

The Pentagon Press:



Illustration by Matt Wuerker

Prisoners Of Ro



spectability

by Timothy Noah

It's the kind of story that investigative reporters are supposed to fantasize about. A major defense contractor is caught overcharging the government by several hundred million dollars for exorbitantly priced spare parts and hefty raises for employees. A middle-level Pentagon official who reports the abuses to his superiors is immediately slated for transfer. When the whistleblower finally goes public, top officials at the Department of Defense launch a campaign to discredit him and force him into early retirement. To look into some of the charges raised, the Pentagon appoints an investigating committee chaired by a man who is a paid consultant of the main contractor under suspicion. The committee finds no evidence of wrongdoing.

Fascinating as it all sounds, unless you're a regular reader of the *Washington Times*, the *Federal Times*, the *Hartford Courant*, or one of the Florida papers, or a regular viewer of ABC News' "20-20," you've probably missed out on this saga. The story of a Pentagon whistleblower named George Spanton has received virtually no attention in the nation's leading newspapers, wire services, and evening news shows; if these news organizations have covered the Spanton story at all (and most haven't), they've assigned it the kind of play usually reserved for the GSA's new regulations on leasing office furniture.

That so many important journalists and their editors have missed the Spanton story is more surprising when you consider the rash of first-rate stories that have recently appeared about faulty weapons systems and huge cost overruns. These stories reveal a new combination of skepticism and sophistication in the press corps' approach to the military. But dismaying shortcomings remain in how the Pentagon is covered, as the Spanton story reveals.

Clark Mollenhoff of the *Washington Times* is a hulking, sixtyish man who speaks in a low croak and tracks down stories with a determination that is legendary among his fellow Washington reporters. ("He has this tendency," says one, "to get on an issue and ride it, ride it, ride it.") His tenacity is not always regarded favorably by Mollenhoff's fellow journalists. In Timothy Crouse's *The Boys On The Bus*, an anonymous member of the White House press corps calls Mollenhoff (then a Washington cor-

Timothy Noah is an editor of The Washington Monthly.



respondent for the *Des Moines Register*) “the Male Sarah McClendon,” referring to the eccentric White House correspondent who presidents under fire at press conferences can usually count on to change the subject. The comparison is revealing of how the respectable press tends to lump its uncool or unusual colleagues into the same category of irrelevance. Mollenhoff may embarrass other reporters with his sometimes strident, sometimes humorless approach, but he repeatedly gets the stories that they have missed because they kept their cool.

Mollenhoff first heard about Spanton from one of his sources in the spring of 1982. Spanton was working for something called the Defense Contract Auditing Agency—the branch of the Defense Department that audits contracts—in West Palm Beach, Florida. As a Pentagon auditor, Spanton had written a 15-page report on excessive wage hikes among companies with government contracts. The firms, Spanton had found, were granting raises of 15 to 20 percent to their employees while federal employees were getting raises of only 5 to 8 percent. This didn't strike Spanton as very fair; why should people whose livelihood depended on the government receive better treatment than those who worked for the government? Surely, Spanton's superiors would want to look into this further.

Only they didn't. What they really wanted to do once they took a look at George Spanton's audit was transfer him to Los Angeles. Spanton's report was stirring up trouble at Pratt & Whitney, a division of United Technologies that made jet engines (and spare parts for those jet engines) in West Palm Beach. Spanton had singled out Pratt & Whitney for \$150 million in “excessive wage escalation.” He also called for greater access to Pratt & Whitney's books, as well as an industry-wide audit. In effect, Spanton was calling into question the DCAA's traditional kid-gloves approach. The reflexive bureaucratic response was to send the spoilsport away. Spanton's superiors at the DCAA regional office in Atlanta and at the Washington headquarters—Paul Evans and Charles Starrett, respectively—threatened to fire him if he did not agree to the transfer.

This reaction is less surprising when you consider the reason the DCAA was created back in 1964. Since the late fifties, the GAO had been conducting some fairly vigorous audits of defense contracts under Comptroller General Joseph Campbell. This had led to some embarrassment for Robert McNamara, who as secretary of defense was responsible for preventing waste in

the Pentagon. To avoid further embarrassment, McNamara merged the auditing functions of the four services into one, centralized Pentagon auditing agency—the DCAA.

