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Gates Follows Through

The Pentagon is finally cutting expensive weapons programs it doesn't need.

By Fred Kaplan

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This is remarkable: In his [budget address](#) today, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates actually did what he has said he'd do for some time now—killed or slashed a bunch of weapons programs that don't fill the needs of modern warfare, vastly boosted spending for weapons that do, and took the first steps toward truly reforming the way the Pentagon does business.

For instance:

- He really did recommend halting production of the [F-22 Raptor](#) stealth fighter aircraft at its current level of 187 planes—against the wishes of the Air Force brass, most of whom are former fighter pilots who cherish this Cold War relic above all other programs, even though it has never been used in any of the wars we've been fighting the past few years.
- He eased out the Navy's [DDG-1000](#) stealth destroyer, ending the program with its third ship, to be funded next year, and instead restarted the older but still quite capable DDG-51.
- He canceled the most baroque and expensive components of the Army's [Future Combat Systems](#) program and called for a re-evaluation of what kinds of weapons the Army needs in general.
- He also killed two of the most troubled programs in the Missile Defense Agency, the Airborne Laser aircraft and the Multiple Kill Vehicle, cutting the overall agency budget by \$1.4 billion, about 15 percent of its total budget (a pittance, but a deeper cut than any other secretary or Congress has ordered since the program began).

At the same time:

- He requested a \$2 billion increase for drones such as Predators, which have dramatically improved intelligence and counterterrorism efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, increasing their deployed numbers by 62 percent (by 127 percent compared with a year ago).
- He more than doubled the purchase of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters—the smaller, slightly cheaper stealth aircraft—from 14 in 2009 to 30 in 2010 (way too many, in my mind, given the problems with this program, too, but perhaps Gates felt he needed to compensate politically for killing the F-22).
- He boosted the fiscal year 2010 purchase of Littoral Combat Ships, for counterinsurgency operations to coastal regions, from two ships to three.

- He added money for helicopter pilots and maintenance crews, *theater* missile-defense (against short-range missile attacks on the battlefield), aerial-refueling planes, and the training of more experts in cyberdefense.
- To protect the all-volunteer armed forces, he added \$11 billion to fund the expansion of the Army and Marines, \$400 million for additional medical research, \$300 million for care of the war-wounded, \$200 million more for child care and spousal support—and, moreover, he put these sorts of programs in the baseline defense budget. (Before, they were part of ad hoc programs in the war-emergency supplementals and therefore without institutional protection—or, as Gates put it, they were bureaucratically "homeless"—in the political competition for scarce dollars.)

In a press briefing this afternoon, Gates insisted that these changes were driven not by budget restraints or by directives from outside the Defense Department but, rather, by his own sense of a need to "rebalance" the Pentagon's programs—"to institutionalize and enhance our capabilities to fight the wars we are in today and the scenarios we are most likely to face in the years ahead."

Some weapons need to be modernized, he allowed, to provide a "hedge" against future threats. But even here, he said, "goals should be tied to the actual and prospective capabilities of known future adversaries—not by what might be technologically feasible for a potential adversary given unlimited time and resources."

Thus he slashed a number of naval programs because, as he put it, the "healthy margin of dominance at sea provided by America's existing battle fleet makes it possible and prudent to slow production." He stopped production of the C-17 cargo-transport plane because the department's "analysis concludes that we have enough C-17s with the 205 already in the force and currently in production." He wants to overhaul the Future Combat Systems program because its underlying premise—that lightweight vehicles equipped with computer technology can compensate for heavier armor—was invalidated by the lessons of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This budget will not go down easily in the Pentagon or in Congress. The F-22, the DDG-1000, and the Future Combat Systems are the favored systems by much of the Air Force, Navy, and Army brass, respectively. (It may not be coincidence that he's going after all three services equally; at least he can't be accused of chumming up with one at the expense of the others.) The F-22 in particular is also a favorite of many legislators—the result of politically shrewd subcontracting that spread out production of the plane to key districts in 46 states.

Contracting is another area that Gates is seeking to reform. He wants to slash the corps of service contractors, who come from the defense industry, and to replace them with civil-service professionals, 13,000 of whom he wants to hire next year, expanding to 30,000 new officials over the next five years.

After Gates was confirmed as George W. Bush's defense secretary in December 2006, he gave [several speeches](#) outlining major reforms that his successor should undertake—in weapons procurement, promotion policy, and the whole careerist culture inside the Pentagon. (With only two years in office, combined with a plateful of crises in Iraq and elsewhere, he knew he wouldn't have time to take those steps himself.) When he stayed on at Barack Obama's request, and thus became his own successor, many wondered whether he would turn his words into action.

With this budget, he has begun to do just that.

*Fred Kaplan writes the "War Stories" column for **Slate**. His book, [Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power](#), is now out in paperback. He can be reached at war_stories@hotmail.com.*

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