Pentagon, Congress, states, and governors struggle to set the right course for the Air National Guard.

By Rebecca Grant

Total Force Turbulence


Each of these criticisms—and many more—was in recent months directed at Air Force leadership. What brought the service under such withering fire was a collection of Air Force proposals that would reduce, reshape, and relocate significant parts of the 108,000-strong Air National Guard.

Rarely, if ever, had such broad condemnation come down on the corporate Air Force for its dealings with reserve components—the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve. As the strong language made all too plain, serious rifts had been opened up between the Air Force and the Guard over ANG’s future.

Over the past year, several powerful political factors converged to create divisions:

- The QDR. Throughout 2005, the Congressionally mandated Quadrennial Defense Review, a top-to-bottom Pentagon assessment of US military forces and policies, generated pressure on the Air Force to cut its overall fighter force structure. Fighters are a significant part of ANG, and the Air...
Force marked the Guard’s fighter force structure for painful reductions that ANG supporters resisted.

Future Total Force. The FTF concept, which generated little stir when unveiled in 1997, began to put the Air Guard in a bind. It pushed ANG to turn away from traditional fighter and mobility tasks and toward “emerging” missions such as unmanned aerial systems (UASes), cyberwar, intelligence, and space operations. FTF plans called for creating “blended” units (active and Guard or Reserve combined), which sparked serious questions about state control over ANG units.

BRAC. In May, DOD presented a long-awaited—and much-dreaded—base realignment and closure hit list. It contained USAF plans to pull aircraft from 30 ANG units to reduce the size and cost of infrastructure. It became clear that some Guardsmen would have to move or leave ANG altogether. From Massachusetts to Nevada, governors reacted with shock and anger. Illinois resisted plans to move its fighters to Indiana. Connecticut threatened to sue the Air Force if it tried to move that state’s A-10s.

By fall the BRAC debate was settling, but it was clear that it would take a while to heal the internal divisions and put the Air Guard back on a stable path.

Few had foreseen this storm. Last year, the Air Force was anticipating unique transformation opportunities, not intramural warfare. Lt. Gen. Duncan J. McNabb, then USAF’s director of plans, told Congress in early 2004 that the Air Force over the next two years would have a “rare chance” to “reshape and transform” itself into a new “Total Force.”

Instead, the Air Force ran into unprecedented resistance in 2005. It became a boiling fight that began to cloud the fate of the Future Total Force, generate new pressures on the Air Force budget, and undermine USAF’s plans for transformation.

It also loosened the hard-won bonds between all airmen, be they active or Guard. According to ANG Maj. Gen. Kenneth R. Clark of New Hampshire, the confrontation led some Guardsmen to think that “you maybe don’t have the partnership you thought.”

Clark’s comments, made at a Heritage Foundation event in June, were unusual because his state, far from losing out, was set to gain KC-135s from California ANG units. His words underscored the fact that the central issue was how much say the states would have in the Guard’s future roles, missions, and force structure decisions.

Two Basic Questions

The controversy created two lingering questions: Who will shape the future role and structure of the Air Guard? How will the states and the Air Force balance competing desires and new missions?

The Air National Guard has a degree of independence from Washington, which it derives from the language of Title 32 of the United States Code. The bulk of the language was drafted in the 1950s and sets down the organization, responsibilities, and chain of command of the National Guard, both Army and Air Force.

Title 32 reflects a different era. Much of its language emphasizes the need to prevent Guard units from falling behind in war readiness or depleting their manpower. Clearly, those phrases were written long before the Air Guard became a full partner in what is now a highly sophisticated, all-volunteer active force engaged in global and homeland missions.

Various Title 32 amendments have altered the status of the Air National Guard. However, it has been quite a while since this uniquely American institution has had a major makeover. Earlier rounds of base closures as well as post-Cold War force structure cuts zeroed in on the active Air Force and had a much smaller impact on the Air Guard.

The aircraft inventory of the Air Guard, for example, held steady at about 1,500 from after the Korean War through the mid-1990s. In the mid-1990s, ANG shed a net of about 300 mostly outdated aircraft, after which the force once again held steady at a new level of about 1,200 aircraft.

