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Office of Net Assessment

The United States Department of Defense's **Office of Net Assessment**^[1] (**ONA**) was created in 1973 by Richard Nixon to serve as the Pentagon's "internal think tank" that "looks 20 to 30 years into the military's future, often with the assistance of outside contractors, and produces reports on the results of its research".^[2] The Director of Net Assessment is the principal staff assistant and advisor to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense on net assessment.

According to Defense Directive 5111.11, the Director shall develop and coordinate net assessments of the standing, trends, and future prospects of U.S. military capabilities and military potential in comparison with those of other countries or groups of countries in order to identify emerging or future threats or opportunities for the United States.^{[3][4]} Paul Bracken explains that it is important to have a good grasp of net assessment because it is an "important part of the language spoken by leaders in the higher levels of DOD" and officers who lack familiarity "will be at a disadvantage in communicating with the civilian leadership".^[5]

Andrew Marshall was named its first director, a position he continued to hold under succeeding administrations.^[6] In October 2014, Marshall announced plans to retire in January 2015.^[7] He was replaced by Jim Baker in May 2015.^{[8][9]}

List of directors

- Andrew Marshall, 1973 – January 2, 2015
- James H. Baker, May 14, 2015 – Present

Notable staff

Staff members have included:

- David S. Yost
- Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., formerly the president of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
- Larry Seaquist, recently a member of Washington State's House of Representatives

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'How Is Yoda?': An Appreciation Of Andy Marshall

By ANDREW KREPINEVICH on March 27, 2019 at 6:18 PM



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Andy Marshall

Last year while in Japan for a meeting with senior defense and military leaders, the question most often posed to me was, “How is Yoda?”

The questions were in reference to the nickname given to Andrew Marshall, arguably the foremost defense strategist of the past sixty years, who passed away this week at the age of 97. He is best known for his 42-year tenure as head of the Pentagon’s innocuously named Office of Net Assessment, the defense secretary’s private “think tank” that Marshall formed and led under every president from Richard Nixon to Barack Obama.



Andrew Krepinich

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Marshall himself disliked being compared with the Star Wars character, but the name stuck, and for good reason. Like Yoda, Marshall was quiet and unassuming, and spoke sparingly. When he did, his observations could seem inscrutable to

many who struggled in their efforts to plumb the depths of “net assessment,” a powerful strategic planning methodology Marshall developed and refined over the course of 60 years of public service.

During this time he mentored and trained a group of defense notables, who referred to themselves as graduates of “St Andrew’s Prep.” Among their numbers were a chief Middle East peace negotiator, a secretary of the Air Force, Ivy League professors, and a vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Marshall is often referred to by defense cognoscenti as “the most famous person you’ve never heard of.” While still in his twenties, he had already spent time working on Nobel Prize-winning physicist Enrico Fermi’s cyclotron and as the bridge partner of another Nobel winner, economist Kenneth Arrow.

Marshall, along with titan strategists like Herman Kahn and Albert Wohlstetter, was one of the “Wizards of Armageddon” at the RAND Corporation during its golden era in the 1950s. Although content to work in the background, according to one colleague it was clearly understood that Marshall was “first among equals.”



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Indeed, it was Marshall who suggested to Roberta Wohlstetter the focus for her classic book, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*. His path-breaking work on the role that organizations play in decision-making led to Graham Allison's seminal work, *Essence of Decision*.

Aside from his towering intellect, Marshall's success was rooted in his intense desire and abiding curiosity to understand what is really happening or, more simply, the truth. There was also his intellectual honesty, refreshing in an age where so many are driven by agendas and seek "ammunition" to support their views rather than trying to better understand a complex world. Another key to Marshall's success—and to his enduring value to presidents of both political parties—was his willingness to reconsider his beliefs when they conflicted with the facts, and to challenge the conventional wisdom when it became apparent that it did not reflect the reality of the true state of affairs.

Marshall's dedication to rigorous analysis and his moral courage never shown brighter than when he challenged the CIA over its assessment of the Soviet Union's economy and defense effort in the 1970s. Marshall argued persuasively and successfully that the Russian economy was not as strong as the intelligence community believed, and that the Soviet military buildup was exerting enormous strain on their economy that could not be sustained over time. Simply put, the Soviet Union was not 10 feet tall, but rather had feet of clay. If the United States persevered in its defense of the Free World, Marshall concluded, time was on its side, not Russia's.

Indeed, Marshall's remarkable ability to anticipate shifts in the strategic environment became legendary over time. Over 30 years ago, in the midst of arms control negotiations with the Russians, in a memo to senior Pentagon officials, Marshall explained how China, not the Soviet Union, would emerge over the next few decades as the major strategic rival to the United States.

