

# TODAY vs. TOMORROW

By John A. Tirpak, Executive Editor



**At AFA's Air & Space Conference, top Air Force leaders described the tense balancing act between immediate requirements and future relevance.**



ANG photo by MSgt. David Kujawa

*An A-10 peels away after refueling from a KC-135. Both aircraft are assigned to the Michigan Air National Guard.*

**I**f sequestration, debt ceiling uncertainty, and continuing budget resolutions press on into Fiscal 2014, Air Force leaders will be forced to choose between near-term sufficiency and long-term capability. They are clearly opting for the latter.

Consequently, at the Air Force Association's 2013 Air & Space Conference held in National Harbor, Md., in late September, top Air Force leadership pledged to protect—as much as possible—the projects they believe will guarantee the future relevance of the Air Force: the F-35 fighter, the KC-46 tanker, and the Long-Range Strike Bomber.

If the money is found, USAF will also fund a replacement for the E-8 JSTARS ground moving target radar airplane and buy a new trainer to replace the T-38.

The lingering question is how the Air Force will pay for these things. Acting Air Force Secretary Eric Fanning, at a press conference, said ongoing sequestration

would compel USAF to take “vertical cuts”—meaning the elimination of entire fleets of aircraft—to achieve sequestration spending levels that, by law, demand virtually instant savings.

Among the programs possibly on the budgetary chopping block are the A-10 fighter, KC-10 aerial tanker, MC-12 surveillance aircraft, and upgrades for the F-16—along with large numbers of airmen associated with those fleets.

“You can't get your money out of installations,” Fanning said, because Congress has already ruled out another round of base closings. Moreover, “you can't get money out of ‘people’ fast enough” because there are rules affecting personnel reductions in force, and there would likely have to be buyouts and other incentives. Fencing off the top priority programs also “puts a lot of pressure on that small ... wedge of your budget pie that's left.”

The necessary savings can't be obtained simply by “reducing all your fleets,” Fanning elaborated, because

whether a fleet is large or small, the logistics enterprise that supports it stays about the same size. Only by eliminating the “tail,” he said—the depot, the parts inventory, the contractor logistics support, and the maintenance capability of entire inventories—can USAF get down to mandated spending levels.

Service leaders also warned that even if sequestration was unexpectedly reversed, the Defense Department is still expected to provide a hefty additional package of budget cuts because of the nation’s fiscal condition. President Obama’s Fiscal 2014 budget proposal offered spending levels about midway between sequester and the previously forecast defense budgets, so USAF—under any circumstances—will get smaller.

At any potential spending level, the Air Force is facing “painful cuts that are really damaging, in my view, to readiness and to national security,” Fanning said. “It will be very expensive to fix later.”

As the conference took place, Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, USAF’s Chief of Staff, testified before Congress about the effects of continuing sequestration. He said the Air Force “could be forced to cut up to 25,000 Total Force airmen”—Active Duty, Guard, and Reserve alike—“which is about four percent of our people,” along with 550 aircraft, about nine percent of the inventory.

USAF leaders said that within the flexibility they’ll have—something completely uncertain as of September—they’d try to preserve a force that is ready to fight, at whatever size the Air Force winds up being on the other side of the fiscal crisis. They also promised best efforts to avoid further

furloughs of civilian employees like those imposed this past summer.

Last year, top leaders said USAF would invest heavily in modernizing current systems to mitigate the near-term risk posed by rapidly advancing military technology in the hands of potential adversaries. That approach is no longer feasible.

“There are some things we can’t modernize to keep ... viable against the threat after five or 10 years from now,” Welsh said in his address to the conference. For example, simply updating the legacy fighter fleet won’t work.

“You can’t compete with the fifth generation aircraft” now being developed in other countries “unless you have a fifth generation aircraft. It’s that simple. You can’t dress up an old one and make it a new one,” Welsh insisted. The Air Force won’t be able to operate against “the advanced air defense systems of the future” without the F-35.

### Recapitalization vs. Modernization

His remarks were echoed by Air Combat Command chief Gen. G. Michael Hostage III, who in his Sept. 17 address said that “upgrading the existing fleet ... will be more cost efficient,” but a fourth generation fighter “will be dead” if it comes up against modern air defenses.

