

March of the Four-Stars: The Role of Retired Generals and Admirals in the Arms Industry

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Executive Summary

The revolving door between the U.S. government and the arms industry, which involves hundreds of senior Pentagon officials and military officers every year, generates the appearance — and in some cases the reality — of conflicts of interest in the making of defense policy and in the shaping of the size and composition of the Pentagon budget.

This report looks at the post-government employment records of a subset of the larger flow of “revolvers”: four-star generals and admirals who retired between June 2018 and July 2023. Among the findings are the following:

- 26 of 32 four-star officers who retired after June 2018 — over 80 percent — went to work for the arms industry as board members, advisors, executives, consultants, lobbyists, or members of financial institutions that invest in the defense sector.
- The biggest category of post-retirement employment for four-stars, by far, was as board members or advisors for small and medium-sized arms contractors, with 15 choosing that option. This compares to five who became board members, advisors or executives for one of the top 10 arms contractors.
- Five retired four-stars became arms industry consultants, five became lobbyists for weapons companies, and four joined financial firms that make significant investments in the defense sector.

This brief recommends a number of measures designed to limit undue influence and potential conflicts of interest on the part of retired four-star generals and other retired Pentagon officials and military officers who pass through the revolving door.

- Bar four-star officers from working for firms that receive \$1 billion or more in Pentagon contracts per year.
- Extend “cooling off” periods before retired Pentagon officials and military officers can go to work on behalf of the arms industry.
- Increase transparency over post-government employment and activities on the part of retired Pentagon and military officials working on behalf of arms contractors, including reporting on their interactions with Congress and the executive branch.

The most comprehensive current proposal to address the revolving door issue is Senator Elizabeth Warren’s Department of Defense Ethics and Anti-Corruption Act.[1] The bill would encompass many of the recommendations put forward in this report.

Introduction

This brief documents the extent to which recently retired four-star generals and admirals have gone to work as lobbyists, executives, board members, consultants, or financiers of the arms industry upon leaving government service. It covers the period from June 2018 through July 2023.

The role of generals and admirals in the arms industry is part of the larger problem of the revolving door, in which hundreds of senior Pentagon and military officials go to work for major Pentagon contractors every year, using their contacts with former colleagues to wield influence on behalf of their corporate employers and clients. A 2021 report by the Government Accountability Office found that over 1,700 senior government and military officials — including generals, admirals, and top acquisition officers — went to work for one or more of the top 14 weapons contractors between 2014–19, for an average of over 300 per year.[2] This report looks in greater detail at a smaller number of “revolvers,” focusing only on four-star generals and admirals.

The revolving door is a problem because it creates the appearance — and in some cases the reality — of conflicts of interest in the making of defense policy and in the shaping of the size and composition of the Pentagon budget. The role of top military officials is particularly troubling, given their greater clout in the military and the government more broadly than most other revolving door hires. Their influence over policy and budget issues can tilt the scales towards a more militarized foreign policy.

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There is also the potential for military officials to favor companies they are supposed to oversee while they are still in government, with the goal of landing a lucrative position with them upon retirement. As Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) put it, “When government officials cash in on their public service by lobbying, advising, or serving as board members and executives for the companies they used to regulate, it undermines public officials’ integrity and casts doubt on the fairness of government contracting.”[3]

Official government tracking of post-government employment of retired four-stars and other senior government officials with national security responsibilities is insufficient, but

even under current rules a number of concerning cases have been uncovered.

