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Sources of Weapon Systems Innovation in the Department of Defense: The role of research and development, 1945-2000

Thomas C Lassman, Center of Military History

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Since the end of World War II, civilian and military policymakers have sought to understand and improve the institutional processes involved in the development of modern weapons systems. The persistent calls for institutional, managerial, and organizational reform suggest that such tasks have not always been easy nor clearly defined. This study is intended to bring some historical clarity to that problem by identifying and examining the patterns of organizational and institutional change that guided in-house weapons research and development (R&D) over the course of the past six decades. Specifically, it details the history of weapons R&D in the major laboratories owned and operated by the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force between 1945 and 2000. At the same time, the monograph complements a larger multivolume historical effort that is currently analyzing the policies, procedures, and institutions that guided the development, production, and procurement of major weapon systems during the same period. Together they constitute the on-going Defense Acquisition History Project. The Department of Defense spends hundreds of billions of dollars every year to keep U.S. forces equipped with state-of-the-art weapon systems. Research and development is an essential component of this process. It is the foundation upon which all weapon systems are built once requirements have been set. Although they outsourced a significant share of their research requirements during the Cold War, the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force also maintained extensive in-house R&D establishments whose laboratories turned out many products, ranging from fundamental knowledge in physics, chemistry, and other scientific disciplines to complete prototype weapon systems. What set the services apart from one another, however, was the extent to which they managed and organized their respective R&D programs. In the Army, research, development, and production proceeded alongside one another in the manufacturing arsenals that had been in continuous operation since the beginning of the nineteenth century, despite actions taken by some Army leaders to separate these functions organizationally as a necessary prerequisite to the development of technologically advanced weapon systems. The Navy, by contrast, maintained a sharper organizational division of labor between R&D and production. Established in 1923, the Naval Research Laboratory operated independently of the Navy’s material bureaus, where, like the Army’s arsenals, technological innovation had historically depended on the close coordination of research, development, and production. Created in 1947, the Air Force relied more heavily than the Army and the Navy on the private sector for new knowledge and skills. But it also operated an extensive network of in-house laboratories, the management and organization of which periodically shifted between the extremes of independence from and subordination to the Air Force’s production and procurement functions. Throughout all three services, a disjunction sometimes existed between the formulation of R&D policies at the management level and the implementation of those policies in the laboratory. These relationships and other patterns of organizational change are highlighted in the study and should help DoD acquisition managers to understand the current acquisition environment and successfully navigate their way through it as they seek to make informed decisions about future weapons development across an increasingly broad spectrum of activities.

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