed their depth of frustration.⁴

"We have a 15 aircraft carrier (CV/CVN) requirement, a 12 carrier navy, and a 10 carrier budget."

"We need to be willing to say NO more often—we are stretched too thin."

"Even if you gave me all the parts I need, I don't have the people and the talent to install them."

"If people are so important, why can't we get the things we need to do our jobs?"

Fortunately for Bill, one of his former NWC seminar mates, Colonel Renee Walker, was currently assigned to the Joint Staff Legislative Affairs office. Her office was just down the corridor from the chairman's suite. Although busy, she agreed to join Bill for lunch at the Pentagon food court.

As they sat down with their trays, Renee said the chairman's tasking came as no surprise to her. "Bill, all of the Joint Chiefs are concerned about these reports of poor credibility with the troops. They accept that a certain level of grousing is normal, but some of these latest reports have really gotten their attention. I think there are several factors which are driving the problem.

“First,” she stated, “is simply the recent pace of operations. Despite America’s military being forty percent smaller, deployments had increased sixteen-fold since 1991. Between 1945 and 1990, the U.S. military was deployed overseas 50 times. Since 1990, it’s been deployed 60 times and by 1999, the Clinton administration had deployed U.S. forces 48 times on peacekeeping and combat missions.⁵ And, it’s not just the pace, it’s what they’re doing. For instance, many of the rank and file feel betrayed because Defense Department leaders acquiesced to peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Kosovo that many believed were poorly designed and risky. They felt their senior leaders should have objected more vigorously and resigned rather than accept missions that threatened the welfare of the troops.⁶”

“The anthrax vaccination program has been another source for attacks on senior leadership credibility,” she continued. “The latest figures show that over four hundred service members, including officers, have refused the vaccine.⁷ Now we’ve just had the first military doctor refuse to take the vaccine. He cited his concerns about the vaccine’s efficacy and its potential for long-term health risks.⁸ A lot of this can be traced to serious gaps in the Pentagon’s credibility over the Gulf War syndrome. Senior civilian and uniformed military leaders had steadfastly denied for several years there was any cause for the health problems claimed by many Gulf War veterans. Not too long ago, the Defense Department finally acknowledged Iraqi chemical munitions and drugs, given to many troops to protect them from bio-chemical weapons, may be responsible for some of those health problems.⁹ That admission was a serious blow to the leadership’s credibility and has given greater credence to charges that senior leadership is now ignoring valid concerns about the anthrax vaccine.

“But what really galled the Joint Chiefs,” Renee said, “was the flak they took over their readiness testimony on the Hill in 1998. Several took personal affront at accusations that called their honesty and integrity into question. To a man they felt their testimony was forthcoming and truthful. Remember, they are expected to support administration policy and their testimony reflects that fact. Did we really expect them to discard the two-Major Theater War (MTW) strategy in front of a congressional committee? Instead, they accurately addressed the risks of that strategy.”

“I can agree with you to a certain point, Renee,” Bill interjected, “but, there was a general feeling in the ranks and in Congress that the chiefs were not being sufficiently candid about the military’s problems. Do you remember Senator Santorum’s comments? He’s a Republican from Pennsylvania and a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC). I’ve got a copy of his remarks right here. He was pretty explicit in his criticism,”

My concern is the forthrightness by which you gentlemen have come and testified before this committee . . . you’re at the top of the chain of command and you have a responsibility to represent the Soldiers and Sailors and Airmen that are beneath you . . . you have an obligation to represent the needs of those people and be forthright in advocating for them. And from what I’ve seen in my time that I have been on this committee is, I think, a lack of that zealous representation of the people you represent.¹⁰

“So while the JCS may have felt their reputations had been impugned unfairly,” Bill continued, “the perception out in the field and fleet is that Congress hit the nail squarely on the head.”

“But that’s exactly what I’m talking about!” Renee exclaimed. “Republican members of the SASC and their House counterparts used their hearings to bash the president by criticizing the JCS. Did you know the JCS are required to adhere to a policy document called a SAP – that stands for a Statement of Administration Policy? The SAP for defense issues expresses, in concise form, the administration’s position on contentious issues and the JCS are expected to adhere to those policy definitions. Every administration does this and Congress knows it! Only when a congressman asks for a service chief’s personal opinion, can he express his own views that may diverge with administration policy. You’ll note from the testimony they’re not asked to do that very often.”

Renee continued, “Frankly, most of the JCS’ critics don’t seem to understand that honest people can see things differently. I know those who raise the issue of ethics every time they disagree with a policy position particularly frustrate the JCS. Remember, these guys were in Vietnam and they suffered first hand the consequences of leaders who accepted a compromised military strategy. Comparison of these service chiefs to those Vietnam-era leaders is way off base. They’re expected to give the president and Congress their best opinion about how to provide for the common good, of which national security is only one piece. The rank and file naturally assumes that that means unequivocal advocacy for the military. But that’s not their real duty. They have an obligation to balance legitimate national security needs against all of the other requirements of the common ‘national good.’ Unfortunately, when they do so, it’s translated as abrogating their responsibility to the military.

“Anyway, that’s enough lecturing and I’m late for a meeting,” she said, pushing a folder across the table to Bill. “Here’s my personal file on the JCS testimony and the issues that were raised during the hearing. I want it back, okay? Good luck with the chairman.”

Back in his office, Bill reviewed Renee’s file and his own notes. During their testimony before the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, the JCS insistence that the U.S. military was capable of fighting and winning two Gulf War-sized conflicts opened them up to second-guessing. How could they make such claims when it took the Army several weeks just to move a single platoon of attack helicopters from Germany to Kosovo? Further, the Navy had to denude the Western Pacific of aircraft carriers for the first time since 1943 to support the aerial campaign against Serbia.¹¹ Bill noted, however, the service chiefs carefully highlighted the significant risk involved in adhering to the two MTW strategy, a point that was lost in the criticism of their remarks.

