

Waking Up an Industry

Like the old farmer who slugged his mule between the eyes with a two-by-four "to get his attention," the Pentagon has found a way of waking up wayward defense contractors: by kicking them in the wallet.

We heartily approve of financial punishment to industrialists who swindle the taxpayers and risk servicemen's lives by delivering shoddy military equipment.

It turns out that for more than 25 years the Defense Department could withhold payment to companies that built faulty material, but has just started to do so in a major way. Why? The reasons are instructive.

First, although citizens may be confused by complicated arguments about the merits of the MX or the B1, they certainly know a coffee maker for a cargo plane should not cost \$7,600. Nor do they see a compelling need for \$400 hammers. Thus the Pentagon is feeling public ire at its purchasing blunders.

Second, enter politics. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger wanted to help reelect his friend Ronald Reagan. He realized that news about frittering away defense billions was unhelpful, and he launched a campaign against mismanagement.

Third, encouraged by their civilian bosses, uniformed officers began speaking out against the makers of military junk, and what an impressive list of malefactors they fingered: General Electric, McDonnell Douglas, Texas Instruments, Hughes Aircraft, Todd Shipyards, etc.

The Air Force has withheld \$8.5 million due to General

Electric for B1 bomber engines it says were made with improper quality controls. The navy has rejected 14 GE engines for F18 fighters because of defective parts and told the company to tell Pratt & Whitney how to make them so it would have a second source.

Citing "shoddy workmanship," the Navy rejected Phoenix air-to-air missiles produced by Hughes aircraft and again sought a second source. It has also found flaws in the tail of McDonnell Douglas' F18 and told the company to fix them at its expense.

The Pentagon instructed contractors to stop accepting 4,700 different kinds of electronic chips from Texas Instruments that it said had not been fully tested. Then the Navy refused to take delivery of a new frigate, with weapons containing TI chips, from Todd Shipyards.

One could go on and on, but the point is clear: As Americans have come to accept a standard of unreliability in cars, the military had accepted a lack of reliability in high technology weapons. Fortunately, that attitude now seems dead.

In a recent speech, Cap Weinberger told industrialists that the nation expects defense to be purchased at a fair and reasonable price. The responsibility for eliminating fraud and waste and improving quality rests with industry, he said.

There is little doubt that defense contractors can deliver quality weapons and equipment at a proper cost if their feet are held to the fire. That is being done, albeit 25 years late, and in time it should help the budget and the national defense.

*The Stuart News, Stuart, Florida
Monday, November 5, 1984*