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**An Independent Nonprofit Aerospace Organization**

November 14, 2011

The Honorable J. Randy Forbes  
House of Representatives  
2438 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Forbes:

We would like to commend you on your new initiative: “Strong Defense, Strong America.” As you know, fallout from the global economic crisis portends an extended period of austerity for the military Services. Unfortunately, this imminent budget draw-down does not correlate with an ebb in United States national security interests and responsibilities. The men and women of the US military are balancing an exceedingly broad array of missions—everything from humanitarian relief efforts and challenges in cyberspace to traditional combat operations and nuclear deterrence. As Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta recently explained:

Our challenge is taking a force that has been involved in a decade of war and ensuring that as we build the military for the future, we are able to defend this country...at a time of fiscal austerity. We need to build a force that can confront a growing array of threats in the 21st century.

We fully concur with Secretary Panetta’s assessment. The policy and budget decisions made over the next few months will shape the options available to leaders for decades into the future. One thing is certain: America’s future security demands that strategic wisdom, not short term opportunism, govern this process. That is precisely why “Strong Defense, Strong America” is so important.

In that vein, we would like to discuss the US Air Force and its prospects for the future. The Service stands at a crossroads. The legacy systems that comprise the majority of its fleet are wearing out after decades of hard use. These geriatric airframes—with some planes dating back to the Eisenhower Administration—will not be mechanically sustainable forever. Much like unarmored “humvees” that proved vulnerable to improvised explosive devices in Iraq and Afghanistan, these older aircraft simply lack the design attributes required to operate in contested combat environments. This translates into airframes that require ever-more maintenance and are increasingly less survivable when flown into harm’s way. Put another way, we find ourselves spending more money to sustain a fleet whose combat utility is degrading—that is a bad trend as far as the nation’s security interests are concerned.

The venerable B-52 stands forth as a prime example of this pattern. The newest of these bombers pre-dates the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Service has multiple B-52 pilots who are literally flying the exact airframes their fathers and grandfathers flew decades ago. While such anecdotes make for entertaining human interest news stories, they do not represent prudent defense policy. Today, these geriatric bombers require a year’s worth of intensive repair work every time they enter depot-level maintenance. Even when all the mechanical problems are

addressed, these aircraft are not very survivable in a combat environment. Three decades ago, during the final days of Vietnam, the Air Force lost 15 B-52s in 12 days during Operation Linebacker II. Air defenses have advanced markedly since then but nearly half of our bomber fleet is still comprised of the B-52.

Age-related problems are not restricted to the B-52—they extend throughout the Air Force fleet. In 2000, the Service grounded one third of its KC-135 air refueling aircraft because of a faulty flight control component. In 2004, the Air Force discovered that many of its C-130s had major cracks in their wings. In 2007 an F-15 broke in two while on a training flight due to structural fatigue. In 2008, the entire T-38 fleet was grounded for an extended period because of an aging control surface fixture. Most recently, half of the A-10 fleet was grounded due to wing cracks. This situation was not supposed to happen, but the procurement holiday of the 1990s and the diversion of funds to sustain combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has yielded a procurement bow wave for the Air Force. The lives of legacy systems were repeatedly extended and fleet recapitalization efforts were delayed, deferred, and curtailed. Considering that the Future Years Defense Program outlines a 49-year replacement rate for Air Force aircraft, this problem is slated to get worse.

Given the severity of the financial pressures facing the nation, it is fair to ask: does the nation really need a robust Air Force? Services do not exist for their own benefit—they must stand forth as effective and valuable tools in support of American interests around the globe. For the Air Force, its value is best understood by exploring two realms: vision and actual capability. Prior to the advent of powered flight, wars were fought largely through attrition, annihilation, and occupation. The rise of the air domain changed this equation by affording a new capacity to operate past traditional battle lines. Instead of having to rollback an enemy through brutal battlefield engagements, it was now possible to defeat our enemies through aerial attack—thereby attaining victory in a more effective, efficient, and strategic fashion. Turning the potential of this theory into reality took many years, resulted in countless lessons-learned, and stimulated tremendous technological innovation. One century later, the realized capabilities afforded by speed, range, precision, and survivability have yielded an Air Force of immense capability. Accordingly, while the first combat aircraft of the past century have little in common with their modern descendants, their lineage is based upon common intellectual underpinnings: a quest to attain national security goals effectively and efficiently, without projecting unnecessary vulnerability or engaging in wars of attrition. These “air-minded” principles are what define the US Air Force and the way in which it operates in the domains of air, space, and cyberspace.

