

Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley -- Op/Ed on Strategic Choices

*(This series of four Op-Eds was published in [AOL Defense](#), January 8-11, 2013.)*

**T***his is the first in an unprecedented series of four opinion pieces about the future of the Air Force penned by its most senior civilian, Air Force Secretary Michael Donley.*

*In more than 15 years covering the US military, I don't remember a senior Pentagon official penning a series like this, and we are honored to run it. The series is, I think, an indication of just how deeply worried senior defense officials are about the future. Sequestration isn't really fixed, despite last week's momentary spasm of rationality on Capitol Hill. Defense budgets are likely to continue dropping over the next five years at a time when America faces enormous and widespread national security challenges – Iran, Syria, North Korea, a wobbly European Union, China, global warming, Al Qaeda and its friends – and those are a few of the ones we know about.*

*If there is one theme to Donley's op-eds, it is this: We are smaller and likely to get even smaller at a time when our weapons are old and we are trying to replace them. America's leaders, its people, and our allies depend on the United States Air Force for control of air and space, gathering intelligence, moving people and equipment anywhere on short notice, and the ability to let bad guys know that, no matter where in the world they are, we have weapons that can do them harm. Crafting the right mix of people and weapons to accomplish all those things in these dangerous days is going to be incredibly challenging.*

*In these op-eds, Donley grapples with, among other issues: the difficulties of convincing Congress to let him retire planes and find the right balance of active, Reserve, and (most controversially) Air National Guard forces; how to replace an aircraft fleet that is, on average, 24 years old without breaking the bank while still maintaining the ability to be almost everywhere and able to do whatever is needed; and how to keep planes and people in the air, ready to fly and, if necessary, fight. We will run one op-ed each day through Friday.*

*The Editor (AOL Defense)*

### **Strategic Planning for America's Air Force**

Since coming to Washington in 1978, I watched from vantage points including Capitol Hill, the White House and the Pentagon as the defense budget rose dramatically during the Reagan buildup and then declined after Operation Desert Storm as part of the post-Cold War "peace dividend." Now the cycle is repeating again as higher, post-9/11 defense budgets driven by operations in Iraq and Afghanistan begin to recede and our nation focuses on getting its fiscal house in order.

While still supporting ongoing combat operations in Afghanistan, confronting immediate security challenges throughout the greater Middle East, and putting greater focus on the Pacific, we ask ourselves: How should the Department of Defense balance competing defense needs among the size of our force structure, today's readiness and modernization for the future?

From our collective experience in the 1970s, the generation of defense leaders with whom I serve learned that during periods of fiscal austerity, tough decisions have to be made to avoid a hollow military. I define this as one that looks good on paper, but has more units and equipment than it can support, lacks the resources to adequately man, train and maintain them, or keep up with advancing technologies.

Confronted today by a more complex and dynamic security environment, as well as a significant reduction in defense resources, Air Force leadership determined the best path forward is to become smaller in order to protect a high quality and ready force that will improve in capability over time.

In devising our fiscal 2013 defense budget and planning for the years after, we decided we must get smaller to ensure a fully trained and ready force that maintains the scope of capabilities and flexibility to engage a full range of contingencies and threats. The 2011 Libya operation reminded us that in today's security environment the Air Force must be ready to respond to rapidly emerging crises. We simply do not have months to prepare or to rebuild the readiness of an unready force.

Neither can we assume that when called we will operate only in a benign, uncontested or low threat environment. In some situations, even performing non-hostile or humanitarian missions can involve significant risks, so we must always be prepared to operate and prevail in places that are well-defended. In addition, the U.S. often leads international coalitions who rely on us to facilitate unity of effort and to backstop their more limited capabilities. Mitigating the risk associated with a smaller military thus requires a ready force, versatile and effective across a broad spectrum of potential contingencies.

Improving capabilities over time is also critical to our future and to maintaining the qualitative advantage on which our nation's security has depended for decades. Even as the defense budget comes down from its post-9/11 peak and our forces become smaller, it is nonetheless essential to

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make room for modernization, which accounts for about 30 percent of the Air Force budget. Most of our fighters and helicopters were built in the 1980s. Nearly half of our bombers and most of our aerial refueling tankers were built in the 1950s and 1960s, when the United States spent around 8 percent of its GDP on defense.