Once the DCAA was comfortably in place, McNamara argued that it would be “waste and duplication” for the GAO to audit defense contracts too. It was a classic administrative end-run: first, create a bureaucracy designed to duplicate that of an opposing agency; then eliminate the opposing bureaucracy in the name of efficiency. Under Elmer Staats, Campbell's more docile successor, the GAO more or less stopped auditing defense contracts. This left the job to civilian Pentagon employees working under men who were looking ahead to careers in defense contracting themselves once they retired from the military. Small wonder, then, that George Spanton aroused hostility from his superiors when he proposed cracking down on Pratt & Whitney.

Caspar Weinberger stumbled into the story when he came by the *Washington Times* for lunch one day in August 1982 and was asked by Mollenhoff what would happen to Spanton. Weinberger said he hadn't heard of him. When Mollenhoff told him about attempts to transfer Spanton against his will, Weinberger said, “That would be totally contrary to every policy we've got. We are seeking these suggestions.” A few days later a spokesman for Weinberger said Spanton's transfer would be held off until March, at which time Weinberger assumed (wrongly, it turned out) that Spanton would be due for a routine five-year transfer.

Meanwhile, a few other stories about Pratt & Whitney bubbled to the surface. Among them was a report by Robert Hancock, deputy chief of the commodity division of the Air Force Logistic Center at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma that found Pratt & Whitney had raised prices on some of its spare parts more than 300 percent in fiscal 1982. In one instance, a jet engine spare part had shot up in price from \$35,189 to \$190,855. There was also a Mollenhoff story about a retired Air Force general, Alton D. Slay, who had been appointed to a government panel set up to study spare part overruns after the release of Hancock's report. Slay, it turned out, was simultaneously a paid consultant for—you guessed it—Pratt & Whitney. The panel concluded that no fault lay with Pratt & Whitney or Air Force personnel and recommended a \$4 billion increase in the appropriation for spare parts.

By now it was March and, in the minds of

George Spanton's superiors, time for him to leave. To defend the transfer, they cited DCAA regulations that auditors be shifted around every five years. But when Spanton read the regulations, he found that auditors were to be shifted every five to *seven* years. Moreover, Spanton, then 62, planned to retire the following December, and the rules specifically permitted auditors in that situation to remain. No, no, the DCAA insisted, Spanton had to move because auditors who stayed in one place tended to get too, uh, *cozy* with the companies they were auditing.

If Spanton was getting cozy with his clients, he had a strange way of showing it: he was providing help to an FBI investigation of Pratt & Whitney, which by then was being probed by a federal grand jury for possible fraud in its expense accounts.

To fend off attempts to transfer him, Spanton had filed with the Merit Systems Protection Board. In April 1983 the board blocked Spanton's transfer temporarily. Then Caspar Weinberger wrote a letter to a dozen senators and representatives explaining that Spanton's proposed transfer was "common practice. . . to avoid the perception of 'clientitis.'" Weinberger's letter failed to explain how Spanton's aid to the prosecution of Pratt & Whitney could possibly be construed as affectionate. (Maybe the secretary had a complicated Freudian theory to explain it all.) Anyway, at the same time, Charles Starrett Jr., director of the DCAA, was providing the opposite (and more candid) explanation: Spanton was being transferred because Pratt & Whitney executives refused to provide Spanton with data.

In other words, the director of the primary audit agency for defense contracts was admitting that the government would not force contractors like Pratt & Whitney to put up with auditors they didn't like. What did the Pentagon brass make of this? Vincent Puritano, the Pentagon comptroller, wrote Starrett to express his confidence that, "under your leadership, the auditors will continue as they have in the past to look at all claims. . . and question any they feel should be questioned." It was back to business as usual.

There you have it—the story that *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the evening news shows slumbered through for a year. It's a little complicated, and it requires looking back to events that happened two decades ago, but you would think the story would seem important enough for reporters to make a special effort. Every week at least one of our leading papers publishes an indignant editorial about what the

Defense Department is doing to the deficit. Yet here was a perfect illustration of why the defense budget is as big as it is—and no one wanted to publish it. Why?

