



Interview with the Robert Rangel, Former Chief of Staff to the Secretary of Defense

August 8, 2023

**PETER LEVINE:** I'm Peter Levine, the Director of the Defense Management Institute; and we're here today as a part of a planned series of interviews of individuals who have made significant contributions to improving the management of the Department of Defense. Today, we're speaking with Robert Rangel, who served as Chief of Staff to Secretaries of Defense Robert Gates and Donald Rumsfeld and a Staff Director of the House Armed Services Committee before taking an industry position, from which he recently retired. Secretary Gates has written that "Mr. Rangel knew more and had better instincts about both Congress and the Department of Defense than anyone I ever met." Having worked with Robert up close and observed his work from afar, I can attest the Secretary had it just about right. Robert, welcome.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Thank you.

**PETER LEVINE:** Pleased to have you here. So, let me start, sort of, at the beginning. What brought you into government service? I remember you as the Staff Director of the House Armed Services Committee. How did you get there?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Well, we all had our circuitous ways, I think, of how we found ourselves in government, particularly in senior positions; but I always had an interest in, sort of, public policy. My initial intentions were to join the Foreign Service. I grew up and spent a lot of time abroad based on my father's postings, so that was my general direction. And going into graduate school, I was prepared to do that; but then I needed some credit hours, and I saw an opportunity to work for the local congressman, just to get three credit hours. And it opened up a world that,

academically, I sort of understood but had no practical exposure to. It was politics. It was policy. It was dynamic. It was crazy, and at that age I found it quite appealing. So, I did an internship at the end of which they offered me a job, and I took it and that, sort of, put me on a path. But I never let go of that deeper interest in national security policy, foreign policy. He happened to be a member of the Armed Services Committee, the House Armed Services Committee. And so that, sort of, gave me a path. I wanted to get involved in that. He gave me an opportunity to come to Washington. And that was really what got me started. From that position, I was his Military Legislative Assistant. Then I joined the subcommittee staff, Investigation Subcommittee, around 1985. My first big thing was Goldwater-Nichols, which now thinking back on it, you know, what an incredible opportunity and time to, sort of, start getting your feet wet.

**PETER LEVINE:** And also, one of the biggest management changes we've made in the Department of Defense.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Absolutely. So many lessons that maybe we'll talk about that still, I think, apply today. So that journey ended up turning into 18 years.

**PETER LEVINE:** From three credit hours?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** From three credit hours, but 18 years on the House Armed Services Committee, ending up with Staff Director, as you mentioned. And from there, I grew to, sort of, understand that the logical evolution would be to continue that interest, you know, in the executive side.

**PETER LEVINE:** So, when you went to the Department of Defense, obviously, you had a great degree of familiarity with the Department from your long work with the Armed Services

Committee; but what surprised you most when you arrived in the executive branch and started to see the Department from the inside?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I guess what surprised me the most was, notwithstanding such a lengthy and, I thought, very involved relationship with defense policy and the mechanics of the Department and all the processes associated with it, there was a significant knowledge gap: just the practical experience of the internals, the culture, the dynamics. I'd say that would be thing one thing. Thing two was the distance and understanding between the two institutions. And I found that to be a constant in all my transitions, that these institutions that have such a synchronized relationship, the Congress, particularly the committees, the Department of Defense and also industry, in my latter stages. Even though it's a symbiotic relationship in many respects, the separation of understanding of the culture, what animates them, what drives decision making is quite significant. And that was a startling realization at the very start.

**PETER LEVINE:** Did you learn anything about the way the Department works when you arrive there that you wished you had known when you were on Capitol Hill?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Yes, yes. I guess most fundamentally was the difficulties, you know, how challenging it was just to do the day-to-day operations. The unintended, well, the unappreciated impact that a lot of the mandates of the Congress put on it. I mean, I sort of flipped, which happens and you probably had your own experiences in this respect. In understanding how the overhead, the burden that the Department has to endure and manage through; and it does it, but at a cost for the constant mandates, the constant tugging and pulling, the overhead associated with just the care and feeding and management of Congress as an institution, I think is undervalued and underappreciated. It's understood. Yeah, it's not zero.

**PETER LEVINE:** So, you're looking at this now from a perspective of distance from both the

Department and Capitol Hill, you still come down on the side of too much micromanagement? We could use a little bit more understanding of that from the Congress?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I do. I do. But I also think it can be overstated, and some of it is necessary and healthy. I'm not one of those that believes that the solution and that the healthy outcome of that the relationship would be for Congress and the committees and the oversight mechanisms essentially to pare back to the point that it gives the Department free reign. There's a healthy and, I think, a very productive role for the Congress to play when moderated and when filtered.