Hostage said the full complement of 1,763 F-35s for the Air Force is “not a luxury; it is a national security imperative.” Moreover, he insisted the F-22 inventory—which he called “pitifully small”—*must* be updated to ensure that it remains a world-beater for decades to come.

In all other programs, “our current fiscal environment will likely force me to make



USAF photo by TSgt. Jerome S. Tayborn

the hard decision between recapitalization and modernization,” Hostage said. “If the department says it can no longer support both, I must pick one or the other, and to me, recapitalization is what ... makes the most sense.”

If he were to put the limited monies available into simply upgrading the legacy fleet, that would mean “arriving in the middle of the next decade with a now 45-year-old fighter fleet and most likely no remaining domestic fighter production,” he said. Depriving future Commanders in Chief of a credible combat capability isn’t an option.

“That means accepting risk in the near term,” Hostage admitted, but without the new gear, ACC “will eventually cease to be a relevant combat force.”

The A-10, dedicated mostly to close air support, would have to give way to F-35s, which, though “expensive” as a CAS platform, can perform other highly demanding roles, such as air superiority and deep attack, that the A-10 can’t. The future force must be multirole capable, he said.

Hostage also wants relief from orders to build the MQ-1 and MQ-9 remotely piloted aircraft to a capability of 65 orbits. Appropriate for Afghanistan and Iraq, the

USAF photo by A1C Aaron Stout



Acting Secretary of the Air Force Eric Fanning said ongoing sequestration would compel USAF to make “vertical cuts”—that is, cutting entire fleets of aircraft.



*A KC-10 lands on Wake Island in the Pacific Ocean. The refueler is one of the programs possibly on the chopping block.*

trained for combat.” USAF has traditionally maintained the ability to “fight tonight,” but tiered readiness is the only way to manage the situation.

“Put simply, to deal with the sequester, our training focus will be placed on those airmen filling our most critical mission sets, regrettably leaving many others only partially prepared,” Hostage said.

At the same time, “every indication I see tells me that the high operations tempo of the past two decades will remain the norm” as USAF transitions to the post-Afghanistan era.

The Air Force has been unable to practice for the “high-end fight” because of the permissive air environment over Afghanistan. Welsh pledged to get the service back up to speed in that regard. “Full-spectrum training is something that fell off the table for us about six or seven years ago,” he admitted. “We’ve got to get it back on the table,” he said, as future fights are likely to be far more demanding than Afghanistan or Iraq.

USAF must find a way to afford crucial training events, like Red Flag—which also prepares allies for combat—and Weapons School classes, because they bestow the service’s “Ph.D.s” in combat operations, he argued.

“Our job as an Air Force is to be ready to fight the high-end fight against a well-equipped, determined, well-trained foe. I don’t know how big a force we’ll have to do that, but whatever we have better be able to do that. At least, some of it better be able to. So that’s where we’re going,” Welsh said.

In his House Armed Services Committee testimony, Welsh said full-spectrum train-

two aircraft are “useless” in a high-end fight, where they would promptly be shot down. Similarly, the MC-12, while valuable for “partnering” with a nascent air force, is simply a capability he can’t afford under expected budgets.

“If our future force must be smaller, then it must be vastly more capable,” Hostage said.

While direct confrontation with powers now developing fifth generation aircraft—namely, China and Russia—may be deemed a small risk, more than “50 countries around the world” field Chinese or Russian military hardware, Hostage pointed out. Both countries say they’ll export their latest stealth aircraft when ready.

Hardware is only one part of the calculus of how to apportion USAF’s restricted resources, however. Having credible equipment only works if the force is practiced and skilled at using the gear, and readiness has been hard-hit by the sequester and years of inadequately funded combat operations.

Hostage declared his belief that it would be “morally corrupt” to send airmen into combat who are “less than fully combat ready.” Consequently, he sees probable continuation of the tiered readiness he put in

place last summer: giving only those units in, or soon to be in, combat top priority for training time and flying hours, while other units did not fly.

