

Congress and the Air Force spent a decade wrestling over the final fate of the legendary SR-71 Blackbird.



Going Nowhere

On May 31, 1967, a torrential rainstorm assaulted Kadena Air Base on Okinawa, Japan. Paul Bacalis, the head of the CIA's aerial reconnaissance office, was on base that day. Bacalis recalled an aide's question about the A-12 Oxcart sitting on the runway—"What do you say, boss?"—as well his response: "Launch him!"

Bacalis then watched the aircraft head for North Vietnam on its first operational mission. Less than a year later, on March 21, 1968, it was the Air Force SR-71's turn to contribute to the Vietnam War effort. The SR-71 was the military derivative and successor to Lockheed's famed but short-lived A-12 spy aircraft. Maj. Jerome F. O'Malley and Capt. Edward D. Payne embarked from Kadena on a five-hour mission over North Vietnam.

As with the A-12, the SR-71 Blackbird was a technological triumph, capable of flying at altitudes more than 85,000 feet and speeds faster than 2,100 miles per hour. Most importantly, it could be fitted with a variety of sensors, including two Technical Objective Cameras capable of nine-inch resolution, an Optical Bar Camera that could carry either black-and-white or infrared film, or imaging radar, producing imagery even in the presence of cloud cover. The airplane could also carry intercept equipment to gather radar emissions.

While the SR-71 began its career in Asia, its reach would become global—gathering intelligence on targets in America's backyard (Cuba, Nicaragua), as well as in the Middle East (during the 1973 Yom Kippur War and its aftermath, and at Benina Airfield in Libya after the 1986 El Dorado Canyon raid).

Peripheral SR-71 missions included those flown off the borders of East Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union and later missions yielding radar images of Soviet submarine ports.

By the end of 1989, Air Force SR-71s had flown 3,551 operational sorties.

But in the late 1980s, even as SR-71s flew missions around the world, its days as a reconnaissance platform appeared numbered. Key staff members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Larry D. Welch, and Lt. Gen. Leo W. Smith II of the Budget Review Board all favored its retirement.

The primary argument focused on the substantial costs of operating the fleet—for pilots, fuel, maintenance, and facilities—while the benefits of the high-performance aircraft were marginal, given the capabilities of satel-

The SR-71 reconnaissance aircraft gathered intelligence on hotspots from Cuba to the Mideast and the Soviet Union. At left: An SR-71 undergoes maintenance on a flight line. Below: A 9th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing Blackbird lands after a mission.

lites and other reconnaissance aircraft. In addition, the Pentagon reported there was an air-breathing successor to the SR-71 under development.

Passionate Supporters

A temporary reprieve was granted in 1988, because Adm. Lee Baggett Jr., head of US Atlantic Command, wanted the SR-71 to continue its coverage of Russia's Kola Peninsula, home to a significant Soviet naval presence.

Baggett took his case to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The JCS agreed to fund the SR-71 detachment at RAF Mildenhall, UK, for another year, but even better for SR-71 supporters, the Senate Appropriations Committee also approved another year's funding for SR-71 facilities at Palmdale, Calif., and at Kadena.

The victory was temporary. Before the end of January 1989, the trade press reported the Air Force planned to retire the entire Blackbird fleet.

There were dissenters to the proposal. During hearings in 1989, Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio) challenged the decision, stating he did "not buy it on cost," enumerating the aircraft's capabilities, and characterizing the decision as "crazy."

The Blackbird generated large numbers of loyal and passionate supporters who were enamored with the aircraft's unique capabilities, extreme performance, and distinct, classic appearance. But passion alone could not save the

airplane, and on March 6, 1990, pilot Lt. Col. Raymond E. Yeilding and reconnaissance systems operator Lt. Col. Joseph T. Vida took off from Palmdale on what was anticipated to be the SR-71's retirement flight.

Sixty-eight minutes later, they landed at Dulles Airport in suburban Northern Virginia, having set four speed records on their mission to deliver the aircraft to the National Air and Space Museum.

Then, on Aug. 2, 1990, a little less than six months after Yeilding and Vida landed at Dulles, Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein made one in a series of miscalculations that would eventually put his head in a hangman's noose.

Hussein ordered three Republican Guard divisions into Kuwait, triggering a US-led international response. A buildup of troops followed, as the coalition prepared for air and ground campaigns.