**PETER LEVINE:** This might be a good place to turn back to Goldwater-Nichols, which you mentioned earlier. The statute that was passed over DOD objections. And sometimes we hear the lesson learned is that DOD will never be interested in true reform, and the only way you can get anything done is to go to Congress. That may or may not be true. Obviously, DOD opposes plenty of things that they should oppose. There are plenty of other lessons that could be learned from Goldwater-Nichols. What do you look back to? I think that it really is a seminal piece of legislation. What do you look back to as the key lessons, either in terms of policy or in terms of process of developing policy, we can take from that?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Well, I think you touched on one of them. There is some truth to, whether it should be this way or not I think it's just the reality, that there's a degree of resistance—institutional, bureaucratic, call it what you will—that is almost impossible to overcome for an institution like the Department of Defense to reform itself on fundamental reforms. And so, I don't think theoretically there's nothing stopping it, but in a practical sense, that may be the case. Looking at it through the lens of the Congress particularly now we can talk about what transpired years of efforts of reform by the Congress on various aspects of the

Department. I think what's not well understood that much anymore is Goldwater-Nichols was a multi-year process. It began with determination by certain key members to look at a variety of different things. It accelerated, but it really fermented over a course of almost four years. The culmination of the act that we know of, the 1996 act, really began earlier than that. You can cite Grenada. You can cite Beirut. You can cite a lot of seminal events that, sort of, gave momentum to it. You had the Packard Commission. There was a whole variety of different animating factors and events that culminated, ultimately. But, that fermentation process, I think, was ultimately what made this one of the more significant; and it has withstood the test of time. That's not to mean it was perfect. It continued to be refined and changed over a decade, really. But fundamentally, if you look at the structural changes that emerged from that, they have withstood the test of time. And I think that's a tribute to the commitment and the effort and the patience, quite honestly, to let it evolve for a period of time as opposed to dropping a bill, ramming it through.

**PETER LEVINE:** So, I would also say there was a lot of patience in the implementation phase after 1986, sticking with it, and sticking with it, and sticking with it, and continuing to drill the point home that this was important and staying on message. Is that something that you saw? You were obviously in a position of observing that up close.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I agree with that largely because by the time it passed the, well that whole process yielded strong bipartisan and fairly broad-based support for its objectives. You could argue on some of the particulars, et cetera; but I think as a fundamental initiative it enjoyed that kind of support, which meant it had legs. It had longevity associated with it. Some of the more contentious aspects, talking about the perfecting process, let's talk about Title IV, which in your time as P&R you're probably very familiar with, the joint duty and the joint

education. All strongly resisted; but those that took this on understood the need to force the Department, force the changing culture and the institutional changes, even though they acknowledged up front that this is probably not correct. And it's an instance where the Congress, I think, went over the line in terms of the road at regulation, not a set of legal principles as you normally do precisely for that reason. But then understood, and it was open to the refinement process that continued for a long, long time; and some of those issues, the Department institutionally, you know, fought back and litigated for a long, long time.

**PETER LEVINE:** Another thing I would note about Goldwater-Nichols or I've seen in Goldwater-Nichols. I was not there yet. I was on Capitol Hill. I was not on the Armed Services staff yet. So, I was not a first-hand participant as you were; but it is a piece of legislation that is very much coherent within itself and on message within itself. We pass NDAA's every year. You've been involved in as many of them as I have, which is more than either of us want to remember, which have a grab bag of provisions. And sometimes even provisions that seem contradictory or inconsistent with each other. We pass another NDAA the next year with another set of provisions going in a whole bunch of different directions. Goldwater-Nichols, as you indicated, it has this core message of jointness, and it starts with the idea of the ability to perform joint operations. But then it steps back from there and says, well, what do we need to do to enable that? So, the joint duty requirements, you ask, why do we have personnel-related requirements in a statute that's about operations? It's because we step back from that and say, "What's a key enabler? What do we do to change the culture to work with that?" Is that a product, do you think, also of the long period of time, the long gestation period of time, as I said, so that Congress was able to focus in a concentrated way of and get itself on message? Is that something that would be more helpful in other types of legislation?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I think it would even though increasingly it's more rare or difficult to see that kind of comprehensive approach. But you go back and talk to the participants in the histories. It didn't start out that way. I mean, there were discrete initiatives. You know, I think that the one that had the most, I guess, political interest had to do with sorting through the relative authorities and powers of military service chiefs and operational commanders. And you had still the push from the Beirut experience and the Grenada experience and those kinds of operational events. But with time, it was understood that if you're seriously going to comprehensively try to drive the institution in a particular direction in terms of living up to the ideal of joint operations, joint development and across the board, you had to address all these other issues. Mere organizational changes were not going to be enough or at least would be not as successful.