That means “accepting that some of our units may not be immediately available, requiring some amount of time to get fully



USAF photo by MSgt. Benjamin Blöker

*The Army’s 101st Airborne soldiers make their way to a C-130 at Forward Operating Base Salerno in Afghanistan. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel has said USAF has more C-130s than it needs, but many reside in the Guard.*

ing is crucial because “if we’re not ready for all possible scenarios, we’ll be forced to accept what I believe is unnecessary risk. ... We may not get there in time, it may take the joint team longer to win, and our people will be placed at greater risk.”

Toward that end, Hostage said he’s made it mandatory that his forces practice under conditions they can expect to find in a fight with a near-peer. That means assuming network communications; comprehensive intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; or things like Global Positioning System navigation and timing will be compromised or denied.

“Our airmen practice routinely how to deal with momentary or prolonged interruption of any or all of these unique capabilities,” he said. “Our adversaries should know that such asymmetric attacks will not stop us; they will only make us mad. We will not be stopped and will continue to bring lethal combat power.”

### Varying Effects

Sequestration was not catastrophic for Air Mobility Command in 2013, said Gen. Paul J. Selva, AMC commander.



USAF photo by Roland Balk

**An airman helps load a tank onto a C-5M at Dover AFB, Del. USAF is keeping the Super Galaxy upgrades off the table in favor of other cost-saving cuts.**

However, if sequestration continues, AMC will feel the effects promptly. Fully a quarter of the pilots who need to upgrade to instructor or aircraft

commander won’t be able to do so for some time, and that will wreak havoc with AMC’s leadership progression as time passes, Selva said. The command



USAF photo by A/C Nisha Humes

**Gen. Mike Hostage, ACC commander, said it’s vital that airmen train under conditions they can expect to find in a fight with a near-peer.**

## No Radical Transformation on the Horizon

The armed services are racing to complete the Quadrennial Defense Review by February, armed with the freshly completed Strategic Choices Management Review ordered by Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in April. Hopes have been high that this QDR, coinciding with strategic milestones such as the drawdown in Afghanistan, a new Pacific-centric defense strategy, and unprecedented budget paralysis in Washington, D.C., offers the opportunity for a truly innovative restructure of service roles and missions.

Alas, the QDR may not turn out to be a revolutionary document offering a radical transformation of service functions. So said Maj. Gen. Steven L. Kwast, USAF’s representative to the QDR, at the Air Force Association’s Air & Space Conference in September.

While this QDR demands innovation and may deliver some, “it will be politically constrained. ... There is a lot at stake,” Kwast told the audience. “The only way you take big, bold steps is if Congress is able to take risk with you, and there is not a huge appetite right now for that kind of risk.”

Nevertheless, the debate is critical to what the Air Force wants to be in the coming years. Kwast said the Air Force has a lot more authority to make big changes than it may realize—and shouldn’t take lightly the opportunity to be brave and bold.

In previous iterations, the QDR “was deep, and it covered every subject and was extensive” and produced an excellent report invariably ignored by Congress, Kwast observed. Fiscal pressures are accelerating the process this time, however, he said.

“We will not take a full year. The deep work will happen over the next few months,” he said.

One big reason is the SCMR. Work on the QDR was halted while the SCMR was carried out, but Kwast sees value in the exercise, as it compelled the services to take a deep dive into their budgets.

“The nice thing about the [SCMR] is that it ... gave us insight” into where things stand with the other services, he told reporters. It revealed how the other services spend their money and the magnitude of that spending over time. It’s “a good starting place for this kind of work,” Kwast said.

With the SCMR completed, the QDR won’t try to “crack open” matters and missions that the President and the Office of the Secretary of Defense have now decided are policy priorities. That’s a break from past QDRs, which looked at the full spectrum of missions in DOD, Kwast said.

Instead, the QDR is scrutinizing return on investment and capabilities and whether the current strategy is executable.

is busy returning people and gear from Afghanistan, but as that activity winds down, pilot and maintainer proficiency will become a bigger issue.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel has said the Air Force could reduce its C-130 force because the service has more than it needs. Selva said the number of potentially “excess” C-130s is about 40 airframes, but because so many Hercs reside with the Air National Guard, it is uncertain how such a reduction would play out.

“My position is that the fleet ... is affordable” at its current size, he said, if managed carefully and properly distributed among the Total Force.