Harnessing this strategic vision, the US Air Force is also defined by its broad array of mission capabilities. In times of peace, this means influencing key areas around the world through peaceful military cooperation, deterring potential adversaries with shows of force—both conventional as well as nuclear, and reassuring allies that we will be there for them with credible capabilities should the need arise. Whether assisting in disaster relief efforts or deploying combat aircraft as a symbol of American resolve, the Air Force is a critical tool that stands in support of American policy objectives.

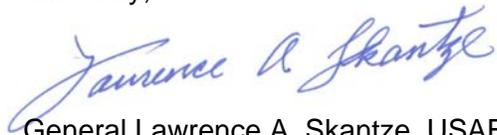
When combat is necessary, the Air Force is a vital asset throughout every facet of the fight: securing freedom of action through air dominance, rapidly degrading enemy capabilities and capacity through precision strike; flying personnel and equipment into the theater; empowering individuals at all levels with critical intelligence data; securing freedom of maneuver for forces on the ground with close air support—oftentimes with Air Force Special Operations personnel personally directing the strikes; enabling command and control via airborne and space-based assets; ensuring network resilience with cyber capabilities; and saving lives through combat search and rescue and aero-medical evacuation. Said another way, whether providing

sovereign options or serving in concert with the joint team, the Air Force stands forth as a vital national asset. Modern combat operations are simply not feasible without the capabilities afforded by American Airmen. While the other branches of the military have regional air arms, only the US Air Force possess the capabilities and capacity required to facilitate sustained global operations anytime, anywhere.

The Air Force now finds itself in a situation where another acquisition deferment will lead to the eventual cessation of key missions. Accordingly, while the recapitalization list is generally considered in terms of systems, it really comes down to a question of what capabilities the nation wants to preserve. Does the United States want to retain the capacity to engage in missions like stemming nuclear proliferation, managing the rise of near-peer competitors, and defending the homeland?

Leaders need to fully consider the ramifications of the decisions they make today as they seek to guide our nation through this difficult period. Just as our legacy fleet has enabled national policy objectives over the past several decades, our future investments will govern the options available to leaders into the 2030s and 2040s. Investing in capable systems will make the difference between success and failure in future wars and between life and death for those who answer the call to serve our nation. When viewed in those terms, failing to adequately invest in the Air Force would be the decision that proves "too expensive" for our nation.

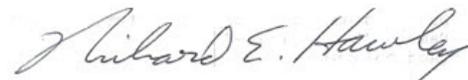
Sincerely,



General Lawrence A. Skantze, USAF (Ret)



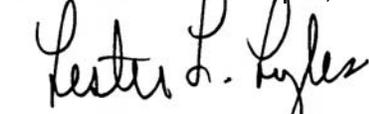
General John Michael Loh, USAF (Ret)



General Richard E. Hawley, USAF (Ret)



General John F. Jumper, USAF (Ret)



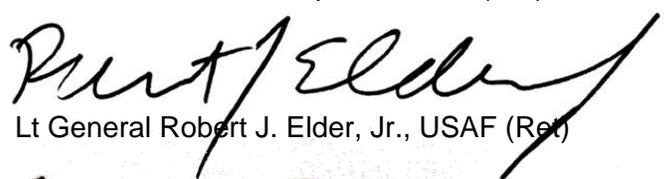
General Lester L. Lyles, USAF (Ret)



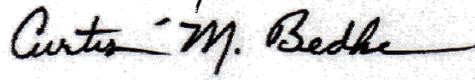
Lt General Michael M. Dunn, USAF (Ret)



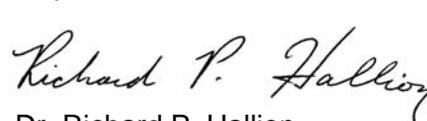
Lt General David A. Deptula, USAF (Ret)



Lt General Robert J. Elder, Jr., USAF (Ret)



Maj General Curtis M. Bedke, USAF (Ret.)



Dr. Richard P. Hallion



Dr. Mark Lewis

cc: Congresswoman Madeline Bordallo  
Congressman Howard McKeon  
Congressman Adam Smith