

Sticker Shock and Awe

Our defenses should get smaller and smarter, not more expensive.

By Jeff Huber

PENTAGON OFFICIALS SAY that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates will soon announce up to a half-dozen weapons-system cancellations. If that's true—and I'm not convinced it is—Gates will probably meet more resistance than the Allies ran into at Normandy.

The time-honored adage says that generals always plan for the last war. American generals, taking things a step further, always plan for the last World War. As strategy analyst William Lind notes of our weapons-acquisition practices, “most of what we are buying is a military museum.” For all the Pentagon's lip service to “transformation” and “revolution in military affairs,” today's force looks like a Buck Rogers version of the force we defeated the Axis Powers with: aircraft carriers, destroyers, submarines, armor, infantry, bombers, fighters, special forces, and so on.

Our “Good War” military was suited to symmetrical enemies whose political behavior could be compelled by defeat of their armed forces. We haven't had a foe like that since the Berlin Wall came down; arguably, the Soviets ceased to be a serious military threat years if not decades before then. Yet the preponderance of our defense budget is spent on gee-wizardry to deter or fight a peer competitor that will never emerge.

At the low-tech end of the spectrum, the Obama administration intends to continue increasing the size of our ground forces to conduct the “long war” against “radical extremists,” despite analysis by Rand Corporation that con-

cludes the best way to proceed in our misnamed war on terror is “with a light U.S. military footprint or none at all.”

Neoconservatives weep that their paisley sky will fall if America's defense budget drops below 4 percent of GDP. If that metric were a true indicator of military might, America would be at the mercy of juggernauts like Burundi (5.9 percent), Eritrea (6.3 percent), and Qatar (10 percent). As for percentages that mean something: America accounts for more than half of the world's defense expenditures. Iran's defense budget is less than one percent of ours. The defense budgets of Russia and China are no more than a tenth of ours. The U.S. and its Western allies supply more than 95 percent of global arms sales; anybody who wants a military that can compete with ours will have to buy it from us.

If Gates is serious about eliminating the fat from the defense budget, he can start by amputating the Pentagon's wild blue extravagance.

Air-power fanatics still argue that the atom bomb was the decisive factor in ending the war with Imperial Japan, but the judgment of history is that strategic bombing is a proven dud. The \$2 billion B-2 stealth bomber is albatross enough, but the Air Force wants to replace it by 2018 with an even costlier manned bomber that will have the same combat radius but carry fewer bombs. By 2035, the Air Force plans to field a “transformational advanced technology capability” for long-range strike using an “advanced system-of-systems approach.” “System of systems” is network-centric

warfare-ese for a weapons program that will transform into a system of economic systems. We already bomb Pakistani weddings and Somali villages with robot airplanes controlled from Nevada and cruise missiles launched from nuclear submarines. Our “global reach” is systematic enough.

At \$338 million per copy, the F-22 Raptor is the most expensive fighter jet ever made, but the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program cost is on schedule to surpass the Raptor project's total tab. The planned production run of 183 Raptor airframes will cost \$62 billion. The Joint Strike Fighter comes cheaper by the pop, but the planned 2,458 aircraft buy will cost upwards of \$1 trillion in acquisition and maintenance costs. Moreover, the Government Accountability Office says the JSF estimate is “not reliable for decision making” because “certain key costs were excluded.” How convenient.

Stealth technology drives the sticker price of these fighters into the stratosphere, but avionics, not radar-evading airframes, is what gives them superiority in air-to-air combat. The F-22's missile, radar, identification, and communications gear can be retrofitted into the F-16 Viper, which is still in production and comes in at under \$20 million a copy. The multi-role Viper is a far better tactical bomber than the F-22, and when the fog of air-war forces a visual dogfight, the Air Force asserts that the “F-16's maneuverability and combat radius exceed that of all potential threat fighter aircraft.”

