

Dr. Jacques “Jack” Gansler  
An Appreciation

On December 4, our community lost a true giant—Jack Gansler. For more than four decades in academia, government and private industry, Jack was laser-focused on finding new and better ways to help the Department of Defense function more efficiently and dynamically, serve our troops and national security needs more effectively, and engage with the broadest possible industrial base more meaningfully. He was, in short, dedicated always to transforming a key component of public administration. Unafraid to challenge orthodoxies, consistent in his challenges to industry and government alike, Jack Gansler was one of our community’s most visionary and consequential leaders of the last 50 years. And he was the epitome of the citizen servant.

To detail Jack’s resume would in itself take pages: His years starting out in industry, during which he eventually became a top executive at TASC; two stints in DoD, culminating in his service as the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics; two Masters Degrees and a PhD; more than two dozen books, scores of articles, dozens of testimonies before congress; founding the Center for Public Policy and Private Enterprise at the University of Maryland; Dean of Public Policy; Vice President for Research; and so much more.

But his list of accomplishments and extraordinary native intelligence aside, Jack’s true gift was his ability to continually to find new ways for new solutions to fit into the unique ecosystem of national defense. One of his most important books, “The Defense Industry,” is widely considered required reading for anyone who wishes to understand the development of the contemporary defense establishment and its interplay with the government. But he never stopped researching new trends and advocating for policies and processes that would enhance the competitive marketplace, open the government’s aperture, and drive meaningful change. And if that change required leaders to rethink some of their most basic instincts and beliefs, so much the better. I remember so clearly sitting with him and another defense department official in a meeting where Jack was to sign an important document that had been months in the making. The other defense official took one last shot at trying to convince him to not sign, saying he was concerned that doing so “would be setting a significant precedent.” Without missing a beat, Jack turned to him, and with his most engaging smile said “Why do you think I’m doing this?”

But Jack was about far more than process and policy. Indeed, his greatest passion lay in developing the next generation of thinkers and leaders. While in government he championed major changes in how the department developed its acquisition workforce. And over twenty years at the University of Maryland, he became a treasured mentor to innumerable students in the School of Public Policy, one of whom beautifully documented his impact at a recent Celebration of Life in Jack;s memory. And he remained a visible and impactful figure across the acquisition community, including the Naval Postgraduate School among others.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Jack Gansler was a fine and gentle soul. Intellectually demanding of students and staff alike, he never demeaned; instead, he taught. This special quality echoed loudly at his memorial and at a reception afterward. No one could recall him ever lashing out in anger; even his son-in-law said he could never remember Jack swearing or getting truly angry. Indeed, as former Deputy Secretary of Defense John Hamre said at the memorial, as effective, brilliant and forceful as he could be, it was Jack’s infectious smile that was most memorable—which, as Dr. Hamre and others commented, also said a great deal about how he carried himself throughout his remarkable career.

On a purely personal note, Jack played an outsized role in my career, both at and beyond DoD and, as we later discovered, was connected to my life in several unexpected ways through various family members.

Sadly, it sometimes isn't until a memorial service that we gain real insight into the personal life of someone we knew well professionally for many years. But as we remembered Jack at that celebration of his life, and as we listened to the moving and genuine tributes from his oldest friends, his son and two daughters; as we heard the stories of him as a father, a grandfather, and a husband, nothing really came as a surprise. In fact, what we gleaned neatly completed the picture of a man few of us will ever forget and for whose guidance, insight, leadership and friendship we will long be grateful.

Stan Soloway President & CEO Celero Strategies, LLC

*Stan served under Jack as the deputy undersecretary of defense during the Clinton Administration and continued to work with him in various unofficial capacities for many years thereafter.*