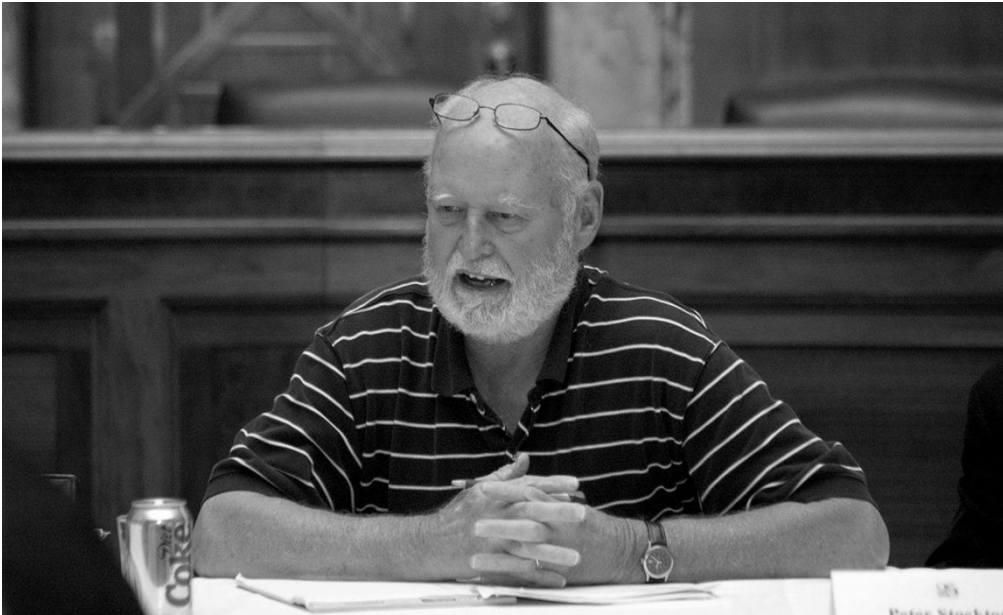


Remembering Peter Stockton

BY KEITH RUTTER | FILED UNDER ANALYSIS | SEPTEMBER 20, 2019

7 MINUTE READ



Peter Stockton speaks at an oversight training for congressional staffers in October 2006. (Photo: Pam Rutter/POGO)

When it comes to mononymous people in government oversight, “Stockton!” was at the top of the list. But he also had a first name. Peter Stockton, age 80, passed away Sunday, September 8. He is survived by, as he would say, “6 1/2 children and 10 grandchildren.”

Stockton spent his life fighting The Man, and The Man in his sights was government corruption. Once he sank his teeth into an investigation he wouldn’t let go.

I knew Peter for about 30 years. Let's be honest—Peter Stockton was an acquired taste. He was blunt and gruff. "Stockton!" was usually followed by an expletive in many corners of DC, even by his friends. But he was a true champion of the nation's taxpayers, and we will be poorer for the loss.

For over 30 years Stockton worked in government attempting to expose corruption (22 years of which were as a staffer for Representative John Dingell). In the 1970s, he investigated most of the major defense contractors and oil companies, the diversion of bomb-grade uranium to Israel, and the death of Karen Silkwood. His investigation into the construction and operation of the Alaskan Pipeline spanned from the 1970s into the 1990s. In the 1980s and early 1990s, he probed the security and effectiveness of the nuclear weapons production program and defense contractor fraud. He also examined bribes made by U.S. corporate executives to foreign officials. His review of mergers and acquisitions led him to uncover insider trading and stock manipulation. Stockton's major investigations also explored overcharging and Medicare fraud in the pharmaceutical industry.

He was the kind of guy who would go on family vacation in Maine, ask for a tour of Bath Iron Works, and convince his boss to order a Government Accountability Office (GAO) audit that discovered substantial overruns—and secure a voluntary \$3.2 million refund.

