

Air Force Association Convention

As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, National Harbor, MD, Wednesday, September 16, 2009

Thank you, for that kind introduction.

It's an honor to have the opportunity to speak to the Air Force Association. For more than six decades this organization has been a tenacious advocate for Airmen and US air supremacy--without which, as Hap Arnold once said, "there can be no national security."

General Arnold was, of course, a formidable advocate for air power long before there was a US Air Force. His dealings with President Roosevelt also showed, once more, that a little civil-military tension is nothing new in the history of our republic. Arnold recalled the time when he said some things in congressional testimony that were none too pleasing to FDR. At a White House meeting, soon there after, the president looked pointedly at Arnold and observed that military officers who were unable to "play ball" with his administration might be found available for duty in Guam.

But, later that year, General Arnold was invited to another White House gathering--a small dinner and he arrived to discover that Roosevelt awaited him with a tray of cocktail mixings. "Good evening, Hap," said the president, as if nothing had happened. "How about my mixing you an Old Fashioned?" Well, I'm afraid the early hour precludes our breaking the ice--literally and figuratively--in a similar manner this morning, but it is a pleasure to be here.

Today, I want to talk about Airmen and air power--about what the men and women of the US Air Force do every day to serve our country, and about the range of things the service must be able to do in the future to protect America against an array of lethal and complex threats. I do so keenly aware of what the Air Force has experienced, endured, and accomplished in recent times--above all, waging two major wars, protracted air campaigns that have accelerated the wear and tear on the service's people and aging inventory.

First, words of thanks to those men and women whose achievements we cherish and whose interests you represent. Since 9/11, hundreds of thousands of Airmen have gone about their duties--usually unheralded, and unrecognized by the usual metric of medals and media coverage. Often they are on the ground, in the dirt, and sometimes under fire--doing their jobs without fail and without complaint. More than 100 have made the supreme sacrifice in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As a result of Airmen's efforts, dangerous men looking to attack our troops and harm our country have met their just end, usually without warning: a distant buzz followed by a bolt from the sky. Some of those strikes may have come from the 74th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron--the "flying tigers" who trace their lineage back to Claire Chennault. They deployed to Afghanistan from Moody Air Force base about seven months ago. Since then, they have completed more than 2,800 combat missions spanning over 12,000 flight hours of reconnaissance and close air support--a record for this historic unit.

Our enemies have also been under the unblinking eye and precision fire of the 214th Reconnaissance Group of the Arizona National Guard, which recently received the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award from Secretary Donley after its Predators logged more than 17,000 hours over Afghanistan and Iraq . Overall, the Air Force has increased the number of Predator and Reaper combat air patrols in theater by more than half from last year, and the numbers of CAPs will grow to 50 by the end of FY 2010.

For America's fighting men and women on the ground, the efforts of Airmen have made a life or death difference.

Take the example of Tech Sergeant Benjamin Horton, from Hill Air Force Base in Utah. Sergeant Horton destroyed more than seven tons of enemy explosives while deployed to Iraq in the hair-raising vocation of EOD technician. His expertise with the tactics of enemy bombers led to the capture of six bombmakers in the Kirkuk region. In one instance, he pulled four injured soldiers from a vehicle after an IED attack, and then cleared the extraction zone to medevac the wounded, earning a bronze star for his efforts.

On a visit to Afghanistan earlier in May, I had a chance to meet with some of the Search and Rescue Aircrews from the 34th Weapons Squadron and 38th Rescue Squadron supporting the Marines in Helmand Province. Over a three month stretch in the spring, "PJs" from the 34th recovered or treated more than 320 casualties--both military and civilian.

Then, there was the crew of Shocker 21 of the 305th Expeditionary Rescue squadron based in Kandahar. They were called in after an American Special Forces team and Afghan soldiers came under heavy attack. In four successive passes over a hot landing zone, Shocker 21 picked up two groups of wounded troops, laid down suppressive fire, and delivered badly needed ammunition. All told, the expertise and courage of Air Force search and rescue teams are making the goal of the "golden hour" a reality in Afghanistan.

In the coming months, America's Airmen will be tested even more. The war in

Afghanistan is entering a decisive phase. In a landlocked nation with mountainous terrain and few usable roads, we and our allies are far more dependent on air power to protect troops and move supplies. This year, the Air Force is on track to deliver over 22 million pounds of cargo within Afghanistan, more than double the amount from two years ago. A C-130 touching down on a dusty, improvised landing strip is a welcome sight at many remote outposts that may be running low on food, fuel, and ammunition.