The physical size of the Air National Guard may have remained virtually unchanged, but the quality of the partnership between it and the active Air Force certainly did not. That relationship improved dramatically. USAF opened the door for more Guard involvement and got a positive response. Guard units gave up the “flying club” mentality and, in return, received modern equipment from USAF.

Soon enough, ANG was playing an integral role in all facets of air operations. By the time of the 1991 Gulf War, the Air Force depended on the Guard for specialized missions, such as RF-4 aerial reconnaissance, and large chunks of air mobility and air refueling missions.

Problems caused by deep, post-Cold War cuts to the active duty force pushed the active Air Force and ANG together even more tightly. The Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve became the repositories of 65 percent of the Total Force’s tactical airlift, 60 percent of its air refueling capability, 35 percent of its strategic airlift, and 33 percent of its fighter-attack capability.

During the post-Sept. 11, 2001, Global War on Terror, the interdependence of Guard and active forces grew again. Commanders in the field
proudly noted that they saw no difference in active and Guard performance. For example, Marine Corps forward air controllers near Baghdad called for close air support during an April 9, 2003, firefight. They didn’t want bombs; they wanted strafing. Michigan ANG’s Maj. Scott Cuel, an A-10 pilot, received the call and put 600 precise rounds into the Iraqi target.

Pride in the Guard’s operational excellence is one of the reasons that proposals to move airplanes—such as Michigan A-10s—are so politically contentious.

Who’s In Charge?

The legal issue is as follows: Section 104 of Title 32 states that “the President may designate” the types of units that go to each state or territory. However, it says, “No change in the branch, organization, or allotment of a unit located entirely within a state may be made without the approval of its governor.”

Several governors have cited the law in support of their claim that they, and not the federal government, have power over state ANG units. The Justice Department issued a ruling contrary to that claim—but to little effect. By late August, Connecticut, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee had filed lawsuits to block the Pentagon plan, and several other states were considering similar legal actions.

From there, the issue gets even murkier. The state governor has full authority “in time of peace” over many types of missions for Guard forces. C-130s ferrying rescue personnel and supplies to flood-ravaged areas work directly for the state governor, an official who can summon them on short notice. However, if the same C-130s are called for federal missions, such as combat in Iraq, the governor is not in the chain of command.

Money, as always, is an issue. States fund the salaries of most Guardsmen unless they are put on federal duty. Equipment—as such as a fighter aircraft—is purchased with federal money, as is ammo, trucks, military construction supplies, and the like.

State contributions and the part-time status of most Guardsmen make the Air Guard a good economic deal for the nation, but many costs are borne by the federal government.

Also at issue is the relationship between the Air National Guard and the communities that create it. No one wants to weaken the militia concept that has been part of American life since colonial times. Guardsmen are community members. Recruiting new members depends heavily on word of mouth and the appeal of serving with friends, neighbors, and even family members. The Guard can keep costs low by drawing in part-timers, and that means staying close to the community and local employers. Some may be willing to commute to units somewhat distant from their hometowns, but many others probably will not.

More fundamentally, state authorities have fought to keep control of Air Guard assets because they’ve learned to love what they do. “We’ll have to call Massachusetts and ask them to do flyovers for Memorial Day,” said the Connecticut adjutant general, Brig. Gen. Thad Martin, in remarks reported by the Hartford Courant.

“Flyovers are the least of it. West Virginia’s adjutant general, Maj. Gen. Allen E. Tackett, called the state’s C-130s “the most valuable resource that we have” because they have provided an essential element in the safety and care of citizens in that flood-prone state.

Another issue weighing in the balance is unit pride. Many Air Guard units have turned in exceptional service in Afghanistan and Iraq, and moves to transfer their equipment to other states would break up the team. Rep. Joe Schwarz (R-Mich.), for instance, noted the combat record of the A-10 units from Battle Creek, Mich. “This unit will have its iron shipped to another base, but its people are gone forever,” he said in a July 20 hearing. This will “eviscerate” the Air Guard in Michigan.

