

The Pentagon Wins a War



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BY THE SPRING of 1971, the Army was in serious trouble with the American public. Growing revelations of corruption, graft, atrocities and battlefield reverses had sadly undermined confidence in the Army's ability to defend the nation.

At the same time, malnourishment, functional illiteracy and blight stalked the cities and rural areas. It was clear the country was losing the War on Poverty. Yet the Department of Health, Education and Welfare had little luck in weening funds from a tight-fisted Congress.

It was then that the administration had one of its rare strokes of genius. The President radically altered his proposed Government Reorganization Plan. Congress, over stiff opposition, reluctantly passed it.

So it was that the Department of Health, Education and Welfare took over the defense of the nation. And the Pentagon took over the War on Poverty.

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THE RESULTS of the exchange surpassed even the wildest dreams of its proponents.

The generals in the Pentagon reacted to this new challenge with the traditional Army tactic they had become so efficient over the years in employing: They marched up Capitol Hill to demand more money.

"We can see the light at the end of the tunnel," General Westmoreland confidently told the happily-nodding Congressmen. And he proposed three new projects:

The first was Sky Bolt. This envisioned fleets of helicopters circling over the nation's ghettos dropping packets of cash indiscriminately on the poor. The contract would be let to the Boeing Company of Seattle. The total cost was estimated at only \$1.3 million.

Second was the TFX (for "Teacher Funding, Experimental"). Lockheed, with the help of technical advisers from Rolls Royce, would be granted a contract to

wipe out functional illiteracy in America. The cost estimate was \$1.2 million.

Lastly, there was the ambitious ABM (for "Anti-Blight Measure"). Under this proposal, a consortium of aerospace firms, headed by Penn Central Railroad executives, would be given the job of rebuilding the cities and cleaning up pollution. Estimated cost: \$1.6 million.

The Congressmen, awed as always by a general's uniform, approved the proposals as usual without a dissenting vote. Out-of-work engineers and craftsmen were rehired. Work began.

In no time, money showered down on the poor. Teachers poured into the classrooms. New housing sprang up in the slums. The air grew fit to breathe, the water fit to drink.

In the first year alone, cost overruns, to no one's surprise, amounted to \$63.7 billion. But Congress, as it had for a generation, passed the huge Pentagon budget without a murmur.

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AS ALWAYS, the money had to come from somewhere. As always, it came from the budget of Health, Education and Welfare. To make ends meet, HEW had to withdraw the remaining troops in Vietnam, end draft calls and scrap all the vast thermonuclear weapons systems it could never unleash without destroying the world.

Yet, oddly enough, the nation was far more secure than ever before. Where it had been weak, divided and on the brink of chaos, it was now, with its sicknesses cured, healthy, prosperous and united. No nation dared attack it. And new nations, to the chagrin of the communists, sought to emulate its happy blend of democracy and capitalism.

The whole thing proved, as a wise philosopher later said, that: "Money can, too, buy happiness. But only if you spend it in the right places."