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Review Essay 34

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Edward C. Keefer provides us with the “authorized, but not official” history of Harold Brown’s tenure as the 14th Secretary of Defense as part of the Department of Defense series on its secretaries. It is authorized in that Keefer had access to the official records, but not official in that Keefer’s assessment of Brown’s time in office, the Jimmy Carter years, is his own. Keefer sees Brown as a loyal and effective Secretary whose reputation needs some rehabilitation because Carter was an unsuccessful Commander-in-Chief, naive and smug in his handling of security issues thorough out his presidency, overly concerned with cutting back on defense in his first two years, and then totally knocked off his horse by the Iranian Revolution with its seizure of U.S. embassy staff and the failed American rescue mission, and the Soviet Union’s unexpected and alarming invasion of Afghanistan in his last two years.

In an encyclopedic (the volume is 902 pages) tour of the Department of Defense’s foreign policy and security related events of Carter’s term, Keefer gives the President credit for several significant and positive achievements—the 1978 Camp David Accords, normalization of relations with China, the START II negotiations, the handover of the Panama Canal, and the revitalization of NATO and meeting the Soviet conventional and nuclear threat in Europe. Carter himself made most of the big decisions (and often too many of the small ones as well), but usually sought and respected Brown’s advice. Certainly, he needed and got Brown’s help in keeping the Pentagon in line concerning what were to it often difficult or distasteful administration positions.

Brown and Carter did not always agree, according to Keefer. Their main differences were over the defense budget, which Brown wanted increased, Korea, where Brown was reluctant to cut forces, and the neutron bomb, which Brown wanted deployed to Europe. Keefer describes Carter as moralistic about nuclear weapons and untrusting of the military, seeing senior officers as invariable threat inflators. Brown is portrayed as a loyalist in every direction, more accepting of military assessments and never confrontational with the White House over policy issues. Brown stayed on through the entire Carter administration and, though he was said

to have wanted to leave government if Carter were to have had a second term, campaigned for Carter's reelection.

A study like this is tedious reading without some framing. A lot of things happened in four years, but how to make sense of it all. Beyond tying it entirely to the saga of the failed Carter presidency, I see four possible frames, all of which are mentioned by Keefer, two of which he develops. The four are: Secretary Brown as a promoter of the second offset strategy; Secretary Brown as the man who began the Reagan Build-Up; Secretary Brown as the man who kept the Joint Chiefs of Staff from going public with their policy disputes with President Carter; and Secretary Brown as the Secretary who realized that the Department of Defense could not be managed. The first two are advanced. The second two make a better story.

Discussions of offset strategies became popular in the Department of Defense and Washington D.C. think tanks in the late years of the Obama administration as a way of coping with rising Chinese military power and a resurgence of Russia's. The reference is to an asymmetric counter to an opponent's numerical advantage in conventional forces. The call then was for a third offset strategy, the first being President Eisenhower's New Look which emphasized nuclear weapons to counter the Soviet Union's conventional threat, the second being the development of stealth technology and precision weapons to counter the same Soviet advantage, in an era of casualty sensitivity. Although the effort to develop stealth and precision spread over the 1970s and 1980s, credit for the second offset is often given to Brown and his Under Secretary for Research and Engineering, William J. Perry, who himself became a secretary of defense in the 1990s.

Keefer catches the offset wave, using the theme as the subtitle for the book. Brown did promote the development of long-range sensors and data processing capabilities which underlie the systems that are now collectively describe as the second offset. He also sought out and supported Perry, who, as mentioned, is closely identified with the development of stealth and the second offset effort. And apparently Brown paid heed to Andrew Marshall, the long-time head of the Office of Net Assessment in the Pentagon who was an advocate of competitive strategies to exploit Soviet weaknesses. But Keefer devotes only one chapter to the offset and provides little in the way of context or analysis.

Truer to the book is the second frame, with Brown as the setup man for the Reagan Build-Up, which was the third peak in the post-Second World War defense budget cycle of peaks and troughs. The first was induced by the Korean War and the second by the war in Vietnam. The Carter presidency involved two years of Carter trying to cut the defense budget and two when the president relaxed the budget constraints, realizing that he faced reelection in a world where the Soviets remained uncooperative, the Middle East was unraveling, and the Republicans were discovering the 'Hollow Military' as an effective campaign theme. During all this, Brown appeared to be the faithful middle man, advocating for most of the increases the military wanted while trying to accommodate the reductions that Carter wanted. But he was more than that.

