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In August 2016, an inspector from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency arrived at Barksdale Air Force base in Louisiana, a nerve center for the U.S. military's global air combat operations, to conduct a routine look at the base's handling of its hazardous waste.

Barksdale, like many military bases, generates [large volumes of hazardous materials](#), including thousands of pounds of toxic powder left over from cleaning, painting and maintaining airplanes.

For years, Barksdale had been sending a portion of its waste to an Ohio company, U.S. Technology Corp., that had sold officials at the base on a seemingly ingenious solution for disposing of it: The company would take the contaminated powder from refurbished war planes and repurpose it into cinderblocks that would be used to build everything from schools to hotels to big-box department stores — even a pregnancy support center in Ohio. The deal would ostensibly shield the Air Force from the liability of being a large producer of dangerous hazardous trash.

The arrangement was not unique.

The military is one of the country's largest polluters, with an inventory of toxic sites on American soil that once topped 39,000. At many locations, the Pentagon has relied on contractors like U.S. Technology to assist in cleaning and restoring land, removing waste, clearing unexploded bombs, and decontaminating buildings, streams and soil. In addition to its work for Barksdale, U.S. Technology had won some 830 contracts with other military facilities — Army, Air Force, Navy and logistics bases — totaling more than \$49 million, many of them to dispose of similar powders.

In taking on environmental cleanup jobs, contractors often bring needed expertise to technical tasks the Pentagon isn't equipped to do itself. They also absorb much of the legal responsibility for disposing of military-made hazards, in some cases helping the Pentagon — at least on paper — winnow down its list of toxic liabilities.

But in outsourcing this work, the military has often struggled to provide adequate oversight to ensure that work is done competently — or is completed at all. Today, records show, some of the most dangerous cleanup work that has been entrusted to contractors remains unfinished,

or worse, has been falsely pronounced complete, leaving people who live near former military sites to assume these areas are now safe.

What [the EPA inspector found](#) when he visited Barksdale was an object lesson in the system's blind spots.

Barrels of the waste hadn't been shipped off and recycled, but rather were stored in a garage tucked away from the facility's main operations. Further, shipping documents suggested that what waste had been sent off the base hadn't gone to U.S. Technology's recycling plant in Ohio, as an Air Force official first told the EPA, but instead had gone to company warehouses in at least two other states. Storing hazardous waste without a permit — and without immediately recycling it — can be illegal.

The inspection findings triggered an investigation to determine if the Air Force had been storing hazardous waste that it was supposed to have been recycling without a permit. It also suggested broader problems with U.S. Technology, which was already the subject of an inquiry in Georgia into whether it was illegally dumping waste — including material that could have come from Barksdale — near a residential neighborhood there.

Barksdale officials told ProPublica that the base “has never stored” hazardous materials at the request of U.S. Technology. The Air Force and the Pentagon declined to answer any specific questions about U.S. Technology's work, except to say that the base had been working with the company for at least a decade.