Got To Have Airplanes

State authorities also are concerned about the consequences of shifting the Air Guard to new missions of the type that don’t include aircraft sitting on the ramp. It’s a cultural issue. They believe that the loss or diminution of the basic flying mission will make ANG duty inherently less desirable and lead to personnel losses and shortages.

The chief of the federal National Guard Bureau, Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, echoed this view. “If you take the flying unit out of the National Guard, you’ve taken the Air out of the ... Air National Guard,” he said. “Pretty soon, you don’t have an Air National Guard.”

Blum added, “I am personally committed to stationing a flying unit in every state and territory, bar none.”

Tactical fighters lay at the heart of the months-long war of words between the active Air Force and the Air Guard. The active force lost nearly half of its 37.5 tactical fighter wings during the early 1990s. As a result, the active Air Force now accounts for 64 percent of Total Force fighter aircrews, while the Guard provides about 30 percent. The Air Force Reserve supplies six percent.

Worse, plans called for the total Air Force to shed another big chunk of fighter force structure—the equivalent of a fighter wing each year for five years, or a cut of about 25 percent. The question all year was: Which
component will give blood? Air Force senior leaders said it should be the Air Guard.

They noted that, throughout the 1990s, advanced precision guided weapons increased manyfold the combat capability of each fighter. Today’s fighter force is much smaller than it was in 1991, during Desert Storm, but it can strike a far larger number of aim points.

Moreover, stealth and other improvements embodied in the F/A-22 and F-35 fighters would cut the Air Force’s future losses to enemy air defenses. The Air Force, as a result, decided that it no longer needed to maintain a large reserve force of legacy aircraft to replace aircraft and crews lost in battle.

The upshot was that fewer fighters are needed for the mission. Today’s force of about 2,500 tactical warplanes (active, Guard, and Reserve) could well shrink to as few as 1,700 in the next decade. Older F-16s and F-15s would retire, leaving behind a lean force of F/A-22s, F-35s, and some later-model F-15E and other legacy fighters.

Top USAF officials argued that the Air Force could not impose these new reductions on the active fighter units and still preserve a semblance of Total Force balance.

**Fork in the Road**

The Guard thus faced diverging paths. On the one hand, it could hold onto every fighter squadron that it has now, but, as a result of wear and tear and other factors, wind up with fewer and fewer fighters to spread across those squadrons as time went on. (USAF projects that, in a little more than a decade, an average ANG fighter squadron would have a mere six aircraft.) On the other hand, the Guard could close down units, roll up flags, and consolidate its remaining fighters into a relative handful of squadrons big enough to be stable and efficient.

The Air Force decided to take the second route, but the Air Guard resisted. Therein hung the biggest issue. Fighter numbers had to be reduced; the only real questions were when and where.

The new streamlining moves promised to bring the Air Guard into line with the active component’s reorganization, begun more than a decade ago.

“We took down [active] flags to keep the numbers of aircraft up in [active] squadrons,” said USAF Lt. Gen. Stephen Wood, director of plans on the Air Staff. “In the Air National Guard and in the Air Force Reserve, we kept the same number of flags—squadrons across states and [territories]—but lowered the [per-unit] number of aircraft” as systems slowly aged out.

This time, senior USAF leaders believed the Guard should follow the active force’s lead. There was to be no loss of actual ANG personnel spaces. Vanished flying squadrons would be replaced by units responsible for other types of missions.

As many viewed it, moving on from fighters to other, newer missions was a natural result of the maturation of air and space power. BRAC may have been a forcing factor, but it was the Future Total Force initiative that called for the Air Guard to follow the active duty Air Force into the new missions such as UASes, space, and cyber-warfare.

Reorganization was part of that plan, but it proved to be highly controversial. Critics worried that the FTF plans for new missions and blended units would undercut state prerogatives and dilute the unique esprit de corps that characterized long-standing, local-based air units.