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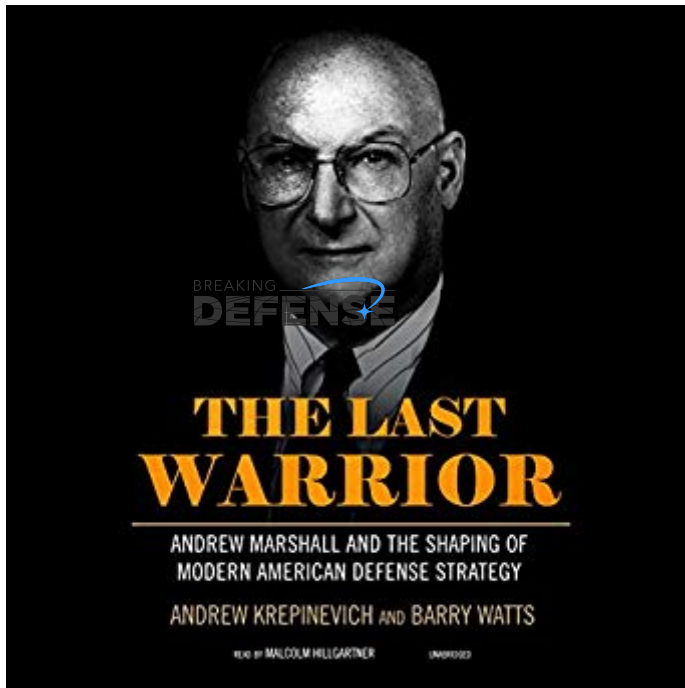
“We need to be careful about these scarce precious assets,” said Tom Karako, a missile defense expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “While we’re only sending one battery, once it’s there, it’s probably not going to come back.”

By VALERIE INSINNA

While it’s become fashionable in some circles today to assert that thinking about war—indeed, even thinking about how to avoid it—makes one a warmonger, Marshall was anything but. He was one of a dwindling number of people who witnessed a nuclear weapon test. When asked about the experience, Marshall would emphasize the weapon’s power—the flash so brilliant it felt like being inside the Sun itself—and its horror.

He felt it would be useful to have the world’s leaders witness such a test every so often, so they could better understand the folly of war. And when his travels took him to Europe, which they often did, Marshall would try to visit the cemeteries at Normandy to pay respect to those of his generation who had not survived to

see the better world they made possible through their sacrifice. To a great extent his public service was driven by a desire to ensure their sacrifice was not in vain.



Toward the end of his life, Marshall expressed his fear that Americans may be forgetting how fragile peace is, and how hard it has been historically to avoid war. In sharing his fears, Marshall would recall the most emotional public experience of his lifetime. It occurred at his high school graduation in 1939, only a few months before general war would break out in Europe. It had been only a generation since the last world war, and parents at that time knew

from personal experience that, if another war came, casualties would be enormous, and few families would be spared. Normally, graduations are a time of celebration and great expectations. The mood at this graduation, however, was subdued. Parents sat somberly in their seats. Many wept.

Marshall dedicated his life in an effort to ensure that such a scene would never be repeated. It never was—not on his watch. But the price of peace requires eternal vigilance. Through their hard work and sacrifice, Marshall and the “greatest generation” gifted the United States a long peace. But the question remains: Are today’s Americans willing to make the sacrifices necessary to keep it?

Andrew Krepinevich served in the Office of Net Assessment from 1989-1993. He is the co-author, along with Barry Watts, of the book The Last Warrior: Andrew Marshall and the Shaping of Modern American Defense Strategy.

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Abstract:

Has the work of the Office of Net Assessment ONA, and that of its only Director, Andrew Marshall, significantly influenced U.S. defense and national security policy Are their assessments responsible for derailing cherished Service programs such as the Crusader Judging by the press coverage of the development of the Quadrennial Defense Review QDR in the spring and summer of 2001, this debate exercised just about everyone in the Defense establishment. Given the facts on the ground, it was a peculiar debate - one of form over the substance of the transformation, as it seemed more important to keep Andrew Marshalls name off the final product than his thoughts out of it. In fact, DoD and the services have been and are pursuing research, training, and systems ad infinitum consistent with ONAs own work and their sponsored studies. Ample documentation of the latter is available from the same period, and most of it never figured in the debate over the strategic review. Furthermore, although neither the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review QDR nor the National Security Strategy appear to have Marshalls imprimatur, they both enshrine a principle central to the ONA studies available for review a capabilities-based force is a more powerful tool than a threat-based force. Based on an examination of how recent research and program implementation correspond with ONAs studies, the answer to the questions above is yes. This paper looks at three of the many areas addressed by ONA over the last few years to illustrate the point that the services are moving towards acquiring highly flexible capabilities military use of space, biotechnology and bioscience that are consistent with the transformation playing out in DoD.

