

The “2018 Bomber” Controversy

In its 1999 “Bomber Roadmap,” the Air Force famously declared that it had no need for a new long-range strike aircraft until 2037. It soon wavered but did not change course by much. Then, early in 2006, the Pentagon’s Quadrennial Defense Review set a new goal: USAF, the QDR decreed, will have a new bomber ready for combat in 2018. That marked the birth of the “2018 Bomber.”

After nearly 20 years out of the bomber development business, the Air Force faced a tough task. The service last year completed an analysis of alternatives for the projected aircraft. It determined its preferred characteristics. It declared the 2018 Bomber to be No. 5 among all of its modernization priorities.

And then ... silence.

Deep, deep silence. Over the past year, the Air Force has released no final system requirements, issued no request for proposals to industry, offered no detailed timeline, and—most ominously—inserted no development money in its 2009 budget.

Because of these factors, the 2018 target date may be fundamentally unserious. Time was short from the outset. Now, the deadline will be reached in 10 years—a relative blink of the eye in the world of aircraft development.

True, the Air Force can take advantage of work that already has been done. In the 30 years since the start of the B-2 program, the F-22 and F-35 fighter programs have added much to the store of knowledge about stealth, propulsion, and sensors. The new bomber should feature “durable” stealth, advanced avionics, and greater range and payload than comes from fighters.

Moreover, USAF plans to stick with proven technology and avoid delays caused by pursuing high-risk, high-payoff items. The service claims it will incorporate only those technologies that have been modeled or prototyped by January 2009.

Still, that target date looks shaky, if history is any guide. In assessing the realism of the project, it is instructive to review USAF’s experience with the two most recent bombers.

■ B-1. Rockwell won the B-1A contract in 1970 and made the first flight of the aircraft in 1974. President Carter halted the program in 1977, President Reagan revived it in 1981, and the Air Force declared the B-1B operational in 1986. Thus, even if one factors out the Carter delay, it took 12 years from contract to IOC, and eight years between first flight and IOC.

■ B-2. Though the stealth program dates to the 1970s, Northrop won a development contract in 1981 and carried out first flight in 1989. IOC came in 1997. Elapsed time from B-2 contract award to operational status: 16 years. The interval between first flight and IOC was eight years.

More recently, the Bomber Roadmap of 1999 postulated an 18-year acquisition effort to bring in the “2037 Bomber.”

Today, the Air Force has published no date for a contract award, let alone a date to fly an airplane. Unless the Air Force plans to pull something out of the black world—and that could well happen—we most likely won’t see a new bomber by 2018.

This conclusion was solidified in the minds of many by the absence of bomber funding in USAF’s Fiscal 2009 budget, unveiled on Feb. 4. The period covered by this budget runs through Sept. 30, 2009. By that time, 43 months will have passed since the bomber was announced in the QDR, but the program will remain unfunded.

Here is the budget story for the “priority” programs in 2009:

1. KC-X tanker, \$900 million.
2. CSAR-X helicopter, \$320 million.
3. Satellites, \$8.6 billion.
4. F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, \$3.4 billion.
5. New bomber, \$0.

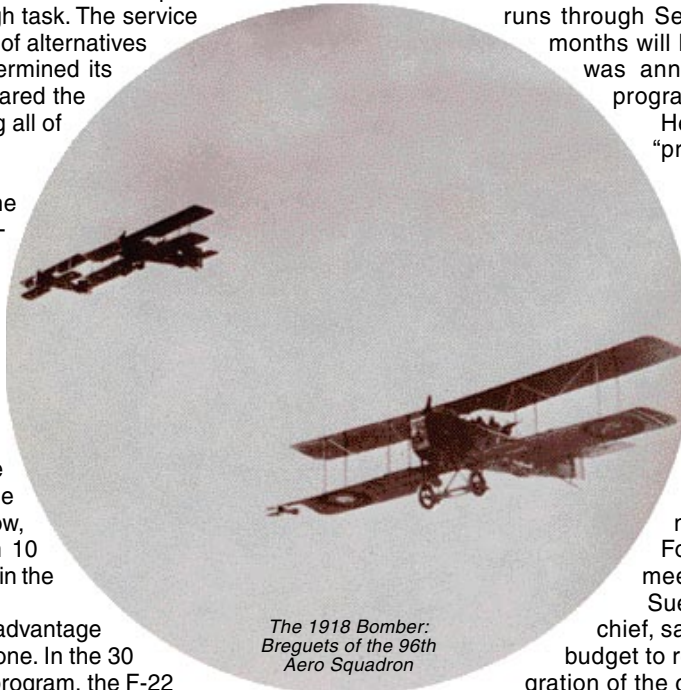
No one is challenging the worth of the top four Air Force procurement priorities, each of which is critically important. But, for many, the lack of money for the 2018 Bomber makes it hard to believe the Air Force is seriously committed to meeting the target date.

Sue C. Payton, USAF’s acquisition chief, said last year, “We will not have a budget to really move forward with ... integration of the currently existing technologies” until 2010. A recent assessment by industry analysts, published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, concluded that the new bomber has lukewarm support and little advocacy within the Air Force. Further, lack of support from unified commanders makes a speedy development all the more difficult, said CSIS.

“It was operational pull from the field that had led to the rapid fielding of UAVs,” CSIS noted, and not efforts “to jam UAVs into the force in the 1996 vision and long-range plan.”

The ability of an aircraft to strike over long ranges, deliver a large payload, and survive against modern air defenses in hostile airspace can only grow in importance. The differences between IOC in 2018, 2020, or 2022 may not be all that critical, but commitment to the program is vital if the Air Force hopes to field the new bomber in a reasonable amount of time.

It would be easy to declare the schedule too hard, allow the program to slip, and fall back on what is now the “2035 Bomber”—USAF’s long-term plan to field a revolutionary system. However, if it did so, the Air Force would be right back where it was in 1999. ■



The 1918 Bomber:
Breguets of the 96th
Aero Squadron

More information: <http://www.afa.org/Media/Reports/Bomber0207c.pdf>