

By Robert S. Dudley, Editor in Chief

## Weathering the QDR

NEXT month marks the end of President George W. Bush's first term—four years which unexpectedly turned into a period of near-continuous overseas warfare. As we look back, it is startling to see how much air and space power contributed to US success in those combat operations.

The swift toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan and of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, plus gains against al Qaeda and other terrorists around the world, are attributable largely to our dominance in air and space. Land and sea forces were indispensable, yet air and space power proved to be pre-eminent in the conventional battlespace.

All of this should suggest heavy support for air and space in DOD's next Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), launched on Nov. 4. The Air Force, however, has cause to be wary. Big defense reviews in 1993 and 1997 led to deep cuts in its forces. The 2001 QDR brought more scrutiny (though no reductions).

A QDR is an in-depth look at US strategy, forces, and policies. Each newly elected (or re-elected) president produces for Congress a QDR report. The report of QDR 2005 isn't due until next fall, but it is clear DOD wants to reshape the armed forces to mesh with the Bush Administration's new global realignment plan.

This realignment logically should enhance the standing of airpower. USAF's worldwide strike and mobility capabilities will become critical after 60,000 to 70,000 overseas-based US forces return to home bases, from which they will have to deploy in order to reach combat zones.

There are, however, questions about whether support will hold up throughout the long QDR grind. Previous reviews degenerated into budget drills, with each service looking more or less to its own interest.

All of the services face money problems. Under Bush, the defense budget has enjoyed robust growth and will reach \$402 billion next year (not counting many billions to fund combat operations). Even so, the surge can't go on too much longer.

The Congressional Budget Office foresees a federal deficit of \$422 billion this year, \$348 billion next year, and \$300 billion for the rest of the decade. That, plus looming bills for social programs, will have a dampening effect on military spending.

According to Air Force Gen. Charles F. Wald, deputy commander of US European Command, the "real issue" will be deciding the "proper mix" of various forces, given limited funds.

The fiscal problem is compounded

### **In the upcoming defense review, the Air Force could face a "perfect storm" of pressures.**

by another uncertainty, which is more conceptual in nature.

According to the *Washington Post*, DOD officials are taking a close look at a new, long-term strategy that shifts spending and personnel away from main conventional power to build smaller and more specialized forces for fighting guerrilla wars, terrorism, and other unconventional threats.

The proposal, presented last August to Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, embraced a long-term reorientation of defense funds away from aircraft, warships, and the like toward special operations forces, mobility, communications, and intelligence. It holds that US forces today face no serious "traditional" military foe and should focus on dealing with three other kinds of threats—catastrophic, disruptive, and irregular. This, they say, argues for maintaining a smaller "high-end" force.

The idea of getting smaller has already occurred to Air Force leaders, who believe that this will free up money to help pay for critical modernization programs.

Stealth, precision, and space technologies make it possible for USAF simultaneously to get smaller and more powerful. Lt. Gen. Duncan J. McNabb, formerly deputy chief of staff for plans and programs, said the service will

"focus on capability" and not "the number of tails you have."

One USAF study looks at reducing the fighter force by up to 25 percent over the next 20 years by retiring older F-16s and F-15s and cutting planned purchases of F-35 fighters.

There is a limit, however, to how small the conventional force can get, said Wald. Moreover, he said, "I think it would be wise to cover our bases at the higher end of the spectrum."

In the debate over the proper balance, the F/A-22 fighter is certain to get heavy attention. The Raptor is expensive. USAF is on record as saying it needs 381 of the stealthy aircraft, the centerpiece of future air warfare concepts. Others argue that the Air Force could get by with fewer.

Scrutiny will fall not only on the F/A-22. The Air Force also has on the books plans for increased investments in unmanned aerial vehicles, ISR systems, long-range strike, airlifters, tankers, and space capabilities.

On top of pressures generated by the QDR, the Air Force will be affected by other major studies. The Pentagon is now or soon will be engaged in a new Mobility Capability Study, an Operational Availability Study, and a major Base Realignment and Closure study.

McNabb once said the Air Force faced what could be described as a "perfect storm"—a precise convergence of financial and other pressures that could bring new opportunities but also force hard choices.

The test for the Air Force in the year 2005 will be figuring out how to deal with these disparate pressures and still maintain a balanced force that can be sustained over the coming decades. The goal is to position USAF to obtain the resources sufficient to meet the nation's requirement for air and space power.

If the record of the past four years of combat operations is any guide—and it is—that objective should be at the top of everyone's lists. ■