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Grassley: The Office Of Net Assessment Is A Failure

Prepared Floor Remarks by U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa
The Office of Net Assessment is a Failure
Monday, February 7, 2022

Grassley: The Office of Net Assessment is a Failure



VIDEO

On [November 18](#) last year, I came to the floor to speak about the Office of Net Assessment within the Pentagon.

That office's purpose is to produce an annual net assessment, which is a long term look at our military's capabilities and those of our greatest adversaries.

In 2018, according to the Director of the ONA, that office hadn't produced a net assessment since 2007. Not doing its job for 11 years, and possibly more, calls into question whether this office should even exist.

Yet, a recent Inspector General report states that the office “produces...highly classified net assessments.”

I question their conclusion based on the available evidence.

In last year’s floor speech, and others over the years, I discussed my oversight of this office dating back to 2019.

I also discussed my amendment to the national defense bill.

That amendment would've done one very simple thing: require the Government Accountability Office to determine how much taxpayer money the Office of Net Assessment actually uses for net assessments.

I want to know how much we can cut from their budget to save the taxpayer money.

Apparently, that type of pro-taxpayer legislation was too much to ask for.

Accordingly, it appears that the Office of Net Assessment gets to keep operating like a Pentagon slush fund for irrelevant and political research projects.

On [February 5, 2020](#), the Director of the Office of Net Assessment told me, “We review all deliverables to ensure they're consistent with the statement of work. We evaluate each deliverable to assess whether we should seek additional information or require a resubmission of commissioned work.”

I'll return to that statement in a bit.

In [December 2020](#), I asked the inspector general to take a deeper dive into the Office of Net Assessment's contracting practices. That means connecting all the dots in the contract transactions to ensure everything matches up.

The inspector general reviewed 20 contracts.

On [January 25, 2022](#), the inspector general issued its results and found, in part:

- Office of Net Assessment acquisition personnel inappropriately performed Contracting Officer Representative duties for 20 contracts.
- ONA acquisition personnel and an office providing contract support didn't maintain complete contract files, including pre-award and contract administration documentation. That also included the failure to maintain signed contracts and modifications. Since 2019, I've repeatedly asked for a full accounting of Stefan Halper's contracts. Either they never had one or they've decided to obstruct Congress.
- ONA acquisition personnel and an office providing contract support inappropriately approved invoices for payments totaling 9.8 million dollars due to a lack of oversight. And that's just for the 20 contracts the Inspector General sampled. Without required supporting documentation for payment, the door is wide open to fraud, theft and improper payments.
- Without established and documented surveillance measures for ONA service contracts, the Office of Net Assessment may not have received all services outlined in contractor statements of work.
- At this point, the next finding is no surprise: the ONA didn't administer contracts in accordance with federal, Defense Department and Washington Headquarters Services internal regulations and policies.

Further, the audit states, “Office of Net Assessment Acquisition personnel can't verify whether they received services, valued at 4.1 million dollars, in accordance with the statement of work.”

Now, let’s return to that quote from the Director of the ONA, “We review all deliverables to ensure they’re consistent with the statement of work. We evaluate each deliverable to assess whether we should seek additional information or require a resubmission of commissioned work.”

Based on the available evidence, his statement is false.

Here’s the bottom line: the ONA has no clue what they’re paying for and whether they’ve even received complete work product.

And whatever they’re actually doing, it’s not in compliance with federal regulations, policy and law.

This is a complete embarrassment and a slap in the face to the American taxpayer.

While the ONA wasted millions of dollars in taxpayer money every year, the communist Chinese government developed hypersonic missiles that can travel the globe.

If this unit isn’t doing the job they’re supposed to do, why are we still funding it?

It’d be better to take their 20 million dollar budget and give it our service members. At least we know they’ve earned it.

A government slush fund will always be a government slush fund unless the Congress steps up and fixes the problem.

I encourage my colleagues – especially those on the Senate Armed Services Committee – to take a stand against this blatant waste, fraud, abuse and gross mismanagement.

