



USAF photo by A1C Lauren Ely

THE OXYGEN IN THE FIGHT

By John A. Tirpak, Editorial Director



Russian Federation Ministry of Defense photo



USAF photo by SrA. Chris Drzazgowski

Gen. David Goldfein, the new Chief of Staff, faces a daunting to-do list but says the Air Force is up to its challenges.

Left: USAF Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein speaks to an audience in San Antonio. Manpower issues are impacting readiness, the new Chief says. Middle: Russian Su-27 fighters practice an intercept during Caucasus 2016, a Russian air force training exercise. Goldfein is no fan of Russia's provocative stunts. Bottom: An A-10 performs a low-level strafe.

IT'S just as well that Gen. David L. Goldfein, the Air Force's new Chief of Staff, ascended to the job from the vice chief position, as he's had to hit the ground running in confronting some heavy challenges and at least one "crisis."

In an interview in early August, Goldfein said he has his man, train, and equip work cut out for him. The Air Force needs to expand, act fast to stem a critical and growing shortage of fighter pilots and maintainers, cope with the demands of a major ongoing combat operation, rebuild the service's relationship with Congress, and fix some long-term problems with the service's structure. All this must be done while dealing with a resurgent Russia and a hefty modernization program.

It's a daunting list, but Goldfein believes the Air Force is up to it.

"We're in ... a full sprint to build our numbers back to 321,000" Active Duty people, he said, up from the current level of 308,000. The Air Force has put a lot of resources into recruiting and the training pipeline, he said, to match manning levels to the extraordinary demands put on the service. That number is a combination of what Congress has authorized, as well as a discretionary two percent allowed to the Secretary of the Air Force, Deborah Lee James, to fill critical deficits on a temporary basis.

Truth be told, the needed number—to fill an across-the-board shortage of about 20 percent in many specialties—is much higher than 321,000, but Goldfein wouldn't name a specific target for end strength.

"I've not seen the data that gives me the fidelity" to unequivocally set a personnel goal, he said, adding that, based on his long experience, "once you've [set] a number, that number never dies. You're married to it." USAF is on track to reach the 321,000 figure by 2019.



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USAF photo by SrA. Betty R. Chevalier

Left: Airmen unload a GBU-12 from an F-35 during Northern Lightning in August, an exercise at Volk Field, Wis. Bottom: SrA. George Thompson tightens a ratchet strap around the engine of an EC-130H Compass Call aircraft.

“leading indicator” of difficult times ahead.

The competition with the private sector to attract a limited cohort of Air Force-eligible people is getting more intense—and not just in high school graduates. Boeing said in August that it anticipates a worldwide airline industry need for more than 617,000 new pilots in the next 20 years.

To retain pilots—the Air Force is 700 fighter pilots short now and expects a 1,000-pilot deficit next year—Goldfein said he plans to attack the problem on two fronts: quality of life and “quality of service.”

The former can be addressed with money, he thinks, by increasing aviation incentive bonuses. If the Air Force can take the cost of college tuition “off the table” for a pilot’s family, or “pay off school loans,” such moves would clearly reduce the pressure for pilots to seek fatter paychecks with the airlines, he said.

Moreover, industry can rarely compete with the Air Force culture that looks after an airman’s family when he or she is deployed, he said.

“That, to me, is as important a quality of life issue as money,” he said.

Quality of service is a tougher nut to crack. It involves making sure pilots, maintainers, and people in all specialties get to do what they signed up for, work on cutting-edge technology, and can “be the best” at their work.

“If they can’t go out and be the best they can be” because of funding-restricted flying hours or parts availability, for ex-

ample, “frustration builds up, and I think people are going to vote with their feet.” Goldfein said there’s an inextricable link between morale and readiness.

“The Secretary and I have got to get both [quality of life and quality of service] right,” he said. “If we attack only one or the other, we may not make an impact.”

THE SQUADRON LEVEL

He’s not too concerned if some people leave to take up jobs with contractors, doing essentially the same jobs—maintenance or flying remotely piloted aircraft, for instance—since they “continue to produce airpower.” He’d rather they stay in uniform, of course, but he’s thrilled if departing people join the Guard or Reserve. That’s a win, he said. “I only lose them if they take off the uniform and they don’t put it back on again.”

Goldfein said he’s long been troubled that cumulative budget and manpower cuts have pushed functions that should be done at the squadron—especially support tasks—to higher levels.

“We succeed or fail in the Air Force at the squadron level,” he said. Over time, USAF has “pulled the rug out” from under this basic unit, and he wants to fix that.

There won’t be a mad dash to reorganize, though, he said. He’ll take his time developing a new concept of operations for what the 21st century squadron needs to look like. The overall organizational chart may be flatter—eliminating, say, the group. For now, “I’m going to resist mightily the tendency to start attacking the ... org chart,” he said.

There will probably be some restructuring, but it won’t happen overnight, and he’s going to get a lot of input from many levels before tweaking things. First, there’ll be a “crisp, concise, written in English” concept of operations—“no more than four or five pages”—of how to put functions where they belong. There will need to be a milestone calendar with reachable goals.