It hadn’t helped the JCS credibility either when, during the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) hearing on 27 September 2000, the chairman of the HASC detailed a litany of readiness problems facing the military: The Air Force was experiencing its lowest readiness levels in fifteen years, with only sixty-seven percent of its combat units reporting C-1 or C-2—the highest ratings; the Army faced serious ammunition shortages and several of its

training commands were at C-4—the lowest possible readiness rating. All of the services faced serious ammunition shortages: the Army was short \$3.3 billion in basic ammunition, the Navy had only half of the four thousand land-attack Tomahawk cruise missiles required to meet a two war contingency, and the Air Force had less than ten percent of its air-launched cruise missiles required in a two-war scenario.¹²

Renee's file also included several *Early Bird* articles by retired senior military officers that disputed the JCS readiness claims. General George Joulwan, the former NATO commander, stated in a Fox News interview that the United States would be hard pressed to fight another Desert Storm with today's forces.¹³ General Zinni, former commander of Persian Gulf forces, warned about the growing strain on U.S. forces and the military's aging equipment that was stretched to the breaking point.¹⁴

Even Republicans in Congress, nominally strong supporters of the military, were going on record with their criticisms of the JCS testimony on readiness. Representative Curt Weldon (R-PA) was reported as saying, "The JCS have not been willing to disagree publicly with this president even when we ask them in a closed, nonpublic environment and, to me, that is a mistake." He continued, "I want to hear from the service chiefs what they think is the best for our warfighters and for our Soldiers—not what they think is best based on the sanitization of spin masters at the White House."¹⁵ Bill reminded himself, however, that these comments were made just prior to the 2000 presidential elections and wondered how much politics played in these kinds of statements.

As Bill reflected on the issues, particularly readiness, he began to better appreciate the JCS position. These guys had lived through the draconian budget cuts of the 1970's and they knew what a real hollow force looked like. From that perspective, the current readiness situation didn't seem nearly as dire as the critics portrayed it. They understood that the military could live with lower readiness rates, particularly when one considered the nebulous nature of readiness reporting. In fact many insightful observers were beginning to ask the more relevant question, "Ready for what?" From the JCS standpoint, while higher readiness rates were certainly preferred, they had to balance readiness against personnel accounts, current operations, and future requirements. They had no easy choices and any position they took opened them to criticism on many fronts.

Bill closed the file. How would he advise the chairman to address the issue of credibility and loss of confidence among the rank and file? Were the leadership problems real, or only a matter of perception? Either way, something obviously had to be done. While he had gained a much better appreciation for the politics and compromises involved in complex national security issues, he was also equally aware that ninety percent of the armed forces didn't understand or care. To them, the issues were pretty much black and white and any attempt to introduce shades of gray immediately called into question the integrity and ethics of those involved. He remembered an article he had clipped out during his days at NWC that said in part,

It may be hard for civilians to comprehend that professional Soldiers are inspired by the ideals of selfless service and noble sacrifice. . . They seek in daily life those values that sound corny to civilians but held highly by military professionals: honor, duty, courage, [and] honesty. Doing the right thing when no one's watching. And that is why they are quick to detect political correctness, shading of the truth and sliding ethical standards in themselves, their colleagues and especially in their senior officers.¹⁶

The chairman understood the Joint Chiefs had lost a good bit of credibility with the rank and file. He was committed to restoring their faith in the chain of command. And it was Bill's job to come up with some insights and ideas on just how to do that. Before turning to his computer, Bill called home and told his wife he wouldn't be home for dinner.

Notes

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4. Robert J. Caldwell, "We have a Big Problem in Naval Aviation," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 24 September 2000, sec. G, 1.
5. Jack Spencer, "Opinion: Military Readiness is Front, Center in This Election," *Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News, Bridge News*, 5 September 2000.
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7. David Allen, "Sailor's Anthrax Court-Martial Underway," *European Stars and Stripes*, 10 January 2001, 4.
8. Deborah Funk, "Air Force Physician Refuses to Submit to Anthrax Vaccine," *Air Force Times*, 15 January 2001, 16.
9. CNN, "Government Study Finds Clue to Gulf War Syndrome," 21 January 1997, available from: <<http://www.cnn.com/US/9701/21/gulf.war.illness/>> [accessed: 01 November 2000] and "Pentagon: Drug May Be Linked to Gulf War Syndrome," 19 October 1999, available from: <<http://www.cnn.com/US/9910/19/gulf.war.syndrome.02/>> [accessed: 11 January 2001]
10. Hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, by Sen. Strom Thurmond, chairman (Washington D.C.: Congressional Information Service, 29 September 1998), available from: <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/congcomp/>> [accessed: 8 January 2001]
11. Editorial Staff, "Bill's Hollow Military," *New York Post*, (New York: NYP Holdings, 28 September 2000), available from: <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/>>, [accessed: 3 January 2001]
12. Robert J. Caldwell, "Military Retired Say Defense Is An Issue," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 22 October 2000, sec. G, 1.
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14. Steven Lee Myers and Eric Schmitt, "Military in Struggle for Resources but Ready to Fight, Officials Say," *New York Times*, 27 September 2000, sec. A, 20.
15. Kerry Gildea, "Service Chiefs Still Not Forthcoming on DoD Needs, Weldon Says," *Defense Daily*, 6 October 2000, 5.
16. Wood, 2