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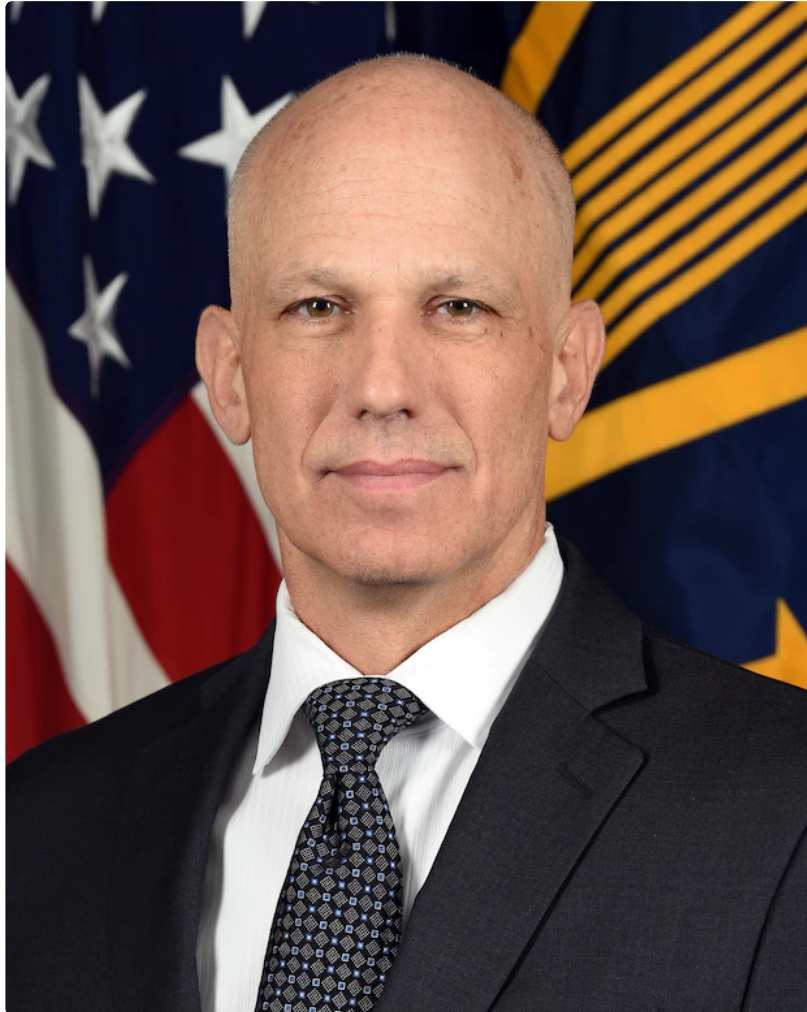
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James H. Baker

Director, Office of Net Assessment



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Mr. Jim Baker is the Director of the [Office of Net Assessment](#) (ONA), the Department of Defense's source of deep, long term future thinking on strategies and opportunities that improve the U.S. position in military-economic-political competition. As the Director of ONA, Mr. Baker is responsible for providing the Secretary of Defense and other senior leaders with independent comparative assessments of the prospects of the military capabilities of the United States

relative to other actors, as well as the political, economic and regional implications of those assessments. He previously served as Strategist and advisor to two Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He holds four graduate degrees, two in engineering disciplines and two in security studies from military institutions.

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Office of Net Assessment (ONA)



Since its founding in 1973, the Office of Net Assessment (ONA) has continually provided long-term comparative assessments of trends, key competitions, risks, opportunities, and future prospects of U.S. military capability to the Secretary of Defense and Deputy Secretary of Defense. ONA's work is conducted in accordance with written guidance by the Secretary of Defense, as well as DOD Directive 5111.1. ONA's mission and worldview have remained largely unchanged in its 40+ year history.

ONA products include internally-produced assessments which represent years of detailed analysis. These assessments are highly classified, tightly controlled in distribution, and provide strategic-level management insights for the Secretary of Defense and other senior DOD leaders. Several such assessments have been completed since 2017.

The office also produces and commissions shorter studies, less formal assessments, and topical memos, to support its research or in response to requests from the Secretary or senior DOD or Congressional leadership. These studies include historical analysis, alternative futures, and more speculative work about the possible character of military conflict in the future. ONA research on the character of future warfare since 2000 formed the diagnostic basis of the most recent National Defense Strategy. An ONA-sponsored study helped inform Congress' decision to reverse the Budget Control Act in 2017. On several occasions since 2016, ONA work has been used in briefings to the President.

Though the Department does not publicly disclose the entire scope and nature of ONA's research, the office has produced and distributed hundreds of unique works to individuals across the U.S. government since 2015. ONA products, both externally commissioned and internally written, are read by or briefed to the Secretary, Deputy Secretary, and Under Secretaries of Defense, the Chairman and Joint Chiefs of Staff,

and the Combatant Commanders. ONA work is also shared widely with other government agencies, including with the National Security Council staff, the National Intelligence Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the State Department.

Director's Biography

