
Defense Report

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The Decision to Build More C-5 Transport Planes — Common Sense Triumphs

There is a growing realization that the United States can no longer isolate itself from the rest of the world. We are philosophically motivated to promote individual freedom; our economy drives us to obtain far-flung sources for raw materials and markets for our products. Whether we like it or not, those considerations tie us inextricably to the security of a wide variety of nations and raise the very real possibility that we may have to fight to help preserve them.

Our ability to move military forces swiftly to defend our vital interests is key to having a truly credible deterrence against third party interference. Yet we are far short of the air and sea transportation assets required to move substantial forces to remote areas and to sustain them after they are deployed. For this reason the armed services closely watched the just-concluded congressional debate over whether our airlift capability should be augmented with improved C-5B transports, similar to the C-5A's already doing yeoman service throughout the world, or with modified Boeing 747 civilian transports.

In terms of capability the C-5's seemed to have everything going for them — the ability to carry tanks and other outsized cargo, built-in loading ramps and mid-air refueling, among them. But the C-5, the world's largest cargo aircraft, had a bad reputation because of a history of cost overruns and weaknesses in wing structure requiring costly modification. The 747, on the other hand, was less expensive, had a proven record as a commercial carrier, and several were available for immediate conversion to cargo-carrying configuration. The cargo version would not, however, be able to carry tanks or other outsized cargo, could not refuel in mid-air and would not have cargo ramps.

Quite understandably, the congressional battle for the C-5's was led by the delegation from the state in which they are built — Georgia — while the pro-747 arguments were made by the representatives of the state of Washington, where the Boeing Company is having trouble finding buyers for its aircraft. There was certainly no doubt that the 747's could have added some airlift capacity, but it would not have been the kind most needed.

Congress has now authorized further procurement of the more-capable C-5B to begin in fiscal year 1983. The Congress is to be congratulated for making that difficult, but correct, choice. We trust that it will be similarly farsighted in appropriating the necessary funds.