**PETER LEVINE:** Let me move you forward. After you left the Department, you came to industry, and I'd like to ask you the same question about a change of perspective. Were there things you learned in industry that you wish you'd known when you were in the Department or on Capitol Hill?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Yes, less so, I suppose. In many respects it's the same refrain, the lack and of depth of understanding of the impact that certain behaviors, certain requirements, et cetera has on that element of, sort of, the enterprise. In the same fashion, I think that part of the reason that industry turned to people like us was even though their entire business is entirely dependent on understanding, with great depth and intimacy, it's singular customer—the government—the gap of knowledge and largely on understanding, not just the mechanics. I think they have that down pat, but it's what lies beyond that and the understanding of why, the decision making. So, the temptation to resort to very quick analysis of, well, this decision was

made or this resource decision or this programmatic decision was made because they like this company or they like this individual and et cetera, very superficial, very simplistic. In reality, it's rarely that simple. That's rarely the case. So that I think is a challenge, just the institutional, cultural differences. And even though I think there is an appreciation for the, sort of, the downstream effects of fiscal decisions and programmatic decisions, it's this tension of the fact that at the end of the day, our defense industry is a business and responds to a variety of different audiences—investors and Wall Street and shareholders. And yes, it's a customer, but that balancing act is very difficult, and that's I think poorly appreciated on the government side.

**PETER LEVINE:** Let me turn to your service when you were in the Department. You worked for Secretary Gates, and you talked about the misunderstanding between, the lack of understanding between Congress and the Department. I would have said that in the years that I've seen the relationship between DOD and Capitol Hill that Secretary Gates probably had the best relationship with the Congress of any Secretary I've seen. I don't know if you agree with that, but I wonder whether having seen that from the inside. He appeared to have a different perception of his own relationship with Congress as he wrote it over in his book. But having seen that from the inside, do you have thoughts on what senior DOD leaders could do to improve relations with Congress? How you go about that?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I do, very strong thoughts. I wouldn't disagree with your opening observation. But I find it ironic, and you alluded to it, because sort of the unvarnished opinion and perspective of Bob Gates is quite harsh on that. But I give him great credit in understanding the necessity, in many respects the inevitability, and the fact, that in order for him to achieve what he was seeking to achieve in a variety of different areas, it was necessary for him to invest the personal effort, energy, relationship building, maintenance, pick your term, to first cultivate



and then sustain those kinds of relationships. Your former boss, Carl Levin, he and Gates, you probably would have never straight up thought they would have a harmonious relationship. But they actually did. You know, philosophically, fairly different, sort of, career-wise fairly different, but I think they found themselves at a crossroads in time in terms of the positions they held the interest, some of the issues at hand. Same goes with John McCain, very difficult individual. We had our own issues at times but, and on down the line, he understood it. It wasn't something that needed a lot of convincing and this, I think, was a virtue of the fact that by that time he had had such a lengthy prior history, you know, and his own bumps in the road, you know, Iran Contra and things that sort of sear your set of experience, a lot of scar tissue, but it led to just a straight up understanding, intellectually and otherwise, that in order to be successful at that level, particularly at that time, remember, I mean, he came into the job at a point of a lot of political fracture. President Bush was strongly repudiated politically. He lost the House, you know, lost the Congress. Don Rumsfeld was fired as a result. You know, so he came in and the environment shaped that urgency, I suppose, and paid attention to that. So, to answer your question, every circumstance is different, the dynamics are different, but I think the fundamentals are the same. Whatever you may think about the Congress, it's not going away. You can't ignore it. I don't know that you can apply this universally across the entirety of government, but for the Department of Defense, it is just a fixed variable that you have to incorporate.

**PETER LEVINE:** Secretary Gates was able to cancel several major weapon systems and shut down one major command and a number of other organizations. That's something that very few, if any, Secretaries of Defense have managed to do. Do you have any thoughts as to why he was able to succeed in that area where others failed?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Well, in some respects, it's a continuation of what I alluded to. There's the internal dimension to that we can talk about, if you want. And that is the external, and external includes the White House as well. But as he mapped out a strategy and, sort of, the ambition of what he wanted to accomplish, it included a recognition that maybe you can drive all this to the internal processes and incorporate it into a budget proposal, et cetera, but then it goes into the Congress and, you know, Congress will do what Congress is supposed to do and work its will. But he and I, sort of, recognize why expend all that effort if, essentially, you're going to get 50% of that outcome, if you're lucky, left to its own devices. So, he incorporated none of the decision making, but early went to some of the key stakeholders, committee chairs, rankings, et cetera, and brought them in. Here's what I'm trying to do. Here's why. You may agree or disagree on some of the particulars, but I invite you to engage me, et cetera. And while there wasn't a lot of change that resulted of that, there were some modifications on the margin, but it made a difference.

