

## Repairing sequester; Readiness first; The Long-Wait bomber ....

### THE LONG ROAD BACK

It will take quite some time to undo the damage to Air Force readiness done by the sequester—more than a year, in some cases—and there's still no sign the nation is reconciling its strategic situation with its finances. That reconciliation needs to happen, and soon, said Air Force Secretary Michael B. Donley in a late April meeting with defense reporters.

Donley is stepping down this month after five years in the post, bridging two presidential Administrations. Even if Congress acts to halt the sequestration cuts that have so far caused the Air Force to idle 17 combat squadrons, the damage to readiness will extend “well into Fiscal '14,” Donley said. It will take “anywhere from three to six months” to rebuild the lost proficiency of pilots and crew members who have stood down due to slashed flying hours and get them back up to “combat mission-ready status,” he said.

However, sequestration is putting USAF in an even bigger hole with regard to depot maintenance. The Air Force has deferred the induction of dozens of aircraft and engines into depot. Even if sequester is reversed, “that's a capacity-limited sort of situation,” Donley said, and an accelerated get-well plan may not be possible. These deferrals will “ripple through the depot maintenance system over many months, and in some cases, [it] may take a year or more” to catch up. “It will take a while to dig out” of the maintenance hole, he warned.

More broadly, however, “the tension between needing to do something to address the deficit and the strategic environment has been two separate discussions ... [moving] along in parallel,” Donley observed. It is of course “up to the national leadership to decide when those streams cross, and to make the right decisions on a budget plan that fits the strategic realities we might face,” he said, adding that he doesn't doubt the US would prevail in any conflict for the near future. However, he warned bluntly that “we're adding risk” about how long that will be true.

The trade-offs required are seen “very clearly” within the Pentagon, he said, and the department is trying to convey “to the national leadership and to the Congress where those risks are.”

It's important that “we get to a national-level discussion and decision on the way forward for resources for defense,” he asserted.

If sequestration isn't undone, the Pentagon faces another half-trillion dollars in cuts over the next decade. Decisions on how much of that the Air Force will have to bear “haven't been made,” Donley said, “but we all recognize significant adjustments” in the size of the service would result. Deeper force structure and personnel cuts are a certainty, he said—“you have to take things out to get to \$487 billion”—and modernization accounts will be in peril, especially given that readiness accounts will get top priority.

The nation's leaders are “fairly set that we need to have a ready force, whatever size it is. There are different ways of measuring that ... but I think there's broad agreement that the smaller the force, the more ready it needs to be.” The \$487 billion taken from defense so far has already drastically reshaped the force, Donley said; doubling that figure would “be more dramatic.”

He acknowledged, “It's controversial, but we've already demonstrated [that] stuff has to be retired or you can't proceed with modernization.”

### NEW BOMBER: WAIT FOR IT

The Air Force is committed to the Long-Range Strike Bomber, which is intended to replace the B-1B and B-52H fleets beginning in the mid-2020s. Donley assured reporters that the need for the program is well-established.

“It's a high-profile part of our force structure; it's an integral part of the strategic triad as well.” Because of that, the program gets “good and appropriate attention” in the new defense strategic guidance; planned funding “grows in the outyears and it remains one of our most important priorities.”

Lt. Gen. Charles R. Davis, the top military deputy in the Secretary's acquisition office, told a panel of the House Armed Services Committee on April 24 the bomber is “absolutely critical” to USAF's future ability to project power. The existing bomber fleet is being modernized to the degree possible, Davis said, but that money doesn't really “provide a new capability” and merely maintains the status quo.

“All we have been able to do is react” to increasing anti-access threats around the world, Davis said. Legacy bomber updates help stay on top of vanishing vendor issues, new threat radar modes, and missile technology, but “I do not know how we do that for another three decades,” he told the sea power and projection forces subcommittee.

The LRS-B will allow USAF to operate in parts of the world where it “can't necessarily survive for lengthy periods of time today,” Davis asserted, adding that the aircraft will oblige enemies to react to the Air Force, instead.

USAF photo by Scott M. Ash



Donley (left, here with Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh) says digging out of sequestration will take time.



**Future USAF Long-Range Strike Bomber—absolutely critical.**

Along with the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, USAF is working on a bomber contract strategy, Donley said. He cautioned, though, that the Air Force is “still a year or two away” from “what I would call the down-select decision” to one contractor that would take the project through development and into production. He specifically declined to discuss the current status of the competition.

