

The Real B-2 Mistakes

DEFENSE Secretary Robert M. Gates, addressing an Air Force Association audience on Sept. 16, announced he was “committed” to acquiring a new long-range strike system for the nation. However, he admonished the crowd, “we must not ... repeat what happened with our last manned bomber.”

Gates was referring, of course, to USAF's B-2 stealth program of the 1980s and 1990s. “By the time the research, development, and requirements processes ran their course,” he said, “the aircraft ... turned out to be so expensive—\$2 billion each—that less than one-sixth of the planned fleet of 132 was ever built.” It makes “little sense,” he said, to pursue a prospective B-3 bomber in the same fashion.

With all due respect to Mr. Gates, that is not the way the B-2 saga actually unfolded 20 years ago, and it is not a proper guide for shaping a B-3 program or any other kind of aircraft effort. President George H. W. Bush reluctantly closed down the B-2 under intense Congressional pressure. In that, one can find lots of mistakes not to repeat, but they aren't as Gates describes them.

Now that the Pentagon chief has made an issue of it, it is worth remembering what happened a generation ago. Three main points stand out.

First, Mr. Gates has the cost issue exactly backward. The small production run was not caused mainly by the high cost of each B-2 bomber. Rather, it was the political decision to limit B-2 production to small numbers that led to high per-aircraft costs.

In the original 1981 B-2 plan, USAF proposed to acquire 132 B-2s. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, facing Congressional opposition in 1990, cut the number to 75. That step lowered the total B-2 cost from \$75.4 billion to \$61.1 billion, but it raised the per-aircraft cost from \$571 million to \$815 million.

“Eight hundred million dollars a copy raises immense problems for me,” sniffed Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), even though B-2 spending, on average, fell to about one percent of DOD budgets.

In 1992, the B-2 program was slashed again, this time to 20 aircraft. (One more B-2 was approved later, bringing the total to 21.) The new and lower \$44 billion program cost was spread over a mere

21 aircraft. That's how each B-2 wound up “costing” more than \$2 billion apiece.

Second, the B-2's cost was not the only, or even the most important, reason for the demise of the program. The B-2 ran into trouble in the late 1980s and early 1990s mainly because the 40-year-old Cold War went into a massive and terminal thaw.

The B-2 made its first flight in July 1989. Four months later, the Berlin Wall fell and the Warsaw Pact collapsed. This development eliminated East European targets from the strategic target set

In the B-2 program, one can find lots of mistakes not to repeat, but they aren't as Robert Gates described them.

which the B-2 was designed to cover. The lessening of superpower tensions, combined with massive federal deficits, put further downward pressure on Pentagon spending, forcing Bush into the first of the B-2 cuts.

The failure of the August 1991 hard-line coup in the Soviet Union (followed closely by dissolution of the USSR) weakened the remaining rationale for large numbers of B-2s. “Who is it going to bomb?” sneered Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.). In January 1992, Bush halted the program.

Third, many defense experts continued to call for more B-2 production, even after the program was halted.

In January 1995, seven former Pentagon chiefs wrote to President Clinton, advising him to purchase more B-2s. Signing the letter were Melvin Laird, James Schlesinger, Donald Rumsfeld, Harold Brown, Caspar Weinberger, Frank Carlucci, and even Cheney. The B-2, they said, “remains the most cost-effective means of rapidly projecting force over great distances.”

In 1997, former Bush National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft advised Congress to buy more. He said a fleet of only 21 B-2s wasn't enough to meet US requirements, and that DOD and service opposition to production was “shortsighted and parochial.”

Even so, Congress and the Pentagon rebuffed all calls for additional B-2 bomb-

ers. No proposal ever gained support from the Air Force, which faced severe budget woes. Political pressure on the service was also great.

For all of these reasons, Air Force officials decided USAF would be better off waiting to deal with the bomber issue. It recommended scheduling the next mission area assessment for 2013, though that assessment has been moved up several years.

Funds for initial work on a “next generation bomber” program are still included in this year's defense authorization bill. The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, in a recent study, proposed shooting for a B-3 bomber force of 130 aircraft, entailing a development cost of \$16 billion and a per-aircraft flyaway cost of \$425 million. It would be extremely stealthy, capable of manned and unmanned flight.

As USAF gears up, however, Gates has laid down his marker. “Whatever system is chosen to meet this requirement—be it manned, unmanned, or some combination of the two—it should be one that can realistically be produced and deployed in the numbers originally envisioned,” said Gates.

This has produced something of a quandary. On one hand, his twisted history of the B-2 could generate public apprehension that a new program could wind up producing \$2 billion bombers. On the other hand, he is setting up what looks to be unrealistic expectations about the low cost of a new long-range strike aircraft.

We agree that the US should stick with the program, whatever it turns out to be. The reality, however, is that high-quality weapons don't come cheap.

Speaking to shareholders in May 1990, Kent Kresa, Northrop president, noted what should have been obvious: “A 350,000-pound aircraft with a 172-foot wingspan that is virtually impossible to detect and identify and track and then defend against, and is also more efficient than anything that has preceded it, is not going to be inexpensive.”

This was true of Kresa's B-2. The same will be true of the next bomber. Yet to be seen is whether Washington will stick with the effort when the going gets tough, as it surely will. ■