For example, as the Project on Government Oversight (POGO) has noted in its path breaking report “Brass Parachutes,” while he was in the service, General James E. Cartwright advocated vigorously for the JLENS, a surveillance balloon notorious for an incident in which it broke free from its moorings and floated 160 miles off course.[4] Cartwright blocked the Army from canceling the program in 2010, then joined the board of JLENS’s producer, Raytheon, after retiring as vice-chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.[5]

In another prominent case, General James Mattis went to bat for the blood testing firm Theranos while he was serving as Commander of the U.S. Central Command, then joined the company’s board upon leaving government service. Mattis pressed the Army to buy and utilize Theranos equipment, as he acknowledged in an email to Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes uncovered by the Washington Post: “I’ve met with my various folks and we’re kicking this into overdrive to try to field your lab in the near term.”[6]

After Mattis left the military to join the Theranos board, he defended the company’s practices — even as it was marketing a product that did not work, with false claims that included denying charges that it was out of compliance with Food and Drug Administration requirements.[7] Mattis later claimed that, despite being a board member, he was not informed of the limitations of the Theranos devices while he was serving at the company for compensation of \$150,000 per year.[8] In 2018, Holmes was indicted on charges of wire fraud for allegedly perpetrating a “multi-million dollar scheme to defraud investors, doctors, and patients.”[9] The Securities and Exchange Commission described Theranos as an “elaborate, years-long fraud” in which Holmes “exaggerated or made false statements about the company’s technology, business, and financial performance.”[10]

Retired military officers were also prominently involved in a lobbying effort that prevented the Navy from divesting itself of multiple copies of the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), which the service had determined were not relevant to the most important challenges facing the Navy and would, if retained, result in a service that was “less capable, less lethal, and less ready.”[11] The LCS is also plagued with technical problems that were described in detail in a New York Times investigation of the campaign to save the ship from retirement.[12]

The role of ex-Navy officers in the campaign to save the LCS was described in detail by Danielle Brian, Executive Director of the Project on Government Oversight, in her April 2023 Congressional testimony.[13] Among the retired Navy officials spearheading the effort to block the retirement of the LCS was a retired Navy veteran, Timothy Spratto, who served as general manager of BAE Systems’ shipyard in Jacksonville, Florida, where the littoral combat ships are serviced.[14] Before joining BAE, Spratto served as Assistant Chief of Staff, Material Readiness and Assessments, Naval Surface Forces Atlantic.[15]

Another key player in the effort to save the LCS was retired Rear Admiral James A. Murdoch, who served as program executive officer for the littoral combat ship program from 2011–14 before leaving government service to become the international business development director for ship and aviation systems at Lockheed Martin, one of the prime contractors for the Freedom-class Littoral Combat Ships.[16] Also involved in the successful lobbying effort was retired Captain Tony Parisi, who worked on the General Dynamics team that trains crews to run the LCS, and wrote an op-ed in 2022 for Real Clear Defense titled “Don’t Give Up the Ship.”[17] The work of these former military officers resulted in the procurement and

continued deployment of flawed ships that cost taxpayers billions of dollars and put crew members at risk.[18]

More consistent and detailed reporting on post-government activities of military officers who go to work in the arms industry would likely uncover many other incidents similar to the ones described above.

Proponents of the revolving door argue that the expertise ex-military officers bring to the arms industry can improve its performance and ability to produce systems relevant to the needs of the warfighter. This is belied by the fact that — according to a study by Senator Elizabeth Warren’s office — over 90 percent of senior government officials who go into the arms industry serve as lobbyists.[19] Their job is to promote projects and practices that boost the bottom lines of their new employers, not weigh in on how the firms carry out their government-funded projects, for good or ill. To the extent that there is expertise in the military sector that can make contractors more effective, it can be transmitted without hiring a majority of retiring senior officials as lobbyists (see detailed recommendations, below).

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One overall finding of this report is that the nature of the revolving door has shifted. Not only do retired officers join the boards of major contractors like Lockheed Martin or the ranks of lobbyists at major firms that include weapons contractors as clients, but they set up their own consulting firms, work as advisors to defense startups, and join firms that finance arms companies. There are many routes available for former military officials to seek work in the arms sector. In the sections that follow we provide details on post-government employment of recent four-star retirees and recommendations for curbing their influence over decisions on Pentagon spending and policy.

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

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