

Assignment Pentagon: The Insider's Guide to the Potomac Puzzle Palace
Maj. Gen. Perry M. Smith USAF (Ret.)
Brassey's, \$30

By Jennifer Elsea

Retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Perry M. Smith, now CNN's chief military analyst, says this guide is designed to help not only those headed for a first assignment at the Pentagon "who would like to get the kind of informal advice that they might get over a couple of beers at the bar," but also for others interested in how the Pentagon operates. My guess is you *will* learn a lot from this book, but for the tougher questions about life in the Pentagon—and for some of its more intriguing trivia—you'll need another source.

Smith provides a map to help you find your way through the building's labyrinth of hallways, but keep in mind that the place seems to have been designed to confuse the enemy. The building is supposed to allow a brisk walker (which newcomers quickly become) to get from any one location to any other in under 10 minutes. This, however, takes a lot of practice. Plan extra time for getting lost.

(Hallway trivia question: Whose portrait is the only one in Pentagon history to get defaced? Answer: General Merrill A. "Tony" McPeak, current Air Force chief of staff and aspiring successor to Colin Powell. An unknown, felt marker-wielding artist drew a non-regulation mustache under the general's nose. It is suspected the perpetrator was protesting McPeak's new design of the Air Force uniform, which very much resembles that of a Japanese commercial airline pilot.)

Smith recommends you join the Pentagon Officers Athletic Club (POAC). He touts POAC as a "great place . . . to exercise your network of contacts." So that's what all those officers who spend half the day down there are doing.

For readers interested in food, Smith notes that opportunities to grab a quick bite are plentiful. During the summer, he recommends the center court snack bar (for you Pentagonians, he's talking about

"Thigh Land"). He doesn't mention, however, that far and away the best deals are offered by the services' separately run officers' "open messes," where you can get a fancy meal served to you on real dishes by actual waiters. (And the price is unbeatable: Entrees of the day normally run from about \$4.25 to \$6.00 and the food is superb.) Of course, you need at least two stars on your shoulders to get in the door.

Smith mentions that the DoD telephone directory is always out-of-date, but the greater problem is that it's next to impossible to find an office in it if you aren't exactly sure of what the office is called. Offices change names as quickly as personnel rotate and often perform functions entirely different from what their titles imply. And when the Pentagon has been ordered to cut headquarters personnel, it occasionally just shuffles them around and assigns them, on paper, to field units. For example, the Air Force staff's operational support, which works directly for the Air Force chief of staff, is not actually assigned to the staff. It falls under the "Air Force District of Washington," headquartered at the nearby Bolling Air Force Base.

For the most part, the book reads like selections offered as "Officer Professional Development" at any of the service schools. It's good advice for officers at any level of military staff. But beginners at the Puzzle Palace shouldn't be surprised to discover that some of those who get ahead break a lot of the rules and often operate under their own set.

Indeed, Smith warns against the traps of self-serving *modus operandi*: misplaced loyalty, personality conflicts, and intra-service rivalries that neither serve the interests of the organization nor the nation. The impression the reader gets is that the supposedly lofty level of integrity and competence at the Pentagon keeps the place honest, and reason generally reigns.

Smith, therefore, omits any explanation of procurement scandals which are driven by, at worst, lies, and, at best, willful disregard for the truth. He does, however, assure us that as the "black"—i.e., secret—programs of the

eighties become declassified, critics of defense R&D spending will fall silent, and some may even shed a tear of remorse about how wrong they were to distrust the military.

What this book sorely lacks is a genuine sense of the forces of bureaucratic politics that shape the Pentagon's peculiar culture and lead to such peculiar policy. How did we end up paying \$600 for a hammer anyway? What series of insane decisions lead us to sink billions into use-less airplanes like the C-17? If anyone can explain *those* aspects of Pentagon life over a beer, I'm buying.

Jennifer Elsea, a former Army captain, is an intern at The Washington Monthly.

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By Daniel Schorr

When *The Washington Monthly* called to ask me to review a new book by Harrison Salisbury about 20 of his personal heroes, I ventured the guess that they would include a *New York Times* publisher, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and a figure from Salisbury's China experience. I was almost right about the publisher (Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger was the owner who designated publishers from her family) and about Khrushchev, but hardly prepared for seven entries from China.

The 20 make an odd assortment—some dead, some alive, some famous, some largely unknown. The author says that he deliberately “passed over the most renowned figures of our times” like Churchill, DeGaulle, the Roosevelts, and John F. Kennedy, but then Robert F. Kennedy makes the cut. The Chinese nominees are mainly victims of the regime's oppression, but then there is Premier Zhou Enlai, “the consummate courtier” of Mao Zedong for 40 years.