The possibility of war led to calls for resuming SR-71 operations. Ben Rich, the head of Lockheed Skunk Works (the SR-71's legendary development shop), contacted Air Force Vice Chief of Staff Gen. John Michael Loh and offered to put together a package of three airplanes for about \$100 million. Rich suggested using the supersonic spy aircraft not only to gather intelligence but also "to sonic-boom the bastards." Loh presented the idea to Defense Secretary Richard B. Cheney, who wasn't interested, telling Loh, "Once we let this damned airplane back in, we'll never get it back out."

Fast

By Jeffrey T. Richelson





Airmen assist pilot Maj. Barry MacKean after an SR-71 flight. Opponents of continued Blackbird operations objected to its cost and felt that satellites and other reconnaissance assets could do the job.

Other voices for reactivation came from the Senate and the military. A request from Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W. Va.) to use the Blackbird to support the Desert Shield force went nowhere. Even the pleas of US Central Command's Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf were in vain, as the Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Gen. Colin L. Powell rejected his first request, and a second passed up to Cheney fared no better.

The Gulf War was not sufficient to get the SR-71 recalled to active duty, not even the postwar Department of Defense assessment, "The Conduct of

the Persian Gulf War," which asserted, "The SR-71 ... would have provided broad-area coverage of a large number of Iraqi units" during Desert Shield and "would have been of value for BDA [bomb damage assessment] and determining Iraqi force dispositions" during Desert Storm.

Back From the Grave

In 1994, nearly four years after the Blackbird's nominal final flight, proponents finally began to have more success.

On Feb. 3, after a briefing by Lockheed on SR-71 reactivation, Gil I.

Klinger, the Pentagon's director of space and advanced technology strategy, requested the company produce a study on the cost of reactivation, with the results presented by mid-March. Lockheed proposed returning three refurbished SR-71s to operational status for 12 months, with one 30-day deployment, for \$79.4 million.

Thanks to Byrd and several of his colleagues, Lockheed got what it wanted. Byrd and others contended that in 1990, the Pentagon was less than fully truthful about the status of the planned replacement for the SR-71.

The efforts of Byrd and other SR-71 supporters paid off when the DOD appropriations bill for Fiscal 1995 provided \$100 million, with \$60 million earmarked for restoring three aircraft to operational status—cost estimates validated by a July 15, 1994, Pentagon study.

Other appropriations tracked closely with the Lockheed proposal; the budget would fund one year of operations, with one 30-day deployment during which there would be 10 operational sorties.

While the absence of an SR-71 replacement was one factor in the Senate appropriators' decision to breathe new life into the Blackbird program, another was likely the continuing conflict with North Korea over its nuclear program,

Below, SSgt. David Hansen directs an SR-71.





which had the Pentagon studying scenarios for an attack on the country's Yongbyon reactor.

Even without conflict, restoring the three SR-71s to operational status began on Jan. 5, 1995. But while Congress could force DOD and the Air Force to restore the airplanes to operational status, it couldn't force them to actually use them—or stop them from planning for program termination.

A December 1994 congressional memo to the commander of Air Combat Command noted the Air Force and Pentagon leadership was not programming funds to operate the airplanes in the 1996 fiscal year or beyond. In addition, it reported the Pentagon was setting aside \$5 million for program termination costs. The memo also noted the “recent discussion with Air Staff ... indicate[s] that the congressional proponents for the program will be satisfied if the Air Force shows it is making ‘good faith efforts’ to achieve a deployable mission capability within the current fiscal year.”

A month after the reactivation began, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, in a handwritten note to two other senior Air Force officers, wrote, “We see the SR-71 as a one-year congressionally directed action that should be terminated ASAP.”

It did not appear Fogleman would get his wish, when further funds were appropriated in April.

But while funds were appropriated, they were not authorized to be spent by the Senate Armed Services Committee. This set off months of legal wrangling over whether funds

could be spent if they had not been authorized.

On April 16, 1996, relying on the findings of DOD and Air Force general counsels, the Air Force ordered an immediate halt to all SR-71 operations.

Call in the Lawyers

The legal findings, allowing DOD and the Air Force to shut down SR-71 operations, were also the basis for denying two requests from members of the Intelligence Community to employ the Blackbird. On May 28, 1996, the National Security Agency requested a mission over Bosnia. Then in June, the Defense Intelligence Agency submitted a request from US Pacific Command

A Blackbird from RAF Mildenhall, UK, takes off through the fog. Its cameras could produce imagery even in cloudy conditions.

for a mission, with the likely target of North Korea. That request met the same fate as NSA's.