Today our nation spends closer to 4 percent of GDP on defense and the Air Force now finds itself with a geriatric fleet on average more than 24 years old—with too many planes approaching 50 years old. Since 9/11, the Air Force built out the C-17 airlift fleet, bought 187 stealthy F-22s and nearly 300 Remotely Piloted Aircraft. But RPAs built for Iraq and Afghanistan may not survive in contested airspace. Key satellites are approaching the end of their expected service life. Aging components in our nuclear and communication enterprises face obsolescence and still await refreshment from the latest generations of information technology.

In addition, the missions and technological threats confronting our military continue to change. Modern air defenses; missile defense; congested and contested operations in space; and cyber defense are among the rapidly evolving challenges that also require new investment. The globalization of information technologies continues to fuel advanced military research and development abroad. Consequently, in some areas the U.S. is working harder to sustain more narrow military advantages. Between aging inventories and new, more sophisticated threats this is clearly not the time for a procurement holiday.

So, how to get smaller? And how small is too small? The Air Force has retired nearly 1,900 aircraft and downsized by over 30,000 active duty personnel in the last decade. In planning for a yet smaller force, our decisions have favored keeping aircraft and equipment that can be used for many purposes over those with more narrowly focused capabilities. Where feasible, we seek to divest smaller fleets with niche capabilities, and also focus on common versions of key aircraft to maximize operational flexibility and minimize sustainment costs.

Accordingly, the FY13 budget request identified 286 aircraft for elimination across the Total Force -- Active, Guard and Reserve -- over the next five years. These changes would have resulted in a reduction of 9,900 Total Force Airmen during FY13. These reductions, however, were widely criticized as falling too heavily on the Guard and Reserve.

There is little disagreement that the Air Force must maintain readiness and modernize, however there is real resistance to divesting aircraft and downsizing installations. It is understandably difficult to accept reductions that affect individual communities, an obvious reason why Congress has thus far been reluctant to approve another round of base closures. But it is not possible to avoid real impacts when programming the \$487 billion in defense reductions required by the Budget Control Act.

Over the past few months, Air Force active duty, Guard and Reserve leadership has come together to rebalance the reductions across our Total Force. Our revised, compromise plan

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recently approved by Congress restores about 38 percent of the aircraft and 55 percent of the personnel reductions originally proposed for the Guard and Reserve. At the same time, it permits the Air Force to proceed with selected aircraft retirements and transfers necessary to meet budget targets while protecting readiness and modernization.

With these changes, the active duty Air Force will be down to approximately 329,000 personnel – approaching the same size as when it was established as a separate service in 1947. There are real questions about how much smaller the Air Force can become without incurring significant risk to the capabilities we provide to joint and coalition forces, including: control of air and space; gathering intelligence around the world; moving people and equipment anywhere on short notice; and the ability to hold any target at risk.

Like the other services, the Air Force will work with our defense and national leadership to fine tune our plans and programs as we confront both a dynamic security environment and the nation's fiscal challenges. We will adjust and compromise as necessary, but we'll need broad consensus with Congress on the way forward to avoid a hollow force. Trading size to maintain a quality force, and staying focused on readiness and modernization, will be politically difficult and challenging to implement. But absent additional resources, this likely remains the best combination of choices available to sustain America's military as the world's finest.

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### **Few Options for a Smaller Air Force**

Like all of our military services, the U.S. Air Force has been through an extraordinary decade of change. Airmen have moved unprecedented amounts of personnel and equipment to remote theaters of operation; built global command, control and intelligence operations; provided 24/7 close air support to ground forces; and introduced new technologies, including Remotely Piloted Aircraft.

All of this was accomplished as the Air Force retired nearly 1,900 aircraft and downsized by more than 30,000 active personnel. Today's Air Force is smaller than before 9/11; and its base budget after accounting for inflation has been relatively flat since 2005.

Faced with further reductions in defense, Air Force leadership made the decision to become smaller in order to protect a high quality and ready force that will improve in capability over time. The question is, how?

Determining where the Air Force can take additional risk in force structure and fulfill the defense strategic guidance is a challenge. Options are limited because, in most mission areas, our "supply" of forces is equal to the strategic "demand" with almost no margin in capacity.

