US Air Force purge: Growing tensions within a militarized state

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The sudden sacking of both the senior civilian and military commanders of the US Air Force Thursday is symptomatic of the growing tensions within an American government dominated by militarism and torn by divisions over what strategy Washington should pursue to defend its global interests.

The forced resignations of Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne and chief of staff Gen. Michael "Buzz" Moseley were ostensibly triggered by what Defense Secretary Robert Gates called "a chain of failures" in the Air Force's handling of US nuclear weapons.

The top-level firings followed the completion of a report on a strange incident in which four Air Force ballistic missile fuses—crucial components of nuclear weapons—were shipped to Taiwan in 2006. The Pentagon attributed the shipment to a mistake in which the nosecone fuse assemblies, which trigger intercontinental ballistic missiles as they approach their target, were sent instead of battery packs intended for use in Taiwanese military helicopters.

According to the official story, this supposed mix-up, which provoked heated protests from China, went undetected for 17 months, until the Taiwanese military alerted Washington last March.

The controversy followed the even more disturbing incident in August 2007, in which an Air Force B-52 flew the breadth of the US with six nuclear-tipped cruise missiles fixed to its wings. As far as it is known, the flight marked the first time that an American bomber had taken to the air armed with nuclear weapons since the height of the Cold War more than 40 years ago.

The armed B-52's flight from Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota to Barksdale AFB in Louisiana was also declared a "mistake." While the final report on the incident remains classified, it is far from clear how the warheads, which are electronically monitored and must go through multiple checks before being removed from their bunkers and placed on the wing of an aircraft, could have been mistakenly mounted on the plane.

Given the context of the incident, which transpired amid reports of planning within the Bush administration for an attack on Iran, including possible use of nuclear weapons, the perfunctory statement from the Air Force that the transfer was an "error" and that "the munitions were safe, secure and under military control at all times" hardly allayed concerns.

Taken together, the claims of innocent errors as the explanation for sensitive nuclear devices being sent to one of the tensest areas of the globe and a nuclear armed flight in the midst of mounting war threats strain credulity. Both incidents strongly suggest that much more is taking place behind the scenes in the US military and state apparatus than the American people are being told.

Meanwhile, a security exercise conducted last month at the Minot Air Force Base simulating an attack on nuclear weapons storage areas found a gross lack of security, which was blamed on a failure of leadership.

At Thursday's Pentagon news conference, Gates described the shipment of fuses to Taiwan as "a significant failure to ensure the security of sensitive military components." He continued: "More troubling, it depicts a pattern of poor performance that was highlighted to us following last year's incident involving the improper [transfer] of nuclear weapons between Minot Air Force Base and Barksdale Air Force Base."

Gates claimed that the decision to remove the two men was "based entirely" on a report prepared by Navy Admiral Kirkland Donald, director of naval nuclear propulsion, on the Air Force handling of nuclear munitions. The defense secretary said that probe revealed a "gradual erosion of nuclear standards and a lack of effective oversight by Air Force leadership."

While no doubt the incidents raised grave questions, the manner in which the two officials were forced to resign evinces a level of urgency that suggests that far more was involved than the release of an investigator's report.

Both Wynne and Moseley were attending an Air Force leadership summit at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. Moseley was hastily summoned to Washington Thursday for a meeting with Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and asked to resign. Later that same day, Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England was sent to Wright-Patterson to find Wynne and demand his resignation as well.

It should also be noted that the shakeup at the top of the Air Force is being carried out with the Bush administration facing barely seven months more in office, after which those replacing Wynne and Moseley will almost certainly themselves be replaced as well.

Within the Pentagon, the tensions building up between Gates and the top Air Force officials have been recognized for over a year. Their sources extend well beyond the two nuclear weapons "mistakes."

Gates has been increasingly open in his criticisms of the Air Force on other matters.

Speaking on May 13 in Colorado at a seminar organized by the Heritage Foundation, the right-wing think tank, Gates said that the military was plagued by what he called "next-War-itis—the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict." He demanded that all planning and procurements be subordinated to the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The remark was widely seen as directed particularly at the Air Force.

Speaking in April at the Air War College in Alabama, where the Air

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Force's trains its senior officers, Gates complained bitterly about the failure of the military to provide necessary resources for the Iraq war.

