

Air Supremacy in a Downdraft

IT WAS April 1953. “TV Guide” was making its first appearance on newsstands. Young geneticists James D. Watson and Francis H. C. Crick were unveiling the so-called “double-helix” structure of DNA. Singer Harry Belafonte was celebrating his first hit single, “Matilda.”

And in that same month, enemy aircraft (in Korea) killed a US soldier. He was the last to perish in this way; because of USAF’s vigilance, there have been no fatal air attacks on American ground forces—zero—in some 56 years.

The Air Force brand of air dominance—total, unquestioned, and suffocating—has been around quite a while, so long that many now view it as a birthright. It is not, a point made with special force and clarity by Dr. Rebecca Grant, director of the Mitchell Institute for Airpower Studies, in this issue’s lead article, “Losing Air Dominance.”

According to Grant, USAF today “is in danger of losing” its ability to guarantee command of the air, and, with it, its power to protect land forces, surmount enemy defenses, and subject an adversary to devastating aerial attack.

As Grant makes plain, the problem stems not from poor tactics or technologies but “from the breakdown of a fighter master plan set in motion after the Gulf War of 1991.” Air supremacy is in a downdraft; the fighter force is old and getting older. Soon, USAF will lack sufficient numbers of advanced fighters to operate in heavily defended airspace.

Grant’s story (excerpted from a fuller study, available at www.afa.org/mitchell/reports) makes for lamentable reading. It is a tale of how USAF, in the wake of the Gulf War, chose to forgo purchases of existing F-15s and F-16s and devote its resources to a smaller but highly advanced force of stealth fighters, only to see the plan run afoul of the Pentagon bureaucracy.

As is now well known, the key factor in the collapse was unwillingness on the part of three Administrations—Democrat and Republican—to adequately support the F-22 fighter. Over the years, it has been weakened

by foolish reductions, culminating in the Bush Pentagon’s decision to cap the fleet at 183 fighters, about half of the required number.

This decision exploded the Air Force fighter plan. Yet the Pentagon did not adjust the national strategy to take account of this fact. As Grant wryly notes, “There was no announcement that the future threat had changed—just that the future should stop being such a problem for Pentagon planners.”

The demise of the F-22 explains the weakening of USAF’s grip on air

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dominance. Without sufficient numbers of this potent, world-beating fighter, all other elements of the air dominance mission are put at risk.

It is doubtful that, lacking F-22 support, much can be accomplished by other Air Force fighters, including the other “fifth generation” stealth aircraft, the F-35.

Not everyone agrees with this assessment, of course. Some in DOD think of the F-22 and F-35 as being interchangeable, and that more Raptors aren’t needed.

That, in fact, is the view of Pentagon chief Robert M. Gates and his top aide, Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England. Both would sacrifice more F-22s to protect the F-35. Here are, however, some reasons to doubt their analysis:

- **Stealth.** The F-35’s all-aspect signature is much bigger than the F-22’s in key bands and against certain threats.

- **Speed.** The F-22’s top speed of Mach 2 exceeds that of the F-35.

- **Supercruise.** The F-22 can hit mid-Mach 1 speeds without resorting to fuel-gulping afterburners. The F-35 cannot.

- **Altitude.** The F-22 flies combat profiles at 50,000 feet; the F-35 employs at 30,000 feet.

- **Weapons.** The F-22, with a full bomb load, can carry four air-combat weapons in stealth mode. The F-35 can carry only two.

- **Agility.** The F-22 features vectored thrust and can turn at twice the rate of an F-35.

None of this is a military secret; from the start, the F-35 was conceived as the less-potent, less-costly “low” part of a “high-low” fighter mix. It may prove to be a stellar performer, but these weaknesses could make a huge difference in battles with the air arm of a near-peer such as China or Russia.

Final resolution of the fighter problem will fall to the new President, Barack Obama, and his advisors. In the campaign, Obama stated, “We must preserve our unparalleled airpower capabilities,” but no one really knows how he will resolve this issue.

First, top officers are sounding out lawmakers and others with a new proposal for 250 to 275 Raptors. This plan would lop more than 100 of the fighters from the long-validated requirement. DOD officials are sure to resist even this compromise, but lawmakers have expressed interest.

In fact, Congress in November finally forced a recalcitrant Pentagon to spend some F-22 funds that lawmakers had appropriated to keep the Raptor line open.

Second, USAF contemplates cuts in its legacy fighter forces as a way to save billions in maintenance and upgrade funds now flowing into these aircraft. Service officials say Fiscal 2010 will see accelerated retirements of 314 older F-15C and F-16 fighters and a smattering of A-10 attack aircraft.

These two moves, if realized, could leave the Air Force with a highly capable fighter force, but it would be small—perhaps too small to fully support current defense strategy.

Large nations—China, India, Russia—are moving aggressively to improve their airpower. Even less advanced nations are acquiring sophisticated air defense systems that will complicate USAF’s combat missions. The history of recent warfare makes plain that whoever controls the air has an excellent chance of dominating the entire battlespace.

For decades, that has been us. Without some large course correction, however, it might turn out to be someone else. ■