About the time one is ready to conclude that the ticket for admission into the Salisbury pantheon is having been part of his vast journalistic experience, one comes across two whom he has never met—Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov and Edgar Snow, the biographer of Mao Zedong. Snow is one of four journalistic heroes, along with Homer Bigart, longtime correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*; David Halberstam; and Roger Wilkins (who shares billing with his law professor wife, Patricia King).

Salisbury's principal domestic theme is civil rights. Aside from Wilkins and King, there are sketches of Cecil Roberts and Bessie Edsell, white and black women who fought for civil rights in Birmingham, Alabama. Also, he chooses Sue and Lawrence Brooks, warriors for desegregation in Boston with whom Salisbury climbed mountains in the Adirondacks. And then, hardly needing more posthumous attention, there's Malcolm X, whom Salisbury met during a stint as national editor of the *Times*.

An odd assemblage, but why not? This is Salisbury's book, and after a

long and distinguished career, he should get to name any heroes he wants. But, lacking any new perception, any real unifying theme, this becomes a conceit, a gathering together of left-over file folders. One could have hoped for more from a Pulitzer Prize laureate with more than 20 books behind him. These biographical sketches, though occasionally interesting, lack a sense of recollection in tranquillity that Theodore H. White, for instance, brought to *America in Search of Itself* and *In Search of History—A Personal Adventure*.

With Salisbury, we get less insight than hyperbole. “The Bobby [Kennedy] of 1968 knew there were questions to which no one, not even a Kennedy, had the answers. . . . He understood life as he had never understood it before, because he understood death.”

Or this: “David Halberstam's exploration of the faded American dream, powered by a relentless mind and ever-renewing physical strength, was transforming him into the conscience of the American heritage.”

On matters of which I have independent knowledge—like Khrushchev and the Soviet Union—I am troubled to find Salisbury shaky about his facts. Salisbury writes that after his 1959 tour of the United States, “Khrushchev was as happy as a small boy. He rushed back to Moscow to prepare” for a reciprocal visit by President Eisenhower. In fact, after his American trip, Khrushchev rushed off to Peking to face a Chinese Politburo seething with resentment over his romance with capitalist America. On the way back to Moscow from Peking, he stopped at Baku for a speech to renew pressure on the Allied position in Berlin. His romance with Eisenhower was already in trouble.

Salisbury writes that when word of the downing of the U-2 spy plane on May 1, 1960 reached Moscow, “Khrushchev sought out the American ambassador, Llewellyn (Tommy) Thompson, at a diplomatic reception. ‘You have to help me,’ he told Tommy, ‘I’m in a terrible spot.’” That does not square with what the late Ambassador Thompson told me at the time—that he had no knowledge of the flight, let alone the downing of the U-2, until Khrushchev publicly announced it before the Supreme Soviet, pointing to a flabbergasted American ambassador in the diplomatic gallery.

Salisbury also has a way of stating as fact what can only be matters of conjecture. Consider this almost novelistic surmise about Khrushchev's visit to the IBM building in San Jose, California. “I caught a glance exchanged between Khrushchev and one of his aides. They knew what [Thomas J.] Watson was showing them, even if Watson didn't. I knew, too, because I had read my Marx. I knew that the great goal of communism, and hence of the Soviet system, was to abolish the distinction between blue collar and white collar. . . . But, here in America, the citadel of capitalism, the historic distinctions of blue and white collar had been obliterated. . . . That was the nuance that underlay the quick glance between Khrushchev and his aide. . . .”

What a glance! To think that I was there and missed the story of Khrushchev in San Jose facing up to the coming defeat of communism!

Salisbury continues, “When later Khrushchev proclaimed, ‘We will bury you,’ and ‘Your children will live under communism,’ I knew that he was only whistling in the wind.” But those remarks were made not “later,” but earlier. “We will bury you” was in 1956, in my presence, at a reception in Moscow amid rising disillusionment with communism in East Europe. “Your children will live under communism” was actually “Your grandchildren will live under socialism,” and was uttered in 1957 in Khrushchev's “Face the Nation” interview on CBS and again in 1959 during his “Kitchen Debate” with Vice President Nixon.

Details, details. But they suggest that under the exterior of a journalist, there lurks in Salisbury a romantic novelist who can rearrange history and divine meanings from glances. No one but a romantic could write of Khrushchev, “No man could have married a woman so straight and warm and intelligent as Nina Petrovna without a good heart. Nor possess a son so sympathetic, understanding—realistic—as Sergei Khrushchev.”

No one should begrudge Harrison Salisbury his eclectic collection of heroes, however much time may have blurred some details. Whether they help to illuminate the past is another matter.

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