“I’m looking to move out on this plan 1 January 2017,” he said. “If we’re

Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, Goldfein’s predecessor, said shortly before retiring in May that he thinks the Air Force needs between 350,000 and 370,000 people on Active Duty to meet growing demands in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, the nuclear enterprise, battlefield airmen and security, space operators, and mission growth and to fill shortages among fighter pilots and maintainers. The pilot and maintainer shortages alone are so steep they constitute crises, Goldfein asserted.

The manpower issue is “defining our readiness ceiling, in terms of what we can produce and sustain” and is the “No. 1 priority in our budget submission,” he said.

There’s also worrying data from the recruiting service, which has always made its quotas early in the month. The quotas aren’t being met until late in the month, now, Goldfein noted, and he’s concerned this could be a



USAF photo by A1C Kristan Campbell

Maintainers work on an MQ-9 Reaper before a mission during Red Flag 16-3 at Creech AFB, Nev.

“We do not change the way we do business. We fly where we need to fly, we sail where we need to sail, we operate in accordance with international law and accepted rules of international behavior,” Goldfein said.

The Air Force’s relationship with Congress has been rocky for some time—exemplified by a testy March hearing, with Senate Armed Services Committee chair Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) browbeating Welsh about the A-10 retirement, calling him untruthful and cutting Welsh off every time the Chief of Staff tried to explain the Air Force’s position.

Goldfein said it would be wrong to “grade our relations with Congress based on one single event.” He’ll aim for a good working relationship, but the desire to get it won’t color the way he presents the facts.

The Air Force, he said, has certain values—things “we just truly believe as a service” that will be part of any conversation with Congress. The Air Force has interests, and Congress does, too, and when they overlap, great, but when they don’t, it shouldn’t be “overplayed.”

“What we’ve got to do is find out where we do have common interests, without us sacrificing on our ideals. That’s the way I intend to approach it as the Chief.” Goldfein plans to be a “good listener,” keying in on areas where the interests of Congress and the Air Force align.

It’s “not actually their job to take my advice,” he said, but “I believe it’s their job to respect the position and listen [and] I also have got to be OK with them

disagreeing when our interests don’t align.” No matter what, he’ll always present the “best military advice that is not driven by [other] considerations.”

AS GOOD AS IT GETS

Moreover, he said, it would be foolish to hope to “redefine” the relationship by winning affection for “any one particular leader through the power of his or her personality.”

If the Air Force has a poor relationship with Congress, but “we haven’t sacrificed our ideals and we’ve been good listeners and we’ve laid out our interests ... in a meaningful and coherent fashion,” and the service has real data to back its positions, then “maybe it’s as good as we’re ever going to do.”

If there’s “bad news” because “we know that our interests just can’t align, then that’s something I think a Chief ought to be ready to deliver, and I intend to.”

The “good news,” though, is that his predecessors “have really set the stage” for him, and in his conversations with the Hill, most of the time, “our interests are understood.”

One of the areas of friction has been the Air Force’s huge oversupply of bases and facilities. By the Pentagon’s last estimate, USAF has 32 percent more infrastructure than it needs, but Congress has rejected Pentagon requests for a new round of Base Closure and Realignment (BRAC) for years. Can anything be done, short of BRAC, to help the Air Force slim down?

There’s promise in some ideas for a “public-private partnership” at some facilities where USAF has “no use for it” but still must, “for environmental reasons, keep water and electricity ...

going to it” and might allow a private concern to use the facility. That idea works best when the base is located adjacent to a thriving city with economic demand, he pointed out.

Another approach might be to shrink a base’s footprint. “Sometimes our costs ... are associated with just how far out to the perimeter” facilities have to be maintained. “As we get smaller, we can lean more and more to a smaller footprint.”

Even so, these approaches are just “nibbling at the edges. They’re not going to produce great savings. We really need a BRAC.”

Goldfein said the three most valuable experiences on his way up the Air Force ladder were serving as aide—and then executive officer—to Chief of Staff Gen. Michael E. Ryan; a year-long school assignment with the State Department; and serving as director of the Joint Staff.

Ryan, Goldfein explained, took the time to “share his thinking with me” about how he ran the Air Force and approached the Balkans war, and “I still rely on that experience today.”

In the State Department assignment, Goldfein went to school with people “from every government agency” and got insight into “a completely different way of thinking and a different culture.” Many of the foreign service officers with whom he studied are now high-ranking State Department officials, and Goldfein said he was able to “build a network that I still tap into today.”

The Joint Staff assignment allowed him to “see our Air Force from the outside” and learn how to optimize what each service brings to the fight. It is “powerful” when each service’s approach to problem solving is “an equal part of the dialogue,” and the experience “helped me to start to really think at the strategic level of a service Chief,” he said.

Providing a full-power Air Force is his overriding goal, though. USAF’s contribution in strategic readiness, mobility, air superiority, homeland defense, and intelligence—to name just a few—“underwrites every military operation,” Goldfein stated. “What we deliver to the joint team has become the oxygen that they breathe. ... When you have it, you don’t even think about it. When you don’t have it, that’s all you think about.”