The Chief Steps Down

Declaring that he may have been “out of step with the times and thinking of some of the establishment,” Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman cut short by more than a year his tour as Air Force Chief of Staff and retired from active duty on Sept. 1.

He requested early retirement in a hand-written note to Air Force Secretary Sheila Widnall on July 28. Three days later, Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen announced the nomination of Gen. Michael E. Ryan, commander of US Air Forces in Europe, to replace Fogleman. Cohen had begun interviewing candidates on the basis of press reports that Fogleman might be about to leave.

The reports centered on the disagreement between Fogleman and top defense officials on what punitive action, if any, should be taken as a result of the bombing of the Khobar Towers housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, in June 1996, in which 19 US airmen were killed. Fogleman emphatically took the view that it would be wrong to hold the Air Force wing commander in Dhahran at fault. Two Air Force inquiries found that the casualties were attributable to an act of war and not inattention to security by wing officials.

However, that conclusion differed with the judgment of an investigation headed by a retired Army general and with the outspoken position of several members of Congress that someone ought to be held accountable for failure of security at Khobar Towers. Secretary Cohen took that view as well. On July 31, he stripped Brig. Gen. Terryl J. Schwalier, who had been wing commander in Dhahran, of a previously approved promotion to major general. Schwalier announced his retirement the same day.

Fogleman declined any public comment beyond a brief written statement. In fact, he played down disagreement on Khobar Towers as a factor in his decision to go, saying that “the timing of my announcement was driven by a desire to defuse the perceived confrontation between myself and the Secretary of Defense over his impending decision on the Khobar Towers terrorist attack.”

In a letter to the men and women of the Air Force, Fogleman said: “My stock in trade after 34 years of service is my military judgment and advice. After serving as Chief of Staff for almost three years, my values and sense of loyalty to our soldiers, sailors, Marines, and especially our airmen, led me to the conclusion that I may be out of step with the times and thinking of some of the establishment. This puts me in an awkward position. If I were to continue to serve as Chief of Staff of the Air Force and speak out, I would be seen as a divisive force and not a team player. I do not want the Air Force to suffer for my judgment and convictions.”

Also, he told the troops, “I’ve always said that my serving as the Chief of Staff was a 'tour,' not a 'sentence,' and that I would leave when I made all the contributions that I could. After I accepted this position in 1994, I met with other senior leaders of the Air Force to discuss our goals for my tenure. We wanted to take care of the troops and their families, to stabilize the force, to set a course for modernization, and to develop a new strategic vision.”

On Fogleman's watch, the force did begin to achieve stability after a period of intense change. He launched a comprehensive reevaluation of future requirements and options. That effort became the basis for two landmark reports, “New World Vistas,” which explored the technological possibilities, and “Air Force 2025,” which examined the threats and missions the future force might confront. Among the outcomes was a recognition that the emphasis in Air Force operations is gradually moving from air and space to space and air. These studies were also instrumental in the development of “Global Engagement,” the Air Force’s long-range plan for the 21st century.
The plainspoken Fogleman was popular with the force and was highly respected by his peers, but his relationship with senior Defense Department leaders was not always smooth. The Khobar Towers controversy was definitely part of it.

In September 1996, Gen. Wayne Downing, the retired Army officer who led the initial investigation, announced his opinion that Schwalier “did not take all measures possible to protect the forces at Khobar Towers.” That finding was published by the Pentagon and got major notice by Congress and the news media.

The Air Force conducted its own inquiry, which came to far different conclusions. Publication of that report, however, was postponed by the Defense Department, which subsequently sent it back to the Air Force to recheck certain parts. The second Air Force report was similarly withheld and was not released until after the decision in July 1997 to fix blame on Schwalier.

Fogleman told the Senate Armed Services Committee in February that it would have a “chilling effect” on commanders if they are liable for punitive action when “despite their absolute best efforts [they] are targeted by somebody in an act of war and somebody is killed.”

The Quadrennial Defense Review, completed in May, was another source of apparent tension. While the review was in progress, the Air Force was often at odds with Joint force planners who tended to undervalue airpower, especially in the first critical stages of conflict. The final QDR report praised the contributions and potential of airpower, but in the implementing actions, airpower took the deepest cuts of all. The Air Force agreed to the reductions allocated, including a reduction in F-22 fighters. That, however, was not enough for topside staffers in Secretary Cohen’s office. Taking their advice rather than Fogleman’s, Cohen further decided to cut back the F-22 production rate.

Fogleman had been Air Force Chief of Staff since October 1994. Before that, he had commanded an Air Force wing, an air division, a numbered air force, a major command, and a unified command. He had amassed more than 6,500 flying hours in fighters, transports, tankers, and helicopters and had flown 315 combat missions in the Vietnam War. Early in his career, he was a history instructor at the Air Force Academy. He liked to draw on historical examples in his speeches, and he published a list of books strongly suggested for reading by Air Force leaders.

Among the prominent Fogleman themes were integrity and personal responsibility. In August 1995, Air Force officers, senior NCOs, and executive-level civilian employees were required to watch a videotape, “Air Force Standards and Accountability,” in which he said that Air Force standards must be “uniformly known, consistently applied, and nonselectively enforced.”

He and his wife, Miss Jane, will make their retirement home in Durango, Colo.