During his investigations, he developed an expertise in government contracting and the procurement process, and also worked closely with such government investigative agencies as the GAO, the various inspectors general, the FBI, and the Department of Justice. Stockton also had extensive and varied expertise in the operations of the Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Defense, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Securities and Exchange Commission, Health and Human Services, the National Institutes of Health, and the Food and Drug Administration. He worked extensively with corporate and government whistleblowers. On one memorable occasion, Stockton chased a source to Greece to uncover how General

Dynamics, then the largest defense contractor, was defrauding the Navy and manipulating their stock. That investigation led to the chair of the board and the chief financial officer both resigning.

Stockton also worked for Energy Secretary Bill Richardson as his personal troubleshooter on evaluating physical and cyber security at the nuclear weapons complex and shutting down wasteful facilities and programs.

He worked with the Project On Government Oversight for over 14 years. Besides being married to Danielle Brian at the time, maybe what drew Stockton to POGO was his appreciation for our investigations. Stockton often commented: “POGO’s **Bug Bomb Report** was the best investigation I have ever read.”

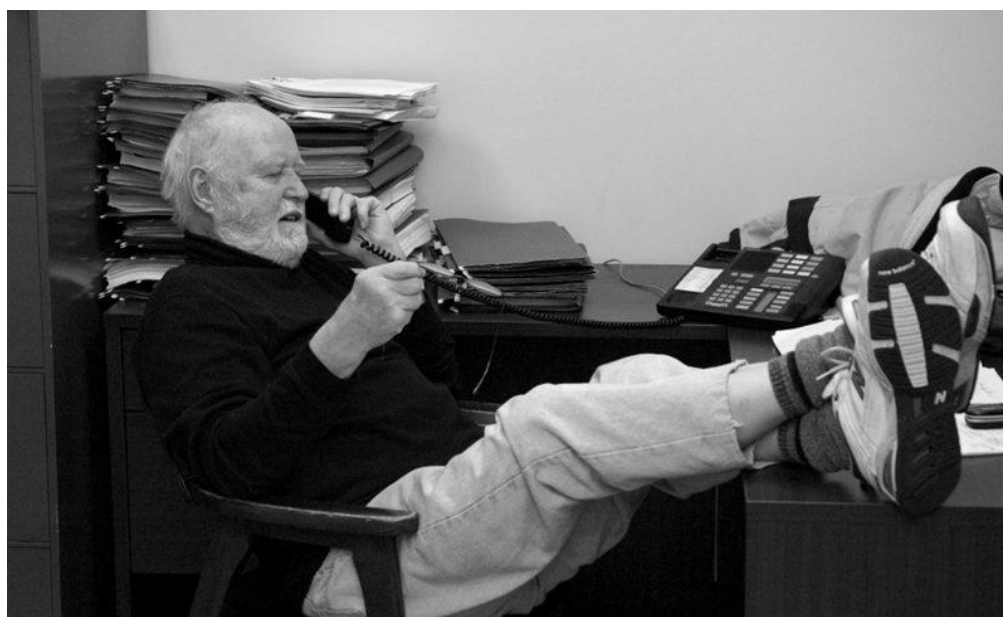
His first report with POGO was **U.S. Nuclear Weapons Complex: Security at Risk**, which was released in October 2001, just weeks after 9/11. His work on **the lack of security at U.S. nuclear power plants** was released about a year later. Both of these reports resulted in POGO **testifying before Congress** several times, and led to vital reforms that improved the safety and security of sites housing nuclear material. After POGO's report on security guards at nuclear power facilities falling asleep on the job, the **Nuclear Regulatory Commission adopted a fatigue rule** that limited the hours security guards could be on shift. Stockton's work on the nuclear weapons complex resulted in a reduction in the number of sites with stockpiles of special nuclear materials across the country and improved security standards across the complex.

During his time at POGO he partnered first with Lynn Mandell, then Ingrid Drake, and finally with Lydia Dennett in investigations that exposed poor government oversight of the management of nuclear weapons and material. Ingrid recalled that as she began to work with Stockton, one of their first meetings was at the Department of Energy with a high level official. When Peter and Ingrid walked in, Peter just randomly introduced Ingrid as his colleague

and as former Army Special Forces member. Given Ingrid's casual "hippie vibe," she thought that this was obviously a joke and that the official would know. As the meeting went on, the official made a joke about the military and then seriously looked at her and said, "Please do not take offense."