A good example of how Brown operated in this difficult environment involves Carter's decision to cancel the B-1 bomber. Brown, who had been Director of Defense Research & Engineering and then Secretary of the Air Force during the Kennedy/Johnson years, knew both the intensity of the Air Force's interest in building a new bomber and the limits of the technology the B-1 embodied against Soviet defenses. He pushed for work on stealth technologies, which eventually led to the B-2 bomber and the development of air-launched cruise missiles which would allow the Air Force's existing bomber, the B-52, to remain effective into the future. But stealth was too highly classified at time to promote in public as an alternative to the B-1 and the cruise missiles were a hard sell because of complicated arms control issues. Brown thus advocated low-level

production of the B-1 to keep the Air Force happy. When Carter insisted on outright cancellation, Brown allowed the tooling to be saved. The Reagan administration later used the tooling to revive the B-1, building a 100 of them, while starting the B-2 and buying air-launched cruise missiles. Although senior officers, Keefer reports, believed that Brown was not a strong enough advocate, he was in fact a hardliner. And when sentiment about the need for substantial increases in the defense budget began to change as America's view of the Soviets and the Middle East soured, Brown was there with a long list of programs that needed support.

Brown as advocate for increasing the defense budget points to the third frame: Brown as the man who kept the lid on the Pentagon. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had no love for Carter. In his first session with the Chiefs, Carter made it clear that he did not think much of their advice and that he wanted to cut back on both the budget and the nuclear arsenal. To the Chiefs he was a Lieutenant who had done nothing in his service who now seemed to relish the opportunity to insult and ignore the four stars. The Navy leadership was certain that he wanted to slow the rebuilding of the surface fleet after Vietnam and the retirement of ships built in the Second World War, and was appalled when he vetoed the FY 79 Defense Authorization Bill over the inclusion of a nuclear-powered carrier. The Air Force fought hard to keep the B-1 alive and wanted a mobile ballistic missile to protect its other leg of the nuclear TRIAD. The Army, a little less put upon by Carter, still suffered the loss of the Panama Canal and threatened cut backs in its South Korean troop deployments. And all of the Chiefs worried about the normalization of relations with China, which forced the apparent abandonment of Taiwan and American bases there.

And yet there was no revolt. Only one general was publicly fired, Major General John Singlaub, the Chief of Staff for U.S. forces in South Korea, for protesting President Carter's intent to pull out a division. Most senior officers just complained to Brown (or about him), ground their teeth, or sought out friends in Congress or among the retired officers to express displeasure with the administration's policies.¹ Somehow Brown kept things from blowing up politically. Keefer does not dig deep here. Of course, it helped that nearly all of Carter's arms control, pull back, and budget reduction schemes quickly fizzled. The Navy got its carrier, SALT II was not ratified, and nearly all the troops stayed in South Korea. The Soviet Union's aggression and the Iranian students' zealotry helped also.

The fourth possible frame holds a core of an answer, I think. Keefer mentions too briefly a 1981 speech Brown gave at the University of Michigan just after his retirement as Secretary in which he argued that the Department of Defense could not be managed.² It was too big, too complex, and too political. Brown ought to have known as he had worked for Robert McNamara, a secretary of defense who certainly tried to manage the Department and failed, and took over as Secretary from Donald Rumsfeld who would come back again as Secretary during the George W. Bush administration and fail disastrously in his attempt to manage the Department. Brown resisted Carter's attempt to impose Zero Base Budgeting on the government, the Department of Defense included, believing to be impossible nonsense. To Brown, at least in that speech, the Department had to be treated as an organization with real interests and important traditions. Brown

¹ John D. Mini, "Conflict, Cooperation, and Congressional End-Runs: The Defense Budget and Civil-Military Relations in the Carter Administration, 1977-1978," (M.A. Thesis, History Department, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007).

² Harold Brown, "Managing the Department of Defense: Why It Can't Be Done," *Dividend* magazine of the Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Michigan (Spring 1981), 10-14.

recognized that the services preferred their bases to be in warm climates, their sacrifices to be rewarded with medals and parades, and their weapons to be the best available and in constant renewal.

How exactly Brown kept the Chiefs happy enough to stay out of trouble during the Carter years we do not know. Keefer does not say. Brown himself in his own reflections on offices does not say.³ In his post-Defense Department years, he and his last Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force General David C. Jones, became advocates for Jointness, the soft logrolling of service interests that has become the military's religion since the mid-1980s. Where these attitudes were in the Carter years is not clear. Desert One, the failed April 1980 Iranian hostage rescue mission, is often cited as justification for Jointness. It certainly was a hodgepodge of Air Force, Navy, Army, and Marine units and equipment that ended in disaster. But its lessons are the need for both specialized units and mission rehearsals rather than the worship of brotherhood.

Brown was a very good Secretary of Defense.⁴ He knew his business, having been a nuclear weapons designer, a manager of weapons development, and Secretary of the Air Force during time of war before taking office as Secretary of Defense. Keefer takes us through Brown's many experiences as Secretary, noting that though not part of President Carter's inner circle or even sharing all his policy beliefs, he served Carter and the nation well. This history, however, lacks the inside the Pentagon politics that would tell us how he did it.

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³ Harold Brown with Joyce Winslow, *Star Spangled Security: Applying Lessons Learned Over Six Decades Safeguarding America* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

⁴ I am not alone in this assessment. Frances Tilney Burke, "Why did Robert Gates name Harold Brown as his favorite defense secretary? And what can we learn from that?" <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/09/why-did-robert-gates-name-as-his-favorite-defense-secretary?-and-what-can-we-learn-from-that/>