

Beyond the F-22 Problem

ROBERT M. Gates, the Pentagon chief, recently declared, “We’re fighting two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the F-22 has not performed a single mission in either theater.” Even by the low standard of Raptor criticisms, this one was strange.

The F-22, as Gates knows, has not been around very long. Nor is it the only virgin weapon out there; in its wars with terrorists, the US has not employed ICBMs, attack submarines, or Patriot air defense batteries, either. Yet the Defense Secretary has not seen fit to mention that.

Unfortunately, though, we cannot easily dismiss Gates’ remark. He and Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England have drawn a line in the sand on the Raptor. (See “Washington Watch,” p. 8.) And their actions suggest something deeper and more ominous than opposition to a fighter.

USAF says it needs 381 Raptors, but its 2009 budget, unveiled Feb. 4, makes no provision for any beyond an already approved 183. If there was any doubt about DOD’s hostility, Gates and England erased it with this string of remarks to House and Senate panels:

■ Gates, Feb. 6: “It [the F-22] is principally for use against a near peer. ... Looking at what I regard as the level of risk of conflict with one of those near peers over the next four or five years, ... something along the lines of 183 is a reasonable buy.”

■ Gates, Feb. 6: “My worry is that a significant expansion of the production of the F-22 in the out years will [limit] how many [F-35s] can be purchased.”

■ England, Feb. 12: “The Air Force [does] have older airplanes. Unfortunately, a lot of the money was spent on a relatively small number of F-22s that are very high cost.”

■ England, Feb. 13: “My strong feeling is that we have enough F-22s. They’re designed for a specific mission, we have enough to do that mission.”

■ England, Feb. 13: “The [F-35] performance and the F-22 performance is extraordinarily close. ... [The F-35] is a much newer airplane, so it also has very similar, if not in some cases better, performance with other attributes.”

■ England, Feb. 13: “We have an aging fighter fleet, but, on the other

hand, they’ve spent \$65 billion, and we have 183 F-22s. I mean, at some point, we have to decide not to buy the very costly, high-end airplane, and buy the quantity.”

Translation: The F-22 is of no value in irregular war. The Raptor is needed to fight China, Russia, or other “near-peers,” but such war is unlikely. The fighters are competitive, not complementary. The focus on the F-22 has aggravated USAF’s aging fleet problem. The F-22

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is a one-trick pony. The two new fighters are comparable.

Not to put too fine a point on it, senior Air Force officials dispute each and every one of these assertions.

Now is not the time for detailed rebuttals, which we and others have printed on many occasions. The bigger question at this point is this: Why, on an issue of supreme importance to the Air Force, does the Pentagon find itself unable to agree with USAF’s leadership? Why does the Air Force lack clout?

The Air Force has been struggling with this one for a while. It was a subject of an unpublished point paper produced in 1998 by John T. Correll, a former Editor in Chief of this magazine and a respected commentator on airpower issues. The gist of Correll’s paper was captured in its provocative title: “Is the Air Force No. 4?” Number 4, that is, in standing among the US armed services.

Correll observed that, in the seven years since USAF’s triumph in the 1991 Gulf War, the Air Force had lost much ground relative to the other branches. By 1998, he noted, it had “become popular to disparage airpower, especially Air Force airpower.”

As Correll told it, most of the anti-Air Force sentiment originated within the other services, but they had successfully exported it to the news media, think tanks, Congress, and DOD offices.

Airpower routinely was undervalued and discounted in joint doctrine and budget deliberations.

“In the Joint World,” Correll wrote, “the Air Force encounters the headwinds of tradition” and airpower was always made subordinate to the surface battle.

Ten years have passed, and the problem seems, if anything, to have gotten worse. The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps readily accept the Air Force in a support role—ISR and air mobility—but not as a force which can act in an independent combat fashion. This has had consequences.

Five years of bloody ground combat in Afghanistan and Iraq indisputably have pushed the Army and Marine Corps to the head of the Washington line. The Navy clearly occupies a more favored position when it comes to command assignments.

Maybe the Air Force really has become No. 4. If so, that may explain why airmen have such difficulty making their F-22 case; it could be that nobody’s really listening. It may well be one reason that USAF’s unfunded requirements list this year exceeds \$18 billion.

What is to be done? One school of thought holds that USAF is in bad odor because airmen have been cocky and arrogant, and that the proper response now is to lower the volume, become jointer-than-thou, and do the best one can. Others say the Air Force needs to speak up more forcefully for its position. This is what Correll, a decade ago, called “The Billy Mitchell Position.”

The decision on how to approach the problem will influence more than just the outcome of the F-22 matter, which is still up in the air. (Rather than moving to shut down the line, DOD has opted to let a new Administration decide whether to seek more of the fighters.) It will also help determine the service’s future size, shape, and mission.

For the Air Force, there won’t always be a Gates. There won’t always be an England. There will, however, be a new President and Secretary of Defense next year. We should all hope that they bring greater understanding to dealing with USAF’s multiple problems. ■