After Blackbird supporters on the Senate Appropriations Committee threatened to block the Fiscal 1997 intelligence authorization act, \$39 million was appropriated for the SR-71—\$30 million for operations and maintenance and \$9 million for procurement.

In 1997, another military command requested assistance from the SR-71, this time US Southern Command, one



An SR-71 taxis along a flight line. Numerous loyal supporters admired the SR-71's distinct appearance and capabilities: It could fly higher than 85,000 feet and faster than 2,100 mph.



At top, Lt. Col. William Dyckman (l) and Lt. Col. Thomas Bergam deplane from the SR-71's last operational flight in 1990. At right, the high-altitude pressure suits worn by Blackbird pilots.

of whose primary missions was, and is, counternarcotics.

The US Intelligence Community monitors every aspect of the drug trade, from cultivation to refining to shipment. But in 1997, SOUTHCOM felt some of the answers it wanted required a greater overhead collection effort. The command first looked to the venerable U-2 spyplane.

The U-2 Was Unavailable

From Oct. 15, 1996, through Dec. 15, 1996, and then again from April 12, 1997, until June 14, 1997, SOUTHCOM requested U-2 missions in its area of responsibility to provide broad-area coverage in support of its counternarcotics missions. A secret Sept. 12, 1997, Joint Staff memo, since declassified, explained that "wide-area imagery is required to identify specific drug laboratory and transshipment point locations and associated trafficker ingress and egress routes."

But the command's requests were denied because, according to the memo, the U-2 fleet was fully committed to fulfilling the "higher priority requests" from other regional commands.

With the U-2 repeatedly unavailable, on Aug. 18, 1997, SOUTHCOM's operations directorate requested two SR-71 missions be flown in September. For a while, it appeared they were going to get them.

An order was prepared for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, approving the SR-71 missions, when



the Air Force objected. Air Force Lt. Gen. John P. Jumper, the deputy chief of staff for air and space operations, told the Joint Staff's director in early September the Air Force believed a U-2 undergoing maintenance work could be used to fulfill SOUTHCOM's request.

Whether this U-2 ever flew in support of SOUTHCOM is not publicly known, but it is known the SR-71s never did. Ultimately, the Joint Staff's operations directorate informed the command there would be no Blackbird missions.

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The Joint Staff veto of the SOUTHCOM missions was followed by a higher-level veto of the Blackbird program from the White House.

In October, President Bill Clinton line-item-vetoed the entire SR-71 program. All operations except routine maintenance stopped. But then, in June 1998, the Supreme Court overturned the Line Item Veto Act.

On Aug. 5, 1998, Rep. Norman D. Dicks (D-Wash.), a veteran congressman with a background in intelligence issues, wrote to DOD requesting the \$39 million previously approved for the SR-71 be used for the program again, with the authority to spend the money being extended through the 1999 fiscal year.

Sixteen days later, William J. Lynn III, then the Pentagon's comptroller, wrote Dicks with bad news, saying, "While I fully understand your thoughts on the matter, unfortunately, it is no longer a course that is open to us." Lynn explained that in March 1998, the Secretary of Defense had approved permanent retirement for the SR-71 and the Air Force had begun retiring the aircraft in April.

"To reverse this process now would require much more than ... \$39 million," Lynn noted, and could not be done during the remainder of the fiscal year. The department was powerless to extend funding.

Lynn also informed Dicks that the Air Force had better uses for \$30 million in maintenance funds—notably the maintenance costs associated with aircraft returning from duty in Southwest Asia. The SR-71, Lynn noted to Dicks, "was an extremely valuable reconnaissance asset, and we plan to retire these aircraft in a manner befitting their outstanding contribution to our nation's defense."

In the end, the repeated attempts to get the SR-71 back in the air, flying missions, proved futile. Its advocates in Congress had a passionate belief in its continued viability, and various intelligence agencies and military commands believed there were times when it could satisfy their requirements.

None of those groups were able to overcome the opposition of those who felt the SR-71 had outlived its utility and wanted to put the Blackbird out to pasture—and keep it there. ■