

Joint Chiefs Of Staff - Gods Of

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War, Guardians Of Peace

WASHINGTON (AP) — If you could get in — and you can't — it would look like an average corporation board room.

Yellow walls. Twelve leather chairs. Water glass, pad and pencil at each place. Map board on one wall, projection screen at the other.

But there are no windows. The men could be corporation directors. Trim. Middle-aged. Businesslike.

But they wear uniforms.

They are the Joint Chiefs of Staff: gods of war, guardians of peace who fight our country's battles from the halls of the Pentagon to the shores of Vietnam.

In that room — they call it "The Tank" — they make decisions that cost billions of dollars and could affect billions of lives.

It is the headquarters of the world's mightiest military machine where just one product is made: decision.

The Tank, located in the Pentagon but not underground, has only one use: for the 2 p.m. meeting of the JCS every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Entrance is on facial recognition only.

It would be a rare man in the street who could name one face, much less all five. But the Pentagon police know them: Gen.

Earle G. Wheeler, chairman; Gen. Harold K. Johnson, Army chief of staff; Adm. David L. McDonald, chief of Naval operations; Gen. John P. McConnell, Air Force chief of staff; Gen. Wallace M. Greene Jr., Marine Corps commandant.

Meeting day, 2 p.m., the chiefs file in. And, according to men who have been there, it goes like this:

"Hello, Buz (Wheeler)." "Hi, Johnny (Johnson)." The Tank is on a first-name basis.

If it looks like a long afternoon, the chiefs may take off their beribboned tunics. Although there is no fixed arrangement, Wheeler likes to sit next to the secretary who takes the minutes.

The chiefs have all been briefed on the agenda which usually runs to five or ten items. Wheeler opens the session. He knows the Army disagrees with a certain study paper.

"Johnny, you don't buy our solution to this. Why not?" Johnson says why not. The other chiefs give their views. Some times a dissenter may persuade his colleagues. Or vice versa. If not, the chiefs report out a "split" paper that may go back for further study or to Defense Secretary, Robert S. McNamara or President Johnson for decision.

Or maybe it will turn out like the time in the late '50s when the chiefs were in heated argument over the future of the B70 bomber. Adm. Arleigh Burke, the CNO, a damn-the-torpedoes, full speed ahead sailor, was headedly opposed. The chiefs took the impasse to President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Being comrades at arms, they drove over together from the Pentagon. The argument resumed at the White House. The admiral kept full speed ahead. His colleagues fumed. At the conclusion of the session, the chiefs piled into their limousine. Except Burke. He wasn't invited. He had to send for his own car.

Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, a cigar-chewing sports car buff, and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, a multilingual scholar, reportedly used to get so apoplectic at each other, they couldn't speak. Wheeler, however, is considered a master at preserving accord. That may be a reason why there reportedly have been only two splits in the last five months.

But he does not stifle dissent. He asks around the table for the chiefs' views, usually starting with the man whose service is most involved.

"But we don't try to compromise if there are fundamental differences of view," he said. "One thing the chiefs loathe is a lowest common denominator."

Wheeler turns up another agenda item. The war, now, in Vietnam, almost invariably comes up. Or it may be wars that could come tomorrow, anywhere, any time, hot, tepid or cool.

With the aid of the 400 officers of the joint staff, the JCS planning body, the chiefs constantly prepare and review plans for any contingency.

"I think they probably have 50 plans just to invade the state of Pennsylvania," said a former defense secretary facetiously.

"Contingency plans for, say, Upper Volta, may be handled below the JCS level," said a Pentagon 'Indian'. (In Pentagonese someone below a chief is an Indian.) But all plans are reviewed at least annually and the chiefs also draw up a five year projection of defense needs and probabilities called the JAYSOP — for Joint Strategic Operations Plan.

The agenda may cover the buttons that launch missiles. Or the buttons that secure sailors' bell-bottoms. Or how many ounces of meat should be on the serviceman's daily menu. Or what advise they might give the President on bombing in North

Vietnam. Or the costs of the Nike-X antimissile missile. (The chiefs are agreed it is needed as well as advanced manned bomber.)