**PETER LEVINE:** I interviewed Bob Work earlier this summer, and he said that the Secretary of Defense has to be ruthless to be effective. And he named Secretary Gates as the most effective Secretary he'd seen and said that some of the other Secretaries he worked for would have been much more successful if they'd been willing to fire people. What's your reaction to that?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I think there's some truth to it. That that's a pretty harsh characterization of it. But there is some truth to it.

**PETER LEVINE:** You talked about the internal dimensions of being able to get through, not the external stakeholders, but get through the building a major change like the one that

Secretary Gates was able to drive through. Beyond ruthlessness, what kinds of characteristics and what kinds of effort did that take to get that done within the building?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** First is personal commitment. In other words, many prior efforts and, sort of, the standard playbook that the Department uses for such reviews—whether it's programmatic, organizational, or whatever, it can even be chartered by the Secretary of Defense—but you put a team together, you put a task force together, whatever the mechanism is, you give them a general sense of direction: here's what you're expecting. And then they go off and do it, and they bring you back a product. He recognized that that would yield an outcome but it would not yield ambition, number one, that he felt was necessary. So, he made this a very focused and personal initiative. He kept it within the immediate Office of the Secretary. He put me in the front of a lot of it. And it was very controversial. It's very unconventional, and it's not a formula that you can replicate. You know, it's not something that you would want to say this is the normal way you're going to run the Department. It was a very unique, very focused initiative. Secondly, he ensured that the key stakeholders—the service chiefs, the service secretaries—had a role, had transparency and visibility even though at the end of the day, there was a lot of disagreement. The other thing just to put all the cards on the table is remember when this happened. It happened in between transitions of government. So, you basically had somewhat open field running in terms of the normal institutional players who were also going through transition, et cetera. That wasn't by design, that was just a statement of fact. And thirdly, you mentioned the decision to disestablish certain organizations. He did something fairly unconventional. He, sort of, front loaded that. Even though the way it was structured, there was still an ability to do the analysis and essentially come back and move and reshape it. But he mandated, and I'll explain why, the disestablishment of three organizational entities: a

defense agency, an OSD secretariat, and a combatant command. And his intent behind that was, I mean, the macro of all this, was to essentially harvest cost savings, particularly in the out years, that could be redirected and basically backfill some of the reductions that he knew were coming by the new Obama administration. That was the grand bargain that he tried to strike with the Services and the organization.

**PETER LEVINE:** You mentioned that he was running this out of his own office, and obviously, you played an important role in that effort. And I'd like to relate that over to current issues or subsequent issues about management of the Department of Defense, particularly positions of DCMO, Chief Management Officer. And the question is to whether significant management issues can be delegated and, sort of, assigned to somebody else. I would have said I held the position. I was DCMO briefly. I would have said to the extent that I was successful, it was because, not because of my position, not because of any authorities Congress gave me, but, but because of my relationship with the Secretary and Deputy Secretary and because other people in the building understood that I had that relationship. Congress has a great desire to reorganize the Department at all times. Can you talk about the effectiveness of a management organization created by Congress? You can talk about it in the context of the CMO or DCMO or what you think it would take for that to be successful. What's your view on that?

I think you've partly answered the question. My view, my experience and it's just that, Peter. I know it's a topic that deserves a lot of attention and discussion because it's a problem still in search of a solution. But I think the harsh reality is, it's so extraordinarily difficult to expect that, particularly when it begins as an externally imposed solution, which the whole idea of a DCMO structure was. And the Department resisted, it, ignored, it starved it, and I was part of that for some time. Ultimately grudgingly agreed, "Ok, we'll work with this." And Congress

kept coming back and sort of raising the ante, we'll elevate it and the precedents level, et cetera. And make sure the Department understands "We really mean that this person needs to be respected." And, I think you put your finger on it. You can do that. And that is I'm not saying it's inconsequential, but it pales in comparison to that fundamental understanding that whoever it is, is empowered by the person at the top. I mean, Title 10 makes it very clear, authority, direction and control comes from a singular individual: The Secretary of Defense. Everything else is secondary. And I think that's one of the challenges, particularly as you look at the OSD structure and the service is sort of playing this as well. Is those power relationships, those authority relationships are complex, they're complicated, they're very dynamic, they're driven by personalities. But at the core is this question of there's undisputable truth, that at the end of the day, the Secretary of Defense holds that singular statutory responsibility and authority. Where it gets fuzzier and then contentious is as it devolves down several layers. So, when you inject another layer or another actor in that structure, it's dynamic, it's fluid. That's what my view was. At the end of the day, that's the classic role of the Deputy. And yes, the Deputy was designated CMO, but it's not enough just to have that title or appended to the charter. A Deputy has to embrace it. A Deputy has to understand it has to live it operationally. You can create support structures like, Business Transformation Agencies, whatever it is. But at the core is, it's not just the day-to-day grinding through the administrative processes. It's the ability and the willingness and the drive to take on hard issues; hard, difficult management issues, which the Department I think has struggled to do.