Then, of course, there are the C-17 and C-5 crews flying thousands of tons a day in and out of theater. And the tanker aircrews and maintenance personnel keeping planes in the air that are often older than their parents. Without these efforts and the exertions of tens of thousands of Airmen--including engineers, security forces, medical personnel, explosive ordnance disposal experts, and those protecting our lines of communication in space and cyberspace--the entire US war effort would simply grind to a halt.

Many of these tasks in high demand today have been core service competencies for decades. Others are no doubt making Curtis LeMay spin in his grave. All told, the full measure and potential of air power--kinetic and non-kinetic--in counterinsurgency, stability operations, and irregular warfare is getting the focus and attention it deserves--both within the service and in the wider public. For example, the number of air strikes in Iraq in 2007 was nearly five times the total from the previous year--playing a key role in the security gains of the Surge.

Within the Air Force, these combat lessons learned have become the seeds of future acquisition decisions and institutional change. A couple of weeks ago, I visited the Texas factory where MC-12 Liberty aircraft are being outfitted with reconnaissance and intelligence gear before shipping off to the battlefield. The Air Force is considering bringing online a fleet of light fighters and cargo aircraft--inexpensive, rugged platforms that can be used to build local capacity in lift, reconnaissance, and close air support missions, and are also usable and affordable by partner nations.

ò With regard to ISR: the production of the most advanced UAVs across the military will increase to 48 annually, and I'm told we are currently training more pilots for unmanned systems than for fighters and bombers; and

ò An air advisor school house is now open whose graduates are helping our partners overseas confront the threats within their borders.

As you know, institutionalizing these kinds of capabilities was what drove many of my budget recommendations earlier this year. The goal was to give these critical capabilities a seat at the table when priorities are set and budget decisions were being made. But, contrary to what some have alleged, the purpose was not to reorganize and rearm the entire US military to hunt insurgents and do nation-building or to fight wars just like

Iraq and Afghanistan. Programs specific to these kinds of missions will continue to make up a small fraction of overall defense spending. For example, over the next few years, the Air Force is planning to devote an extra \$175 million annually on programs dedicated exclusively to irregular warfare--a significant commitment at a time of tight budgets, but not exactly an existential threat to overall modernization accounts, which, in the case of the Air Force, will total some \$64 billion for the next fiscal year.

With hundreds of thousands of troops deployed in two major combat theatres, fielding these capabilities and putting them into the hands of the warfighter as soon as possible are the most important thing to do.

It is not, however, the only thing we must do. It would be unwise to assume that conflicts of the future will be like those of today or the past--the fatal conceit of military planners since antiquity. The crumbling remains of the Maginot Line and the cemeteries in Flanders Fields are monuments to that tragic folly. And with regard to air power, it would be irresponsible to assume that a future adversary--given enough time, money, and technological acumen--will not one day be able to directly threaten US command of the skies. As an allied commander from World War II said, "Air power is like poker. [The] second-best hand is like none at all--it will cost you dough and win you nothing."

With this admonition in mind, consider the capabilities the United States has or will have over the next 20 to 30 years.

At the high-end of the spectrum of course is the F-22, which provides a critical hedge against the possibility that another country could some day field enough advanced fighters to directly challenge the United States. It is far and away the best air-to-air fighter ever produced, and will ensure US command of the skies for the next generation. Our commitment to this aircraft is underscored by the nearly six-and-a-half billion dollars provided over the next few years to upgrade the existing F-22 fleet to be fully mission-capable.

The largest piece of the US air-dominance portfolio, designed to span a wide range of the conflict spectrum, is the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. It lacks some of the high-end air-to-air attributes of the F-22, but this fifth-generation stealth aircraft has cutting edge capabilities in electronic warfare and in suppressing enemy air defenses.

Without question, the F-35 program represents an ambitious effort. More than 3,000 aircraft, counting all military services and foreign partners. Twenty-two million lines of code. Over \$46 billion for development plus an estimated \$300 billion in total acquisition costs. A truly massive investment in the future of US air power.

