

The April 2008 edition of *Government Executive* magazine features an article highlighting alumnus Matt Reres ('62).

## **Ethics Enforcer**

By Rafael Enrique Valero [rvalero@nationaljournal.com](mailto:rvalero@nationaljournal.com) *Government Executive* April 1, 2008

*Matt Reres helped Defense officials negotiate the fine line between sanction and scandal.*

During the first Gulf War, the Army wanted to land helicopters in the desert without blowing sand back up into their turbines. Helipads would have to be built, ASAP. Matt Reres, the civilian deputy general counsel of ethics and fiscal policy, the final authority on both matters for the Army, wondered where he could find the funding. By approving money, not from military construction appropriations but from a budget line that qualified the pads as temporary structures by judging that they were not "long term," he managed a fiscal sleight of hand. The pads were built.

"Fortunately, a lot of people agreed with that one; otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here," he says, chuckling about one of his more "innovative" decisions.

Reres, 65, says he's thankful he never had to arbitrate a serious ethical misadventure before retiring in 2007. Whether during Republican or Democratic administrations, the executives he counseled wanted to stay out of hot water, especially when it came to the media. "With The Washington Post over there, you're spending all your time responding to their queries, instead of getting on with your job. Who needs that hassle?" he says.

Federal code sets out 14 principles of ethical conduct, and they apply to everyone in the executive branch, says Reres. After becoming deputy counsel for ethics in 1993, he decided that a cautious rule of thumb would be to best keep the reputations of the higher-ups untarnished.

"I wanted to be conservative," Reres says, "because in effect the rules, as far as I'm concerned, are the last point before you fall over the edge. I didn't want the Army to stand too close to the precipice." Reres recalls counseling one political appointee - who had extravagant taste in office furniture and wanted to accept rides on privately owned jets - that avoiding even the appearance of impropriety was paramount. That's the 14th principle. But the appointee, not thrilled by the advice, hotly complained to Reres' boss.

"He went to the general counsel and said, 'This guy's judgment is wrong. You should get rid of him,' " Reres laughs, adding that the appointee apparently believed ethical standards were negotiable. "I couldn't believe it."

Reres retired from the Army in 2000 after a 31-year career in the active-duty ranks and the Reserve. He entered government as the chief of the Defense Department's tax, property and law branch in 1977, eventually joining the Senior Executive Service in 1989. Of all his work, perhaps he's most pleased with leading the establishment of the Pentagon's electronic Financial Disclosure Filing System in the 1990s, to capture, track and flag the financial disclosures of senior executives.

"Some men are like rivers," Reres sometimes likes to say. "They choose the path of least resistance and become crooked."