

Wastrels of Defense: How Congress Sabotages United States Security

By Winslow Wheeler, Naval Institute Press, 2004

Review by Emanuel Pastreich

Winslow Wheeler is an insider who spent his career working on defense legislation in the United States congress. He shares the opinion of many in the government that although abuses have always existed within the government, the system has spun out of control and no longer is subject to any form of meaningful oversight, or prioritizing. Not only does Wheeler suggest that much of the spending on defense is useless to any form of meaningful protection of the United States, he presents countless examples of how projects that have real security value are undermined or gutted to feed pork projects aimed at enriching their patrons. Whereas previously there existed overlapping systems of meaningful review for military projects in the federal government, Wheeler paints a bleak picture of a bureaucratic culture in which military officials, corporate interests, staffers and would be watchdog organizations cooperate so perfectly that meaningful questions about even the most serious problems is off-limits.

As for the business of "pork" (military projects that serve no real defensive purpose but bring added income to the states of the congressmen who introduce them into legislation) Wheeler writes that "What was once a predictable but part-time activity has become a full-time preoccupation that permeates Congress's activities and members' decision-making processes. Ironically, this occurs even though there is less selfish benefit to pork than most members of Congress and their staff think."

Winslow Wheeler worked as a staff member for numerous congressmen and in the General Accounting Office for thirty-one years. From 1996-2002 he was the senior analyst for national defense for the Republican staff of the senate budget committee. Wheeler served on the staff of Pete Domenici (Republican, New Mexico), Jacob Javits (Republican, New York), Nancy Kassebaum (Republican, Kansas), and David Pryor (Democrat, Arkansas). As such he understands the process by which legislation is formulated and modified on a daily basis with regards to defense. In 2002, Wheeler wrote a highly critical essay about the response of congress to the 9-11 attacks that he published under the pseudonym "Spartacus." He lamented in this essay how senators added \$4 billion in useless "pork" projects to benefit their own home states immediately after the 9/11 attacks. For example, Senator Robert Byrd (whom Wheeler praises elsewhere for his strong stand against the Second Iraq War) asked for an army museum for his home of West Virginia. Ted Stevens asked for parking garages in Alaska. All this happened at the same time \$2.4 billion was taken away from military training and weapons maintenance to pay for it. When Wheeler's identity was exposed, he was forced by Domenici to resign.

But the reader becomes aware that in context it was not at all odd that these senators added immense pork to a defense bill passed in what was imagined to be a moment of crisis. The reason was simply that the use of defense funding to pay for fisheries, gyms and day care centers and numerous defense systems of marginal utility has become the full-time job for many Capitol Hill staffers. Congressmen have always tried to get projects inserted in the budget for their own states and their corporate supporters, but

today there is no counter force to argue for the greater good. There is no voice of reason in the room as the budgets are made into fodder for a reelection campaign.

Wheeler is not merely uncovering the venality of humans, he is making an argument for a fundamental shift in the system itself. Whereas defense appropriations bills in the 1980s might have had as many as 200 or 300 pork items, today a bill typically contains thousands, and only very short explanations of their content. Wheeler describes another era, especially the bravery of Thomas Eagleton, who was the primary author of the War Powers resolution of 1973 that limited the ability of the president to wage war without congressional authority. He concludes that such bravery and integrity beyond anything to be found in Washington today. The culture of political confrontation that was so strong forty years ago, and made the balance of powers work, has clearly died. Senators cultivate close friendships with the generals in the pentagon and avoid any decisions that might affect those relationships. Military programs are developed and funded without anyone along the line taking a hard look at the relative qualities of what is produced-as would be the case in any other process. ...

Critique of Wheeler's Book

The thirty years of experience Wheeler had on Capitol Hill gives his narrative far greater detail on the daily process of lawmaking and politicking surrounding defense issues than one can find in most any other book. This book is a rare gem in that it presents the inner workings of government in considerable resolution, more so than would be possible for most critical writers who are denied access for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, there is a distinct myopia that creeps into his writing at times. Wheeler hesitates to come to overarching conclusion that the phenomena he observes are part of a general breakdown of civil society, citizenship and ideology that renders increasingly large sections of the [military/economy] ineffective. Why is it that these staffers can go about their business without a thought to the terrible consequences of reducing the state to a money-making machine for special interests? That essential issue is perhaps as critical as how the pork is snuck into the budget. We can ask further issues: corporate interests that support the unregulated waste of government funds, the attempts to lease airplanes from Boeing so that far greater profits could be realized, and American society or the general system of administration.

Wheeler does not question overall spending, or the abuse of power involved. He suggests the degree to which reelection becomes more of an issue than policy making, but not the dark side of what the reasons might be.

All senators showed exclusive interest in pork for their own states, and most importantly, it was important that it looked on paper as if the state benefited, not whether it actually does.

The death of citizenship is the true cause.

This shift is part of a larger social shift in American culture that is well-documented in

Theda Skocpol's book "Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life" (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003):

"To the extent that nationally influential membership associations still flourish, they are likely to be professional groups. Where once cross-class voluntary federations held sway, national public life is now dominated by professionally managed advocacy groups without chapters or members. And at the state and local levels "voluntary groups" are, more often than not non-profit institutions through which paid employees deliver services and coordinate occasional volunteer projects.

Another shift seems to have happened as well. No longer are supreme acts of national citizenship understood as going hand in hand with active participation in voluntary associations. And no longer do we highlight the achievements of politically active, cross-class voluntary associations, like the GAR and the Grange. For some years now, America's most visible and loquacious politicians, academics, and pundits have proclaimed that voluntary groups flourish best apart from active national government- and disconnected from politics. The downplaying of the governmental and political wellsprings of civic engagement is subtle among academics and middle-of-the-road commentators, but quite blatant among conservative pundits (pp. 7-8)."

Staffers have become an independent class that pursues their own interests, to the detriment of society. They are subject to no regulations whatsoever.