"I've been wrestling for months to get more intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets into the theater," said defense secretary. "Because people were stuck in old ways of doing business, it's been like pulling teeth."

Gates was referring in particular to what he viewed as the Air Force command's dragging its feet on the deployment of greater numbers of Predator UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), the armed flying drones used to detect and attack those resisting the US occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Senior Air Force officials have reportedly balked at turning the UAVs over to the Army and have insisted that they be operated by trained pilots. They also apparently objected to the back-to-back deployments of UAV crews.

More fundamental are the divergences over Gates's insistence that the full resources of the military be subordinated to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in particular, and, more generally, to the preparation to fight similar colonial-style wars of repression and occupation in other parts of the world.

Others in the military brass, particularly in the Air Force and the Navy, resist this conception, and point to the potential for new major wars with rising potential challengers such as China, which has begun to modernize its own air force, navy and ballistic missile system. Underlying their position are powerful institutional and financial interests.

The Air Force has continued to publicly press for the rebuilding of its fleet of some 5,000 tactical warplanes. It has demanded additional funding both to build a new F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which will not be in full production for several more years, as well as to obtain additional F-22 Raptors, beyond the 183 it has been authorized to buy from Lockheed Martin.

The F-35 program is projected to cost some $300 billion, while the F-22s cost approximately $175 million each.

Gates told the Senate Armed Services Committee in April that he opposed increased production of the F-22s. "The reality is that we are fighting two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said, "and the F-22 has not performed a mission in either theater."

Despite the secretary's statements, senior Air Force officers staged a virtual mutiny, continuing to press Congress for additional funding to acquire more F-22s.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the resigning air force secretary, Wynne, was recruited to the Pentagon by the Bush administration in 2001 after a 30-year career in the aerospace industry, where he had headed the space divisions of both General Dynamics and Lockheed Martin, maker of the F-22 and America's number one military contractor.

The purge at the top of the Air Force was clearly seen as having substantial financial implications. "This can't be good for any of us," a Lockheed Martin official close to the F-22 program told *Aviation Weekly*. "I was completely surprised and nobody I know knew anything about it beforehand," the official is quoted as saying.

It is now nearly half a century since the Republican President Dwight Eisenhower urged the American people to "guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex." The ever-closer relations between America's expanding military and a financially powerful arms industry, he warned had the "potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power."

The threat indicated by Eisenhower in his farewell speech of 1961 has mushroomed into something far beyond anything the World War II general could ever have imagined.

The Air Force alone now disposes of a budget of close to $130 billion, while military spending as a whole - including the successive "emergency" funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the nuclear weapons appropriations for the Energy Department - is fast approaching one trillion dollars a year.

US generals and admirals who serve as regional commanders now act as American pro-consuls, not only in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in many other parts of the world, where they wield far greater power than any ambassador or other civilian representative of the US government.

Meanwhile, an officer corps that in a previous period generally avoided partisan politics has become highly politicized, influenced not only by the Republican Party, but increasingly by the Christian right.

Finally, in pursuit of its strategy of global militarism, the Bush administration has sought to portray the military as entitled to virtual veto power over the elected government, insisting that it is the commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan-hand-picked supporters of the administration's policies—who must decide the course of the wars.

Under such a government, a sudden shakeup within the top ranks of the military like this week's unprecedented simultaneous removal of a service's civilian secretary and uniformed chief—or for that matter the forced resignation of Central Command head Admiral William Fallon in March—raises a number of disturbing possibilities.

Was there more to the unauthorized flight of a nuclear-armed bomber last August than the government dares reveal to the American people?

Are the Air Force chiefs being sacked in preparation for using America's airpower in another criminal war of aggression, potentially against Iran, under conditions in which the Pentagon's uniformed command is already deeply dissatisfied with the over-extension of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Had the near mutiny over military procurements, which apparently enjoyed the backing of powerful financial interests, gone further than has been revealed? Were they forced out to avoid a more open challenge to the civilian control of the military?

The answers to these and other crucial questions remained hidden behind a veil of "national security." Clearly, however, under conditions of a protracted decay of basic institutions of bourgeois democracy in America, the ever-increasing power of the military poses the most fundamental threat to the basic democratic rights of American working people.

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