**PETER LEVINE:** I always admired Gordon England and enjoyed working with him. Can you talk about how Secretary Gates and Secretary England divided responsibilities, and what thoughts you have as to how as a Secretary works best with the Deputy Secretary or vice versa?

**ROBERT RANGEL**: Sure. I would agree with you. I enjoyed working with Gordon England. I respected as I got to know, when I came over it the wasn't called chief of staff, but the equivalent position for Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, was still there, but shortly thereafter he was migrating out. And it was interesting, my initial perception of Gordon. I'd known him as Secretary of the Navy. Then, he went over to the Department of Homeland Security, and then either he fled or was convinced to come back. I wasn't sure how he'd do. I mean, you know, his history was industry executive, Secretary of the Navy. Not sure if he had sort of the experiences to enable you to all of a sudden be basically a master integrator and serve to sort of tame all the lions and keep the three-ring circus operating harmoniously, et cetera. But, Rumsfeld had a fairly simplistic, but I thought effective method that he used. He basically had a quadrant that he sat down usually with Wolfowitz, but I remember that meeting with England where they basically said, "Here's our division of labor. Here's where I have primary lead. Here's where you have primary lead. Here's where we overlap." And that was refined, et cetera, but that was very useful. Rather simple, but very useful. Fast forward to Rumsfeld departs, Gates comes in. Part of what made England so valuable was the mandate for the incoming Secretary from the President. Let's remember why that transition took place. We were in two hot wars. Iraq was going badly. Politically, the perception was that large measure was why Republicans lost badly at the polls. New secretary mandate was, "Fix the war." And so, he was very explicit in that respect, "I'm here to do the President's bidding in terms of getting arms around the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, et cetera. And that's where I'm going to concentrate most of my effort, even though I have interest and obligations across the board. But that's where the bulk of his emphasis. And that meant turning to Gordon England saying, "You're going to run the Department. And not only did he make that clear to him, he made that clear to the Department.

Not that Gordon was not empowered, but that sort of settled the issue. And the usual end-runs and whining and so forth. It didn't go away, but it had gotten mostly filtered out. It didn't go anywhere.

**PETER LEVINE:** Yeah, let me turn back to some ancient history. I don't know if you even remember, but one of the issues that you and I tangled with each other on, when we were much younger, was an effort that I was staffing on the Senate side to improve the Department's management of contract services. And the issue in particular was cutting DOD funds in anticipation of improved performance of service contracting. I raise that because of the question of efficiency initiatives and the relationship of efficiencies to saving money. And it seems to me that I've learned a lot about that relationship since then, but I suspect that you may have known more than I did then, I'll give you credit for that. But, that you probably have, too. And you mentioned Secretary Gates frontloading some things to get savings. But efficiencies, initiatives often, as in BRAC, cost money up front rather than saving money up front. Can you talk about the relationship between actually saving money and improving management and whether we should be looking to management improvements as a source of some huge amount of money that's going to save the Department of Defense?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Complicated, lengthy topic. But responding the way you framed it, I think the honest answer is yes. It's, not an unfair proposition to essentially look to management reforms to yield cost savings. Where it gets, in some respects, perverted or abused is when that's the sole driver or the principal driver. Because, to your point, the historical experience, it rarely yields it or certainly not in the short term. Which, you see it so many times. I mean, the Congress is horrible at this. And you and I are probably somewhat guilty of...

**PETER LEVINE:** At some point in my time.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Yeah, of resorting to these kinds of tricks of you need to find some sort of offset, et cetera. And so, you put in some provision that CBO or somebody validates as yielding X in the near term. But the reality is it somewhat depends on execution. So, to your point, the efficiencies effort, in some respects, was guilty of that, even though it didn't set a target, necessarily. And it was not just management reforms, as I think you acknowledge, there's a lot of program cancellation and a variety of different initiatives. But I would subscribe, I think what the premise of your question is that it's a perilous proposition to essentially look to management reforms to automatically yield or even successfully yield. And that shouldn't be the prime purpose, because quite honestly, there are so many other aspects that should drive management reforms in terms of just speed of decision, speed of action. And what are the challenges that a department or an institution as large as the Department faces? It's expensive, it's cumbersome. Some would say even wasteful. But that's just a one dimension of it. And at the core, what's its mission? What is impeding the ability to deliver for the country, the core mission? It's not just the cost, even though I don't want to downplay that, that's important.