The F-22 isn't the only waste of our air superiority dollar. Despite what Secretary Gates says, the Navy's shooting down of a crippled spy satellite with an SM-3 surface-to-air missile in February 2008 did not prove we are able to knock down ballistic missiles. According to physicist Richard L. Garwin, intercepting a low-orbit satellite is like "shooting ducks in a pond." Bagging a ballistic missile is a different matter. Garwin, whose defense-technology credentials include former membership on the President's Science Advisory Committee and the Defense Science Board, says, "Protecting the United States against attack by nuclear weapons or biological weapons is a failure and will remain so for the foreseeable future, so long as [we attempt] to carry it out by mid-course intercept." Intercepting an object on a

ized version of the *Nimitz* that will serve our security requirements every bit as well as a shiny new Ford can.

All ten *Nimitz* class carriers—including the just christened *George H.W. Bush*—were built to the same drawings used in construction of the *Nimitz* itself, which began in 1968. Once built, the subsequent *Nimitz* carriers underwent costly overhauls to replace their old guts with the newest gadgetry.

We might need fixed-wing carriers for the time being to fight or deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, but we don't need all 11 we have now. At most, four carrier groups should be assigned to this mission; a fifth would unquestionably get in the way. Since carriers spend roughly half their lives in a shipyard and maintenance cycle, eight total are sufficient, and we can get by with seven.

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ballistic arc is more challenging than hitting one on an orbital trajectory, but the main problem is that our interceptor missiles can't defeat the decoy countermeasures any ballistic missile employed against us is likely to have, and Garwin says they will never be able to.

Though the Navy has decided only to build three \$3.3 billion *Zumwalt* class destroyers, it's still full speed ahead for the new *Gerald R. Ford* class of nuclear aircraft carriers. The per-copy-cost guess is \$8.1 billion, twice the price of the currently active *Nimitz* class carriers. The Navy justifies the additional cost with the promise of savings in future operating expenses—savings that, when the future arrives, will have vanished like a blind dowager's silverware. Assuming we ever need to build another aircraft carrier—a generous assumption—we can build a modern-

The "Triple H" air wing—Hornets, Hawkeyes, and Helicopters—will be sufficiently capable as long as we have carriers. The F/A-18 Super Hornet can haul all the paraphernalia the Air Force's F-16 can carry, and the two-seat Hornet F will eventually assume the EA-6 Prowler's electronic-attack function. The twin turboprop airframe of the E-2 Hawkeye, the Navy's mini-AWACS, has accommodated radar- and communication-system upgrades for decades, and can for decades more. The SH-60 Sea Hawk helicopter marks the end of the useful evolution of rotary-wing carrier aircraft; the hapless tilt-rotor V-22 Osprey project confirmed the old Soviet maxim that "better is the enemy of good enough."

What our seven or eight carriers don't need on their flight decks is the Unmanned Combat Aircraft System. Christian Lowe of Military.com thinks the

Navy UCAS could "save the carrier fleet." He whimsies, "Imagine a Navy strike plane launching off the catapult as its carrier begins steaming out of its San Diego naval base. The jet refuels over Hawaii, then again over Guam; it gets updated targeting data from its mother ship 6,000 miles away and launches its strike on an enemy nuclear missile silo in East Asia—all in one sortie. Sound impossible?"

It's entirely possible, but it's utterly dim. Such a strike plane, manned or unmanned, doesn't need to launch from a carrier as it leaves its San Diego naval base. It can take off from the San Diego naval base and land there, too. A land-based UCAS could fill an existing requirement: since we already have global-reach bombing, we may as well hang on to it. It might prove useful someday. UCAS or something like it can fill the Air Force's next generation long-range strike needs. The pilots who run the Air Force have consistently stiff-armed unmanned vehicles like cruise missiles and drones that compete with their bomber and fighter programs. It's partly understandable that they don't like the idea of geeks sitting at computer terminals in Bumsteer, Iowa putting them out of a job, but tough. Greyhound is hiring.

What the carriers desperately need, along with the rest of the Navy's ships, is a reliable means of defending themselves from short-range weapons. Only now, more than eight years after the *Cole* bombing, has the Navy awarded a \$23 million contract (to General Dynamics) to run an integrated ship-defense development program. More critical than the rubber-dinghy threat, though, is the SSN-22 Sunburn anti-ship missile with its supersonic cruise speed and 15g terminal maneuver. Iran has it, and our carriers and other ships in the Persian Gulf carry nothing that has a prayer of knocking it down.

