

Focus on the “no fail” nuclear mission; Keeping the Total Force in the loop; Donley’s sobering conclusion

DONLEY’S ASSESSMENT

The Air Force needs to stay focused on its nuclear expertise, continue to push overall modernization, and find a way to heal the relationship between the Active, Guard, and Reserve, former Air Force Secretary Michael B. Donley urged in his final interview with this publication.

Donley, who stepped down June 21 after the longest tenure of any Air Force Secretary—five years—acknowledged it will continue to be a challenge to keep the Air Force focused on the “no fail” nuclear mission in the years to come.

“There’s some aspects of our enterprise that are aging and need modernization,” Donley said of USAF’s nuclear force, which includes B-2 bombers, B-52 bombers armed with air launched cruise missiles, and ICBMs. Some of that modernization, however, is hindered “by the uncertainty at the strategic level about the size ... [and] shape of the force, and it’s also facing pressure ... because of the budget situation.”

The Air Force’s nuclear force, Donley said, represents “a relatively small part” of service resources—“about five percent”—but it needs disproportionate funding because the various pieces are all due for replacement or modification. The Minuteman ICBM is getting an upgrade, the cruise missile force requires replacement, and USAF is pursuing a new bomber that will pick up some of the nuclear role.

These are “significant modernization challenges,” Donley said, but “it’s a national-level mission” the Air Force can’t ignore. It’s important “the institution stays focused on this mission and recognizes the importance [and] funds it at appropriate levels,” he said.

Donley took over in the summer of 2008, shortly after then-Secretary Michael W. Wynne and then-Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley were ousted by then-Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates in part for their continued support of the F-22 fighter that Gates wanted to kill. Gates, however, put the nuclear weapons material handling mistakes on Wynne and Moseley’s watch as the reason for their ouster.

Donley said, “I don’t know or believe that the situation was manufactured,” but the marching orders for him and Chief of Staff Gen. Norton A. Schwartz when they came in was to deal with complacency in the nuclear mission.

“The first order of business” was to assemble all the studies and reports done on the Air Force’s nuclear mission in the wake of incidents of carelessness and “determine a way forward,” Donley said. With the end of the Cold War and a steady decline in the size of the nuclear arsenal, the mission had become something of a backwater for the service that seemed not to offer a career path to top leadership. That has been addressed, Donley said, but will continue to need attention as the New START potentially drives even further reductions in the nuclear enterprise.

“We’ve found ways” to reassign people within the nuclear field and select them for staff positions at DOD and Air Force headquarters, Donley said. Pilots can move about in the flying career field, and security forces have opportunities in other parts of the force. “Missile folks have worked across the space and acquisition” career fields, as well, so “I think there are continuing opportunities for men and women who serve in the nuclear enterprise,” he said.



USAF photo by Scott M. Ash

Heal the Total Force, said Donley.

FINDING THE TOTAL FORCE BALANCE

Donley said there is “potential that the Total Air Force will get smaller” as a result of continuing budget constraints and uncertainties about whether the sequester will continue into Fiscal 2014. He noted that “the current Active Duty force is as small as it has been since we were created in 1947,” so it’s “more important than ever” that the Active, Guard, and Reserve “get more closely integrated.”

That’s been tough since USAF’s Fiscal 2013 budget proposal called for larger cuts in the Guard and Reserve than in the Active force. The ensuing rift with the state Guard units and governors highlighted problems in how USAF leaders keep the reserve components in the loop about changes.

“We’re continually in the process of finding where that right balance is” in the size and missions of the three components, Donley said. Given the tightness of budgets, “there are already some constraints on marginal capacity or capability areas that are very finely balanced already” and may not allow for as big a role for some components as they’d like.

“It’s too soon to [say] how it all balances out,” Donley said of the future for the Guard and Reserve. “Part of it’s driven by strategy—what the Air Force will be asked to do in the future.” Active forces typically provide the bulk of overseas presence, and “we see a continuing demand for Air Force capabilities ... [and] a continuing overseas presence,” Donley said. These forces are needed in the US Central Command area post-FY ’14, and there will be “some presence in the [Persian] Gulf, some continuing presence in Europe although that is down substantially.”

Donley established a Total Force Task Force to examine the relative roles and makeup of the Active and Air Reserve Components, and “I think we’re on a good track now” to resolving the issues, he said. Future directions should “take advantage of what have been successful associations” between Active and ARC elements and “understand how to refine and fine-tune them.” The task force will discover where those associations work or don’t, and why, he said.

What is clear, though, is that “100 percent Active will not work and 100 percent reserve component will not work,” Donley said. The trick will be to find the “tolerance level” in various missions for the best mix of the two. There will still be areas where the Guard and Reserve will have most, if not all of the capability—aerospace control alert, aerial firefighting, or aerial spray were examples he mentioned—and the ARC will not simply become a piecemeal supplement for Active Duty personnel.

The task force, Donley noted, may be made permanent, because the relationship will continually need rebalancing.