As with every advanced military and commercial aircraft, the F-35 has seen its share of

rising costs, delays, and other development issues--and no doubt will see more challenges in the future. Three weeks ago I had a chance to tour the F-35 plant in Fort Worth. I made clear to the manufacturers our expectations with regard to costs and schedule, and they assured me that earlier problems are being aggressively confronted and addressed.

Next year's budget reflects a major commitment to accelerate the development and production of the F-35--with nearly half a billion dollars added to the FY 10 budget to support the flight-test program. Our objective continues to be to equip the first training squadron at Eglin Air Force Base in 2011, and achieve initial operating capability for the Marines and Air Force in 2012 and 2013 respectively. I consider the F-35 program a major leadership priority--with all that entails with regard to funding, oversight, and accountability.

As you know, the Air Force's modernization program includes accelerating the retirement of more than 230 of its oldest fighters--just under 13 percent of the total fighter inventory--leading some to allege a looming "fighter gap." In my view, such a conclusion is based on dated assumptions about requirements and risk--assumptions that also pervade thinking about some of our land, sea, and amphibious forces as well. The definition of the requirement should be un-tethered from the current force structure and instead be defined by what is needed to defeat potential adversaries in plausible scenarios. What we then find is that the more compelling gap is the deep chasm between the air capabilities of the United States and those of other nations. For example, the United States is projected to have more than 1,000 F-22s and F-35s before China fields its first fully operational fifth-generation fighter--a gap that will grow well into the 2020s.

The disparity with other countries is even greater when it comes to pilot quality and logistics. Last year the United States Air Force devoted one-and-a-half million hours to flight training--not counting ongoing operations--and conducted roughly 35,000 aerial refueling missions. The Russian Air Force, by comparison, conducted about 30 refueling sorties.

All told, the combination of F-22s, F-35s, and legacy aircraft will preserve American tactical air supremacy far into the future. Moreover, a key additional--and yet untapped--part of this mix of capabilities is unmanned aerial vehicles. Today, because of their effectiveness in Iraq and Afghanistan, these systems are mostly thought of as counterinsurgency platforms. But they have enormous game-changing implications for conventional conflict as well.

In future years, these remotely piloted aircraft will get more numerous and more advanced, with greater range and the ability to fight as well as survive. The director of

the Air Force's unmanned task force has compared judging UAV potential based on today's systems to judging manned aircraft based on the Wright Brothers Flyer. Large numbers of increasingly capable UAVs--when integrated with our fifth-generation fighters--potentially give the United States the ability to disrupt and overwhelm an adversary using mass and swarming tactics, adding a new dimension to the American way of war.

At this point it is not clear what the full strategic impact could be--whether, for example, it could be comparable to the impact of carrier aviation on naval warfare. We certainly do not want to engage in the kind of techno-optimism that has muddled strategic thinking in the past. But we cannot ignore the wider implications of this profound shift in battlefield technology, especially since their low cost and high utility make UAVs very attractive to other nations.

In fact, when considering the military-modernization programs of countries like China, we should be concerned less with their potential ability to challenge the US symmetrically--fighter to fighter or ship to ship--and more with their ability to disrupt our freedom of movement and narrow our strategic options. Their investments in cyber and anti-satellite warfare, anti-air and anti-ship weaponry, and ballistic missiles could threaten America's primary way to project power and help allies in the Pacific--in particular our forward air bases and carrier strike groups. This would degrade the effectiveness of short-range fighters and put more of a premium on being able to strike from over the horizon--whatever form that capability might take.

I am committed to seeing that the United States has an airborne long-range strike capability--one of several areas being examined in the ongoing Quadrennial Defense Review. What we must not do is repeat what happened with our last manned bomber. By the time the research, development, and requirements processes ran their course, the aircraft, despite its great capability, turned out to be so expensive--\$2 billion each in the case of the B-2--that less than one-sixth of the planned fleet of 132 was ever built.

Looking ahead, it makes little sense to pursue a future bomber--a prospective B-3, if you will--in a way that repeats this history. We must avoid a situation in which the loss of even one aircraft--by accident, or in combat--results in a loss of a significant portion of the fleet, a national disaster akin to the sinking of a capital ship. This scenario raises our costs of action and shrinks our strategic options, when we should be looking to the kind of weapons systems that limit the costs of action and expand our options.

