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Review Essay—Battle on the Potomac

Thomas C. Hone

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BATTLE ON THE POTOMAC

Thomas C. Hone

Wilson, George C. *This War Really Matters: Inside the Fight for Defense Dollars*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2000. 239pp.
\$19.95

If you plan someday to work in the Pentagon, then you need to read this book. If you are a citizen just trying to grasp how defense budgets are made, you need to read this book. If you are one of the so-called “policy makers” in Washington, you also need to read this book, because it is about you and what you do.

George C. Wilson was the defense correspondent for the *Washington Post* for twenty-three years. People like me looked forward to Wilson’s reports and books because he had (and still has) a nose for war, and for the people and institutions that make war. He also has a knack for getting to the point and for getting people he interviews to do the same. He has certainly packed this slim book with candid comments about the defense budget process. If you did not know why people compare the budget process to sausage making (you can eat the product but you don’t want to see it being made), then you *will* know after you have read this revealing account of making the budget and approving the most recent Base Realignment and Closure list.

Why did Wilson write this book? He wrote it because, as he says, few Americans “know much about the bloodless but vital fight for their defense dollars. This book provides a ringside seat for watching this fight up close and personal.” Why select the 105th Congress (1997–98) to watch? The reason is that “the 105th, because it fell between the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, was less distorted by seasonal electioneering.” Is there a bottom line to the book, a central message? Yes. “Military leaders . . . must engage in the art of the possible to achieve their goals.” They must master this art in order “to maximize their effectiveness in government councils.”

Thomas C. Hone is the principal deputy director, Program Analysis and Evaluation, of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He is a former professor of defense acquisition at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Professor Hone has worked as a special assistant to the Commander, Naval Air Systems Command.

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I can hear the teeth of professional military officers grinding. How often have I heard officers say, “I don’t want to be a politician!” As Wilson shows, however, the nation’s military leaders—especially the chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—have no choice in the matter. They are intimately involved in the debate over how to use the nation’s resources to defend the

nation's interests. To the degree that they bring truth, integrity, intelligence, and tactical human skills to that debate, the nation benefits.

Yet officers are right to be wary of the political process in Washington. The people who dominate it at the highest levels are intelligent, calculating, ambitious, energetic, and committed. They are also frequently at odds with one another. Getting involved with them is often like trying to mediate a fight between two cats. Increasingly, however, most of them— whether elected or appointed, in the executive branch or in Congress—lack military experience, so senior military officers *must* contribute their professional opinions, insights, and preferences to policy and budget debates.

The value of *This War Really Matters* is that Wilson gets almost all the participants in the partisan political process of making the budget to speak candidly about their views, their motives, and their tactics. The book is a classic case study of how Washington works, and it is told largely in the words of the movers and shakers themselves. By drawing on extensive interviews with officials in the Pentagon and with members of Congress, Wilson breathes fire into what most citizens regard as a confused, frustrating, and dull process. The fact that he does this in a little more than two hundred pages of text means that readers can casually peruse this book on an airplane or master the text in a few evenings. The author makes reading even easier by providing chapter summaries in his introduction. Readers short of time or interested in just one of the issues Wilson explores can first consult these summaries; they are excellent guides.

This War Really Matters begins by considering the responses within the Department of Defense and Congress to the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) in 1997. Wilson focuses his attention first on John Hamre, then Pentagon comptroller, and his efforts to persuade the media and members of Congress that the Clinton administration was providing enough fiscal support to the Defense Department. Wilson then shifts to William Cohen, the secretary of defense. Given what Wilson calls President Bill Clinton's "detachment" from the QDR process, it was up to Cohen to persuade the administration's Republican opponents in Congress that a "no-growth" level of defense spending was adequate to meet the nation's needs.

