

Clawing back from the precipice; USAF's credibility gap; Total Force future; Flex and stretch

EIGHT AIN'T ENOUGH

Air Combat Command chief Gen. Gilmory Michael Hostage III said at an Air Force Association-sponsored event in July that during the height of last year's sequester-driven groundings of combat units, he had just "eight combat-ready" airplanes available if a contingency popped up in Syria, Iran, or North Korea. "That's how bad it got."

All the other combat airplanes under his command were getting spun up to go to a forward operating theater or were already in combat, Hostage said.

"We have clawed our way back out of that hole," he said, but while combat crews are once again up to combat proficiency, depot backlogs persist and Hostage is sure sequester will come again.

As for the decision to divest the A-10, USAF Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III said it was not solely an Air Force in-house management choice.

Speaking at a "State of the Force" press briefing July 30, Welsh said, "I asked the combatant commanders ... if you had \$4 billion to spend," which is what USAF will save in the near term by retiring the A-10 fleet, "would you prefer to keep the A-10 and have more [close air support] capability? Or would you prefer to buy more ISR or other things? I now have a list of 15 things they'd prefer us to spend the money on."

Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James, at the same briefing, bristled at the notion that the service is somehow giving CAS short shrift by divesting the A-10.

"It's possible we could get into" a contingency that would require "higher levels of close air support in the next year or two or three. And if that is the case, we've got it. We've got the F-16. We've got the F-15E." Moreover, with regard to the A-10, "this was designed to be a five-year, gradual retirement plan. So it's not as though we ever suggested that the A-10 go away overnight."

USAF still hasn't crawled out of the readiness hole created by last year's budget sequester. If sequestration returns in Fiscal 2016—as existing law says it must—the Air Force will be in deep trouble again, particularly if Congress won't let USAF shape itself to be affordable, top USAF leaders warned.

In the briefing for Pentagon reporters, James said USAF will once again build a two-tiered budget for the coming year: one that spells out what "we really need" and one which, under sequester, USAF will have to "live with."

She said readiness is getting seriously shortchanged—both immediate, fight-tonight readiness and the long-term readiness of having future systems capable of defeating projected threats.

To keep funding the flying hours, operations, and maintenance necessary to stay combat-ready, USAF is reducing the ranks at an accelerated rate, bringing itself down from 330,000 airmen this year to "just 307,000," Welsh said. For just the next year, he said USAF has "already approved about 13,400 airmen for voluntary separation and over 6,000 for involuntary separation." The reductions will be made in about one year instead of the five allowed by the Pentagon, to reap the savings as fast as possible, so it is hoped, they can be plowed back into readiness.

USAF needs to get down to "a size that we can afford to train and operate," he said.

Both James and Welsh pleaded with Congress to avert sequester, saying that readiness cannot help but fall further. They also said that the personnel reductions they've programmed depend heavily on Congress permitting USAF to divest itself of the A-10 and U-2. If those actions aren't allowed, it will derail all the personnel cuts that go with them and hurt readiness that much more.

"Please don't carve money out of readiness," James said, addressing herself to Congress. That's exactly the effect, she said, if Congress requires USAF to keep the A-10 and U-2 in inventory but doesn't appropriate the money to operate them. Even if all the divestitures and force reductions requested in the Fiscal 2015 budget are approved, she said, it will take more than a year for the Air Force to undo the damage done by last year's sequester.

CREDIBILITY PLAN

The Air Force in July rolled out "America's Air Force: A Call to the Future"—dubbed Strategic Agility—its latest service vision document. While meant to take a 30-year look ahead and anticipate, conceptually, what USAF will need to be in 30 years—in terms of personnel, organization, and equipment—Strategic Agility is really a template to keep USAF focused on what's important, what's affordable, and what's believable.

James, at the July 30 "State of the Air Force" Pentagon press conference releasing the 20-page document, called it a "strategic framework" that will "help guide our long-range planning efforts."

Almost immediately, however, she described it as a way to help restore some of USAF's credibility on Capitol Hill, which she said has dwindled in recent years.

In courtesy calls on Congress, James said she hears that "the Air Force seemed to lack consistency in our policy



Please, Congress: Don't hamstring readiness any further.

choices, our resource choices. One year we would say this, another year we would say that.” The new vision should “certainly help us attain better results in the consistency department.” All future plans and budgeting decisions will have to keep with the overall concepts of Strategic Agility, she said.

James didn’t elaborate on the issues where USAF has been perceived as inconsistent, but members of Congress have cited the service for ambiguity on remotely piloted aircraft, upgrade of legacy fighters, tactical transport, and manning levels, among others.

Welsh, sitting beside James, said the service simply can no longer afford to start projects it can’t finish or waste funds creating duplicative or incompatible systems.

While the new vision looks 30 years ahead, it sets the stage for a far more detailed 20-year plan—expected to be complete at the end of the year—which will harmonize “all 12” of USAF’s other roadmaps, such as for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, mobility, and air dominance, to name a few.

