Remarks by the Honorable Michael W. Wynne
Secretary of the Air Force
at the Aero Club of Washington DC
May 22, 2008

It is a pleasure to be at the Aero Club today and among so many friends in the aviation industry.

From national programs -- such as the Civil Reserve Aircraft Fleet -- to local programs -- such as the relationship among Cardozo TransTech Academy, the Aero Club, and the 495th Air Refueling Wing at Andrews Air Force Base -- the Air Force and commercial aviation industry have long partnered to enhance the nation's national security and economic vitality.

Our country's vastness and its economy depend upon commercial aviation as the backbone of national and international commerce. Global trade undergirds America's strength and allows the United States to project its economic power.

In my opinion, the commercial aviation industry and the Airport Associations are a crucial component of America's economic strength. Strong, healthy US commercial aviation is vital for America's ability to project its economic power. This has been true for decades, and will remain true into the foreseeable future.

Our Common Challenges
Today, I would like to focus on the many common challenges that we in the military share with our commercial and general aviation brethren.

As Secretary of the Air Force, I am CEO of what is essentially the world's largest airline. I am Secretary of the military department with the greatest diversity of aircraft and air missions. We operate airports across the United States and even in foreign countries.

I am responsible for the operations, availability, mission success, and long-term viability of a fleet of over 50 aircraft types, most of which have multiple variants. The breadth of our air missions range from delivering humanitarian relief to devastated areas, as we are doing in Burma and China today … to monitoring treaties that support confidence-building measures … to being prepared to place a silver cloud and precision weapon over any point on the planet on a moment's notice.

Included within our fleet are fighters, bombers, and special operations assets to project America's Global Power; tactical airlift, strategic airlift and tankers to ensure America's Global Reach; and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance assets to deliver Global Vigilance.

Today, the total Air Force inventory numbers at slightly over 5700 aircraft, including helicopters and multiple types of unmanned aerial systems, flown by over 19,000 pilots. This includes our regular, reserve and Air National Guard forces.

Our tactical airlift fleet consists of over 500 C-130s and a strategic airlift fleet of over 280 C-17s and C-5s. We also operate 85 passenger aircraft to transport our Nation's civilian and military leadership.

Our C-17s host our aero medical evacuation capability. Aeromedevac is the military equivalent of the Corporate Angel Network, which I know is passion for many in this room. At its essence, aeromedevac is a flying intensive care unit.

I often call aero medical evacuation the "miracle of Iraq." Today, if a wounded warrior in Iraq has a set of vital signs and makes it to the theater hospital at Balad, the survival rate of those casualties is over 97%. Our Air Force medical community, including our aero medical evacuation capability, plays a significant role in this survival rate.

Our tanker fleet refuels not just Air Force aircraft, but also aircraft flown by the Navy, Army, Marines and our Allied partners. Our tanker fleet consists of 59 KC-10s and over 480 KC-135s. It is a pivotal component of the Joint fight.

Our KC-135 tankers currently average over 48 years of service, and our plans do not fully retire the KC-135 tanker until 2040.

Just as commercial aviation is a backbone of America's economic vitality, our tactical airlift, strategic airlift, and tanker fleet are the backbone of America's ability to project its strength swiftly and decisively across global distances.

Today, that means flying humanitarian relief missions into Burma and China … at the same time we track and strike insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan … and simultaneously use airpower, such as in Korea, to let all of the world's leaders know that America's commitment to democratic governance and the rule of law is steadfast.

A Geriatric Air Force

I never intended to become Secretary of a geriatric Air Force.

But 17 years of continuous deployments in the Middle East and the procurement holiday in the 1990s means that your Air Force flies the oldest fleet of military aircraft that our nation has ever known. When my generals attend graduations for pilot training, parents find it difficult to believe that our nation is sending some of their sons and daughters to fly planes that are nearly 50 years old. That, however, is today's reality.

As you might expect, our maintainers do the heavy lifting of keeping our fleet ready for any contingency. I am so proud of our maintainers, and I sing their praises even chance I have. Even in the most austere environments, even in 110 degree heat and with dust bowls sweeping across the flight line, or even at 40 below just south of the Arctic Circle, they keep our aircraft ready and the mission moving.

I am sure that you find the same in your organizations – that your maintainers deserve much of the credit for keeping planes in the air and not sitting in the hangar.

The U.S. Air Force bases out of 180 airfields worldwide. About half of our airfields are managed by civilian airport authorities – especially among our Air National Guard units. That means that partnering on airfield, airspace, and fuels management issues is never far from my mind. Partnering across civilian-military enterprises, and public-private enterprises, is crucial for how we move forward.

Next-Generation Air Traffic Control, Net-centricity, and Special Use Airspace
The Department of Defense, and the Air Force in particular, is partnering closely with the Federal Aviation Administration to implement the Next Generation Air Traffic Control system, and the promise that it possesses. When I was in Europe just over a month ago, the trip reinforced just how critical it is for us as a nation to move forward and partner smartly on implementing Next Generation Air Traffic Control.

The Federal Aviation Administration reported in October that the Next-Generation pilot programs in Alaska and Ohio are already producing significant results. For example, the FAA credits the Capstone program in Alaska, which deploys the Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) in areas with no radars, with a 40% drop in general aviation accidents. The FAA also reports that United Parcel Service fitted 300 aircraft with ADS-B at its Louisville hub, resulting in 30% reduction in noise and 34% decline in emissions.[1]

The network centric environment and machine-to-machine level data exchanges are vital for next generation systems. Next generation systems provide the foundation for robust, efficient, secure, and timely transport of information. They support a broad community of users and individual subscribers. They are also scalable, with features that allow adaptation for growth in operations and shifts in demand.