The C-5M is achieving an 80 percent reliability rate, is a “magnificent” performer, and AMC has no plans to put that upgrade—with about 40 airplanes to go—on the table as a potential cut. To pay for it, though, Selva said AMC might

**Then-Brig. Gen. Steven Kwast (second from right) briefs a general from the Afghan National Army Air Corps at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan. Kwast, now USAF’s representative to the QDR, says Congress has no appetite for taking bold transformational risks.**

accelerate the rate that underperforming C-5As are withdrawn from service. This would require congressional approval.

Selva also said the requirement for 479 tankers is solid, but he may take out the KC-10s as KC-46s deliver, to rapidly achieve a vertical cut.

Welsh said the KC-46 tanker is not an optional program. When the last KC-46 is delivered, there will still be “200-plus tankers” in the fleet—mostly KC-135s—that will be more than 65 years old. “We just have to recapitalize this fleet,” he said.

The long-range strike bomber (LRS-B) “is another mandatory recapitalization

program for us,” he added. To underline his point during the Air & Space Conference, Welsh showed a photo of a B-52H when it was new in 1962—and then the same tail number aircraft today, counted on to perform combat missions.

In a press conference, Welsh said the LRS-B, to be bought in numbers ranging from 80 to 100 aircraft, will fix a glaring USAF force structure problem: the ability to bring high capacity strikes with stealth at range and “operate continuously throughout the conflict.” The existing fleet of B-1Bs, B-52s, and B-2s “just won’t age that



USAF photo by Capt. David Faggard

The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance didn’t take account of the sequester, Kwast noted, and that fact “makes the affordability part of the strategy work a real problem. That’s why you hear it more,” he said.

The Air Force’s facility with “global power, global reach, and global vigilance” will be in high demand in the coming years, Kwast said. “We have truly become indispensable to every other joint partner out there,” he told reporters after his speech.

While the Air Force has a great deal of authority to make institutional change, Kwast said, he conceded to reporters that no serious intraservice roles and missions scrub—a new “Key West Agreement,” for example—can happen without political will. There’s likely to be debate about the breakdown of functions within the services and about the return on investment per cost of effect—looking at submarines, long-range strike, naval aviation, and ground forces. But anything “transformational” will probably be elusive, Kwast predicted.

“The only way that happens is if you are given the permission to do that,” he said of a notional new “Key West”-style deal on service responsibilities.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff want to shape expectations during the debate period, both from Congress and the

general public. That duty falls to Adm. James A. Winnefeld Jr., the JCS vice chairman, who delivered his own remarks at the AFA conference. Because the military has little idea how much money it will have to spend in coming years—or what it will be obliged to spend the money on—leadership and strategy will be critical to the services getting their priorities right, he told the audience.

“Those who would suggest that we should just articulate our strategic ends and then simply demand the means to make it happen have never really seriously done strategy out there in the real world,” Winnefeld observed. This approach risks leaving the military with a “bankrupt strategy,” he added.

As a result, the Air Force and DOD need to prioritize missions, and the JCS have decided clearly the kinds of wars that won’t get priority. Earlier, in another public venue, Winnefeld cautioned that the counterinsurgency capabilities built up over the last decade won’t serve the new strategic or fiscal environment.

“I’d submit that we’re more likely to see a Desert Storm-type of operation—ejecting a nation that has invaded an ally or a friend of the United States—than we are to see another decade-long counterinsurgency campaign,” Winnefeld forecast. Instead, the US must be postured for high-intensity

warfare in the future, he emphasized at the AFA conference.

“When the next big fight comes ... I think that contest will be ... a much different fight—one that’s faster and harder and dependent on capabilities brought to bear by American airmen,” Winnefeld predicted.

He said, “We will not win that fight without dominant airpower.” Future enemies will “use many of the tools we’ve employed so successfully, such as ubiquitous ISR, networks, stealth, and precision guided weapons, against us.”

Winnefeld conceded that “there will be tough internal choices” as the Air Force makes its adjustments in the coming budget cycles. “Midgrade and senior leaders will have to look beyond the wars in which they grew up and beyond the service communities in which they grew up,” he said.

The strongest QDR arguments, Winnefeld suggested, “will be tied to the ends of our national security interests.” The most innovative solutions that “correspond to our ends will be the ones that must be most empowered to shape our ends.”

