

Records You Don't Want To Set

A DECADE ago, the Air Force was at war and fielded a Total Force fleet of 2,526 fighters, 182 bombers, 637 tankers, and 976 transports.

Ten years later, USAF is still at war and operates 514 fewer fighters, 23 fewer bombers, 136 fewer tankers, and 193 fewer transports.

In 2004, the force was already feeling the effects of the 1990s "procurement holiday." B-1 bombers averaged 16 years old, F-15s were 19, the A-10 fleet averaged 22 years old, the T-38 trainer was 36, and USAF's B-52 bombers and KC-135 tankers were both 42.

Ten years later, through the magic of not buying aircraft, each of those fleets is exactly 10 years older. In the intervening decade, USAF bought zero bombers, retired more than twice as many fighters as it purchased, just recently got the KC-46 tanker program started, and is still mulling a new bomber and a T-38 replacement.

The Air Force is older and smaller than ever, and things might get much worse. The Fiscal 2015 budget, for example, proposes retiring the A-10 and U-2 fleets to help make ends meet.

The US is now a military spending outlier. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute recently studied military expenditures worldwide. By SIPRI's accounting, US military spending declined by 7.8 percent in 2013.

This should not be shrugged off as inconsequential. In 2013, China's military spending was almost the mirror image of America's, rising 7.4 percent in one year.

"Military spending in the rest of the world excluding the United States increased by 1.8 percent," SIPRI noted. "The next three highest spenders—China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia—all made substantial increases."

In fact, "China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia are among the 23 countries around the world that have more than doubled their military expenditure since 2004," SIPRI wrote.

The US also saw large increases in defense spending after 2004, but those increases were largely consumed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The past decade of defense spending did very

little to deliver the nation a next generation Air Force—and now the money is quickly drying up.

In mid-April came DOD's "Estimated Impacts of Sequestration-Level Funding" report. If Congress does not end the sequester, it will hit readiness and modernization hard. One-third of the cuts would come from operations and maintenance accounts, and two-thirds from modernization. Personnel cost growth would slow, but we'll have more on that assumption later.

Will the smallest and oldest US Air Force wither away?

The Air Force is already dealing with a years-long decline in readiness, brought on in part by the heavy use its aircraft have endured in the War on Terror.

According to DOD, a return to sequestration funding in 2016 will reduce "readiness funding by \$16 billion [through 2019] to include approximately \$9 billion ... in maintenance, which would further increase service maintenance backlogs." For the Air Force, this would mean weapon systems sustainment accounts would be cut to just 67 percent of requirements.

The modernization cuts would be more dramatic, if only because they are easier to visualize. According to the report, from 2016 through 2019, a return to sequestration will bring:

- Five fewer KC-46 tankers
- A three-year delay in the Combat Rescue Helicopter
- 38 fewer MQ-9 Reapers
- 10 fewer MC-130J special operations transports
- One less GPS III satellite
- An end to the Adaptive Engine technology program
- 531 fewer AIM-120 missiles
- Eliminating the KC-10 tanker
- Retiring the Block 40 Global Hawk
- Divesting the MQ-1 Predator fleet

Adding insult to injury, DOD predicts sequestration would force the Air Force to give up 15 F-35 strike fighters. The other partners in the triservice program would give up two airplanes (the Navy) and no airplanes (the Marine Corps).

DOD also assumes Congress will approve "compensation savings." This will

be a hard sell: In recent years, lawmakers have eagerly ordered the Defense Department to increase military pay and benefits, even with recruiting and retention at or near all-time highs. But if Congress does not go along with DOD proposals such as a one percent military pay raise in 2015, the Pentagon will have to come up with another \$31.2 billion through 2019. "DOD must also train and equip those we send into harm's way to meet the national security challenges of the future," the report dryly notes.

A decade ago, the Air Force was strained. Today the combat forces are smaller and older. Recent modernization was concentrated in space, mobility, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance accounts.

"The Air Force is now spending about five percent of its [budget] to buy new aircraft"—another record low, wrote Mark A. Gunzinger, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, and David A. Deptula, dean of the Air Force Association's Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, in a recent CSBA report, "Toward a Balanced Combat Air Force."

During the later years of the Cold War, USAF offset the Warsaw Pact's huge numerical advantages by fielding a technologically advanced force operated by highly trained airmen. Many of the same aircraft are still in service, and it is ever harder to keep up the maintenance and training that allow the Air Force to be the world's best.

Something needs to change or USAF will soon have too few aircraft and too old an inventory to defeat advanced threats. The Air Force could soon lack both capacity and capability. Without those, it will also lack credibility against the Russias, Chinas, North Koreas, and Syrias of the world.

Gunzinger and Deptula offer a partial way out this mess: by rebalancing the defense budget. Even if there were a reason for it, the notion that the Army, Navy, and Air Force receive roughly equal shares of Pentagon spending is false, they note.

When "pass through" funding the Air Force never actually controls is factored out, USAF only receives about 22 percent of the DOD budget. ■