By balancing civilian requests for special use airspace against current levels of readiness, NextGen planners can meet DoD's mission and readiness needs in special use airspace. Then, we can release the airspace when no longer required to meet military requirements. The key to striking this balance is building transparent information systems that support knowledge-enabled decisions. The key is also to add time as a dimension in the planning – i.e., working the release of airspace not in blocks, but dynamic. We are evaluating several initiatives to enhance east coast access as well as identify how we can improve the processes for releasing airspace during holiday periods.

Global Positioning System
There are times when I really do wish that when a person turns on his or her Garmin, a message would pop onto the screen that says, "Brought to you courtesy of your U.S. Air Force." The Air Force developed, launched, and continues to maintain and upgrade the Global Positioning System, which provides unprecedented capability for both military and civilian users.

The planned improvements for the Global Positioning System provide a solid foundation for civilian use of NextGen capabilities. The Department of Defense has committed to 24 satellites in 6 planes and a semi-synchronous orbit. Currently, the GPS constellations include 31 healthy satellites. Future satellites will have increased accuracy and integrity, with increasing capabilities fielded at each new satellite launch.

What can be accomplished with this technology fully implemented is quite remarkable. It starts with better planned routes, approaches and departures, saving time and money—while allowing greater density. We could learn again the lesson of the Berlin Airlift, which is celebrating a 60th anniversary—arrivals and departures in constricted airspace in record time, at densities now forbidden.

[1] "Fact Sheet: Next Generation Air Transportation System 2006 Progress Report," Federal Aviation Administration, October 2007, available: http://www.faa.gov/news/fact_sheets/news_story.cfm?newsId=8336

Alternative Energy
We are also partnering on a different front, that of reducing our demand for energy, by using the natural environment around each of the Air Force Bases. So at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, we have the largest Solar Panel Farm in America, some 140 acres, saving our Air Force $1 million per year.

At Dyess Air Force Base in Texas we are using waste-to-energy and wind energy to reduce our needs there. At other bases we are partnering with local energy providers to be more agile when it comes to the Environment and Energy. Our nations' airport authorities are doing the same thing, which makes sense, especially at the rates we are paying today.

The Air Force uses about 7 million gallons of aviation fuel each day, and last year our total aviation fuel bill topped $6 billion. Every $10 increase in the cost of a barrel of oil translates into an increase of over $600 million in our operations and maintenance outlays annually.

The net result is that instability in oil prices wreaks havoc on how we manage our flying hour program across the Air Force. The Air Force has always been a technology leader, but the current environment impels us toward even greater action in technology and alternative fuels development.

The Air Force and the Defense Energy Support Center, which is part of Defense Logistics Agency, is currently looking at transitioning from JP-8 to Jet A. This could potentially save the Air Force $30 million per year. It would reduce the number of jet fuels produced and provide greater opportunity to have a single battlefield fuel in the future.

The Air Force is also working closely with the Commercial Aviation Alternative Fuels Initiative (CAAFI) to introduce and certify the use of domestically produced alternative fuels. We both are working on the certification of our respective fleets on a 50/50 blend of synthetic fuel produced by the Fischer Tropsche process. We plan to certify the entire Air Force fleet on synthetic fuels by 2011 or 2012.

Our intent is to diversify our supplier base for energy needs, which includes encouraging new suppliers to enter the market. Our long-term aim is to reduce costs, increase price stability and enhance energy independence. We plan on making a market, not being a supplier; but this takes capital—and therefore a market with a long term outlook, and more importantly a long term commitment to purchase at the right quality levels.

As we develop and evaluate various alternative fuel options, we also want to think through the entire life cycle of fuels management – from extraction to consumption. For example, with bio-fuels, we need to consider the effects on food prices, water use, and engine maintenance. With clean-burning coal-to-liquid fuels, there are opportunities to reduce carbon footprints and reduce maintenance costs given increased BTU levels compared to other alternatives.

We also need to keep a close eye on the regulatory environment. It is entirely plausible that European regulators will soon challenge the aviation industry with some type of cap on carbon emissions. Reducing the carbon footprint is a top priority for many European countries. As we continue toward synchronizing standards across international borders, we could find the U.S. aviation industry affected.

Alternative fuels offer incredible opportunities for public-private partnerships. When the military sponsors technology "mega-projects," civil and commercial innovation often follows.

Technology flows from the defense to the commercial sectors, transforming industries and even economies. For example, ARPAnet led to the Internet and the Atlas rocket project led to commercial space programs. I think we could find the same synergy with alternative fuels.

Conclusion

I appreciate your invitation to come speak today and to discuss the many common challenges that we face in military, commercial and general aviation. We partner in a number of significant areas, and we have many new and exciting areas to explore together.

Your Air Force operates an incredibly large and dynamic air transportation network, with thousands of aircraft and dozens of airports across the world. We transport people, supplies, and equipment when and where needed. We provide in-transit medical care for our wounded warriors that is second to none. We partner with industry, the FAA, ICAO and many host nations to operate the Air Force enterprise efficiently and effectively.

Many in this room are civilian employers of our Reserve and Guard forces. Flexibility in your personnel policies allows Airmen to contribute their time and talent to your organizations and their country. Your efforts ensure the viability of one of our nation's strengths: the citizen-Airman. Thank you for your support of our military members, on both an institutional and personal level.

Monday is Memorial Day. As you enjoy this national holiday with your family and friends, please consider taking a moment to reflect on the Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines who offer so much to their country.

God bless you, our United States Air Force, and the nation that we serve.

I am happy to open the floor to questions.