**PETER LEVINE:** I asked you earlier about the perspective you gained from going to private industry. I want to ask a related kind of question. We're often told the Department should hire people from the private sector because it needs the management experience that only private sector managers have. Some appointees from the private sector have been very successful. Others have struggled to figure out what the Department of Defense is and how it works. Do you have any thoughts as to the appropriate role of private experience and senior leadership of the Department?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I think you the way you frame the question is charitable because the record sort of disproves the proposition. But like everything else, there's no absolutes here.



**PETER LEVINE:** Gordon would be a case.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Gordon England would be a case. But I would argue that his private sector experience grounded him. But it was his time and he was also a unique individual. We can, we can cite singular examples of successful exercises or instances like that, just like we can cite disastrous ones. But as a fundamental proposition, there is value in that private sector experience, but is not grounded or tempered or joined with an understanding of the culture, the environment. Government is political, not in a big “P” partisan but in a small “p.” There’s so many factors and dynamics that shape and drive behavior and et cetera, and the private sector experience brings new tool kits, tool sets that you can bring, and practices and so forth. They have to leaven them and mix them in a productive fashion with a healthy understanding of the culture of the institution and what animates government.

**PETER LEVINE:** Let me ask you a related question. I interviewed David Walker earlier this summer, former Comptroller General, and he has a strong view on whatever success or position we have to the Chief Management Officer. He had the same view he had when the DCMO was first created 20 years ago, which is that we should have somebody in that position who not only has significant management experience but is a term appointment; term appointment for five years. So, it would be somebody who would cross over from one administration to the next. You're, talked about the way the Department works internally, and the way people relate to each other within the Department. What would be your take on the likelihood of somebody being successful in a term appointment in the Department across administrations at the political level?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I guess I'm of mixed views. Intellectually, I mean, in a theoretical sense, I can understand David Walker's point. I know he's been making this, and of course, that's his

experience on GAO. But on the other side of the equation, it runs counter and it sort of is a tension with the question of that close affinity with the leadership of the Department. So, I'm not sure how you balance that. On the plus side, the notion that this individual is not going to disappear with the end of an administration, et cetera, gives them some added degree of bureaucratic pull, I suppose. My instinct is that that gets outweighed by the disconnect, if you will. And, at the end of the day, it goes back to the core principle. I think fundamentally, if you want somebody that's going to drive administrative processes, I'm not sure it makes that much of a difference. If you want somebody that's going to be in a position to essentially affect fundamental, not just change, but sort of drive decisions and so forth, they need to be perceived to have real influence, if not authority over resources, over personnel, over those key ingredients that at the end of the day matter, in terms of bureaucratic, power and authority. And a term appointment, I don't think addresses that.

**PETER LEVINE:** I've taken the view that the Chief Management Officer or DCMO, the position that I was in, is always playing on somebody else's turf. There's no issue that is a CMO or DCMO you own that you're not, if it's an acquisition policy, you want an effect, an acquisition process or a human resources process or system or a financial, there's some other owner of that process in the Department. Some other owner of the resource, some other owner of the personnel. And to me, that means that that person has to be able to work well with others and has to be aligned with the senior leadership of the Department in order to be effective. I'm guessing you agree with that.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I agree wholeheartedly. I mean, I would take it further as well. Two things, let me sneak in an ancillary issue which is the reason that those structural complications face a DCMO or anybody sort of trying to play within that structure is organizational. But you

and I have partaken in this: Congress over decades has sort of built the structure. You open up Title 10 and there are statutory charters for all the undersecretaries, all the assistant secretaries, and they get added, they get expanded. And those become impermeable walls in many respects, with only one entity being able to essentially drive beyond it. And I faced that right out of the box when I came into the Department, in terms of trying to affect certain outcomes on discrete issues, et cetera. And maybe it took a third conversation, but pretty soon they were reaching for either the DOD Directive, but the DOD grounded on the Title 10 provisions such and such and such as to why the USD Comptroller did this or the PNR didn't play this game, but others did. So, there's a consequence for that, where you essentially just add another layer without addressing the underlying superstructure that's been created legally and administratively.

**PETER LEVINE:** Yeah, I think there are other reasons for the Department's structure. It's so big. It requires pillars in a sense, and I guess the biggest pillars would not be the undersecretaries, but the services. And I wonder...

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I don't disagree with that, but let me just put an information point. I'm not convinced however, that that needs to be enshrined in Title 10.