Already, however, FTF has had some successes. USAF’s goal was to station more active and reserve component members together to keep units robust and to take advantage of Guard experience. The 116th Air Control Wing, Robbins AFB, Ga., flies the E-8 Joint STARS battle management aircraft. It has been working under the FTF concept since 2002. At Creech AFB, Nev., Predator UAS squadrons draw on active, Guard, and Reserve members.
The Guard and Reserve forces have the kind of experienced personnel that become high-value assets needed for the active components to meet their force requirements.

Brig. Gen. Charles V. Ickes II, deputy director, Air National Guard, noted the power provided by ANG experience. “The vast majority of our maintainers are a little older and a little more experienced,” he said. “They will more rapidly [give] experience [to] the young active duty folks. That’s the same for our aircrew members.”

Despite FTF’s positive features, trust and consensus were required to make the project work. Those elements were seriously damaged by the BRAC and QDR imbroglios.

National Guard Bureau

A key player in this drama was the National Guard Bureau, headquartered in Washington, D.C. This bureau encompasses both the Army Guard and Air Guard and is headed by Blum, who is a Title 10, federal active duty military officer.

Managing the Guard requires cooperation between the states, Air Force, and Guard Bureau. The process calls for the Air Force to lay out future requirements, which then go to the Air Guard office within the National Guard Bureau, which then determines a new mission set apportioned to states and various Guard units. According to Wood, the Air Force already had identified more than 100 of these “emerging mission” opportunities, some that would be core missions of 21st century operations.

Blum pointed out that, when it comes to planning future missions, his Guard Bureau is “stuck in the middle” between USAF and the 54 adjutants general of the states and territories. He added, “I act as the channel of communication” between these elements.

Blum made it clear that his NGB was “totally involved” in the development of future missions sets and in preparations for the 2005 Quadrennial Defense Review. He also emphasized that USAF’s leaders had pledged to look after ANG’s interests no less than those of the active force.

He told reporters earlier in the year: “I have been assured by the Secretary of the Air Force and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force ... that the Air Force will not exclude the Air National Guard from any mission set, nor will we be denied the opportunity to fly and operate any equipment that will be developed and fielded in the Air Force.”

Blum also went on record with favorable comments on FTF. “We in the National Guard Bureau ... are in there every day involved in Future Total Force,” he said in a July 20 appearance before the House Armed Services Committee. “Twelve adjutants general are making recommendations [as state representatives] ... on Future Total Force and the way ahead.”

“It’s Not His Lane”

However, Blum contended that the armed services should not cross into sensitive territory by trying to shape Guard missions in anything more than a general way. The NBG chief had a firm response when asked whether he thought the Chief of Staff of the Air Force had the power to dictate missions for specific units.

“It’s not his authority,” declared Blum. “It’s not his responsibility. It’s not his lane. It’s mine.”

When force structure has been placed in the Guard, he said, it is up to the Guard to decide what to do with it. He added, “I have made that very clear.”

Blum reported that disagreement over this matter had become a sore point with the Air Guard. “I don’t have that issue with the Army,” he said. “It is only the Air Force.... They are starting to discover that the Air National Guard is part of the National Guard. They have viewed it as part of the federal reserve of the Air Force for many years.”

With those remarks as a prologue, Blum’s declared intent to keep a flying unit in every state began to stand out as a marker—and a possible future source of contention.

Blum went on to say that, from his perspective, the airframes themselves were not the most important considerations. “The flying unit brings with it all of the complementary pieces—engineers, base facility operations, security, communications, command and control, fire fighting, medical facilities, logistics facilities,” he said.

“It’s the least important part for the governor of the state. What is important for the governor of the state is the presence of all of those enablers, all of those combat support specialties that are necessary to sustain and generate that air unit.” They would be critical to state missions, homeland security operations, or federal operations.

Complicating everything was the resurgent role of the Air Guard in homeland security missions. Guard air defense fighters were the ones that responded first on 9/11. Now they fly about 90 percent of the air sovereignty missions. They are backed by air refueling units and mobility forces that are critical to emergency response plans of all types.


