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Viewing the Pentagon from several sides

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BACK IN the bad old days of the Nixon administration, Attorney General John Mitchell told reporters to "watch what we do, not what we say." Well, those days are back at the Pentagon. Lately, what has been said over there has been having less and less to do with what is being done.

First, there's the current mini-flap over the Salvadoran Army's "retaliation" action against the guerrillas thought to be responsible for the machine-gun slaying of four U.S. Marines at a sidewalk cafe in San Salvador on June 19. At the time of the killings, President Reagan vowed the Marines would be avenged. "We and the Salvadoran leaders will move any mountain and ford any river to find the jackals and bring them and their colleagues in terror to justice," he said.

Asked about that pledge during a radio interview this week, Caspar Weinberger said: "We have done a number of things that are, I think, very discouraging to future terrorist acts . . . in one situation, where the guerrillas in El Salvador who came in and murdered the Marines . . . the Salvadoran government, with our assistance, has taken care of—in one way or another, taken prisoner or killed as a matter of raids—a number of the people who participated in that killing in the guerrilla-held sections of El Salvador."

The syntax was a little garbled, but Weinberger's meaning seemed clear: At least some of those responsible for the murder of the four Marines have been killed or captured, right? Think again. In San Salvador, President Jose Napoleon Duarte said he didn't know anything about it and a spokesman for the military high command said that "there must have been a misinterpretation."

Well, yes, there was. Yesterday, Weinberger told the AP that, hey, he didn't mean to suggest that the actual triggermen had been captured or killed. No, rather, the Salvadoran Army, with a tip or two from U.S. intelligence, had "weakened the effectiveness" of the Maoist-type guerrilla group of which we believe the killers are members. Oh.

Then there's the continuing story of whistleblower A. Ernest Fitzgerald, the AF civilian systems analyst who won a 13-year battle for reinstatement after he was fired in 1969 for being a little too blunt about Pentagon waste. Last week, he got his first job performance rating in three years and, guess what, he was sub-par in just about every category except "communication."

"I am convinced," wrote his evaluator, Richard E. Carver, assistant secretary of the Air Force for financial management (and the Republican former mayor of Peoria, Ill.), "that Mr. Fitzgerald is a competent and skilled employe who has lacked overall direction in his effort to manage and reduce costs, which has substantially inhibited our ability to address these very important problems." Carver insists his evaluation is not an attempt to "impair Mr. Fitzgerald's career in any way. It is not an attempt to fire him." But others, notably Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.), chairman of a House investigating subcommittee looking into Pentagon waste, thought differently. His office said he will hold hearings to see if the Air Force was trying to harass a witness.

FINALLY, comes the Army's fabulously expensive ($4.2 billion) and controversial "Sergeant York" air defense system. Weinberger reported that a recent test was "the most realistic operational testing that we ever put a weapon system through." Said John E. Krings, head of the Pentagon's test office: "Rest assured it has been a tough test." But Rep. Denny Smith (R-Ore.), former combat pilot in Vietnam and now co-chairman of the congressional Military Reform Caucus, says otherwise. He notes the Army's claim that six of seven flying targets were downed but asks how come all except one were brought down by self-destruct devices triggered from the ground? Good question.