If the services “get this right, emerging from the far side of all this complexity will be a smaller but more modern, faster, more lethal, and far more capable Air Force.”

—Marc V. Schanz



USAF photo by SSgt. Eric Harris

well,” and the LRS-B needs to appear in the mid-2020s, he said.

Welsh further told reporters that if asked to name priorities beyond the top three, he would “recapitalize JSTARS” because ground moving target information is now considered a basic of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. “All the combatant commanders want it,” so the issue becomes “how do we provide it at the best cost over time.”

He predicted that the T-X—a trainer to replace the 50-year-old T-38—is “coming, and we’ve just got to figure out how fast we can get there from here.” He seconded a comment from Gen. Edward A. Rice Jr., then Air Education and Training Command chief, that he’s not worried the T-38 will “fall out of the sky tomorrow,” but a new trainer program should be quickly pushed forward once there’s budget space for it. “We should accelerate it, not slip it,” he said. Nevertheless, it is not in the current budget.

Air Force Materiel Command boss Gen. Janet C. Wolfenbarger, asked about the effect of vertical cuts on her workforce, said she won’t just lay off the people associated with the terminated programs, but will realign them to maintain a proper mix of manning at every level of management. Nevertheless, she anticipates there will be layoffs. That’s hard, she said, because AFMC has been trying to rebuild its acquisition acumen by beefing up its workforce in recent years.

### Shifting the R&D Money

In her speech, Wolfenbarger hit on the theme of preserving future capabilities. She’s heard “consistent messaging” from top DOD and Air Force leaders that

basic science and technology research must be maintained. Without giving numbers, she said the next budget’s S&T accounts will be “fairly constant” with the levels of the past few years, and she reported having “the endorsement of the senior leadership at every level” to make sure USAF maintains its technology edge.

However, Northrop Grumman Chief Executive Officer Wesley G. Bush, in his address, warned of danger in USAF’s approach to new programs.

Bush said the Air Force—and DOD broadly—is emphasizing making new technologies “more mature so they’re ready for procurement.” That’s a good idea, since pressing too fast with technologies that weren’t yet ready for fielding has undone a number of high-profile programs. But Bush said such pressure inevitably means R&D money “gets shifted” away from basic S&T and toward risk reduction, starving “early stage development.”

He said “my biggest concern” is “a very dangerous risk aversion” on the part of Pentagon technology managers. Occasional failures are part and parcel of “pushing technology to the maximum,” he said, adding the Air Force must be “willing to take risks.”

USAF’s financial situation won’t just hammer aircraft programs, but will create the prospect that “all programs will get broken,” according to Gen. William L. Shelton, head of Air Force Space Command. The sequester, if it continues, would be devastating to US space and cyber capabilities, he said. Threats to American satellite constellations are emerging almost every day in jamming, lasers, space-based inter-

***An MC-12 Liberty aircraft prepares for takeoff from Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. The MC-12 is valuable for partnering with a nascent air force, but it may prove to be a capability USAF can’t afford.***

ceptors, and electromagnetic pulse.

“The threats are going up, the budgets are going down, but we’ve got some real priority choices we’re going to have to make, and cyber is one of those,” Shelton said. Cyber capabilities must grow and are “foundational” to everything the Air Force does, but a static cyber budget will leave the US vulnerable, he observed. Sequester has meant Shelton has had to degrade capabilities by reducing maintenance accounts and sustainment capabilities.

Given all the intimidating talk about being “resource-limited, downsizing, all those kinds of things”—as well as probable flatlining pay and benefits for service members—Welsh urged conference attendees, “Don’t panic too quickly.”

“You’ve got to step back every now and then and realize how big the enterprise still is,” he said, describing the hundreds of thousands of airmen supporting combat operations, ISR, mobility, space, and cyber. “This will still be a big Air Force.” More important, no matter what happens with the defense budget, USAF is still “the best air force” in the world.

“This is a great time to lead,” he said, because as they choose priorities, today’s airmen will have a huge role in shaping what the service looks like for decades to come. As for USAF’s fiscal uncertainties, Welsh said he hoped they would be short-lived.

“I am an optimist,” he said. ■