Fighters and bombers represent 18 percent of total Air Force personnel. Though fighter forces have declined for decades, the force levels outlined in the FY13 budget bring the supply in equilibrium with the demand outlined in the defense strategic guidance. We plan to protect the essential air superiority fleet and fighters with multi-role capabilities. While some reductions in the A-10 air-to-ground fleet and the oldest F-16s have been controversial, there could be more downward pressure on these fleets if budgets decline further. Any significant reductions in the bomber force would be inconsistent with the strategic guidance which values long-range strike capabilities.

Mobility forces, including long-range strategic airlifters, tankers and tactical airlift comprise 13 percent of Air Force personnel. These forces are sized to move and sustain joint forces over long distances consistent with defense strategy. Congress manages the long-range fleet to a specific floor, currently 301 aircraft, with recent approval to go to 275 pending a report on capabilities. The tanker fleet is largely right-sized to support the joint force.

The tactical airlift fleet is sized somewhat larger than the defense strategy would require, but Congress has been inclined to protect Guard and Reserve C-130 units which make up about 70 percent of this force. If additional active duty C-130s are retired, then Guard and Reserve units could have to increase deployments to meet peacetime demand.

The Air Force provides a number of "enabling" capabilities for the joint force, including command and control; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; and space. These enablers, including cyber (an area where all services contribute), account for 19 percent of Air Force

personnel and demand for these capabilities has been increasing. Reductions here would, in general, be inconsistent with joint needs; but potential adjustments in both ISR capacity and capabilities may deserve a closer look once U.S. forces leave Afghanistan.

The nuclear-capable bombers and ICBMs that make up two legs of the nation's strategic nuclear triad account for less than five percent of Air Force personnel. These forces could become smaller as we implement the new START agreement reached between the U.S. and Russia. But potentially deeper reductions must consider multi-dimensional challenges from the world's emerging nuclear powers in a more complex security environment.

Decisions at the national level will determine the makeup of the nuclear enterprise; however it must have the focus and resources necessary for credible deterrence. Airmen must know this remains a critical mission with no margin for error. The nation's nuclear expertise must not be allowed to atrophy; and focused attention is necessary no matter the size of the force.

Air Force special operations and personnel recovery capabilities are in high demand and the expertise of Air Commandos is essential to joint special operations. The ability of Air Force helicopters to fight their way in and out of medevac and recovery operations is unique to the joint team and has proven its value over the past ten years. At less than 3 percent of the Air Force, these forces are already so small that resources saved in further downsizing would be outweighed by capabilities lost.

The above forces total about 60 percent of Air Force personnel, leaving 40 percent in the training, installation support, logistics, and research and development that underpin combat capability. This may appear to be a logical place for additional risk; the Air Force, however, has already drawn savings from this well.

We have achieved our efficiency goal of over \$3 billion in FY12, and planned savings will increase each year to \$42 billion total by FY16 -- a twelve-fold increase. We cut planned growth in civilians by 16,000 personnel, cut the Air Force headquarters by over 2,000 military and civilian authorizations, deactivated three headquarters, restructured the Air Force Materiel Command, consolidated several Field Operating Agencies, and reduced our AF Band program by 27 percent. We have also set goals to reduce contract services and achieve greater energy savings. The Air Force is tracking efficiencies in no fewer than nine categories and will look for more; but future budgets are already leveraged with planned savings not yet fully realized.

One area where potential savings have not been fully exploited is installations. We need Congress to approve another round of base closures to help consolidate scarce maintenance and repair resources in a more efficient basing structure.

There is great synergy and interdependence between active, guard and reserve forces. Over the past 25 years the active portion of the Total Force has dropped from roughly 78 to 66 percent, so it is becoming more critical to find the right balance. If too much force structure is in the active

duty, then we do not benefit from the lower cost of operation in the reserves. If too much force structure is in the reserves, then guardsmen and reservists need to deploy more often -- even in peacetime -- breaking the model of a part-time force.

Additionally, reserve forces depend on healthy active-duty forces from which trained and experienced Airmen transition to part-time status. If the active force becomes too small, the pipeline into reserve components will diminish. As this occurs, reserve components increase their recruiting directly into the part-time force and levels of experience fall.