“There’s no end point to it,” he said. “We have a good, strong base in relationships that just need to be continually refined.”

THE LONG ARM OF SEQUESTRATION

There will be some Air Force “presence” in Afghanistan after 2014, Donley said, but the exact nature of that has not yet been determined. Plans for the sequencing of units going to Afghanistan has been determined through the end of calendar 2014, he added, but after that, everything is uncertain because of the sequester. At that point, USAF might have to start tapping some of the units that stood down this spring and summer because there was no funding to operate them.

“We’ll provide combat power to the combatant commanders who need it”—those forward deployed and on the Korean peninsula, he said. That will work through the end of 2014, but after that, all bets are off.

“If sequestration ... drifts into Fiscal ’14, we’ll have some significant adjustments to consider, from a planning point of view,” he said. In other venues, Donley has said that if readiness remains a top priority, then modernization accounts likely would be raided to pay for it—something he wouldn’t want to do.

“Perpetuating this lowest state of readiness”—Donley noted he has used the term “readiness crisis”—“with a lack of funding for flying units is not a position we want to be in. We want to get out of this.”

He doesn’t dwell on whether the termination of the F-22 was a good or bad thing, despite the rise of potential fifth generation aircraft competitors in China and Russia and the severe funding problems at home.

“When General Schwartz and I arrived, the dollars were gone out of the Air Force budget,” Donley pointed out, so the decision was made and there were “plenty of modernization challenges in front of us.” His emphasis has been on managing the F-22’s other issues—the oxygen system being one—and continuing to upgrade the system so that it remains “the world’s finest fighter.” That said, however, he’s made it a priority to remain focused on “the need to begin to move to fifth generation capabilities and to stay firm on our commitment to the F-35.”

The restructure of the F-35 program needed to be done, he said, but “we’re through that work,” and the program is now “in a pretty good place” and mature enough that the Air Force has begun a training program for its operational F-35 pilots. The Air Force also has begun to make some basing decisions, he added. “Trying to move faster would not be a good alternative,” but neither would slowing down the program, Donley maintained. “Our challenge, really, and for the [Joint Program Office], has been to manage through the concurrency issues as best we can.”

He added, “We’re the only air force in the world that has this capability. And we are fielding F-35, so I think that’s the larger picture that I think we need to stay focused on.”

USAF’S BIG STICK

The recent deployment of F-22s to South Korea and B-2 bomber overflights of the peninsula seemed to lead to a rapid de-escalation of the crisis with North Korea in May. Did this



USAF photo by MSgt. Kevin J. Gruenwald

The presence of F-22s and a B-2 dampened the North Korean hot zone.

success signal a boost for the Air Force in the current round of budget talks and roles and missions debates?

“I think this was a very effective demonstration of what airpower can do on short notice,” Donley asserted. The “flexibility” of the stealth aircraft—across multiple time zones and areas of responsibility—sent messages “to both allies and potential allies” and showed what the nation and USAF “can do when necessary to demonstrate resolve and send a deterrent message.” As for a budget boost, Donley said the operation showed off the need for long-range strike, which “was recognized in the strategic guidance a couple of years ago.”

Donley said the start-and-stop of the new bomber program over the last decade was not surprising.

“We actually have a pretty poor record on bomber programs,” he said. Pointing to the terminations of the B-70 and B-1—the latter eventually restarted but with a limited buy—and the truncation of the B-2 program, Donley said bombers, though a critical capability, have usually represented risky technology. Failure to rein in cost early enough meant the aircraft couldn’t be bought in needed numbers.

The Next Generation Bomber canceled by Gates in 2009 was felled by cost and complexity, Donley said. When it was canceled, the Air Force “really took a significant deep breath and a long look at what we needed to reconsider” in reconstituting the program such that it would be acceptable to Pentagon leaders. That, in turn, drove USAF to pursue a program with “a lot less risk, ... more mature technologies,” and “inserted cost as a variable.” Requirements were established early, “so that we made trade-offs in range and payload ... and tried to take a family-of-systems approach so that we weren’t attempting to build an aircraft that was destined to be something we could not afford.” Collectively, these steps convinced Gates to give the restructured program the green light.

A “sobering conclusion” from his tenure, Donley said, is that “the progress we make is not guaranteed to last forever.” He’s pleased the F-35, the new bomber, and the KC-46 tanker all made significant headway on his watch, but “none of the things I think I got ‘done’ are done,” he observed. “Getting the tanker on stable footing was important to the Air Force, but we’re not building tankers, yet,” he said, noting that even after a program has some momentum, it can still be stopped.

He made himself a list of some 25 major programs or actions that have marked his tenure.

“I don’t know that I’d call them great victories, but they’re things that happened, that we had to address in the last five years, and probably 80 percent of that is stuff we didn’t plan on ... and you have to address,” he said, such as the air campaign in Libya.

“It’s continuing work, and really, the leadership that occupies these positions are just stewards for a particular period of time,” Donley insisted. ■