That, in turn, will guide development of a “10-year balanced budget,” Welsh said, which will avoid new starts on which the Air Force can’t follow through. No longer will USAF present unfunded priorities that appear in the sixth year—after a five-year plan—because the “need” was deferred.

“That’s stupid,” Welsh said.

The document is short on specifics and isn’t meant either as a technology forecast or a roadmap as such. Instead, Strategic Agility declares USAF’s intention to stay ahead of technology and geopolitics, which are evolving at an ever-accelerating pace.

In practical terms, it calls on USAF to embrace far greater flexibility in how it approaches its man, train, and equip functions. The mix of missions performed by the Active Duty and the reserve components, for example, will shift, so that they’re done by the component that can most efficiently do them.

Shortly before the rollout, Air Force Reserve chief Lt. Gen. James “J. J.” Jackson told an AFA audience that Strategic Agility would aim to achieve “the most capable Total Force at the lowest possible cost,” and that one application of the philosophy would be to use Reservists for seasonal missions, such as hurricane hunting, aerial firefighting or space launch operations. The Air Force would therefore only have to pay for capability “when you use it,” instead of having Active Duty members idle between operations.

WILL “TOTAL FORCE” MEAN ANYTHING?

Indeed, the idea of “Total Force” may even wither away as almost all blue-suiters are likely to spend some time in the Active Duty, Guard, and Reserve—and perhaps take some time away from the service entirely, gaining commercial-world expertise on sabbatical before returning with new skills and perspective.

Some new technologies that will profoundly affect the future force were mentioned. The Strategic Agility document cites hypersonics, nanotechnology, directed energy, unmanned systems, and autonomous systems as “game-changing technologies” that will “amplify” the unique characteristics of airpower—namely, speed, range, flexibility, and precision. These are no surprise. USAF has gone into detail about each of these technology pushes in recent years through its technology horizons roadmaps.

Welsh and James referred to Strategic Agility as the last part of a “trilogy”—the previous installments being the “who we are” document—called “America’s Greatest Air Force: Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation”—and the “what

we do” document—called “Global Vigilance, Global Reach, Global Power for America.”

This last element is the “where we need to go” piece, Welsh said.

The automation element of the plan will find practical application in answering a mandate to cut 20 percent of USAF headquarters jobs, James said.

Besides efficiency, organizational changes will be needed to “lower the cost of failure,” according to the director of the effort to write the vision, Maj. Gen. David W. Allvin, USAF’s director of strategic planning. In order to be more cutting edge, Allvin said, USAF will have to do more frequent experimentation and thus must make it part and parcel of innovation that some experiments will fail.

That’s how “organizations learn,” he said in an interview. Among many failures will be a few standout successes that will drive leaps in capability and advantage, he said, and “we can’t be afraid of that.” The document says the Air Force will devise ways to incentivize smart risk-taking and reward constructive failure in airmen to make it easier for good new ideas to bubble up from the lowest ranks.

Welsh has frequently said the Air Force is not good at telling its own story—a point that is called out in the new vision document. It says that the service must “clearly demonstrate its purpose and culture to a broader audience in American society,” to derive necessary public support and to attract people to serve as airmen.

FLEXIBILITY, THE KEY TO AIRPOWER

James said embracing agility will help USAF avoid being locked in to certain approaches that may be ill-suited to reality.

“We never ever seem to accurately predict the future. We never get it right,” she said. Institutionalizing frequent change and adaptation is the only way to be prepared for anything.

While the vision document calls for nimble plans adjustments, one of the biggest lessons learned from recent acquisition problems is that frequently shifting requirements leads to delay and cost increases. Welsh has said that any changes in requirements for the Long-Range Strike Bomber, for example, must be approved by him—and no changes have been made to those requirements in four years. The KC-46 Pegasus tanker is a fixed-price contract program, and any changes would void the fixed-price nature of the deal.

Existing programs “are what they are,” James said, and their philosophies can’t really be undone at this stage.

The trick will be to shape new programs so they can take advantage of evolving technology through open architectures, allowing USAF to “plug in different types of capability” and use modular formats to be able to swap out new capabilities for old. She said the upcoming T-X trainer program and a replacement for the E-8 JSTARS aircraft will embody the new approach.

Asked if it will be better to build long-lived platforms with the ability to change out their mission gear or simply speed up the rapidity with which new systems are fielded and replaced, Welsh said the future will be some of both.

Systems “we’re going to keep for long periods of time because they cost a lot of money” such as fighters, tankers, bombers, and other items with a potential 50-year lifespan, “we should design for longer life,” Welsh said.

However, there are “more rapid acquisition programs” such as weapons and other items with “a shorter shelf life that we know we’re going to change, and ... we’ll be looking for different solutions” for them. This, Welsh said, “is where agility comes in. We don’t need the same process for everything.” ■