Most Washington reporters consider themselves outsiders and feel duty-bound to maintain a healthy distance from the government. They like nothing better than having a tough question to lob at a White House official at a press conference, for example, and usually consider it unprofessional when their colleagues take a job in government. Still, there is something peculiarly ritualistic about this adversarial relationship that makes you wonder whether reporters are genuinely confident about challenging the status quo. Those tough questions, for example, tend to address more banal concerns—"Would you reveal this secret?" "How would you respond to this criticism?" and so on—rather than challenge the basic assumptions behind those concerns—"Why are we doing this?" "Wouldn't it be better to do this?" etc. And the predisposition to disapprove of taking jobs in government suggests that deep down reporters really do feel vulnerable in their dealings with authority, and musn't allow themselves to get carried away.

The result is that reporters cultivate a detachment toward the workings of government. Stories are not supposed to be crusades; reporters who hammer away on certain topics that the rest of the pack haven't developed an interest in are suspected of not merely pursuing a story but trying to effect change. And trying to effect change is not considered respectable by most journalists.

This has remained true even after the changes that came to journalism after Watergate. Watergate made dramatically clear that beat reporters are overly susceptible to what Caspar Weinberger would call "clientitis." Embarrassed by the inadequacy of their beat reporters to get the Watergate story, major newspapers and TV news organizations hired aggressively adversarial reporters whose duty it is to dig up the stories that lie outside the cloistered world of press conferences, news releases, and background briefings (which, at the Pentagon, are actually referred to as "vesper sessions.") In this category fall reporters like the *Times'* Charles Mohr and the *Post's* Fred Hiatt. These reporters have helped raise the standards of investigative reporting for daily news organizations by taking a more skeptical view of official Washington than their beat counterparts can.

On the surface, this good cop/bad cop approach to journalism should make coverage of

a story like this easier; the beat reporters would just leave it to the investigative reporters. But the conventions of reporting made coverage of the story Mollenhoff had broken a little difficult. Unlike the beat reporter, who is willing to do a story that everyone else is doing, an investigative reporter is supposed to shun stories that don't allow you a scoop. More than once I heard good investigative reporters refer to the story of George Spanton and the DCAA as "Mollenhoff's story." What was the point of telling it again when Mollenhoff had told it so well?

Set aside the obvious answer to that question—that the *Washington Times* isn't read by many people in Washington, let alone the rest of the country—and accept the proposition that investigative reporters shouldn't tell the same story twice. That *still* leaves a lot of avenues for an imaginative reporter to perceive emanating from the Spanton story. Inspiration isn't the same as theft, as any artist will tell you: Michelangelo spent a lot of time studying the Belvedere torso, but no one would call his Moses a fake. To extend this flattering analogy to reporters, there would have been nothing unoriginal in tracking down a few leads that Mollenhoff's story should have brought to mind.

The labor story is a case in point. Although high labor costs are one of the biggest reasons for astronomical yearly Pentagon budgets, the press has done little to expose them. Partly this is because reporters are reluctant to criticize huge labor increases if they can't also reveal huge management salaries—information government contractors withhold from reporters on the grounds that it's "proprietary." But this "proprietary" claim is pure arrogance; why should we take these managers' word that their salaries are in line with the Defense Department's contractual guidelines when all the evidence indicates contrary? Rather than bow to this dubious claim, reporters should be digging into this matter.

Another rich area for reportorial mining is the DCAA itself. The evidence provided by Spanton's case suggests that this agency is not the most aggressive watchdog in the federal government. Call it sour grapes, but on one of the all-too-rare occasions when the GAO took a look at defense contracting, it left a definite impression that George Spanton isn't the only DCAA auditor who is having trouble getting hold of contractors' records, even from the Pentagon's own procurement officers. According to a 1979 GAO report, "one procurement contracting officer said he considered the records to be internal contractor

documents that are not necessary for evaluating contractor proposals." Isn't there a story there?

Ask a reporter why he didn't pursue these leads and he's likely to tell you they just don't match up to, say, a high-tech weapon failure story. Hardware is what really excites his editors, he'll tell you, and the only hardware in the Spanton story was a lot of spare parts, which sounds hopelessly nickel-and-dime. The respectable press has paid more attention to the "spare parts" angle of the Spanton story than any other, but that's largely because it was prepackaged by a government official—in the Hancock report and more recently in a Pentagon inspector general's report—and even then, the reporting was unenthusiastic. But a little imagination would have helped overcome this apathy: one spare part may not be worth much, even if it is overpriced by a factor of five, but what about a whole lot of spare parts? A. Ernest Fitzgerald, the Air Force whistleblower who last year was reinstated in a job he lost during the Nixon administration after he called attention to cost overruns on the Lockheed C-5A transport, offered "20-20" a pretty good explanation for why spare parts matter. "You've got to remember that Mr. Gillette didn't get rich selling razors," says Fitzgerald. "He got rich selling blades."