Wilson goes on to reveal the reactions of senior military officers in the Pentagon to the QDR and to the administration's desire to hold defense spending down. On one hand, the president and the leaders of the congressional majority had agreed to spending caps for all nonentitlement programs. On the other, both parties to the agreement felt there was a need to increase spending in certain areas. Because neither side wanted to take the blame for "busting the caps," both sought the support of the uniformed service chiefs. Secretary Cohen needed them to say that they could live with a "no growth" budget. Cohen's

critics, such as Republican representative Floyd Spence, then chairman of the House National Security Committee, wanted the service chiefs to declare that they could not carry out their legal responsibilities without additional funding.

The chiefs were in the middle. Wilson interviewed a number of senior officers for this book, including Army general John Shalikashvili, and his deputy for the QDR, Air Force general Ronald Fogleman. These interviews make fascinating reading. They reveal strong but honest differences among uniformed service leaders about the roles their forces should play in the future. If one purpose of the QDR was to force service leaders to resolve those differences, these interviews show that it failed. The interviews also show how sensitive the officers were to competition among the services, and how often they found it hard to get people without military backgrounds to understand the special problems faced by military forces entrusted with worldwide missions.

The chiefs supported Secretary Cohen when the QDR was issued in the spring of 1997 and again in testimony to Congress in February 1998. Yet the escalating political conflict between the Republican majority in Congress and the White House kept both houses of Congress from passing a joint budget resolution for fiscal year 1999. This turned out to be an opportunity for the service chiefs to go after the additional funding that they had foresworn the previous year.

In the run-up to the 1998 congressional elections, neither political party wanted to be tagged as “obstructionist.” However, neither party was happy just to continue the budget “caps” agreed to in 1997. In early September 1998, for example, President Clinton met with the service chiefs and told them to take their cases for more funding to Congress. When the chiefs testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee at the end of September, they took a coordinated and prepared position. Wilson calls it “smart politics.” The trick was to get the Republicans in Congress to take the responsibility for “breaking the caps.” The Republicans understood the game and tried to place the onus on the White House. Wilson’s description of the resulting political maneuvering is fascinating.

There is a lot more to this book as well. For example, Wilson persuaded both Representative David Obey, then the ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, and Republican Robert Livingston, then the committee’s chairman, to speak candidly about the budget process. Obey’s views are particularly interesting. Obey claims that the budget process institutionalized in 1974 had failed, and that there was an urgent need for structural reform. Livingston does not agree, but the comments of both representatives merit consideration.

There are more gems, including the travail of F. Whitten Peters, appointed Under Secretary of the Air Force in November 1997. In the dispute between President Clinton and members of Congress over the base realignment report submitted in 1995, Peters was caught in a partisan political battle that also

included major defense contractors, such as Lockheed Martin. A memo Peters wrote at the end of April 1998 to John Hamre, then deputy secretary of defense, describing a way to preserve jobs at a major Air Force depot on the “cut” list, was soon leaked to House Republicans. Peters, trying to find a solution to the dispute that was acceptable to all parties, was soon pilloried by all sides. Yet he managed what Wilson calls “a remarkable turnaround. He converted his former critics into supporters” and may well have saved the process itself.

The scandal over the president’s conduct with White House intern Monica Lewinsky dominated political news in 1998. As George Wilson shows, however, the debates and political maneuvers that affected the fiscal year 1999 defense budget were just as dramatic, if far less visible in the media.

This book is the best introduction in print to the defense budget process. It is also a wonderfully revealing examination of how influential people in the Pentagon and Congress think about their jobs and their constitutional responsibilities.

This War Really Matters has only two weaknesses. The first is that Wilson did not interview President Clinton. As a result, the president’s views in the book are those he gave publicly to the media, or those that could be gleaned secondhand from others whom Wilson interviewed. The second weakness is that it lacks a chronology. The book contains a glossary and a host of useful charts in an appendix, but a chronology would have helped readers—especially if it tracked the Lewinsky scandal and the impeachment of the president in parallel with the progress of the fiscal year 1999 budget.