Though we're neglecting force protection of our frontline maritime assets,

the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency is “soliciting innovative research proposals on the topic of a submersible aircraft.” The war industry has been trying to produce a viable flying submarine since World War II. The closest they’ve come to an operational specimen appeared in a 1960s TV series “Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea,” where its most useful function was to fly Admiral Nelson from the *Seaview* to his favorite girly bar in Bangkok.

Land forces don’t run up as large a bill as the sea and sky services, mostly because they are more manpower-intensive and less gizmo-oriented. They aren’t cheap, though. A recent report from the Army says that plans to increase its size will cost \$40 billion a year. A proportional cost of the plan to beef up the Marine Corps comes to \$16.5 billion annually. That’s over \$55 billion a year for the sake of having enough young bodies to continue the Iraq and Afghanistan fiascos indefinitely or engage in new fiascos just like them.

“Transformation” in the American way of war has come to embrace high-cost gadgetry and jabber-laden doctrine devoid of common sense. The latest slogan from the five-sided meme factory is “persistent conflict.” That’s like the “long war” only more persistent and conflicted—we continue in our war on terror even though all it accomplishes is the creation of more terrorists.

Strategists from Sun Tzu to the Red Baron tell us not to engage in battles we don’t know we can win, yet we aggressively seek battles that we know are unwinnable. The only meaningful way we can transform our military is to stop starting those wars. ■

Commander Jeff Huber, U.S. Navy (retired), writes at Pen and Sword. His novel Bath tub Admirals (Kunati Books) is a lampoon on America’s rise to global dominance.

The Obama administration is using former officials as unofficial diplomats because it does not trust many of the State Department officers and ambassadors held over from the Bush years. The process of replacing the Bushies has been handicapped by a number of vetting blunders, meaning that senior positions have been filled without replacing the supporting officers who would normally develop and implement policies. One official called it a “bureaucracy gap” at the upper levels. This has resulted in the ad hoc solution of sending special emissaries on secret or not-so-secret missions, but critics are concerned that the practice sends out too many signals and blurs the lines of communication and accountability. Some of the emissaries report to the White House directly, circumventing the State Department, though Hillary Clinton reportedly approves of the arrangement, possibly because many of the ex-officials involved worked for her husband.

Two of the United States’ principal adversaries, Venezuela and Iran, are receiving particular attention. In February, former secretary of defense William Perry traveled to the Middle East as a private citizen but bearing several messages from the White House. Perry reportedly met Iranian officials in Dubai, which is where Iranians go to circumvent sanctions, drink, and carouse. He suggested that the Obama administration would be prepared to negotiate all outstanding issues but only after Iran’s June presidential elections. The implication was that the White House would like to see President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad replaced by someone less radioactive. Perry also proposed that the U.S. and Iran might have a common interest in working against the Taliban in Afghanistan. The proposal might seem somewhat bizarre, particularly as the Pentagon has been insisting that Iran is aiding the Afghan insurgency. But the reality is that Iran despises the Taliban, which has declared Shi’ite Muslims to be heretics and in 1997 killed 11 Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif. Tehran would not like to see them return to power. The response to Perry was warm enough to encourage Obama to speak directly to the Iranian people by video on March 20.

The president has also been feeling out Venezuela, but with little success. A senior State Department official who traveled to Venezuela in early February on a confidential mission was told by an aide to President Hugo Chavez that the “Bolivarian revolution” is on course and that the country’s economy will be irreversibly changed. Shortly thereafter, an American businessman with ties to the Venezuelan government visited the country on behalf of the White House. Chavez refused to meet him, sending one of his deputies instead. The underling railed against the United States, claiming that nothing had changed in Washington and that the CIA is still trying to overthrow Chavez. Venezuela is under intense pressure economically due to the collapse in oil prices. Chavez has reacted by confiscating property of multinational companies, particularly in the agricultural sector, blaming them for the inflation and shortages caused by his price controls. Shortly after the departure of the U.S. emissaries, he confiscated a rice-milling plant belonging to Minnesota’s Cargill and took over the land of a Coca-Cola distributorship.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a fellow with the American Conservative Defense Alliance.