There are two final ways in which the press corps revealed itself, in its failure to pursue the Spanton story, to be trapped in respectability: in its regard for the paper Mollenhoff works for, and the source he was dealing with.

The newspaper, the *Washington Times*, is owned by followers of the Unification Church and its leader, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. You would think that Mollenhoff's fellow reporters would have read one or two of his pieces on George Spanton and concluded that this was a story much too important for a paper owned by a bunch of Moonie crackpots. Instead, their logic has been a little different: *because* the stories have appeared in a paper owned by the Moonies, reporters have felt free to ignore it. This seems less peculiar when you understand that most reporters feel pressure to cover not stories that receive the least dissemination in obscure papers like the *Washington Times* but stories that receive the widest dissemination in prestigious newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. For most journalists in this country, these papers certify what's really "news." Had the story appeared in either paper, editors would no doubt be hounding their reporters to get on the story. But whose editor regularly reads



the *Washington Times*? One would expect that Ben Bradlee, the executive editor of the only direct competitor of the *Washington Times*, would make some effort to read it, if only out of *noblesse oblige*. But Bradlee had this gracious comment for *The Post* recently: "It doesn't seem to me I have to read it to keep up. I read it more out of curiosity—never out of necessity."

Somewhat more complicated is the risk to a reporter's reputation posed by government whistleblowers. A whistleblower is someone who says that something is wrong with his organization that the public doesn't know about. The public doesn't know because the organization's leaders are concealing the facts and because the regular press coverage of the agency has failed to uncover them. A reporter siding with a whistleblower thus takes on not only the leaders of the whistleblower's organization—the sort of people likely to dine with his editor or publisher—but also his colleagues, who have either missed the story or concluded that the whistleblower's beef isn't newsworthy. By writing a story about a whistleblower, a reporter is saying, "This person is right and yet he is being ignored." That's a frightening step to take.

It's frightening even for those few reporters who *aren't* afraid to more boldly propose better ways of doing things, for taking on a whistleblower isn't just taking on a cause, but also taking on the promoter of that cause. Whistleblowers are invariably subject to some degree of persecution from their superiors, whether it be demotion, firing, isolation, or, in Spanton's case, unwanted transfer. In large bureaucracies, such harassment can be achieved through byzantine methods that may magnify and even distort a whistleblower's feeling that the system is rigged against him. As this feeling, rational or irrational, takes hold, a whistleblower can start to act peculiar, and may even retaliate in extreme ways—like saying something that betrays hatred of his superiors or self-pity. Once he's under press scrutiny, any slip like that can be fatal, allowing the opposition to write him off as pettily resentful or maladjusted—hardly the sort of person a serious journalist would turn to for a diagnosis of governmental ills.

There's no evidence that George Spanton has let harassment get to him; by all reports, he is a well-adjusted bureaucratic fighter. But at least one reporter I spoke with in the course of researching this article confessed to me that he just didn't know about George Spanton. Maybe he was a lazy bureaucrat who felt like spending his

sunset years in Florida. He certainly didn't write audits that read like other people's audits; they were "screeds." How was he to know whether the guy was for real?

There is, of course, no prescribed way to tell—no reliable method of separating the cranks from the heroes, the McClendons from the Mollenhoffs—and so convention generally dictates that the smartest thing to do is ignore such people and go on about your business. Reporters will deny this, telling you how they stood by Ernie Fitzgerald throughout his 13-year struggle. But a look at the stories they wrote in 1968 and 1969 when Fitzgerald's persecution began will show that most of them didn't touch the story in the beginning. When it comes to those who are blowing the whistle right now, the respectable press is usually the last to recognize them. (The one notable exception to this rule is the case of Franklin C. Spinney the defense whistleblower who, to *Time's* great credit, was featured on its cover one week last winter. But you will recall that this was definitely not one of those weeks *Newsweek* had the same cover, nor has Spinney been celebrated by the networks or the major newspapers.)

