



The high-tech systems ordered during the 1980s revitalized the Air Force and helped win the Cold War.

If you check the tail number of an F-16, F-15, KC-10, or B-1, most likely it will show a year marked from the 1980s. Defense spending under President Ronald Reagan restocked the US Air Force with war-winning platforms that carried out a transformation from the late years of the Cold War to a new world order and the age of precision and information.

One of the lasting legacies of the Reagan buildup was better airpower. The Air Force retired hundreds of old fighters and bought new fighters, bombers, tankers, and airlifters. “None of the four wars in my lifetime came about because we were too strong,” Reagan said.

CONVINCING THE SOVIET UNION

President Reagan came into office after America had suffered through one of its bleakest moments in modern

history: the Iran hostage crisis. Détente was defunct. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. President Jimmy Carter boycotted the 1980 Olympics held in Moscow. Soviet troops menaced Poland.

“By 1980 we had fighter planes that couldn’t fly, Navy ships that couldn’t leave port, a Rapid Deployment Force that was neither rapid nor deployable and not much of a force,” Reagan said in a 1982 speech.

“The 1980s promise to be a new era for the USSR,” wrote William G. Hyland. “The strategic superiority of the United States has clearly ended.”

Not if Reagan could help it.

Americans knew that rebuilding the military was a top priority for the new President. To Reagan, the defense investment was part one of a larger plan. Reagan favored a military increase to counter Soviet forces in the Third

"THE REAGAN BUILDUP

By Rebecca Grant



DOD photo

Above: Two F-15s armed with AIM-9 and AIM-120 air-to-air missiles. During the buildup years, the total USAF inventory of F-15s rose to 732 in 1987. **Right:** President Ronald Reagan delivers to the nation on March 23, 1983, a speech outlining and initiating the Strategic Defense Initiative—"Star Wars."

years, the Soviet Union has accumulated enormous military might, while we restrained our own efforts to the point where defense spending actually declined, in real terms, over 20 percent in the decade of the '70s," he said. "If we continue our past pattern of only rebuilding our defenses in fits and starts, we will never convince the Soviets that it's in their interests to behave with restraint and negotiate genuine arms reductions."

NATO and the US needed credible conventional forces to restore meaning to flexible response and open options for moving away from nuclear weapons.

Matching the Soviet arsenal was worrisome. By 1983, the Soviet Union could muster about 6,500 aircraft. On the horizon was the new Su-27, thought to rival the F-15. Scholars pointed out that the US and NATO had a qualitative edge. The geography of Europe—such as the famous Fulda Gap on the border between West and East Germany—favored defenders. Still, even those who questioned Reagan's buildup most acutely admitted the shortfall in numbers. John J. Mearsheimer and Barry R. Posen tallied a 150 percent advantage in tanks for the Warsaw Pact countries, with a 180 percent advantage in artillery and 15 percent in tactical aircraft.

But there was a gap in airpower, among other things. "The Soviet Air Force could outnumber the US Air Force in central Europe by as much as three to one if it brought forward assets based within the USSR and included earlier generation aircraft like the MiG-21 and Su-7," wrote RAND analyst Benjamin S. Lambeth in a 1985 article for *International Security*. "If NATO European fighters were

World without dangerously draining forces from Europe.

He wanted to bring US forces up to parity, but most of all he wanted to reduce tensions and nuclear arms stockpiles. Recently declassified National Security Council records from April 1982 note Reagan's comments on the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, SALT II (he thought it was "lousy"), and his desire to do "what Ike proposed on all nuclear weapons," namely, to eliminate them. After 1985 he found a willing partner in Soviet Premier Mikhail S. Gorbachev and made startling progress on arms control.

But first, there was the military buildup. In his 1981 confirmation hearing for Defense Secretary, Caspar W. Weinberger said he was worried US forces were "incapable of stopping an assault on Western oil supplies."

Reagan gave perhaps his clearest explanation of defense spending in a speech on Feb. 19, 1983. "Over the past 20



US government photo

An F-117 takes on fuel from a KC-10. The F-117 was built in great secrecy, and the stealthy aircraft was indicative of Reagan's commitment to quality, state-of-the-art weapon systems. The KC-10 Extender, meanwhile, greatly enhanced USAF's global reach.

introduced into the equation, the balance would look more like two to one or possibly less.”

