

The Air Force That Comes Next

THAT was some news conference that Robert Gates held on April 6. Numerous expensive programs—especially USAF weapons—were put to the sword. Not for money reasons, evidently. These steps would have been taken, Gates said, “regardless of the department’s top-line budget number.”

If what the Secretary of Defense said was true—and why would anyone doubt him; Gates is an honorable man—he was not caving in to political pressure to cut defense spending. He was only killing weapons that needed killing.

Gates lofted two charges that seemingly were aimed at USAF. He criticized buying weapons merely to “overinsure against a remote or diminishing risk.” And he spoke against what he saw as the tendency to “run up the score in capability where the United States is already dominant.”

These perceived problems were cited in defense of cutbacks in areas of USAF superiority. The defense chief halted production of the F-22 stealth fighter, scrapped the Next Generation Bomber, refused to authorize more new C-17 airlifters, and dropped plans for a new combat search and rescue aircraft, among other moves.

There is no denying that, at this point, Gates’ thinking has become clear to everyone, and so has the general drift of his attitude toward USAF’s needs. No one doubts that the future Air Force won’t be what its leaders expected it to be.

We don’t intend to use this space to refight the past year’s policy battles. Gates has made up his mind that the Air Force does not need those aircraft. USAF has little option but to accept matters as they are, step up to the mission, and make the best of things.

The Air Force that we know will certainly do that. We hope, however, that the Air Force’s best—whatever it is—proves to be good enough for the nation. About that, regrettably, we do have concerns.

In his remarks, Gates said he wants to focus on the “irregular” wars, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. He sees this type of war, not big conventional conflicts, as the more likely type to face US armed forces in the future, and that budgets should be “rebalanced” accordingly.

We do not doubt that Secretary Gates wants to keep a strong air arm for conventional combat. Indeed, was it not he who wrote (in “A Balanced Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2009) that the US “still has to contend” with “military forces of other countries,” and that “Russia and China” have “air defense and fighter capabilities that in some cases approach [our] own”? It hardly seems logical that Gates would fail to heed his own warning.

Yet his makeover of USAF’s fighter plans and budgets surely is puzzling. His

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decision to let go of the stealthy F-22 fighter in 2011 after production of 187 models will leave USAF nowhere close to the 381-fighter goal it held for many years, and far short of even the 243-jet “moderate-risk” force USAF recently sought. If 243 equates to “moderate-risk,” what can be said of 187?

Gates stated, “The military advice that I got was that there is no military requirement for numbers of F-22s beyond the 187,” and both the Air Force Secretary and Air Force Chief of Staff backed him up.

Gates said he wants to increase the production rate of the joint service F-35 multirole fighter, but the F-35 is not in the F-22’s class as an air supremacy weapon and thus is no substitute. It won’t enter operational service until 2013, at best.

As for the decision to defer a new bomber, Gates said DOD needs a “better understanding of the need, the requirement, and the technology.” USAF, having studied the matter for the past three years, would not have fielded this bomber until 2018. Now it will be pushed further into the future.

The nation’s critical powers of long-range strike will continue to reside in a stalwart but admittedly small and aged fleet of bombers. The youngest B-52s are 46 years old. The B-1Bs date to the mid-1980s. The relative youngsters of the fleet—USAF’s 20 stealthy B-2s—have been around nearly 20 years. The bomber force has become a critical

weapon in the war in Afghanistan. The new bomber, with its long range and penetration powers, was emerging as the US offset to defended “sanctuaries” in certain parts of the world.

Secretary Gates reported that he had a “strong analytical base” for his proposed cut decisions. They “emanate,” he said, from the new National Defense Strategy issued in mid-2008. We would have advised the Secretary to point out that he himself played a major role in shaping that strategy, and that all four service chiefs of the time (mid-2008) strongly opposed it. That is not to imply the strategy is wrong, only that it should not be taken as a faultless guide to military program decisions.

As we said, there seems to be no stopping the Air Force’s transition to something different. Over the years ahead, it will come to possess less and less world-class tactical airpower and modern long-range strike capability. The airlift logjam will continue. Everything will get older. On the other hand, ISR will boom, with the service going up to at least 50 orbits of Predator and Reaper UAVs and probably lots of turboprop aircraft equipped with modern sensors. New tankers will enter the fleet. Service special operations forces will probably grow, too.

This is not the Air Force we wanted. However, the evidence suggests it probably is the Air Force that we will get. Gates has prevailed in getting his program, but he will face an uphill struggle getting it to cover all national requirements.

Nobody can predict the future. Let us hope that the new Air Force and overall US defense force proves to be sufficient to see us through the years ahead.

During April, Gates labored to incorporate his decisions into a \$534 billion Pentagon budget, which now goes before Congress. The lawmakers, as they consider its merits, might keep in mind the words of a recent *Wall Street Journal* editorial:

“It’s worth remembering that the reason our enemies have resorted to terrorism and insurgency is because US conventional forces overwhelmingly dominate on the ground, in the sea, and in the air. That’s not an advantage we can take for granted.” ■