

The Post-June 5 Air Force

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As it was happening, the thunderous June 5 decapitation of the Air Force appeared likely to do severe and lasting damage. Events since then have raised hopes USAF will be able to avoid that fate.

First, Pentagon Chief Robert M. Gates, having sacked USAF's top leaders, moved fast to name their successors. Second, he selected men of great distinction. Michael B. Donley, Gates' pick to be Secretary of the Air Force, is a senior Pentagon aide who earlier served as Acting SECAF. The Chief of Staff-designate, Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, rates high not only as commander of US Transportation Command but also for his work as the Joint Staff director.

For all that, however, worries persist. Questions swirl around the forced resignations of Secretary Michael W. Wynne and Gen. T. Michael Moseley, Chief of Staff. Gates' move was wildly popular—"Absolutely necessary" (*New York Times*); "They had it coming" (columnist Ralph Peters)—but, the claims of the ignoramus press aside, the long-term impact is unknown.

Uncertainty flows from Gates' stated rationale: failure of the two to ensure control of nuclear weapons. (See "The Gates Case" p. 30.) Gates seemed most angered at USAF's alleged failure to do much of anything after a B-52 mistakenly flew across America with six nukes hanging underwing. Note, however, that Moseley, in a Feb. 28 meeting with reporters, said this about the B-52 fiasco:

"We had an immediate command-directed investigation from [Air Combat Command]. We had a list of about 15 to 20 things we did—inventory, stand-down, Chief-directed inspections, all of that. Then I asked for a blue-ribbon review headed by Maj. Gen. Polly Peyer. ... Then Gen. [Larry] Welch, a previous Air Force Chief, went out and did that for the Defense Science Board. ... There's 128 things, I believe, that were proposed. Four of those are not within the Air Force authority to do, so 124 of those things. Fifty-three of them are done; 71 of them are coming to closure."

Was he lying? If you want an opinion from someone who was there—me—the Chief was as serious as a stroke. We note that Gates has yet to release the

investigative report that found such serious fault with Air Force actions. He should do so, and soon.

As Gates acknowledges, many are skeptical that these political executions were really—or only—about nukes. Retired USAF Lt. Gen. Michael M. Dunn, President-CEO of the Air Force Association, spoke for many when he said, "We believe there is more to the firings than meets the eye."

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Dunn went on, "Secretary Wynne and General Moseley have been outspoken in pointing out the Air Force needs to recapitalize and modernize the fleet. ... It is apparent to us that the Department of Defense did not appreciate the military advice nor the warnings they were getting."

This is hardly a military secret. Wynne and Moseley said USAF's budget needed to grow by \$20 billion per year. They argued for more F-22 fighters. They clashed with DOD over control of short-range airlift and unmanned aerial vehicles. Gates has repeatedly insisted that these sharp conflicts played no role in his decision to move against the two leaders. However, one must admit that, given such friction, the emergence of the nuclear weapon issue as a firing offense, at this precise moment, is one hell of a coincidence.

No one wants recriminations to drag on. What's done is done. Gates was well within his rights to do what he did, and Wynne and Moseley accepted responsibility for service shortcomings. Every transition is an opportunity, and the important thing is what happens now.

In that regard, we would note, with credit to Founding Father John Adams, that facts are stubborn things. You may change names on E-ring doors in the Pentagon, but the problems don't just go away. For example:

■ Today's USAF fleet of fighters, bombers, airlifters, tankers, and other

airplanes is the smallest ever and getting smaller. In the past two decades, it has shrunk by 40 percent.

■ The average age of Air Force aircraft, just eight years in 1973, has risen to 24 years today and is headed to 26.5 years in 2012. USAF has not been allowed to buy enough new ones.

■ Today, more than 800 aircraft—14 percent of the USAF fleet—are grounded or operating under flight restrictions, mostly due to age problems.

■ USAF is headed toward a shortage of 800 fighters, if current trends continue. The gap will begin to open in a few years, even if USAF buys every fighter in its program.

■ The C-17 production line, the only remaining source of new strategic airlift, is in danger of closing.

These problems, and more, now pass to Donley and Schwartz. In this, the Air Force is lucky, given their skill and demonstrated integrity.

Many have called attention to the fact that Schwartz is a non-fighter pilot—the first such Chief since 1982—and has spent his career in airlift and special operations. The implication—that he will de-emphasize fighters—is pernicious. The general, more than anyone, understands that he represents the entire Air Force, not a faction or factions.

In months to come, the burden of proof should fall not on the service's new Secretary and Chief of Staff, but on Gates. He has shown he can tear up a service leadership. He has yet to show that he can help that service cope with its many and serious problems.

In one of his more memorable statements, Wynne warned that, unless certain negative trends were reversed, the Air Force would be "going out of business" before long. We are sure this infuriated the clique around Gates. Too bad. It was true.

In a farewell to Wynne and Moseley, AFA Chairman of the Board Robert E. Largent lauded them for "articulating legitimate Air Force requirements." He went on to say that such candor "is precisely what our Air Force needs during these challenging times."

Note Largent's use, in that final phrase, of the words "is" and "needs." Both are in the present tense, and that was not by accident. ■