The US Navy of 1981 couldn't provide much help.

“The reason I say we have lost our margin of superiority is I believe we can no longer tell our Commander in Chief that we have the capability to prevent the Soviets from carrying out their naval task, which is to cut our lines for significant periods of time in certain areas of the world,” said the new Secretary of the Navy, 38-year-old financier John F. Lehman Jr., in 1981.

QUALITY AIRPOWER

Rejuvenating the Air Force was thus one of the quickest ways to boost the conventional balance in Europe, address areas such as the Persian Gulf, and open up maneuvering space in strategic arms limitation talks.

Reagan was a longtime believer in airpower. As a 31-year-old actor, in June 1942 he transferred from the cavalry to the Army Air Forces. He served in Culver City, Calif., with director Frank Capra and others in the First Motion Picture Unit making stirring documentaries such as “Why We Fight” and “The Memphis Belle,” which featured a B-17 crew surviving 25 missions over Europe. Reagan had another special inside connection to the Air Force via his close friend Jimmy Stewart, who would serve a long career in the USAF Reserve and was a decorated World War II B-24 pilot.

Stewart, Reagan, and their wives had been pals and weekly dinner partners for 40 years and continued to be during Reagan's White House years. The two movie stars were on occasion joined for dinner at the White House by their Bel Air, Calif., neighbor Thomas V. Jones, chairman of the Northrop Aircraft Co.

In the Reagan buildup, quality counted—as seen in acquisition of systems such as the F-117, F-15E, and advanced blocks of the F-16 fighter.

In the early 1980s, technology excellence was the byword. However, most of the significant work on stealth, battlefield sensors, and other systems had started under previous Administrations. The Carter Administration nurtured a number of secret projects, including stealth aircraft, the predecessors to JSTARS, and early work on the concept of the Global Positioning System. Defense budgets rose in the late Carter years, too.

By 1981, the debate was about how much to increase defense spending: to five percent of GDP, as Carter planned, or about seven percent, per Reagan's plans.

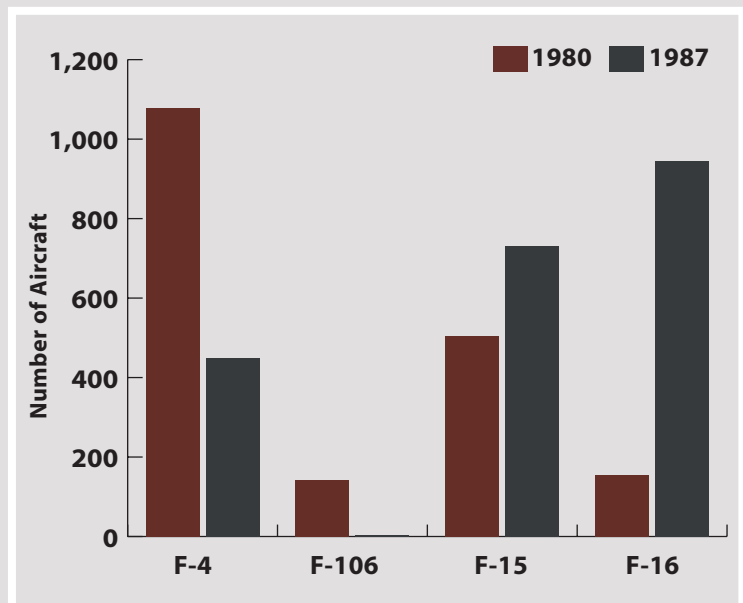
Reagan was a big proponent of advanced technology and didn't want the US military to settle for make-do solutions or second best. “Innovation is our advantage,” he said in a 1986 address to the nation. “One example: Advances in making airplanes and cruise missiles almost invisible to Soviet radar could neutralize the vast air defense systems upon which the Soviets and some of their most dangerous client states depend. But innovation is not enough. We have to follow through. Blueprints alone don't deter aggression. We have to translate our lead in the lab to a lead in the field. But when our budget is cut, we can't do either.”

