

By Robert S. Dudney, Editor in Chief

Wing-Walking Into the Future

FOR many observers, the signs all suggest that 2006 will be a relatively quiet year for the Air Force. The base realignment and closure campaign—bitterly opposed by many in the Air National Guard—is history. The Pentagon has wrapped up its bruising year-long Quadrennial Defense Review. The big mobility study is at an end. What many viewed as a “perfect storm” of troubles seems to have blown itself out.

Maybe. The new Secretary of the Air Force, Michael W. Wynne, and USAF Chief of Staff, Gen. T. Michael Moseley, certainly are striving to steady the service after the battles of 2005. They have had some successes, but the game is not over.

We now can see that the recent upheavals, far from settling matters, left some important issues in dispute. Serious questions are unresolved. The fluidity of the situation was made evident in remarks by Moseley at an April 11 meeting of the Defense Writers Group in Washington, D.C. Here are some of the X factors that he discussed, any of which could produce fireworks. If so, remember you heard it here first.

- DOD cut the F-22 program in half—from 381 to 183 fighters. According to Moseley, DOD gave “assurances” it would go no lower. Even so, Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon R. England is pressing on with a “fighter optimization” study, with results due in August. Asked if it posed a new threat, Moseley replied, “I can’t imagine a study that comes in with less than 183.” Elsewhere, however, others say DOD’s anti-Raptor cabal remains active.

- The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is now behind schedule. Moseley noted, “This whole [fighter] inventory is dependent on ... the F-35. If it continues to slip—and we’re hoping that it won’t—this will drive us into some other decisions” about the shape of the fighter force. “The F-35 eventually will be a wonderful airplane,” he added, “but we’re not there yet.”

- If the F-35 falters, F-22 production could increase. Fighter management, Moseley said, is like wing-walking; you don’t let go of a handhold until you have a grip on another.

- The uncertainties have complicated planning for “legacy” fighters—F-15s, F-16s, and A-10s. At present, USAF might want to keep 196 F-15Cs, but it depends on what happens with the newer fighters. Affordability is an issue. “What do we need to do to the airplane to keep it a while?” asked Moseley. With the F-16s and A-10s,

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the story is much the same, though even more complicated. “A lot of this goes back to the question on the F-35,” he said.

- What to do with the Air Force’s old C-5A airlifter? USAF is examining whether the A, like the newer C-5B, is worthy of a C-5 Reliability Enhancement and Re-engining Program—RERP for short. “I want the RERP test to play out,” said Moseley, “and see what options we have for ... maybe or maybe not RERPing the As.” That would free up some \$5 billion for other needs, such as a new aerial tanker or more C-17s. Yet Congress and DOD lean toward fixing the C-5A. Which view will prevail? “I don’t know yet,” said Moseley.

- USAF’s C-17 transports are wearing out faster than expected because of heavy use. To maintain a planned fleet of 180, the Air Force seeks to buy seven replacements. Moseley hinted USAF could pay for some of this by tapping into millions of dollars set aside to preserve C-17 tooling. “Do you really need to keep that tooling?” said the Chief. “You know, Boeing still has tooling on B-52s. We haven’t built any B-52s in a while.” Without tooling, however, DOD could not resume production in a crunch.

- Moseley said USAF has structured its program to avoid a “bow wave” of unfunded liabilities that would come crashing in during future years. Yet he was quick to agree that the Air Force has

not yet budgeted for a new long-range bomber proposed by Pentagon officials. It has only set aside \$1.6 billion to study options for what is sure to be a multibillion-dollar program. “I don’t know about the bomber yet,” he said. “We’re going to have to think about this one.”

- DOD had planned to retire the U-2 spyplane and the F-117 stealth fighter, both aging systems, and replace their capabilities with those of newer and more capable aircraft—the Global Hawk UAV and stealthy F-22, respectively. However, said Moseley, it “doesn’t make sense” to shed these older warhorses before the Air Force has demonstrated the operational capability of their successors in all critical missions. As a result, he said, “the Air Force may have to buy back”—that is, find the money for—continued operation of the older aircraft for another few years.

- USAF wants to “partner” with the Army whenever possible, but the Army’s concept of fighting on a “nonlinear” battlefield—in small, fast-moving units against widely dispersed enemies—poses questions and problems. “How do you then support land component activities in nonlinear, distributed battlespace?” Moseley asked. “How do you provide the signals from sensors? How do you provide resupply at near real time?” All of these issues have resource implications.

- Conversely, said the Chief, there are questions about how the new Army will support the Air Force, defending airfields and rear areas in this new, nonlinear battlespace. Moseley said these issues have yet to be sorted out among the services.

- Total Air Force personnel—active, Guard, and Reserve—will have to shrink by some 40,000 full-time-equivalent positions over the next few years. This is a touchy subject—especially for the Air National Guard. State governors and adjutants general are poised to resist any cuts, saying that would keep the Guard from carrying out its state and federal missions. Moseley said the Guard and Reserve are exempt this year and next. “We’ve asked their leaders to take some time and look at this, and then come back and tell us what they think,” said Moseley. “I don’t know what that answer will be.” ■