Lynn's favorite Stockton story involved his common refrain: "Everybody knows that." At POGO we love to footnote and document almost everything we do. Stockton did not. Whenever he would be questioned on a fact or figure he quickly responded that everybody knows that. When told we would need to footnote a fact in a report, Stockton often said, "OK, but you are going to look stupid, because everybody knows that."

Lydia remembered going up to Capitol Hill with Stockton to talk about how poor oversight had led to embarrassing security failures. The congressional staffers "couldn't help but take his recommendations seriously despite his often jovial and somewhat mocking tone, tattered Red Sox baseball cap, and muddy sneakers."



Peter Stockton at work in POGO offices in February 2007. *(Photo: Pam Rutter/POGO)*

Stockton's experience and tactics as a congressional investigator helped to shape and develop POGO's congressional oversight initiative. He became

incensed when he heard that committee staff thought they had to submit a Freedom of Information Act request to an agency they were overseeing. “You write a demand letter,” he told *Congressional Quarterly Magazine* in November 2006. “We want it Friday, close of business.” He understood that oversight meant finding your sources, protecting them, and orchestrating the information in a hearing like, as he told the *Washington Post* in 1991, “a Broadway play, except nobody comes to the practices.” Stockton also understood the essential role of the press in conducting oversight. “If you have a good hearing and nobody knows about it, it’s not going to have much of an impact,” he told *Congressional Quarterly Magazine*.

Stockton was a favorite of the press and he knew how to play the game. As one journalist replied when I told him of Stockton’s passing, “Reporters loved him because he was not only brutally honest, he had no filter.” *Technology Review* described Stockton as “Rough-speaking and hardened by years of Naderesque detective work.” To *U.S. News & World Report*, Stockton was “an Indiana Jones-type character whose bluff manner and rumpled dress convey an in-your-face fierceness.”

We reached out to a couple of Peter’s favorite reporters for their memories of working with Stockton. Ralph Vartabedian of the *Los Angeles Times* told us:

Peter was among the great congressional investigators of the last four decades, contributing enormously to the public welfare by holding government agencies accountable for their conduct and policies. Peter’s effectiveness in his work was part brilliance and part personality, the ability to reassure whistleblowers that they were in good hands and would have some fun at the same time. The nation owes a debt of gratitude to his work.

Tony Capaccio of Bloomberg remembered when he first met Stockton around April 1977.

I was just weeks into my internship with muckraking columnist Jack Anderson. I was ok'd to call Stockton by staff colleagues who used him constantly—Grady, Cohn, Mitchell, Smo, Howard.¹ The phone call was brief and a little brusque but we met. He gave me the letter (this was before faxes, by the way). Hot scoop for me that nobody else wanted.

We became buds—for over 25 years. Among the professional/friends highlight reel: Stockton's goofy coup getting a young Brooke Shields to testify in 1982 before Dingell on anti-cigarette PSA's (he let me come in the backroom to get her autograph); a DOE document that led me to be deposed; Caps hockey games to see The Great 8 (Wayne Gretzky); Halloween pumpkin carving parties; softball games (the guy could play any position); squash games (he cheated often using a "pit ball"—swiped in his arm pit for added slime to make it drop off a wall, and ... Lady Gaga's Monster Ball Tour, September 2010 in DC for his 70th (at his request). We sat high but he loved it.

He flashed that toothy smile when Gaga addressed "My little Monsters." I suspect leagues of government bureaucrats called him worse. May the Raconteur of the Rayburn Building RIP.

Finally, no remembrance of Stockton would be complete without mentioning the things he loved. Almost every conversation I had with him somehow

included golf, Ohio State, or the Boston Red Sox. He enjoyed the simple things in life, like a good sandwich and cheap beer.

Several years ago, POGO was referred to as a band of misfits and oddballs that punched above its weight class. There was no bigger misfit or oddball who did incredible work on behalf of the taxpayer than Peter Stockton—and there's no need to fact check that, because everybody knows that.

A memorial celebration for Stockton will be held on October 5, 2019, at 1:00 p.m. at 604 Catesby Ct SW, Leesburg, VA 20175.

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Keith Rutter is POGO's Executive Operations Officer and Executive Financial Officer.

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