The LRS-B timetable is ambitious by any measure. Waiting to launch the actual metal-bending phase of the program for two more years means USAF would have just 10 years to achieve its long-stated goal of having what Donley called “the first article” on the ramp in the mid-2020s. By comparison, the F-22 program was at a similar stage of planning in the mid-1980s and didn’t achieve initial operational capability until 2005.

The planned goal of 80 to 100 bombers at a base-year unit cost of \$550 million is still in force, Donley added. That, however, was as far as Donley would go in describing the classified project, and he warned reporters it will be “several years down the road” before more details are released. One of the few public disclosures so far is that USAF envisions the bomber being “optionally manned.”

While the Air Force will honor its promise to reveal annual funding numbers for the LRS-B, more specifics will have to wait, because “we think the capabilities it will have represent advantages not unlike those that we’ve enjoyed on the B-2.” He pointed out that the B-2’s capabilities have never been discussed “in great depth” and that the public didn’t see that airplane “until it rolled out of the hangar.”

## UPGRADED AND UNMANNED FIGHTERS

The Air Force can’t bear any further reduction in fighters and must upgrade older ones, but it is also apparently having trouble filling the fighter cockpits it has left. Two top planners recently called attention to these twin problems in prepared testimony for the House Armed Services tactical air and land forces subcommittee.

Lt. Gen. Burton M. Field, deputy chief of staff for operations, plans, and requirements, and Davis explained that the Air Force has come down hundreds of fighters in recent years, raising risk to worrying levels.

The F-35 has been delayed by both technical challenges and budget cuts, they said. To “bridge” until the new fighters enter the force, USAF is pursuing “programs that will modernize and extend the service life of our remaining fleet.” Without these service life extension programs and capability upgrades, “it will not be possible to manage risk,” they said.

The A-10 is so heavily used in Afghanistan that it poses “substantial sustainment challenges,” they reported. The service will reduce the fleet by another 61 aircraft, leaving 283, which are expected to last through 2035, thanks to a re-winging program.

The F-16, comprising half the Air Force fighter fleet, is due for a \$1.32 billion update across the Future Years Defense Program. A SLEP will extend service life from 8,000 to more than 10,000 hours, and will include structural improvements as well as the Combat Avionics Programmed Extension Suite, or CAPES, on 300 aircraft. These aircraft will get an active electronically scanned array radar, new displays, data links, and electronic warfare systems.

The Air Force expects to keep 175 F-15C/D aircraft through 2035—assuming a fatigue test now under way gives a green light—fitted with AESAs, new EW gear, and structural life-extension projects, expected to cost \$1.9 billion across the FYDP. The F-15E strike inventory also will be retained through 2035—again, given favorable fatigue test results—and will also get AESAs, a helmet-mounted cuing system, and new EW/self-protection gear. Strike Eagle upgrades will total \$2.5 billion across the FYDP.

The F-22 program is requested to get about \$920 million in Fiscal 2014 alone, split evenly between research, development, test, and evaluation (RDT&E) and production, to keep it able to “operate effectively” in increasingly lethal anti-access, area-denial conditions. Improvements being fielded now are supposed to be installed fleetwide by Fiscal 2017. These include synthetic aperture radar ground mapping, threat geolocation, and ability to use the Small Diameter Bomb.

“Any further delay in the F-35 program will create a serious shortfall (mid- and far-term) in fighter capabilities and force structure,” the generals reported. “The Air Force is very concerned with recent budget reductions and continues to monitor how these cuts affect risk.”

The two asserted that “it is absolutely critical” that the fourth generation improvement programs and requested F-22 enhancements go forward, “and the F-35 matures and begins full-rate production.”

Despite “retiring or reclassifying” some five A-10 squadrons, one F-16 squadron, and one F-15 aggressor squadron last year, the service has enough fighter power to fulfill national strategy, the two generals said.

However, “manning these aircraft is a challenge we are aggressively working,” they added. The Air Force is “200 fighter pilots short” of manning requirements, and they project “this deficit growing to approximately 900 by 2022,” exclusive of flying training problems inflicted by the sequester. The reason is that Active Duty fighter squadrons were cut “to a number that cannot sustain billet requirements.” The service is “currently unable to produce and absorb the required number of fighter pilots across the Total Force.”

The Air Force is taking steps to manage the problem—which leaves fewer experienced pilots for planning air operations or training—and will probably get it under control by 2028, the two generals said, but “even with these changes,” USAF won’t be able to do any better than “82 percent of our overall requirement for fighter pilot expertise” in the meantime. ■