

by Mike Burleson

If you thought the recent knife fights over the F-22 Raptor fighter cancellation was tough, you haven't seen anything comparable as the massive Joint Strike Fighter program implodes under the weight of immense costs in the next decade. At least, that is yours truly's prediction, as all the signs of disaster on a colossal scale, dare I say Biblical proportions, of this likely the most costly and important international weapons venture in all history. Listen to Winslow Wheeler's take in the Huffington Post:

"A financial disaster? How can that be? Visiting the F-35 plant in Fort Worth, Texas last August, Secretary of D Robert Gates assured us that the F-35 will be "less than half the price ... of the F-22." In a narrow sense, Gates is right. At a breathtaking \$65 billion for 187 aircraft, the F-22 consumes \$350 million for each plane. At \$299 billion for 2,456, the F-35 would seem a bargain at just \$122 million each.

"F-35 unit cost will ultimately be much higher...the F-35 program will cost up to \$15 billion more, and it will be delivered about two years late."

I am not particular surprised at what is going on with the F-35, since it is yet another sign of such last century weapons approaching obsolescence, as we reported on the demise of the Main Battle Tank yesterday. Other glaring evidence was the UK reducing its purchase of new planes to only 50, because of high costs. He also details how mediocre the plane is compared to the one it is replacing, with its single benefit seeming to be stealth, though the old weapons just use stand-off weapons as a much cheaper and very effective alternative (as in Operation Allied Force). Foreign air forces hardly even bother with stealth and they have been doing just fine. What is amazing, instead of bringing about a major revolution in aerial design, stealth seems to have added the last few nails in manned airpower's coffin!

I think if the USA gets 500 planes out of this Epic Boondoggle, we will be lucky, with their placed taken by increasingly capable unmanned aerial vehicles, and legacy fighters built off the shelf. Wheeler goes on to say the latest model F-16 costs only \$60 million, while Boeing says it can build the Super Hornet for \$50 million each and I believe them. I predict a rush order of the latter to stave off the mass retirement of older planes bought in the 70s and 80s.

Strategypage goes on to detail how the graphic changes ongoing in airpower is affecting the USAF and pilot morale:

"The U.S. Air Force has a morale problem with its combat pilots. The issue is lack of action for the pilots. That, plus the increased use of unmanned aircraft, and the very real prospect that the age of the manned combat aircraft may be coming to an end. This is made worse with hundreds of fighter pilots being assigned to operating Predator and Reaper UAVs. This was not popular

duty, even though the pilots still draw flight pay. It is tedious work, although the UAV operators often saw more combat action than they did when piloting F-16s or F-15s.

"Specifically concerning the F-35 : Many people, including some generals in the air force, believe that its next generation fighter will not have a pilot on board. Many air force generals admit that the F-35 is probably the last manned fighter. But some believe that the F-35 will be facing stiff competition from pilot less fighters before F-35 production is scheduled to end in 2034."

UAV (unmanned aerial vehicles) are not particularly popular with many U.S. Air Force leaders, but that is not the case in many other countries. Air force generals around the world see the unpiloted jet fighter as a way to break the monopoly the U.S. Air Force has had on air supremacy for the last sixty years.

You might see then why the pilots are depressed. That last statement is a certain one. Rome dominated by landpower. Great Britain by seapower. America leads with airpower, with each of its armed forces structured accordingly around some type of air platform (as we often detail the USN's extreme reluctance to admit their capital ship, the aircraft carrier is in decline). I don't see the end of manned air destroying the US ability to wage war, but clinging to obsolete concepts for nostalgia's sake is a certain path to destruction.

Finally, while manned aircraft orders are shrinking, the builders of UAVs can't keep up with demand. Also from Strategypage concerning the Israeli Heron:

"Germany is joining a growing list of NATO nations that are obtaining Israeli Heron UAVs for their troops in Afghanistan. A German firm is partnering with the Israeli manufacturer to provide maintenance services. The German Herons will become operational in Afghanistan in about four months...

"Australian troops in Afghanistan begun using Israeli Heron UAVs two months ago. Last July, Australian troops went to Canada to receive training on the Heron, which Canadian troops have also adopted...Last year, Canada also ordered half a dozen of the larger Israeli Heron TP UAVs...

"Heron is actually getting a lot of sales because the Predator manufacturer cannot keep up with American military and CIA orders."

So we see with these newer robot aircraft, a small military can quickly build its airpower resources, while a larger nation can enhance its own quickly, economically, and effectively. When you consider the less than 200 traditional jets have joined the USAF inventory in the past decade, while literally thousands of UAVs have been deployed and seen combat during the same time period, can there be any doubt where the future lies?

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