

Better ... Stronger ... Faster

MILITARY acquisition and procurement has always, and will always, be difficult. The military requires specialized, bespoke solutions to complex problems, frequently in small quantities. A labyrinth of laws, rules, budget uncertainties, and politics further complicate the process.

It is no wonder, then, that for as long as there has been a military procurement system, there have been efforts to improve and reform it. Common complaints are that the system takes too long, is too expensive, and is too resistant to change.

Drawing on lessons from recent years, Air Force leaders are moving today to get ahead of some of the military acquisition system's long-standing problems.

First comes a dose of reality. Even if DOD is spared near-term budget disasters, such as a year-long continuing resolution or a return of sequestration, the Air Force's budget is probably not going to be increasing. USAF cannot afford to start a large number of programs with bills that will all come due at some later date when it is hoped that sufficient funding will magically appear.

Service leaders are therefore now taking pains to ensure that programs are timed so that they are affordable relative to realistic future funding—as individual programs and collectively.

To free up funding, sometimes old systems need to make way for new systems. This creates operational risk, and frequently brings about the wrath of Congress. But the Air Force cannot afford to keep old equipment in service forever, because doing so crowds out funding and manpower needed to launch new programs with greater capability.

Recent high-profile examples have included Air Force efforts to divest the A-10 fleet to shift dollars and personnel to the F-35 program; attempts to retire the venerable U-2 spyplane in favor of the unmanned RQ-4 Global Hawk; and a proposal to retire five E-8C JSTARS aircraft to free up funding as a downpayment on the JSTARS Recap program.

The second lesson of recent years is a need to develop systems faster, and top officials are now looking for options to speed up future acquisition programs. One possible scenario could be an independent “should schedule” assessment, modeled on the “should cost”

evaluations major defense acquisition programs receive.

The independent assessments use historical norms to determine how much a program should cost and how long it should take, so officials can budget and plan realistically. But DOD has had some recent success bringing programs along faster and cheaper compared to a decade ago, and the historical averages may no longer represent what is realistically possible.

Bottom line: If the Air Force can accelerate programs, it wants to do so.

To stay in front, USAF needs unprecedented agility in acquisition and from its systems.

Air Force Materiel Command, which has cradle-to-grave responsibility to develop, sustain, and modernize USAF's weapons systems, recently released new mission and vision statements. The command is trying to develop more effective systems, faster. Tellingly, both the mission and vision now include the word “agile.”

Gen. Ellen M. Pawlikowski, AFMC commander, noted there are two ways to provide agility. First, there needs to be nimble development processes, so the Air Force fields better equipment sooner in close partnership with those who will be using the equipment. She said that, generally speaking, the more people who are involved in a development program, the slower that program will progress. Pawlikowski said that for important programs, she just wants to “get the right people on the bus and hit the accelerator.”

Meanwhile, the equipment itself should be designed for agility: flexible, versatile, and adaptable with open architectures and built-in room for growth. This is the B-52 model, as the BUFF is a case study in how a system can be adapted to change with the times.

Pawlikowski said this sort of adaptability should be planned for programs from the beginning, creating systems that can be modified and enhanced later.

The Air Force is no longer facing static, set-piece threats that evolve slowly, she noted in September. It was

just over a year ago that Russia illegally seized Crimea and initiated a covert war in Ukraine, and the US-led air war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria is also barely a year old. USAF needs to quickly develop systems that can change with the times to keep pace with—and get ahead of—unpredictable enemies, because the world will change whether the Air Force does or not.

After a long procurement holiday, the number of urgent USAF acquisition programs is quickly piling up. William A. LaPlante, Air Force acquisition executive, quipped in September that you can make anything an urgent operational need “if you wait long enough.”

The Air Force is rapidly approaching that point. Programs such as the Long-Range Strike Bomber, the JSTARS recapitalization, the KC-46 tanker, the T-X trainer, and the next generation Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent will all be replacing key systems that are decades old.

Many of the legacy systems, such as the B-52 bomber, the T-38 trainer, and the KC-135 tanker, date back to the 1950s or early 1960s. The Air Force needs the stealthy F-35 attack jet to replace 30-year-old front-line fighters. Today's E-8 JSTARS aircraft are in high demand but have exorbitant operating costs and are based on obsolete Boeing 707 airframes that were already used when they were “new” to the Air Force.

It is in this environment that Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, Chief of Staff, said at the Air Force Association's Air & Space Conference Sept. 15, “If we want to have acquisition reform, we are all going to have to accept some risk.” He added that the capability gap between the Air Force and the rest of the world is closing fast.

USAF has made great progress in acquisition in recent years, but it is time to institutionalize the successes and address the problem areas.

There is much to be done, in limited time, and with tight budgets. Smart planning and agility are needed if the Air Force is going to maintain and embrace its combat advantage. The service will need to take some chances to obtain the benefits of strategic agility. It must be allowed to take these chances. ♣