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## Military Readiness

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# Problems Began Long Before Sept. 11

by Carl Osgood

The intense speculation about whether the United States will launch a strike on Iraq has put the spotlight on the condition and readiness of U.S. military forces to conduct operations in addition to those now under way in Afghanistan. Numerous reports, including articles in *Aviation Week & Space Technology* and Congressional testimony of senior officers, suggest that all the services are now stretched near to the breaking point and have little or no surge capability left for operations such as a major campaign against Iraq.

Top Pentagon officials, however, deny that there is a serious problem, as evidenced by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's outburst before reporters on March 28. "You can be absolutely certain that to the extent that the United States of America decides to undertake an activity, that we will be capable of doing it," he said. Rumsfeld criticized Pacific Command chief Adm. Dennis Blair, who the week before had testified to Congress on the readiness problems in his command, including declining aircraft serviceability rates and depleted munitions stockpiles. Rumsfeld said, "It happens that the Admiral . . . was wrong. . . . Maybe not wrong; he may have been speaking of something he knew something about but should not have been speaking about, because the levels of munitions is not everybody in the world's business . . . and he should have known better."

However, the readiness problems that Rumsfeld and other top Pentagon officials wish not to discuss, and which the current strategic crisis has brought to the fore, began long before Sept. 11, 2001. One indication of the type of problems the military has been facing is an article in the Fall 2001 issue of the *Air Force Journal of Logistics*. The article, written by four logistics officers stationed at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, proposed a better system for forecasting readiness of the Air Force's aircraft fleet. In doing so, they provide a snapshot of how logistics has been a factor in a decline in Air Force readiness over the past decade.

That decline, in fact, has been steady over that period. From fiscal year 1991 through Fall 2001, the combined total not-mission-capable rate for maintenance for all Air Force aircraft has increased from 7.6% to 18.1%. The total not-mission-capable rate for supply (that is, an insufficient number of spare parts) increased from 5.5% in FY 1986 to 13.4% in FY 2001. The article cites several factors in the decline,

which are affected by, but not solely determined by budgetary factors.

On the maintenance side, personnel and equipment issues predominate. Manning and experience levels have varied greatly since the draw-down of the early 1990s, while the average age of aircraft has increased. Today, the average age of Air Force aircraft is 20 years, with 40% of the fleet 25 years or older. Older aircraft and equipment tend to be less reliable and more difficult to repair. Furthermore, the increased operations tempo that characterized the 1990s placed greater stress on both equipment and people than had been anticipated during the relatively stable days of the 1980s.

### 'Slow But Steady Decline'

The article identifies other factors in supply system stress, such as diminished manufacturing sources, material shortages, and inventory forecasts. Inventory reduction programs mandated by the Department of Defense reduced the number of spares in the supply system, while the reduction of intermediate-level maintenance reduced ability to repair components, such as aircraft electronics systems, in house. Furthermore, the closure, in the late 1990s, of two of the Air Force's five air logistics centers, reduced depot-level maintenance capacity by some 40%.

The result of all this, as then-Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Michael Ryan told the Senate Armed Services Committee in January 1999, has been a "slow but steady decline in our readiness." He reported that aircraft cannibalization (the removing of a part from one airplane to install it on another) rates had grown by 78% in just the three prior years. He reported that because of the focus on deployed combat forces, stateside units' readiness had declined by 40%.

The article does not take up the effects of the even higher tempo of operations that have resulted in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks. However, all of the problems identified in the article would tend to be exacerbated by such sustained operations. One anecdotal piece of evidence of that is an Air Combat Command press release, dated Dec. 19, that reports that ten-day inspections for B-1 bombers that used to be done once a year on average now have to be done about every two months, because the planes are accumulating flying hours that much faster and the time for inspection and required repairs is being compressed into five days with the same 34-person crew as used to do them in ten days.

The Pentagon's FY 2003 budget submission includes increases for most categories of operations and maintenance for all the services, as well as the logistics systems that support them. However, as the article notes, some of the factors in decreased readiness cannot be solved solely by budgetary increases. Diminished manufacturing sources and material shortages can only be addressed by changes in economic policy. Realities such as these, however, cannot be counted on to restrain the Clash of Civilizations crowd in the Bush Administration.