

Questions for the Candidates

AT AN April 9 Senate hearing, the Air Force warned that it faces a future shortage of some 800 fighters, the aircraft needed to ensure US air dominance. The public shrugged.

It is time to accept that the erosion of US airpower—and of the US military generally—doesn't move the people. A Gallup Poll says 74 percent of Americans think we spend either "too much" or the right amount on defense. It's no surprise, therefore, that military problems (except for the Iraq War) rarely intrude on the Presidential campaign. No candidate has made a special point of rebuilding our worn-out forces.

Such serene indifference has an expiration date. The next President, on Inauguration Day, will confront some nasty, complex, and unavoidable problems, as President Bush hands over a force pushed to near-collapse by underfunding and overuse.

With serious problems besetting the Air Force, the three candidates should be asked a few questions, if only to kick off a process of educating the public. Herewith are our offerings:

You may or may not be aware that the USAF fleet of fighters, bombers, airlifters, tankers, and other airplanes is the smallest and oldest in history. Over the past 23 years, it has shrunk 40 percent (down from 7,000 to 4,300 aircraft), yet average aircraft age has simultaneously soared from 13.6 years to 24 years because we didn't buy new ones. Are you concerned about relying on such a geriatric fleet? If so, what are you going to do about it?

Gen. John D. W. Corley, head of USAF's Air Combat Command, points out that an astounding 86 cents of every "modernization" dollar spent on these "legacy" airplanes goes to keep them safe and flyable, with only 14 cents of the dollar actually paying for increased capability. Does that seem wasteful to you?

USAF considers 2,250 fighters to be a rock-bottom requirement through 2025. Lt. Gen. Daniel J. Darnell, deputy chief of staff for operations, told Senators on April 9 that a gap of 800 fighters will open up between 2017 and 2024. The biggest cause is laggard production of the new F-35; at the currently planned rate of 48 per year, acquisition

of all 1,763 fighters will take three decades. You have a choice of solutions: speed F-35 purchases, patch up old F-16s and A-10s to fill the gap, or live with the problem. Any of the three will cause pain. Which will it be?

Bush has begun expanding the Army and Marine Corps, tapping Air Force accounts to help pay for it. Do you support this? If "Yes," then tell us: What can be achieved with 92,000 more "boots on the ground" that is more important than assuring US air dominance?

The nation's military enters "a period of consequences."

In 2001, a Pentagon mobility study and subsequent analysis of alternatives found that the US needed a fleet of at least 222 C-17 airlifters. That was before the 9/11 attacks, the Global War on Terrorism, and the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, which expanded mobility needs again. Yet today, DOD proposes to shut down C-17 production at only 190 aircraft. What do you make of this decision?

Certain officials within the Office of the Secretary of Defense have cut nearly 200 fighters from USAF's F-22 program, leaving a mere 183. However, the Air Force says it needs a minimum of 381 Raptors to equip its 10 Air and Space Expeditionary Forces. This is the first new air superiority fighter to reach the Air Force in three decades. Pentagon chief Robert M. Gates admits he is now punting the next move to you. Do you, or do you not, support additional F-22 production?

If the answer is "Not," then you must know of some other means by which USAF can be sure of defeating increasingly powerful adversary fighters and air defense systems. What is it?

USAF was compelled to cut 60,000 airmen from its active force to find the money for weapon modernization (see above). Is it ever OK to force a service into such a trade-off?

Today's Pentagon leadership harbors the view that the United States does not now and will not anytime soon face a traditional "peer" or "near-peer" rival. Do you agree that neither China nor Russia fit that description? Also:

This view serves as the basis of a reorientation of our forces away from high-performance fighters, warships, and other "conventional war" systems and toward light infantry and similar elements optimized to deal with "irregular" opponents. Do you believe it is more important to emphasize irregular combat over potential slugfests with major national military forces?

Speaking of preparations for irregular, Iraq-like operations: Can you see yourself taking America into another such war anytime soon?

The relative defense-spending burden on American taxpayers is at historically low levels—equivalent to about 3.4 percent of Gross Domestic Product (not counting the costs of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have nothing to do with maintaining a strong military). Under Ronald Reagan, equipping, manning, and sustaining the force took six percent. Today's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Michael G. Mullen, calls for raising today's DOD budget modestly to the equivalent of four percent of GDP, or \$600 billion a year. Do you believe that level is affordable?

Top Air Force leaders say it will take an additional \$20 billion a year to fix the service's hardware woes. Do you believe *that* level is affordable?

Come to think of it, how do you define "affordable"? Will you apply the same standard to popular entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid?

In September 1999, then-candidate George W. Bush delivered a major defense policy speech—his first—at the Citadel in South Carolina. In it, he laid out his goals for the armed forces. "Moments of national opportunity," he said, "are either seized or lost, and the consequences reach across decades." He titled the speech, "A Period of Consequences."

We now are entering this period of consequences, and things don't look good. The armed forces have gotten older, mostly smaller, and lacking in the resources needed for the long haul in a dangerous world.

The membership of the Air Force Association eagerly awaits word on how you plan to turn things around. ■