We can no longer afford to address force structure issues in three separate stovepipes. It is essential that we holistically manage the health of the Total Force. More than ever, we are committed to working with our Guard and Reserve partners to strengthen our integration of effort.

We are increasing the number of units that partner active-duty, Guard or Reserve Airmen at a single location, growing such “unit associations” from 100 to 115. Already a success story for mobility forces, every U.S.-based fighter unit is now planned for an association, as are the ten locations planned for the new KC-46 tanker. We will continue to refine this winning combination of active and reserve forces.

With few exceptions, the Air Force is now sized and structured to meet the requirements outlined in the new defense strategic guidance. We have stretched the risk we can prudently take from efficiencies in our support functions, and we are pushing to get the most combat power possible through the right balance of closely integrated active, guard, and reserve forces.

Today’s Air Force has very few options for further reductions in force structure without incurring significant risk to the capabilities we provide to joint and coalition forces.

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### **Sustaining a Ready Air Force**

Over the past decade, the Air Force has fielded new and impressive warfighting capabilities in support of joint and coalition operations. Bolstered by combat experience, our military has never been stronger.

At the same time, the sustained focus on Iraq and Afghanistan has come with an indirect cost. While the Air Force has met the demands of a high operational tempo in support of these and other operations, this has inevitably taken a toll on our weapon systems and people, putting a strain on the overall readiness of the force. We have seen a steady decline in unit readiness since 2003.

Given the projected decline in defense budgets, we have made a strategic choice to trade size in order to protect a high quality and ready force that will improve in capability over time. Air Force and Department of Defense leaders are working hard to avoid a hollow military: one that looks good on paper, but has more units and equipment than it can support, lacks the resources to adequately man, train and maintain them, or to keep up with advancing technologies.

“Readiness” can be generally defined as the ability of a unit to provide the capabilities or outputs for which it was designed when and where needed. While protecting future readiness includes modernizing the force (a separate subject), creating combat readiness in the near term is a complex task mostly involving the intersection of personnel, materiel and training. This includes balancing time between operational and training commitments, finding the right combination of funding from different sources, and effectively managing these resources to achieve the desired effects.

Mitigating the risk associated with a smaller military requires a ready force. When units are called to deploy on short notice, a larger force structure provides capacity to reinforce units where some aircraft may be unavailable due to maintenance, repair or modification; and when personnel are in training status, educational programs or positions are vacant. The larger capacity can compensate for shortages in personnel and materiel readiness.

Given the resources available, however, we have reached a point where this larger force structure cannot be adequately sustained. If we attempt to sustain current force levels with rising personnel and operational costs, there will be fewer resources available to support our excess capacity of installations, maintain existing aircraft inventories and other vital equipment, or invest in future capabilities.

A smaller force with less capacity requires greater attention to ensuring fully adequate personnel levels, availability of aircraft, and training to support the full range of mission requirements. These factors become more critical because shortages in aircraft availability or key personnel will have a larger effect on the overall readiness of the force. With a smaller force, including all

active, guard and reserve elements, there is less marginal capacity to meet operational needs. The total force must thus be more ready to meet near-term contingencies, including those that may involve contested operational environments.

For example, over the past decade the ability of combat air forces to do full-spectrum training has been hampered by operational commitments focused on very specific counter-insurgency missions and air-to-ground support. Training to establish and sustain air superiority and suppress air defenses has understandably received less emphasis.

As we rebuild full-spectrum readiness, adding resources for more flying hours to support training must be matched with the resources for maintenance to ensure aircraft availability. And to be fully effective, training must also be supported with flight simulators and training ranges that emulate the modern threat environments our pilots may likely face.

This is a work in progress and we would like to be much better than we are in forecasting readiness “outputs” based on resource “inputs.” Nonetheless, we can recognize what does not work – negative trends or potential threats to readiness on the horizon that are reason for concern.

Critical operations and maintenance activities currently being paid for with supplemental, Overseas Contingency Operations funding are especially problematic. Several funding lines for Remotely Piloted Aircraft and other ISR platforms, for example, should be retained as part of our future force but are not yet part of our base budget. These activities must eventually migrate from OCO funding to an adjusted base budget. If the base budget is not adjusted, these capabilities will need to be retired or, alternatively, if incorporated without increasing the total budget, they will squeeze out other forces and capabilities.