"Someone might have developed a new tactic in Vietnam," said an Indian. "The chiefs would discuss what might be needed to implement it in terms of men and materiel."

"But we don't go into day by day operations there," said Wheeler. "Our role is to deal with strategy. We set objectives and assure that field commanders are properly supported and supplied. In the last two years we have taken a far greater role and interest in logistics."

When Wheeler says 'we', he means we. There is no head at the table in the tank. The chairman is an equal among equals, one chief, one vote, but Wheeler's importance has been growing because he has control of the agenda and because he is closer to the defense secretary, whom he sees constantly, and the President.

"I make my views known on every issue. I am a full partner in the deliberative process. But I can't simply hear the chiefs' views and then decide on my own," Wheeler said. "I'm a bridge explaining the JCS view to the secretary and his to them."

"But when the chairman goes to the President," said a former White House aide, "he gives all the dissenting views. Then the President says 'Buz, or Max (Taylor) what do you think?' and often that's that."

However much they may spurn compromise, the chiefs sometimes find it workable.

"Gen. LeMay fought like holy hell against giving the Army helicopters," said an Indian. "He said they'd be shot out of the skies. I think he just didn't like the Army getting into the air. But the helicopter is really just an airborne truck. It was as ridiculous as the Army telling the Air Force to get rid of its ground vehicles."

On the other hand, the Army wanted its own men to fly the Caribou, a newly developed — by the Navy — short-takeoff supply transport. McNamara, in the meanwhile, had ordered rapid creation of the 1st Cavalry, Airmobile, Division, a helicopter-carried force. The Army, having made its point, could afford to be magnanimous.

"Oh, hell," Gen. Johnson reportedly said. "Let the Air Force have the damn plane." Case dismissed.

Sometimes there is no compromise, just gentle persuasion.

During the B70 hassle, Burke used to drop in at the office of the then chairman, Gen. Nathan Twining, whom he had known well during World War II.

"Goddammit, Nate, you've been to school. You know the airplane isn't going to last forever. You put that thing up in the sky, the Russians will hit it with missiles," Burke would argue.

Twining would talk about evasive action. And the argument went on: in their offices, in The Tank, at lunch, at cocktail parties.

It was not a frivolous issue. Nor have been many of the arguments that have reached the public ear from inside the Pentagon. At stake have been crucial considerations of strategy. What is best for the national security? The burden of such decision is enormous. It is not left at the office.

"You're thinking of future generations of America," said Gen. David Shoup, Greene's predecessor on the JCS. "I might put a little bundle in my bag at night and take it home to study again. Because you want to be sure. Is this what it really means? Are these factual matters that will stand up in history? RY?"

"It's harder than combat because then you're in it. Here you're looking ahead. And wondering if you'll live long enough to see if you decided right."

The meeting adjourns. On an

average day, it might be 4 or 5 p.m. and it could be some hours later. The chiefs return to their offices. They work a 12 hour day. And they take bundles home at night — to be certain.

It is this uncertainty of what is right rather than pettiness or service loyalty that has underlain many of the chiefs' more raucous spats in which they sometimes seem to be fighting each other rather than the enemy. Critics have called the JCS a debating society. But isn't that what it should be?

Said Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, former JCS chairman: "I don't know of any activity that involves such complex problems in which agreement is always unanimous. However, while this is taken for granted in other fields, it seems inexcusable in the military."

"This is an inexact science," said a former defense secretary. "You may not know for 10 years or more whether or not you are going to be right. So you need all the arguments you can get. This is the only way you can decide these questions of strategy."

"The military is by nature conservative," said an Indian. "They are dealing with lives, and they don't want to err on the wrong side. They want to buy too much rather than too little. If this brings debate, so be it."

"If there's a fight, the secretary looks at all the blood drippings, the facts, and is better