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EDITORIAL

Old Soldiers Never Cash Out

For all the stars of ranking generals and admirals in Washington, it turns out there's still a higher grade — “senior mentor.” These are retired brass enjoying lucrative compensation as part-time Pentagon advisers, who, in most cases, also draw V.I.P. pay from companies seeking defense contracts. The mentor cohort has quietly grown in recent years from a handful to at least 158 ranking retired officers — 80 percent of whom hire on at the same time with defense contractors.

There is nothing illegal about the double-dipping. But few people in Congress or elsewhere knew about it until now because there is no requirement to tell anyone, even the Pentagon. As Pentagon advisers, mentors are paid hundreds of dollars an hour for offering counsel to former colleagues on war games and other specialties. As defense contract consultants, they can make considerably more. It's time to closely manage the retirees' good deal, documented in a [report](#) by USA Today.

Defense specialists in the Senate are proposing that ethics rules be written at least to mandate financial disclosure to avoid conflicts of interest. More than that may be needed. The Air Force has just directed that financial statements be required from mentors who might “potentially influence procurement decisions.”

The military and its mentors insist that weapons hawking is unlikely under existing rules, and that the dual role represents a wise investment in expertise needed to burnish the officer corps and maintain national security. “The taxpayers are getting a steal,” declared a retired admiral while declining to disclose his clients.

A steal it may be. Transparency will only secure the mentors' presumed virtue, not harm it.

Federal regulations require part-time employees paid at executive rates to file disclosure reports. But the senior mentors are not covered because they are hired as consultants, not employees. This may not qualify as Catch-22 in the world of Captain Yossarian, nor “the acquisition of unwarranted influence” that President-and-General Dwight Eisenhower foresaw in the military-industrial complex. But it's time Congress and the Pentagon made sure and got a handle on retired brass who sell their advice to both parts of the complex.

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