Reagan's first moves accelerated production of weapons developed during the late 1970s. At the top of the list was



the B-1. Canceled under the Carter Administration in June 1977, the B-1 was a prime campaign issue for Reagan and he wasted no time restarting the bomber program. “The advanced B-1 is favored by the Air Force's high command, by a fairly vocal constituency in Congress and by Administration officials who contend that it would be a better signal to the Soviet Union that the Reagan Administration is serious about rearming America,” reported *The New York Times*.

“The Reagan buildup enabled modernization but little growth in force levels,” noted James C. Ruehrmund Jr. and Christopher J. Bowie in *Air Force Magazine* in February 2011. The Air Force took advantage of the buildup to swap out older fighters for the most modern airframes, thus keeping force levels relatively stable. As tallied by the Air Force in 1988, total numbers of “Fighter/Intercept” aircraft in the





USAF photo

10s greatly facilitated the long flight of F-111s from bases in England.

Manpower wasn't the way to face down the Soviet Union, but Air Force Active Duty personnel number grew nonetheless. The total number on Active Duty increased from 557,969 in 1980 to 607,035 by September 1987. Just five years later, the number declined to 470,315 in 1992.

Beyond this was Reagan's effect on morale. The new equipment, pay raises, restored readiness, and funding for better training and multinational exercises boosted spirits. So did Reagan's obvious affection and respect for the military, which came through in speech after speech. For those in uniform in the 1980s "it meant that we could start to feel proud of ourselves, our uniform, our military, and yes, our President again," wrote former Army NCO David DeBatto.

MILITARY REFORM

Of course, there were critics of Reagan's plan. No Reagan initiative attracted more attention than "Star Wars." Reagan proposed a Strategic Defense Initiative based on a futuristic missile defense system in a speech televised to the nation in March 1983. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) famously labeled the proposals "reckless Star Wars schemes," and the name stuck. Opposition coalesced around the technological difficulties of elements such as X-ray lasers and on the consequences of moving away from mutually assured destruction.

SDI and other Reagan initiatives stoked debate in Washington about the role and structure of the military. The rising budget was a target and so was the emphasis on advanced technology. "The pursuit of the latest 'bells and whistles,' as high-tech frills are called in the military, is a major factor in producing massive cost overruns," wrote Walter Isaacson in a *Time* magazine cover story on March 7, 1983.

That issue featured Pentagon bureaucrat Franklin C. Spinney on the cover after Spinney had briefed the Senate Armed Services Committee on his analysis of cost factors. For hunting tanks, he argued, "five times as many A-10 planes could be bought for the same money as F-15Es."

On Capitol Hill, the Congressional Military Reform Caucus rallied debate. The military reform movement in its purest form shunned defense budget debates and focused only on conventional warfare and sought to empower maneuver warfare with close air-ground coordination as a way to restore America's edge. Through the 1980s, it broadened opposition to the Reagan buildup and a suspicion of high-technology projects.

Lambasting the Pentagon made for easy pickings. "Every new voice calling for reform has helped encourage the brontosaurus Pentagon slowly to raise its head and peer out beyond the money patch where it has contentedly been feeding," opined Colorado Democrat Sen. Gary W. Hart in a 1986 opinion piece for *The New York Times*. Hart was a founder of the CMRC.

For the most part, the reformers were deeply interested in military doctrine and force structure. Most agreed with rearmament even if they differed on details. But an itchy side of the military reform movement emerged with a backlash against high technology. "We need to rebuild the Navy around the submarine, not the aircraft carrier," suggested Hart. "The Air Force's primary purpose should be shifted: It should not be 'winning through air power' but rather, supporting our ground forces."

By 1986, the Congressional Military Reform Caucus had 130 members. Many were thoughtful strategists, while others enjoyed the oratory.

Active Duty inventory increased only slightly, from 2,360 in 1980 to 2,538 in 1987—not including 59 F-117s whose existence was still secret. Thus the total of 1,078 F-4s in 1980 fell to just 448 in 1987. Of the 142 F-106s in the active force in 1980, just five remained by 1987.

