

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3467
January 23, 2012

Air Force Needs to Maintain Its Focus on the Nuclear Mission

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Since the end of the Cold War, the Air Force has struggled to maintain standards of excellence when fulfilling one of its most important missions: being prepared to respond to an adversarial nuclear attack. Recently, the Air Force has decided to move away from having one squadron of bombers dedicated solely to the nuclear mission. This shift increases a risk of failures in the future.

Past Experience. Despite dedication of the service to its nuclear mission and an extraordinary performance of the members under complex changes in the strategic environment and declining nuclear and defense budgets after the end of the Cold War, the fulfillment of the mission has not been problem-free. In 2006, the Air Force mistakenly sent four nose-cone fuses for intercontinental ballistic missiles to Taiwan. In 2007, the Air Force mistakenly carried six nuclear warheads on cruise missiles on a flight from North Dakota to Louisiana. These incidents prompted then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates to set up a task force to look into the Air Force's management of nuclear weapons and resulted in broad changes to improve oversight and management of the nuclear mission and inventory.

One of these changes mandated a creation of the Global Strike Command to organize, train, and equip intercontinental-range ballistic missiles and nuclear-capable bombers as well as personnel to fulfill a nuclear mission. As the leadership reinvigo-

rated the Air Force's nuclear mission, it established a schedule under which one of the two B-52 wings concentrated on nuclear training and the other focused on the conventional mission.

Unfortunately, the Air Force has decided to abandon this concept because it was deemed too constraining for combatant commanders who need the bombers for conventional missions.¹ While other recommendations of the task force—e.g., a stringent inspections regime—remain in place, the United States should maintain a rotational squadron of bombers that would be solely focused on the nuclear mission. Such an arrangement would ensure that the service maintains its levels of readiness, training, and focus on the nation's most important mission.

Aging Fleet. In the years ahead, the Air Force's funding situation is probably not going to improve, so the service will face a number of challenges as its bomber fleet ages. Under current policy, replacement systems will not enter the U.S. arsenal until 2030. By then, the U.S. will have 35- to 70-year-old bombers. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has said

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3467>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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that, under sequestration, the U.S. will be forced to further delay its modernization plans.

The New Strategic Arms Control Treaty with the Russian Federation will require further conversion of some nuclear bombers to conventional-only missions by February 2018. This will increase strains on the rest of the fleet and complicate nuclear-mission training of pilots and operators.

The B-52s' airframes face vexing supply chain and corrosion issues and are the most likely candidates for reductions. The Air Force maintains 76 of them. There are only 20 B-2s, and their availability is hampered by supply issues that place stress on maintaining pilot proficiency and combat capability. Because the fleet is already relatively small, any such disruption will significantly impact U.S. readiness and training. The combatant commanders already require so many missions that the Air Force would need 44–48 B-2s to fulfill them, which exceeds the available force by a factor of about two.²

Future of a Nuclear Bomber Uncertain. While bombers remain central to extended deterrence according to the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, current plans will result in a decline in the capability of the bomber force. While the new bomber should be deployed in the 2020 timeframe, the Air Force plans to certify new bombers for a nuclear mission only after B-52s and B-2s retire in 2044 and 2058, respectively. Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz stated in his November 2 testimony before the House Armed Services Committee that this certification process would be quite elaborate and would involve electromagnetic pulse hardening and other intense testing.

It is all but certain that the new bomber would not be nuclear certified right from the beginning. It may be less expensive to certify bombers for a nuclear mission right from the beginning than to

potentially phase design flaws—for example, a vulnerability to nuclear effects—after they are operationally deployed and then retrofit the entire fleet. For example, engineers had to redesign the entire B-2 program to make the stealth bomber effective and capable of surviving in a nuclear environment at a low-altitude at an additional cost of about \$2 billion.³ It is unlikely that the Air Force will be able to opt for a new stealth technology to make its bomber nuclear-hardened.

According to the Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's November 14 letter to Senator John McCain (R-AZ), if the sequestration mandated in the Budget Control Act of 2011 happens, the Department of Defense will be forced to “terminate most large procurement programs in order to accommodate modernization reductions that are likely to be required,” more specifically, “terminate bomber; restart new program in mid 2020s (\$18B).”

Focus on Nuclear Missions Essential. The nuclear mission remains the cornerstone of U.S. and allied security. More than 30 countries rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Bombers provide U.S. policymakers a unique ability to demonstrate policy intent, can be recalled en route to target to demonstrate national willingness to resolve an issue, and provide the widest array of yield options. It is essential that the focus of the Air Force is kept on preserving this mission and maintaining nuclear deterrence. Maintaining a nuclear-mission-dedicated squadron of bombers would help to achieve this goal.

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1. Michael Sirak, “Dual Capable,” *Air Force Magazine*, January 2012, at <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2012/January%202012/0112dual.aspx> (January 20, 2012).
2. *Ibid.*
3. Rebecca Grant, “Black Bomber Blues,” *Air Force Magazine*, January 2012, at <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2012/January%202012/0112bomber.aspx> (January 20, 2012).