

F. Whitten Peters

August 3, 1999–the present



F Whitten Peters was born on August 20, 1946, in Omaha, Nebraska. Following service in the Navy in World War II, Peters' father decided to reestablish his school-building architectural business in a northern "lake" suburb of Chicago, Illinois. There young Peters grew up and attended two local public schools, Lake Bluff Elementary School and Lake Forest High School. His father died when he was thirteen. Peters earned a Harvard Club of Chicago scholarship, and with the money earned at odd jobs he was able to matriculate and thrive at that institution. After graduating magna cum laude with a bachelor of arts degree in government and economics from Harvard University in 1968, he followed his father's example by joining the Navy as a Reserve officer in January 1969 and graduated as a distinguished graduate and company commander the following June. He married Mary Gores on January 2, 1969. They have three daughters.

His computer program training at Harvard aided his selection to the Atlantic Fleet Intelligence Center in Norfolk, Virginia, where he ran the systems and programming division of the computer center. Over the next three years, Peters received orders for Vietnam. These orders were subsequently canceled because his job in nuclear targeting and satellite reconnaissance prohibited assignment to a war zone and travel to Cold War adversarial countries for ten years following the Norfolk assignment. While he was at the Norfolk intelligence center, his unit received a meritorious citation for discovering Russian-built submarine pens in Cuba. In February 1972 he was released by the Navy and, the next day, was hired back as a civilian employee to complete a project. In August 1972 he earned a Frank Knox Traveling Fellowship from Harvard University to attend the London School of Economics, where the following year he earned a master of arts with distinction in economics. Believing in the Kennedy ideal and challenge of public service, Peters thought that the study of law would provide opportunities for such a career, so he entered Harvard Law School, where for two years he served as president of the Harvard Law Review and graduated magna cum laude with a doctor of laws degree in 1976.

Following law school, he clerked for several judges in the District of Columbia, including Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr. As the costs of raising a family and the comparative salaries of private law practice rose above the relatively stagnant state of public remuneration, Peters opted for the private sector. He joined the law firm of Williams & Connolly in

Washington, D.C., as an associate in 1978; he became a partner in 1984 and remained until 1995. During that time, he served also as an adjunct lecturer at Columbus School of Law, Catholic University of America, teaching government contract law; and he taught advanced criminal procedure at Georgetown University Law Center. Peters also served as a member of the Department of Defense (DOD) Advisory Committee on Streamlining and Codifying Acquisition Law, and as the chair of the Rules of Professional Responsibility Review Committee at the District of Columbia Bar.

In 1995 Peters became principal deputy general counsel for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, where he worked on counterterrorism issues, special operations matters, cyber warfare, and information operations issues. He also worked on such matters as the legal implication of the Olympics, several political conventions, and President Clinton's 1996 inauguration activities. The following year he served as government representative on a Defense Science Board study of vertical merger policy. Peters wrote widely and spoke extensively on acquisition reform, legal ethics, and criminal law topics. He was invited by Secretary of Defense William Cohen to serve as undersecretary of the Air Force. On November 13, 1997, he was sworn into that office and served as acting secretary of the Air Force when Secretary Sheila Widnall resigned. For nineteen months he wore those two hats, surpassing by many months the record of his closest rival for longest tenure as acting secretary. The single most pressing issue at the moment he assumed office as the acting secretary was the structure of depots—politically a highly charged matter that had to be handled delicately. During his stint with the DOD, Peters had worked on other politically sensitive issues, such as the plane crash that killed Secretary of Commerce Ronald Brown, the insubordination case of Kelly Flinn, and the Air Force's shooting down of two U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopters in Iraq. As a result, he and Chief of Staff Gen. Michael Ryan agreed on the need to establish "a better Public Affairs early warning network," which became the "PAZ" function of the Public Affairs Office.

Following the depot problems both Secretary Peters and General Ryan began to focus on other matters. To address the operations tempo, pay, and retirement issues, both men supported the Expeditionary Air Force concept in August 1998. A six-month vacancy in the position of assistant secretary for acquisition also demanded Peters' time and attention.

On July 30, 1999, Peters was confirmed as Secretary of the Air Force and sworn in on August 3. In addition to supervising the training and equipping of Air Force personnel and being responsible for the service's nearly \$70 billion budget, Peters had to oversee one of the largest drawdowns in the history of the Air Force. Proud of the implications of air power's victory in Kosovo, he nevertheless had to endure the tortuous political struggles to continue funding the production of the F-22 and tenaciously advocated the need to retain technological air superiority. Secretary Peters took steps to make an assignment in Washington, D.C., much more appealing for the best and brightest Air Force majors and lieutenant colonels, rather than a "burnout-pit" to which they never hoped to return. He wanted the Air Force to make a much

more persuasive case to Congress in support of its budget and make a better argument for modernization. Being asked to do so much with such inadequate funds remained a continuing source of frustration for Peters and the Air Force.