



Is The Air Force's Self-Destruct Warning Light Illuminated Steadily?

By Mark Stout

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Subsequent to the organizational decapitation caused by the recent resignations/firings of the Air Force Chief of Staff and the Secretary of the Air Force, the Government Accounting Office delivered their assessment the Air Force had made a number of significant errors that detracted from "full and open competition and fairness" in its \$40 billion dollar tanker procurement. Given what's happened in the last five-plus years, is the Air Force slouching towards a niche function?

In the early 1990's, RAND researcher Carl Builder examined concerns regarding the Air Force. Peering back into history, Builder said the Air Force rises (so to speak) when it works from a unifying strategy and vision, and that it falls (no pun intended) when it focuses on systems and hardware. It's inarguable the Air Force has fallen--the concern now is what caused it to fall and how long will it take to get back up?

From the Air Force that gave rise to Curtis LeMay, 2007 saw a here-to-fore unimaginable event: air launched cruise missiles with unaccounted for nuclear warheads inadvertently flown from an air base in North Dakota to a base in Louisiana. The 2008 follow-up? Revelations that ICBM reentry vehicle components had been accidentally shipped to Taiwan. How about the recent assertion by the Secretary of Defense regarding the Air Force's reticence to support unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) ops in Iraq and Afghanistan? To that end, the Army had already taken things into its own hands, with Task Force Odin, featuring UAVs, sensorized civilian aircraft, helicopters, and infantry. The New York Times reports aides to Secretary Gates "say that he has shown keen interest in the Army initiative—much to the frustration of embattled Air Force leaders."

Sandwiching and interspersed with these events were the procurement failures, with the tanker acquisition now predominantly in the public eye. In the significant acquisition efforts this millennium, the Air Force has had problems with cost, schedule, performance, or procurement integrity—or all four. This includes space launch, satellite purchases, airplanes of several types, and helicopters.

At the end of 2007, whether channeling Builder or sensing an Air Force need, the former Air Force Chief of Staff, General "Buzz" Moseley, authored a white paper intended to articulate a vision, called cross-domain dominance. Cross-domain dominance spoke to a mutually supporting interdependence between the Air Force's three "domains" of air, space, and

cyberspace. Was the cross-domain dominance the vision needed as the Air Force had become system-centric, or arguably, system-fixated?

Because it's not that warfighters don't want what the Air Force offers. They do, and in a big way. Any fighting force covets the speed, range, precision, flexibility, lethality, maneuverability, perspective, persistence, and mobility that air, space, and cyber can provide. Even today, the Army, Navy, and Marines each think these are important enough--when possible, which is pretty frequently--to have their own air forces.

However, unless a vision--a good one, understandable, meaningful, and achievable--is embraced, where will the 2028 Air Force come to rest? It might end up necked-down to airlift, aerial refueling, a bunch of F-35s, an F-22 fleet capped at 183, and some helicopters (for any downed pilots, you see). UAVs? Oh, the other services all have their own. Cyber? Everyone's in. Space? Outsourced. Nuclear? The Navy does all that--ICBMs and bombers were deactivated given their unlovely, high pressure missions. If this is the path the Air Force wants to follow, OK. If not, there is work to do.

General Mosley's white paper was intended to posture the Air Force's thinking for current and enduring relevance, and it provides an excellent start to the discussion. However, the weakness in the vision is that it's not achievable. The Air Force doesn't have the resources. General Moseley articulates a near-perfect end-state when pretty good is going to have to do. Nor does he address the concept of what the Air Force should divest itself of in order to become better at what it must do.

This imbalance of desires--they're not requirements--to resources means current and future Air Force leaders will have to set the priorities to move from Moseley's "what" to the much more devilish "how." How will the Air Force refocus its culture, implement new concepts, leverage technology, and recapitalize its equipment? How will it foster intellectual curiosity, learning, and adaptability? How will the Air Force know it is making progress?

While civilian Air Force leaders can come from industry, academia, and other government backgrounds, military leaders are all grown from within. So the Air Force Chief of Staff in 2014, 2018, or even 2028 is someone wearing the uniform right now--they won't be a new hire. At this point, Air Force leaders have to be asking themselves exactly what they can do--differently or better--to move the organization out of its multi-year struggle. Does the Air Force have people with the right skills and experiences to stand in the gap, or are they just younger versions of those who preceded them?

For its own credibility, future success, and service to the nation, the Air Force must find a way out of its current throes. It can be done, but as they say, if you're in a hole, stop digging.

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