**PETER LEVINE:** That's fair.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** To the degree that it does. I don't think it's understood even though I've attempted to have this conversation with my former colleagues, the degree to which this has an impact on the internal dynamics of the Department, as opposed to administrative structures that the Department itself can sort of adjust and modify as needed.

**PETER LEVINE:** Yeah, I agree with you on that. I wanted to turn to the relationship with the services. You saw this from the OSD side, not from the service side, as did I, but I would say

that for the most part, OSD as a whole is in the business of setting policy and overseeing policy, but it doesn't actually run anything. The services run the systems, they run the processes, they run the organization. What do you see as the challenge of being in OSD and trying to manage a department with such strong and discrete subunits as the services are, who actually run the resource and make the day to day decisions. I know it's a challenge, but do you have any words on how to overcome that challenge and how to work with within that challenge?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** It's an extraordinary challenge. We've seen it in various manifestations over the years. And, I wish I had a solution for it. Some of the more successful, I suppose, instances of managing that dynamic and the integration really of the sort of the DOD as an enterprise. You trace back to leadership and individuals, as trite as that sounds. You can tinker; Goldwater Nichols did some of that, and over the years, Congress has tried to do some of that, particularly on the acquisition side. But at the core, that's why who you pick. I mean, I remember early Rumsfeld, he saw sort of this corporate board team and spent a lot of effort and he'd come up and I'm sure he talked to the Senate like he'd talk to the House, his vision and this and that; it didn't work. Just the centrifugal force of the institutional force just creates such and such barriers. But there's no substitute for having somebody at the helm that understands that role. Part of it is communication as well. It's very easy, you get into the Department, the daily challenge is what comes at you fast and furious drives you in a particular direction. One of the things I tried to do in that position that I had was just to push and drive routine interaction, communication to synchronize as much as possible. It sounds simplistic, but it matters and it's remarkable how little of that actually happens, both retrospectively, and as I understand, things evolve. I understand why, and that doesn't speak to the civ-mil challenge, right?

**PETER LEVINE:** I was going to ask you that.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Because you can have a synchronized civilian team, and have a great relationship, and so everybody's growing in the same direction in terms of the OSD team and the civilian secretary in the service. But that dynamic is preexisted, it continues to be highly complex, fluid, and I'm not sure it's particularly healthy, in my opinion.

**PETER LEVINE:** The civ-mil relationship in the services?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Maybe that's too harsh. That is too harsh. It's not unhealthy, let me put it that way. But it's an extraordinary challenge and I don't see that it's really moved. I mean, the joint operations, acquisition has moved, et cetera, but I don't know that anybody would objectively look at just a snapshot of where things stand today in 2023 and say it's dramatically improved from where it was 20, 30 years ago.

**PETER LEVINE:** Yeah. I would say it sort of seems to go in waves though. It's not that it's continually declining. It's that, various factors in influence. I would have said, the strength of the civilian leadership, discontinuities in office, changes in administration. All sorts of factors. I was just reading about Secretary Cheney when he came in. And one of the first things he did was to slap down the then Chief of Staff of the Air Force.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Yeah, I remember vividly.

**PETER LEVINE:** Yeah. And, I imagine that sends a message and probably changes the relationship at least for a period of time or changes that balance if it's done right. But I don't know that anything can change in the long term, the stress will continue to be there. I don't know, do you have that same view or I think, are there things that could be done to change that relationship for the better?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I agree with your assessment of it. Yes, there are things that can be done. I mean, you can sort of go back to the fundamentals, look at the relative authorities and so forth. But I think clarity of the relative roles, in some respect, more assertiveness on the part of the civilian secretaries. You look at their authorities, they're quite remarkable. I don't think it's a lack of authority. But they step in, they're significantly disadvantaged in terms of the support resources that are available. They inherit a set of precedents and practices that are extraordinarily well-established and ingrained. And to move that five degrees, X degrees, et cetera, takes a tremendous amount of acumen and energy. But I think that's largely where part of the solution is. We've seen some do that and some of it just choose to do it selectively in certain areas. But personnel, I mean, something near and dear to your heart, the military personnel process, in particular, the general officer process is hugely consequential, et cetera, always a source of a lot of friction. But it matters. And those service secretaries that assert themselves, I think put themselves in a different place.

**PETER LEVINE:** Some let that process just run on its own and don't stop it at all.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** They just rubber stamp it, even though at the end of the day, ostensibly, it's their recommendation that goes forward.