The emergence of this prominent new homeland mission made the governors even more reluctant to surrender any of their Guard capabilities. ANG C-130 transports and other force elements, it should be noted, have been key components in exercises for statewide emergency response.

State governors do have the authority to organize and maintain defense forces, and they hold full rights to use those forces within their state borders “in time of peace,” as Title 32 put it. However, efficient homeland missions could require the nation to take another look at how to adapt traditional state militia concepts to 21st century needs.

Some argued that ANG responses
should be organized not by state but by region (as is the case with the Federal Emergency Management Agency). Biological weapon attacks and other nightmare scenarios almost inevitably would demand a rapid, regional, federally organized response that would tap into ANG and active units from multiple locations.

National or State Missions?

Proponents of change made the case that new threats do not always respect state borders. ANG’s air sovereignty fighters are performing a national mission, not a state mission, they note, adding that the Guard of tomorrow may be more a resource for one nation than for 54 states and territories.

“Some states are dramatically larger in size than others,” said Rep. Victor F. Snyder (D-Ark.), a member of the House Armed Services Committee.

“All 54 adjutants general realize that we need to modernize and we need to work with the F-16s.”

Snyder added, “It’s still not clear to me why [Guard units] have to be sprinkled in every state and territory.”

While some Guard backers cited the letter of the law to oppose change, proponents of the Future Total Force concept said they wished to uphold both the letter and spirit of Title 32, which they believe endorses even-handedness between the components “so far as practicable.”

Future Total Force concepts appeared to be the main avenue for including the Air Guard in new missions. However, even those units that are open to taking on such missions expressed some concerns about the period of transition. “I can’t ask these guys to take a leap of faith,” said Blum.

“You can’t have a unit sitting home, waiting for two, three, seven years, for that new platform to arrive.”

Guard officials called for devising some form of “bridge” to get the Guard units past this period. One possibility would be to smooth the way to the future with small new purchases of F-15s and F-16s for some Guard units. “All 54 adjutants general realize that we need to modernize and we need to move ahead,” said Lempke, the head of the adjutant generals’ group. “The issue is the bridge.”

The corporate Air Force has little room to maneuver. USAF already faces major cuts to the F/A-22 and F-35, both vital modernization programs. Given that there is no money to spare, such bridge purchases of legacy aircraft would only compound the problem.

What’s more, said USAF officers, the Guard will be moving into new equipment, as the active force will. Plans called for shifting the Virginia ANG’s F-16 unit from Richmond to nearby Langley Air Force Base so that it and the 1st Fighter Wing could train pilots and maintainers to operate the F/A-22.

In North Dakota, unmanned aerial systems operations are slated to become a major mission. KC-135s from Grand Forks will move, Fargo F-16s will retire, and Grand Forks will get “a family” of UASes, including Predators and the high-altitude Global Hawks. Predator and Global Hawk conduct split operations. The air vehicles and small launch and recovery contingents deploy overseas, while pilots, sensor operators, and analysts work from a Stateside base via satellite link.

Wood described UAS operations as a “perfect fit for our citizen airmen” not least because the mission calls for about 90 percent of personnel to remain Stateside.

Concrete evidence from domestic and overseas operations suggested to many that the new organizations and missions could give a big boost to the Air Guard. However, it will take committed partnership between the states, the National Guard Bureau, and Air Force headquarters. The lesson of 2005 is that the partnership cannot be taken for granted.

There is disagreement on the depth of Air Force-Air Guard estrangement. Anthony J. Principi, chairman of the BRAC panel, noted at a late August hearing that he saw “a chasm” between the two military organizations. USAF Chief of Staff Gen. John P. Jumper, whose hearing he saw “a chasm” between the two military organizations. USAF Chief of Staff Gen. John P. Jumper, who was at the hearing, shot back, “We don’t consider disagreements out there with a few adjutants general in the states to be a rift between the Air Force and the National Guard.”

Virtually everyone agreed it was time for a bit more cooperation. As Wood summed up, “It’s a hard process, ... and we need to do it right and so we need to do it together.”

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