

**Senate Armed Services Committee**

**February 12, 2008**

**Subject: United States Air Force Nuclear Enterprise**

**Combined Statement of  
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**I. Introduction**

(U) Chairman Levin, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide you the Air Force way ahead for our nuclear enterprise. Since the weapons-transfer incident of 30 August 2007, we have initiated multiple levels of review to ensure we have not only investigated the root causes of the incident, but more importantly taken this opportunity to review Air Force policies and procedures in order to improve the Air Force's nuclear capabilities. The Commander of Air Combat Command commissioned the Commander Directed Investigation (CDI), a tactical level investigation that focuses on the facts of the incident and determines accountability. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) commissioned the Blue Ribbon Review (BRR), an operational-level review that focuses on the entire Air Force enterprise including both the aircraft and Inter Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) and reviews policies, procedures. The Secretary of Defense commissioned the Defense Science Review Board (DSB) review, a strategic-level independent review that focuses on the Department of Defense (DoD) enterprise and joint organizations. The Air Force takes its nuclear obligations seriously, and will continue to take any measure necessary to deliver this strategic capability safely. Consequently, we have identified the actions required to both enhance our strengths and correct those areas needing improvement.

## History of Incident

(U) The United States Air Force has underwritten the national strategy for over 60 years by providing a credible deterrent force, and we continue to serve as the ultimate backstop, dissuading opponents and reassuring allies by maintaining an always-ready nuclear arm. Throughout our history, our professionalism and dedication has guaranteed the soundness and surety of Air Force crews and weapons on nuclear alert. From its beginning our Service has earned the trust of our national leadership and most importantly, the trust of the American public.

(U) Unfortunately, in late August 2007, the Air Force flew nuclear weapons from Minot Air Force Base (AFB), North Dakota, to Barksdale AFB, Louisiana in an unauthorized manner. Immediately, the Commander of Air Combat Command initiated an investigation into the incident. Soon after that investigation began, the Air Force began to analyze its policies, programs, procedures, and processes involving nuclear assets. Furthermore, the Air Force is working in partnership with other federal agencies both inside and outside the Department of Defense (DoD) to conduct this analysis.

(U) Without delay, the Secretary of the Air Force (SECAF) and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) engaged and initiated a series of eight specific actions: 1) An immediate, successful 100 percent stockpile verification of U.S nuclear weapons in the Air Force custody. 2) A stand-down of USAF nuclear units for extra training and to emphasize attention to detail. 3) A CDI, a tactical-level incident-related investigation, to identify the root causes that led to the weapons-transfer incident, which had already begun. 4) CSAF messages to all Air Force major commands and each individual Airman on standards, discipline, and attention to detail, highlighting mission focus and checklist discipline. 5) 100 percent Limited Nuclear Surety Inspections (LNSI) of all nuclear-capable units, with Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) oversight. This was in addition to previously scheduled NSIs. 6) A SECAF letter to all Airmen

highlighting discipline and responsibility. 7) SECAF visits to Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, and Minot AFB, North Dakota. 8) A CSAF-chartered Blue Ribbon Review of policies and procedures focused on the entire Air Force nuclear enterprise.

(U) At the conclusion of the CDI, the SECAF and the Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Plans, and Requirements, then-Major General Richard Newton, held a press conference to outline the incident and summarize the findings of the initial investigation. Also during that press conference, General Newton discussed accountability measures that were taken as a result of the unauthorized weapons transfer. Seven leaders within the Air Force have been removed from their position, including one wing commander and two group commanders. Additionally, 90 people were temporarily decertified from duties associated with the nuclear mission.

(U) Many of the actions following the incident are ongoing. The Blue Ribbon Review (BRR) represents a comprehensive, operational-level review of policies and procedures of the Air Force's strategic nuclear enterprise including aircraft, missiles, and sustainment missions. This BRR is an opportunity for the Air Force to improve its commitment to a sound nuclear enterprise. The nuclear surety inspections are complete with the exception of the 5<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing at Minot AFB, which must be recertified for its nuclear mission. Additionally, the Secretary of Defense requested General (retired) Larry Welch to lead a DSB review of DoD-wide nuclear weapons surety.

## **II. Root Causes**

(U) We want to assure you that during the incident there was never an unsafe condition, and the incident was promptly reported to our national leadership, including the Secretary of Defense and the President. These weapons were secure and always in the hands of America's Airmen. However, as Airmen, we are accountable and we will assure the American people that

the Air Force standards they expect are being met. In addition, the wings at Barksdale AFB and Minot AFB are units with a proud heritage. It is important that we act to restore the confidence in these units and move ahead. Rest assured, we will.

(U) The root causes identified for the specific incident were unit-level leadership and discipline breakdown at Barksdale AFB and Minot AFB. These breakdowns were due to leadership failures and a declining focus on the strategic nuclear bomber mission. Over time, the breakdown of leadership and discipline among a small group of Airmen at Barksdale AFB and Minot AFB fostered an environment which eroded the strict adherence to established procedures.