In their place, the number of F-16s rose sharply from 156 in 1980, primarily F-16As with some F-16Bs, to 944 F-16s by 1987. The Air Force continued purchases of the F-15 as well. The total active inventory rose from 505 in 1980 to the peak of 732 by 1987.

The concern for advanced tactical airpower in Europe also led the Air Force to purchase two different and distinctive fighter-bombers during the Reagan buildup.

One was the F-117. The production F-117A made its first flight in great secrecy on June 18, 1981. In October 1983, the F-117 reached initial operational capability. The airplane was expensive from the beginning but proved its value due to its ability to penetrate air defenses and knock out vital command and control targets early in a NATO-Warsaw Pact combat scenario. Under Reagan, the clear demand for superior conventional airpower made purchase of the revolutionary fighter a no-brainer.

Next was the Dual Role Fighter, better known as the F-15E. The Reagan Administration hurried along the competition and funded the first purchases of the workhorse that would become indispensable in air-ground warfare.

Reagan also brought the C-5 back into production with modifications and improvements. The first C-5B was approved in 1982 and delivered in January 1986. The Reagan Administration bought a total of 50 new C-5Bs.

Another 1970s design that blossomed in the buildup was the KC-10 Extender. The long-range tanker with cargo capacity flew in the summer of 1980 and Strategic Air Command accepted the first aircraft at Barksdale AFB, La., in March 1981. The KC-10 buy proceeded without a hiccup, yielding 59 aircraft by the end of 1988. KC-10s swung into action for the signature airpower mission of the Reagan years: the 1986 attack on Tripoli, Libya—Operation El Dorado Canyon. KC-



A tendency to exempt programs in their own districts limited the legislative impact of the members. “If you got the reform group together and started going through specific programs, you couldn’t get them to agree on any of them,” said Texas Republican Sen. John G. Tower.

Reagan himself was unfazed. He used a 1984 visit to the Rockwell International B-1 plant in Palmdale, Calif., where he was campaigning against former Carter vice president Walter F. Mondale, to praise advanced technology and air his disbelief that the Carter Administration had let defense slip so far. “This hostility to a strong, secure America—an America at the leading edge of technology—was also demonstrated in his opposition to the space shuttle,” Reagan reminded his friendly audience of aerospace workers. “If it were up to my opponent, I’m afraid Rockwell might still be building the B-25—that is, if you were building anything at all,” he joked.

Reagan emphasized superpower relations in his second term. He’d proposed what became the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) back in 1982. “American power is the

A three-ship of F-16s carry AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles. USAF’s inventory of F-16s grew six times in size during the Reagan years.

indispensable element of a peaceful world; it is America’s last, best hope of negotiating real reductions in nuclear arms,” he said in his 1986 address to the nation.

Reagan met Soviet leader Gorbachev for the first time in Geneva in 1985. The two men talked for two days in Reykjavik, Iceland, in October 1986, and Reagan visited Moscow in the spring of 1988. The START agreement was not signed until 1991, but British Prime Minister Margaret H. Thatcher credited Reagan’s superpower thaw as a factor in ending the Cold War.

The rise in defense spending didn’t last. Congress passed the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act in 1985 and reaffirmed it in 1987. The law called for either balancing the budget or forcing automatic cuts. The spending cuts usually attributed to President Bill Clinton and, on occasion, George H. W. Bush, actually began during the Reagan Administration’s second term, when the United States was still engaged in the Cold War. Defense spending topped out at six percent of GDP in 1986, then declined every year from 1987 to 1999.

Still, the Reagan buildup left USAF with a modernized and much-improved force. The buildup created the high-technology Air Force that dominated Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and won over Kosovo in 1999. Much of the hardware continues to operate effectively—but with increasing cost and obsolescence—even today.

Ronald W. Reagan died June 5, 2004. An impressive reminder of the Reagan-era buildup paid tribute. Twenty-one F-15Es flew past the US Capitol for his state funeral, the largest F-15E flyover at that time.

These were not show fighters; the 21 F-15Es from Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C., were operational aircraft, with thousands of hours of combat time in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and other operations. ■

Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev speak during a summit in Washington, D.C., in 1987. The two leaders made significant progress working together on arms control.



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