

By Robert S. Dudney, Editor in Chief

## Battle Damage From the QDR

WASHINGTON, D.C. DEC. 19, 2005

SOME months before the 1991 Gulf War, a contemptuous Saddam Hussein said of his prospective foe, "The United States relies on the Air Force, and the Air Force has never been the decisive factor in the history of war." It was, to say no more, a gross error in judgment.

US airpower, 79 percent of it from USAF, would soon eviscerate Iraq's military force. (See "The Strategy of Desert Storm," by John T. Correll, p. 26.) And the Gulf War was just the start; airpower would later prove to be a—and perhaps *the*—decisive factor in combat from Serbia to Afghanistan, from Bosnia to Baghdad.

Given such recent success, it is surprising that the Pentagon itself would undervalue airpower, but it does. Is it the equal of other types of force, or has the war on terror now made "boots on the ground" more important? Fifteen years after Desert Storm, airpower seems to have slipped in DOD's estimation.

Lest you think this is being excessively negative, note the direction of the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review of defense programs, strategy, and policies. As we go to press, officials seem to have decided some key QDR issues, and not to the Air Force's advantage.

■ USAF will be prohibited from acquiring more than about 183 F-22A fighters, the aircraft USAF considers the heart of future aerial combat. That is about half of the 381 Raptors needed for the minimum deployment of one squadron for each of the service's 10 air expeditionary forces. The decision kills plans for building an FB-22 bomber, too. In effect, DOD reaffirmed last year's sudden program cut, though it extended production to 2010.

■ The Air Force's next generation ISR platform—the E-10—is a goner. DOD said no to a multi-aircraft effort; the Air Force will be allowed to build a single E-10 to test new radars and other technologies. Some suggest USAF will have to hitch a ride on the Navy's new multimission maritime reconnaissance aircraft and otherwise make do with its venerable AWACS and Joint STARS.

■ C-17 transport production will end

at 180 aircraft, despite the fact that service officials have long claimed the Air Force needs at least 222 of these advanced airlifters. The Pentagon now says a recent mobility study determined that 180 is "adequate." One idea is that commercial aircraft could be called in to close any future capabilities gap.

■ The Air Force probably won't get to acquire a "pure" aerial tanker to replace its old KC-135s. Instead, USAF probably

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will address this need by developing a hybrid tanker/airliner aircraft. The idea is that such an aircraft, produced in limited numbers, would "swing" from one mission to the other when required. Many of the Eisenhower-era KC-135s might be given new engines and kept around for many years more.

■ USAF's F-35A fighter variant gets only lukewarm—and possibly temporary—approval. DOD tried to kill it and force the Air Force to use a heavier Navy version, but DOD backed off when it saw there were little or no near-term savings to be had. The issue likely will come up again as part of a new tactical air "optimization" study that will go on this year. USAF is certain to buy far fewer than its planned 1,763 aircraft.

These program decisions, while highly significant, are not the most painful of the QDR's outcomes. In order to meet new fiscal guidelines, Air Force officials concluded they had no choice but to cut personnel in a big way.

The personnel accounts were seen as a logical place to seek savings, given that weapons programs already had been cut to the bone and recent pay, bonus, and benefit increases have brought about dramatic increases in manpower costs. However, the future reductions could force off the rolls as many as 40,000 active, reserve, and civilian Air Force members.

The upshot of the QDR, then, is that the Air Force of future years will be smaller and less capable than it otherwise would be. The Pentagon viewed the course correction as unavoidable, in light of the need to find billions of dollars to fund a major expansion of Army and Marine Corps ground troops and special operations forces to fight terrorists overseas—and to do so without increasing the federal deficit, raising taxes, or touching entitlement spending.

Plans called for the Pentagon to go final with its QDR report early in January, so there was still time for last-minute shifts and surprises—which, from USAF's point of view, could be either positive or negative.

Restoration of any major Air Force priorities, however, is unlikely to come from Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and his aides. Pressure for change is far more likely to come from Capitol Hill, where signs of concern are evident.

The House Armed Services Committee, for example, opened its own review this fall. Its chairman, Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.), suspected that the Pentagon's QDR effort would not produce a realistic defense program but one designed to fit a precooked budget figure.

Signs of unease are evident on the Senate side, too. Sen. Jim Talent (R-Mo.) noted in a Nov. 18 speech that defense spending today, measured as a percent of GDP, is less than it was in Jimmy Carter's presidency. "The Quadrennial Defense Review needs to be military-driven, not budget-driven," he warned.

The QDR report will be delivered to Congress next month, and it will be used as the basis for discussion of Pentagon budgets for the period of Fiscal 2008-13. That means lawmakers will have plenty of time to take the measure of Rumsfeld's work and make independent decisions about its merit.

We believe it would be a very good idea for Congress to take a long and hard look at the product, and then take steps to repair some of the battle damage this QDR threatens to inflict on the Air Force. ■