The conventional approach of respectable journalism prevents embarrassment, but an unfortunate side-effect is that it prevents originality as well. This is as true for the investigative reporter as it is for the corporate manager who favors financial stability over the perils of entrepreneurialism. Reporters don't think of themselves as timid souls, and in many ways they aren't; within the boundaries of what they perceive to be respectability there's room for a fair amount of courage—but not for much originality. Instead of following the safe paths of their predecessors, we need more reporters who judge the merits of potential stories, not on the basis of convention, but on the basis of their own original thinking.

If reporters had thought about the Spanton story, they might have realized that Clark Mollenhoff's unseemly enthusiasm was focused on a pretty good story. If they'd thought a bit further they could have guessed at likely promising developments in the story that could have been their own. And if they'd thought long and hard about Spanton and what he had to say, they might have come to a reasonable evaluation as to his reliability, rather than written him off as a risk. Instead, they maintained their chilly distance, waiting for someone with more authority to tell them that it all mattered. ■

Why Gandhi Drives The Neoconservatives Crazy

by Jason DeParle

A year ago the story of Mahatma Gandhi was fast fading from memory. Those who were old enough might remember him from the newsreel footage that flashed in 1940s movie theaters—but recall little beyond the fact that he somehow brought the British empire to its knees. For the most part, Gandhi's fame had faded with the passing of time. He was just a foreign name connected to a distant land and a previous era.

Of course Richard Attenborough's film changed all that. Suddenly Gandhi was once again splashed across the pages of the world press. He has appeared in the film sections, in the style sections, on the op-ed pages, and in the Sunday magazines. Biographies have been rereleased, and foreign correspondents of an earlier day have gone digging for their notes. As an advocate of small-scale economics, Gandhi presumably would approve: a cottage industry has been spun out of Gandhiana.

As the reappraisals stack higher and higher, one would hope we'd all find ourselves getting closer to the elusive truth about one of the few indisputably great men of this century. Instead, however, we seem to be getting closer to something more mundane: the preoccupations and illusions of the left and the right. A review of the discussions and debates that Richard Attenborough's film biography has inspired provides a useful Rorschach of these ideologies, and some insights into where both camps go wrong in their view of contemporary America—to say nothing of colonial India.

The commentary ranges across a wide terrain. The liberal *Progressive*, for example, concluding that "Gandhiism. . . is relevant," argued that among the film's many messages is "the knowledge that diet is crucial to well-being." Given Gandhi's affection for such delicacies as groundnut butter and lemon juice—and his many nearly suicidal fasts—the *Progressive's* conclusions seem questionable. Ralph Nader, mean-

while, appropriated Gandhi on behalf of the consumer movement: never mind that Gandhi's asceticism had distinctly non-consuming proclivities.

Of course, most of the Gandhi discussion has focused on "peace." "In these days of raised consciousness about the nuclear threat," says *McCall's*, the film "speaks to the power of peace." *The Christian Century* had a similar thought: "It is good to be reminded of Gandhi's beliefs when the possibility of nonviolent conflict resolution as a substitute for war requires our serious consideration." So did *Newsweek*: "At a time of deep political unrest, economic dislocation, and nuclear anxiety, seeing *Gandhi* is an experience that will change many hearts and minds." Now *McCall's* doesn't reveal what it thinks the film says when it "speaks to the power of peace." Nor does *Newsweek* say what changes will come to our hearts and minds. But Colman McCarthy, a Catholic liberal, gets more specific. Writing in *The Washington Post*, he claims, "The relevance of *Gandhi* is that the moral force of nonviolence is always stronger than its opposite, the physical force of violence." *Gandhi* provided music to the liberals' ears. The weak triumph over the strong, good over evil, righteousness over injustice. Antiracism, anticolonialism, and nonviolence prevail.

On the other hand, a chorus of conservative voices has attacked the movie and attacked the man. Columnists like Patrick Buchanan and Emmett Tyrrell have joined the fray. The strongest words, however, have come from Richard Grenier, film critic for *Commentary*. Not satisfied with simply attacking the movie and the man, Grenier in a March article for the magazine went on to vilify all of India, all of Hinduism, and then to flail at a target closer to home, and close to the hearts of his fellow neoconservatives: American liberals. Grenier's 13,000-word tirade was widely reprinted and subsequently released as a book dedicated to Norman Podhoretz and Midge Decter.

Jason DeParle is a staff writer at The New Republic.