**PETER LEVINE:** Let me ask you about one more set of relationships and then I'll give you the chance for the last word. But the last set of relationships I actually would like to ask you about is the White House and National Security Council. DOD doesn't operate in an environment in isolation. Even within the administration, there's always an issue of others who want to be in the Department's business, or the Department wanted to be in another's business, depending on your point of view. Do you have views as to what brings about a more successful or a less successful relationship with the White House and the National Security Council? Is

that something that the Department can control or is it just at the mercy of the administration? And if you're an administration that wants to micromanage that you can be as much a victim of that as a victim of Congress. What's your take on that?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** I'd say it's neither of those poles, you know. I think the answer, like a lot of these things, is somewhat in the middle. First, let's recognize that the Department has certainly a unique arrangement in that its principal actor and the interagency is not the deputy, but historically, it's been the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. There's a lot of benefits for that, et cetera. But in some respects, if not watched, if not managed, that can put the Department on its back foot. It's also one of those features, I suppose, that, coming from the Hill sort of understood it in an academic sense, but didn't appreciate the significance of it, largely because a lot of it is policy formulation. And particularly in a period where the United States was engaged operationally abroad, very dynamic and critically important. Like a lot of these things, it matters how the incumbent or the existing Secretary chooses to view that. Rumsfeld was famously combative to the point of it becoming counterproductive as time went on. Gates was a master at it. He was the Deputy National Security Advisor for several presidents. He knew that system inside and out. He also had preexisting relationships with Steve Hadley and Condi Rice. So, there were a set of conditions there that really helped him manage that. But even then, a lot of skirmishes, but it was an investment of time, effort, and bureaucratic energy to ensure that that balance was productive. I worry that other instances we've seen other teams of actors and that the trend line has been for an increasingly more assertive, not necessarily even the principals, but the National Security staff sort of the entities reaching down into the Department. I think there's a civ-mil dimension to this in terms of, this is one of the Goldwater Nicholls and making the Chairman the principal military adviser to the president and how that's

been interpreted over the years by the Joint Staff as granting them an independent channel. So it's complicated, a lot of roles and a lot of relationships here. But in the scheme of things, how important is that to a secretary and how much effort and energy are they willing to invest, to manage it and maintain it, I think is a critical question that they should answer.

**PETER LEVINE:** Let me just let you have the final word here. If you were going to give some advice to senior officials coming into the Department today or the beginning of the next administration, what would be the first thing you'd tell them, or the first few things you'd tell them?

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Well, I'm going to characterize that as senior officials, meaning political appointees. It doesn't necessarily have to be for the Department; there's military and career, don't mean to exclude that. But I'll frame it that way. And under a system, most of the senior officials, civilian officials are obviously political appointees. Nothing I haven't said before, mostly privately, but it's important for the Department, this Department to... Why are you there? Why do you choose to take on these responsibilities? You're not going to the Department of Interior. I don't mean to disparage anybody, but there's a uniqueness, there's a consequence. There's a fundamental purpose to what the Department does, and you can apply that to the State Department and apply that to a lot of elements of government. But the uniqueness, you should be there, your purpose for being there fundamentally should be somewhat related because it's going to be an extraordinarily challenging, sometimes frustrating, et cetera. What animates you, what drives you to keep at it and keep you motivated, keep you focused, keep you energized. At the core that has to burn bright in you. And remind yourself of that. Six months in, you know, your inbox is overflowing, and people are screaming at you, and the Hill wants you to come testify, and whatever. Why are you there? And understand that there's multiple audiences, there



are external audiences, but you also sit at the pinnacle of these mass structures that you're responsible for. And I've seen too many people, I don't think with malice necessarily, but just succumb to the challenge of getting disconnected from that. The role of a politico in the Department of Defense is unique. I haven't really seen it defined in any one place, but it has multiple dimensions to it. Part of it is to understand that you're not there just to keep the trains running on time. If you do that, that's great. You deserve a pat on the back. But you're there for some other purpose. Sometimes it's policy, sometimes it's political, small p. There's an obligation also to understand part of it is to serve as a filter and a buffer for a very assertive external set of dynamics, particularly this day and age. I mean, the Department of Defense has been the punching bag for public discourse forever, before you and I arrived on the scene. You don't have to go to Washington, you can just go to the movies and see it. It's always the bad guy. It's inefficient, it's waste, fraud and abuse, et cetera. Managing that, insulating hardworking individuals and institutions that care about what they do is an important part of the role that they play. And it's extremely hard to take the time and invest some slice of your time and your management energy to do all that. But most political appointees are not there for a long time. I hope this has changed, but when I looked it up when I was in, it was like 18 months, you know, just the attrition and the turnover, which means you've got to sprint for a period of time. Don't get satisfied, don't get complacent. At the beginning, you have to understand you're not going to be here necessarily for a maximum four years. Make it worthwhile because it matters.

**PETER LEVINE:** Can't ask for a better conclusion than that. Thank you, Robert.

**ROBERT RANGEL:** Well, thank you, Peter.