Whatever system is chosen to meet this requirement--be it manned, unmanned, or some combination of the two--it should be one that can realistically be produced and deployed in the numbers originally envisioned. That is why it is so important that with aircraft--as with all of our major weapons systems--schedules are met, costs are controlled, and

requirements are brought into line with reality.

Now, before closing, I'd like to turn to some areas that underpin America's strategic strength and global reach--areas of ongoing and future importance to the Air Force and the United States.

First, just about all of our military forces--land, sea, and air--now depend on digital communications and the satellites and data networks that support them. With cheap technology and minimal investment, adversaries operating in cyberspace can inflict serious damage on our command and control, ISR, and precision strike capabilities. The recently activated 24th Air Force under the service's Space Command--working with other military and non-military partners--will make an important contribution to protecting this key domain.

Second, the role of space and satellites has never been more crucial to military operations--from GPS-guided munitions and navigation to missile defense and communications. The Air Force has extended its streak of successful national-security space launches to 65. Our forces around the globe could not succeed without the satellite-based capabilities provided by the Air Force 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Third, the Air Force's nuclear stewardship. The stand-up of the Global Strike Command--and the future consolidation of the 20th and 8th Air Forces in this command--is a historic marker that will add clear lines of authority and accountability to the service's nuclear mission. These institutional reforms will also help keep this critical expertise alive and valued within the service and its officer corps. The activation of another B-52 squadron further illustrates our commitment to America's strategic deterrent. All told, more than a year of introspection and hard work is starting to show some results--steps on the path to institutional excellence in a mission where there is no room for error.

And finally, I am pleased to announce that source selection authority is returning to the Air Force for the KC-X refueling tanker, with a draft Request for Proposals to follow. I don't need to belabor the importance of getting this done soon and done right, and my office will continue to have a robust oversight role. We are committed to the integrity of the selection process, and cannot afford the kind of letdowns, parochial squabbles, and corporate food-fights that have bedeviled this effort over the last number of years.

I have confidence that the KC-X selection authority is in good hands with the service's leadership team of Secretary Donley and General Schwartz. Indeed, the Air Force is fortunate to have a deep bench of senior flag officers, including four Combatant Commanders--as many as any other service, including the first Air Force officer to lead Southern Command. I depend greatly on their expert advice and strategic vision.

All told, the foundation of America's air power in the 21st century rests, first, a broad and versatile mix of capabilities--tactical and strategic, manned and unmanned, from cyberspace to outer space. And second, on the quality and commitment of our Airmen, without which all of the most advanced hardware in the world would be of little use.

Which brings me to a final thought. This organization properly reveres the memory of leaders like Billy Mitchell, who advocated for air power between the world wars in the face of cherished traditions and conventional wisdom. Cavalry, for example, was against aircraft because they might scare the horses. One of my predecessors, the Secretary of War at the time, told a friend that General Pershing managed to win a war without even looking at a plane, much less riding in one. Another US war secretary, Newton Baker, thought that Mitchell's idea of using airplanes to sink a ship was "so damned nonsensical and impossible that I'm willing to stand on the bridge à while that nitwit tries to hit [it]." That must have been a helluva temptation!

It strikes me that the significance of Mitchell and his travails was not that he was always right. It's that he had the vision and insight to see that the world and technology had changed, understood the implications of that change, and then pressed ahead in the face of fierce institutional resistance.

The transformative figures of American air power--from Mitchell to Arnold, LeMay to Boyd--had this quality in varying degrees. It is one I look for in the next generation of Air Force leaders, junior and mid-level officers, and NCOs who have experienced the grim reality of war and the demands of persistent conflict. These are men and women we need to retain and empower to shape the service to which they have given so much.

In this dangerous new century, our country faces a fiendish and complex array of threats, and our military confronts a bewildering array of tasks. To overcome these challenges will call on all of the elements that make up America's defense establishment--military and civilian, Congress, industry, retired flag officers, veterans' groups and military service organizations--to step up and be part of the solution. To be willing to stretch their comfort zones and re-think long-standing assumptions for the wider and greater purpose of doing what is necessary to protect our country. I believe this is happening in the United States Air Force. The American people are grateful to Airmen for having protected us for many decades and we are counting on you to do what it takes in the years ahead.

My thanks again to AFA for the opportunity to speak with you today, and for everything you do on behalf of our country and our Air Force.

Thank you.

[BRIEF Q&A TRANSCRIPT TO COME]

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