
Defense Report

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Strategic Mobility: An Achilles Heel?

In 1939, Germany conquered Poland in 27 days. Today, military planners say that it would take U.S. military strategic airlift 19 days to move a full combat division and all of its equipment to a European battlefield. NATO resistance in a war in Europe would surely be much better than that of the Poles in 1939, but 19 days is a long time!

Present U.S. airlift can move a division's troops and normal sized equipment in much less than 19 days, but it cannot move the essential out-sized cargo, such as large artillery pieces and tanks, equipment which provides the vital striking power of a military force, in a lesser period of time.

The completion of the replenishment of pre-stocked equipment in Europe, currently underway, will permit rapid air reinforcement by two divisions. But follow-on divisions could well be too late unless DOD's plan to improve strategic airlift is approved and funded.

The DOD plan, the Airlift Enhancement Program, would reduce the time to move a full division to seven days. Essentially, this program would: (1) assure maximum use rate of the most effective 70 USAF strategic cargo aircraft, the C-5's, by strengthening the wing structure, which will also ensure a much longer life span for the aircraft; (2) "stretch" the 275 C-141's in the USAF inventory, thereby increasing their capacity by about 30%; and (3) enlarging the entryways of about 100 of the 153 wide-bottomed commercial cargo aircraft which will be made available to DOD in an emergency by the commercial airlines as part of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF).

DOD proposed this program last year and Congress appropriated part of the money for the C-141 phase (\$16.5M) and \$32M for planning and the initial engineering for the C-5 portion. However, it turned down the CRAF proposal. DOD is asking for the CRAF funding again in FY 77 because, as Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld said, the CRAF modifications "would produce over half of the capability increase sought in the entire Airlift Enhancement Program at less than one-third of the total cost."

The DOD program will take several years and will be costly, but it will be worth it. The ability to "git thar" even without "the mostest" remains as essential to success in battle today as it was when Nathan Bedford Forrest first enunciated his doctrine.