Other threats to readiness include personnel and operational costs rising faster than the budget; savings from defense cuts not being adequately reapplied into readiness-related activities; and the inability to make or implement strategic choices, like reducing force structure or installations, that would help to consolidate resources and protect a quality force.

The concept of “tiered” readiness, through which some units are resourced for higher levels of readiness than others, also bears close scrutiny. Air Force skepticism of this approach is grounded in two strategic realities. First, we support several Combatant Command missions that require 24/7 support, including various space operations such as missile warning, command, control and communications, and GPS operations. Cyber defense and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance are also 24/7 missions that provide indications and warning of critical events and threats for our national leadership. Operational readiness for these units is a continuous requirement.

These and other activities like special operations and personnel recovery involve complex and exacting missions requiring a high degree of individual and unit proficiency. Standing

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intercontinental ballistic missiles alert for nuclear deterrence is another example where a sustained, higher state of readiness makes sense at both strategic and operational levels. At the strategic level, a ready nuclear deterrent enables freedom of action by ensuring that no other country is able to threaten the use of nuclear weapons in order to limit or deter U.S. policy options. At the operational level within the nuclear triad of ICBMs, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and nuclear-capable bombers, it is ICBMs that maintain the highest readiness posture at the least cost, compensating for rotational or other operational constraints in the other two legs.

High priority missions such as those outlined above cannot be done adequately, and in some cases cannot be done safely, at lower levels of readiness.

A second strategic reality is that the range, speed and striking power of air forces make them among the most flexible and agile elements of the joint force. In support of U.S. defense strategy, air forces are inherently capable of responding quickly and can be shifted on relatively short notice between critical theaters of operation. Intentionally posturing the Air Force for lower readiness and a long buildup to full combat effectiveness would negate the essential strategic advantages of airpower.

In the politics of defense spending there are many advocates for protecting hometown units and bases, and many advocates for new equipment of all kinds. As the defense budget declines, the political default in Washington thus risks too many units and bases than we can adequately support, with more modernization programs than we can afford. In this competitive stew, it falls to DoD and the services to protect the readiness of the force.

In the past 35 years of my professional experience, the Air Force has been called upon more than 150 times to conduct combat or humanitarian operations in more than 50 countries around the world. Combat sorties in the CENTCOM area have continued uninterrupted since 1991. The completion of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are important milestones that should provide an opportunity to reset the force, but other international security challenges remain and, in some cases, are growing. America will need a ready Air Force.

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## **Modernizing the Air Force**

Among the most difficult challenges facing the Air Force is the need to modernize. In the sine waves of defense spending since World War II, most resources during defense buildups have supported wartime operations in Korea, Vietnam and more recently Iraq and Afghanistan. The early-1980s build-up was the only one to focus on modernization without the burden of large combat operations, and to a significant degree we have been living off the investments from that era or even earlier.

The need for modernization is pervasive across the Air Force. While service life extension programs and periodic modifications have largely kept our inventory up to date, the cost of maintenance and sustainment is rising as budgets are flattening, and new threats and technologies require new investments.

The average age of our fighter aircraft is now 23 years, rescue helicopters 22 years, training aircraft 25 years, bombers 37 years and tankers nearly 50 years. Satellites for missile warning, navigation, secure communications and other needs are also aging and replacements must be built and launched on a schedule consistent with the life expectancy of current constellations.

Given the proliferation of ballistic missile technology, integrated air and missile defense is a compelling operational need. Cyber defense and secure and resilient command and control networks are increasingly important. From nearly every aspect, the defense enterprise struggles to keep up with the demand for modern information technologies in its weapons and business systems.

The Air Force spends about 30 percent of its budget on research, development, procurement and construction – investments in future capability. Annual investment has been as high as 59 percent during the Reagan years, but is often the first casualty of shrinking defense budgets as leaders focus on operating and maintaining the current force. Within the \$54 billion in reductions aligned to the Air Force over the next five years under the Budget Control Act, over 70 percent came from lower priority, delayed or poorly performing investment programs.

