
Defense Report

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Selecting a Military Transport Aircraft—We Must Look to the Future

After much debate and finger-pointing, Congress has decided to go along with the Administration's plans to augment our strategic airlift fleet with 50 advanced models of the huge C-5, the only aircraft in the world that can carry main battle tanks. In the minds of most military men this was the proper choice when the range of choices was limited to just two: the C-5 or a modified version of the B-747 jumbo jet.

Those same military men, however, are alarmed by the absence of any program to develop a follow-on aircraft that would be available in the relatively near-term future to replace the C-5s, the hard-working fleet of intermediate-sized C-141s and the old, mostly worn-out fleet of C-130 short-range tactical transports. Their very real fear is that we will some day find ourselves in need of applying all our airlift assets in an emergency situation but will be confronted with a family of aircraft well past its prime.

We must get maximum effectiveness from a force structure that is less than adequate to deal fully with all our worldwide foreign policy commitments. Unless we can respond rapidly and effectively in several areas simultaneously, the credibility of our deterrence against third-party adventurism is less than believable.

A couple of years ago we were about to embark on the development of an aircraft known as the C-17. It was designed to be the long-term replacement for the intertheater C-5s and C-141s and would have had the capability to use short, unhardened airfields that would permit it to fill in for the intratheater C-130s. Several of the nation's major aircraft manufacturers had submitted designs, and one of them had been selected for development after months of close scrutiny. Unfortunately, the C-17 was one of the early victims of the competition between spending on social programs and spending on national defense.

This was a short-sighted decision. Every day that goes by without completing its design and development brings us closer to the possibility of being unable to deal with an emergency because the airlift fleet cannot sustain a prolonged effort.