

The “Unpleasant Truth” Is that the U.S. Air Force Cannot Manage its Programs

Written by Nick Sanders

Monday, 15 August 2011 00:00

Perhaps you're getting a bit tired of reading yet another article about schedule delays, cost overruns, and technical glitches on USAF programs? We understand. After all, in the past month we've written about [cost problems](#) on the next generation aerial tanker. And our website is rife with stories about problems with the F-35 Lightning II program. Everybody, it seems, is piling-on and the constant barrage of criticism about programmatic problems can get a little tiresome. So we get it.

If you're sick of reading about aircraft program management failures, you may as well click away now, because this is another one of 'em. Today we're going to discuss the absolute, inarguable, failures of the U.S. Air Force to manage its programs.

We're going to start with [this editorial](#) over at the Aviation Week's Ares Defense Technology blog, penned by Bill Sweetman. Mr. Sweetman wrote—

... the Pentagon, industry, lobbyists and friendly politicians are going to have to come to grips with an unpleasant truth: the White House and Congress are largely not to blame, aside from a failure to provide oversight and leadership. Procurement spending was abundant in the past decade. In all too many cases, it just has not delivered capability to the front lines. ...

... a lot of R&D was funded in the 1990s (including F-22 and the first stages of JSF) on the grounds that production would restart after 2000. Both the Navy and the USAF had similar combat aircraft plans, with one fighter in full-scale development in the 1990s, to be followed by JSF.

But while the Navy's Super Hornet has gone reasonably well, both the USAF's programs have failed to deliver what they promised on time. The JSF's struggles are well documented - less so, the delays in adding capability to the F-22.

Mr. Sweetman then discussed a 2004 Lockheed Martin presentation that showed the F-22 program roadmap. After looking at LockMart's promised roadmap to success, he commented—

... had all gone to plan, the USAF would be taking delivery today of F-22s with air-to-ground radar modes ready to go and full Small Diameter Bomb capability, plus the ability to use Link 16 to communicate with all other assets on the battlefield. The next step -- to be delivered in 2014 -- would be the Block 40 Global Strike Enhanced variant, with two-way satcoms and wide-aspect radar coverage, including side arrays.

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These plans have been downscaled and delayed. Air-to-ground radar and SDB may be operational next year -- depending on how the record-duration grounding affects testing -- but anything like what the 2004 plans called Block 40 is well beyond 2016, and satcoms and side arrays are little more than a dream.

In that last bit, Sweetman was alluding to the [indefinite grounding](#) of the F-22. The Air Force has been remarkably closed-mouth regarding the cause(s) for the grounding of the entire fleet—which has lasted more than 14 weeks as this article is written—but reports continue to surface that the aircraft’s oxygen system has problems. As one article (link above) reported—

The ... jets have been grounded because they appear to be poisoning their pilots. Tests have found multiple toxins in the blood of Raptor pilots affected by symptoms similar to hypoxia while flying the jets. And the Air Force hasn't been able to source the problem, leading to a cascade of complications.

The blood tests turned up chemicals from oil fumes, burned antifreeze and propane, according to the Air Force Times. ... Deliveries have been effectively halted because government test pilots can't fly the jets under the grounding order. ... What was first thought to be an oxygen delivery problem leading to hypoxia -- and the possible cause of a fatal crash last November -- is apparently more complicated.

But it may not just be the Honeywell-designed on-board oxygen-generating system that’s the problem. As the article quoted above notes, the USAF investigation has grown to encompass “all aspects” of the aircraft.

Getting back to Mr. Sweetman’s editorial, he next discussed the original program roadmap for the F-35. He commented that, if the program had held to its plan—

Today, the Air Force would be declaring IOC with a combat-capable Block 2, capable of interdiction, ‘enhanced air-to-air’ (Block 1 was to introduce AMRAAM), close air support and destruction of enemy air defenses.

Block 3 operational test and evaluation would be under way, to be completed in 2012. More than 180 F-35As would have been ordered for the Air Force and more than 90 of those would have been delivered. The next contract would be the first multiyear deal.

Those F-35s would already be replacing older aircraft, so the Air Force would not be looking at

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expensive service-life extension programs and upgrades.

Mr. Sweetman also made an important point about cost control—

... had the F-35 program stayed within its cost bounds, the F-22 would not have been cut to a silver-bullet force and would still be in production. And with fighter recap in hand, the Air Force would be in better shape to start building a new bomber -- a task that was, in 2006, considered do-able by 2018 if the money was available.

So quite obviously, both of the Air Force’s flagship aircraft development programs are in trouble. But that’s not the end of our article.

If we didn’t have a point of view about this sad situation, we wouldn’t bother to write this article. If we didn’t have something to add, it wouldn’t be worth our time (or your time to read it). So here goes: we don’t believe the root cause of this situation is ineffective contractor management. Instead, we believe the root cause is ineffective management of contractors. We think it’s a military problem, a Pentagon problem. And we don’t expect any significant changes to the status quo until and unless the Pentagon’s acquisition and program management culture changes.

We respect our military and we sincerely thank them for the service and their sacrifices, and for often risking their lives so that we can live in freedom and security. But that respect should not blind us to the problems endemic to the massive bureaucracy that seems to exist primarily to prevent weapons programs from progressing efficiently. This is not a new theme for us—we’ve written about DCMA and DCAA in less than flattering terms, and we’ve posted links to a Defense Science Board report alerting the Secretary of Defense to pretty much this same issue. Yet nothing changes.

And we’re not alone in our concerns.

In the August 2011 edition of National Defense magazine, General Lawrence Skantze (USAF, Retired) wrote that “the issue of accountability ... is nonexistent in the acquisition process.” He added—

Program managers, even the best, have no real control over their programs. ... [The Pentagon] has and will survive any attempt to restructure it. No one is accountable. If they were, a significant number would have been let go in the past few years. The entrenched structure will resist and survive any defense secretary. ... The only real solution, indicated by the Defense Business Board, is to create a Defense Department acquisition corps, independent of the Pentagon bureaucracy, with adequate resources, facilities and people, and

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no linkage to the Pentagon except in reporting to the secretary of defense. The head of the acquisition corps will be accountable.

Now we don't wholeheartedly endorse General Skantze's position. As a threshold matter, we think it's absolutely critical to disconnect acquisition problems from program management problems. (Naturally, we think the Pentagon should be focusing on both.) But we do completely agree that if the Pentagon cannot cut back and streamline its own bureaucracy (DCMA we're looking at you), then it's time to start over.

And as much as we've resisted the notion in the past, it's time to thoughtfully consider a new DOD contract audit agency—one that is better managed and less concerned about tooting its own horn by fabricating findings, and more dedicated to supporting the needs of both acquisition professionals and buying commands. Both DCAA and DCMA have failed the taxpayers, and the Pentagon bureaucracy has failed to implement effective course-corrections. Accountability is lacking and perhaps it is time to start over.

And we think the U.S. Air Force may be a great place to start implementing the new regime. Because it's inarguable that the current approach to contractor and program management isn't getting it done.