The Air Force has a clear picture of its investment spending and priorities.

Over the next five years, modernization of fighters and bombers accounts for just over 30 percent of Air Force investment. Fighter modernization is dominated by the F-35 program, which alone accounts for 15 percent of total Air Force investment, followed by continuing upgrades to the F-22 fleet, F-15 and F-16 improvements.

The new Long-Range Strike bomber is one of our top priorities and encompasses approximately two percent of Air Force investment. An additional three percent over the next five years goes to sustain and modernize the B-52, B-1 and B-2 bombers to ensure these aging aircraft remain viable.

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Space programs account for another 20 percent of investment, and our 10 largest programs include four space systems which the joint force and the American public depend upon for access to space, secure communications, missile warning, and navigation and timing. In this area, the pace of modernization is less a matter of choice and more dependent on the life expectancy of capabilities on orbit. Building and launching satellites is an expensive business and we are looking for ways to reduce costs, increase competition and improve resiliency without introducing unacceptable risk.

Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; command and control; and cyber capabilities account for about 12 percent of total investment. Nuclear forces, special operations, and personnel recovery are another 10 percent.

Mobility modernization accounts for 13 percent of investment, and replacing the 50 year-old KC-135 aerial refueling tanker with the KC-46A is the most urgent priority. The KC-46 program of record is 179 aircraft, and calls for 18 aircraft by 2017, with final delivery in the late 2020s. The C-17 procurement is now complete at 223 aircraft, but we are continuing modifications to maximize its ability to carry cargo and fly farther. The C-5M program is modifying C-5B aircraft with new engines and avionics to make it more reliable and facilitate retirement of the C-5As.

A tanker story from our past can be used as a microcosm to describe the challenge of Air Force modernization and why this is so hard. Between 1958 and 1964, the Air Force built roughly 1,400 tankers -- half the older KC-96s, half the new 707-based KC-135. This occurred when the United States spent on average eight percent of its annual GDP on defense, and the Air Force alone accounted for 40 percent of the defense budget. In the KC-46 program, we plan to buy a fraction of that number of aircraft and will take longer to do it. We could build them faster, but with the nation spending four percent of GDP on defense today, and with 20 percent of the defense budget, the Air Force cannot afford to go faster. When the KC-46 program is complete in 2027, we will have recapitalized less than half of the current tanker fleet.

The same pattern is repeating in other areas. The latest modernization of the C-130 fleet began in 1999, but at the current rate only 42 percent will have been replaced with the new J-model by 2019 -- 20 years later.

Underpinning the Air Force's ability to leverage and field these crucial technologies is America's aerospace research and development infrastructure -- a national asset that must be protected to ensure future U.S. advantages in technology, as well as commercial aviation and space. Accordingly, we are protecting science and technology funding as a share of our total resources.

To continue funding these high priority investments, we've made the hard choices to terminate or restructure programs with unaffordable cost growth or technical challenges, eliminate

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expensive programs when more affordable alternatives exist, and discontinue or defer programs simply beyond our reach in the current fiscal environment.

America's Air Force is the most capable in the world, but modernization can't wait for the next up-tick in defense spending. We have important production lines under way and development programs now maturing that are, or will soon be, ready for production. Cancelling programs to wait for a future generation of technology would be wasteful and, in many cases, would risk the loss of critical engineering talent.

The new threats and investment needs, like cyber and missile defense, are not theoretical possibilities for the future. They are here, now. Modernization of the nation's nuclear deterrent lies ahead. Other important programs, like a replacement for the Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System surveillance aircraft and a new trainer, are not yet funded.

The plans and resources available for modernization are not optimal, but we are making tough choices to keep them workable for the future. Further reductions in defense would make these choices even harder.

America's Air Force must remain the most capable in the world; yet it is older than it should be and the need for modernization is growing while overall defense resources are diminishing. There are many advocates – in our own service, the Department of Defense and Congress, and among our industry partners -- for much needed modernization programs; but we are already in the business of reducing some programs to fund higher priorities.

We need to stay focused on the right priorities and be careful about adding more programs than we can afford. Nonetheless, we must sustain forward momentum in modernization. The future success of the Air Force and the joint team will depend on it.

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