Specifically, one of the two pylons for this flight was not properly prepared because an informal scheduling process subverted the formal scheduling process. This was the result of a lack of attention to detail and lack of adherence to well-established Air Force guidelines, technical orders, and procedures.

(U) In addition to discipline breakdowns at the unit level, a declining focus on the strategic nuclear bomber mission was cited as a root cause in the CDI. Since the end of the Cold War, aircraft units have taken on conventional commitments in the midst of an ever-increasing operational tempo and a continuously-shrinking force. Thus, the role of the strategic nuclear mission, especially in dual-tasked aircraft units, competed for time, attention, and focus. The turning point of this diminished focus began when aircraft came off nuclear alert status. At the same time, the Air Force began 17 years of continuous combat including conventional airpower commitments across the spectrum of regular and irregular war in numerous theaters of operation. Training in nuclear procedures became less frequent without the daily activity required by nuclear alert conditions coupled with the expanded commitments of dual-tasked units. As a result, nuclear-related experience-levels have declined within bomber and dual-capable units.

### III. Way ahead

(U) The BRR is a comprehensive, thorough, operational-level review of Air Force policies and procedures of the Air Force's nuclear enterprise. Senior leadership in the Air Force sees the BRR as an opportunity to improve a sound nuclear enterprise. As such, the BRR examines the organizational structure, command authorities, personnel, and assignment policies, and the education and training associated with nuclear weapons. This analysis takes into account operations, maintenance, storage, handling, transportation, and security. The BRR finds that the Air Force policies, processes, and procedures are sound and that the Air Force commitment to the nuclear enterprise is strong. However, there are opportunities for improvement in the Air Force's overall support to the nuclear enterprise. Specifically, the BRR draws five general conclusions and offers recommendations to better organize, train, and equip the Air Force nuclear enterprise.

(U) The BRR's five general conclusions are: 1) Nuclear surety in the Air Force is sound and the nuclear weapons inventory in the Air Force is safe, secure, and reliable. 2) Air Force focus on the nuclear mission has diminished since 1991, while the conventional commitment has expanded, the operations tempo has increased, and the number of Airmen has declined. Operations NORTHERN WATCH, SOUTHERN WATCH, ALLIED FORCE, ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM are but the most notable examples of the operations we have undertaken since 1991. 3) The nuclear enterprise in the Air Force works despite being fragmented into a number of commands. For example, nuclear surety in the Air Force is sound among both the ICBM force under Air Force Space Command (AFSPC) and the nuclear-strike aircraft under Air Combat Command (ACC). 4) The declining amount of Air Force nuclear experience led to waning expertise. During the decline in nuclear experience, conventional experience grew exponentially. Today, with almost half the Airmen it had during the Cold War,

the Air Force fulfills a far greater number of conventional commitments, world-wide, than it did just 17 years ago. 5) The Air Force nuclear surety inspection programs need standardization.

(U) The BRR's recommendations range in scope and scale and can be categorized into those that can quickly be accomplished, those that are moderately complex and require more time, and those that require substantial resources and time. For example, strengthening the relationship with Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) can be accomplished with relative ease; developing a comprehensive list of all critical nuclear-related personnel positions in other agencies will require some time; and resourcing a long-range replacement and recapitalization program for aging nuclear weapon systems and nuclear support equipment will require substantial resources and time.

(U) The Air Force Nuclear General Officer Steering Group (AFNGOSG), an entity with 20 general officers from all disciplines across the AF nuclear enterprise and originally established in 1997, has assessed, validated, and assigned responsibility for implementing the recommendations from the CDI, the BRR, and the DSB. One of those recommendations already completed is for the chair of the AFNGOSG to be upgraded to a 3-star general, specifically, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Plans, and Requirements. Given the collective nuclear experience on the AFNGOSG, we will depend on this group to track and ensure broadest implementation of the outstanding recommendations. As of the time of this hearing, nearly one-quarter of those recommendations are complete.

(U) These recommendations extend to all levels of the Air Force. For example, one of the recommendations is to restructure the Air Staff to increase the visibility and focus of the nuclear enterprise, and the AFNGOSG is currently evaluating a number of alternatives to achieve this goal. Other recommendations include reviewing how the Air Force presents forces to Combatant Commanders, and the commonality of nuclear forces among the different Numbered

Air Forces. Common throughout the CDI, the BRR, and the DSB are recommendations that focus on the level of experience, knowledge, frequency of training, exercises, inspections, standardization and evaluation, within our nuclear enterprise.

**IV. Closing**

(U) The Air Force is committed to continuously improving its ability to fulfill the Nation's nuclear mission, grounded on our core values of integrity, service, and excellence because it is a credible nuclear deterrent that convinces potential adversaries of our unwavering commitment to defend our nation. The Air Force portion of the Nation's nuclear deterrent is sound, and we will take every measure necessary to continue to provide safe, secure, reliable, nuclear surety to the American public.