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A Fourth Leg for the Table

Your editorial in the December 2018 issue, entitled “The Air—and Space—Force We Need” [p. 2] was very interesting. It provides a light on the thinking behind the Air Force’s position on the need for a Space Force. It is reminiscent of a piece that could well have been written in 1947 with regard to the need for an “Air Force.”

I am certain that while the Army saw little need for the creation of a new service, it undoubtedly saw the likelihood for a reduction in size and mission after the end of World War II and realized that much of the new strategy would place an emphasis on air supremacy (especially the doctrine of massive retaliation). In light of the possibility of a threat from the Soviet Union, some of the statements in your critique could have been lifted verbatim from the Army’s perspective on the need for an Air Force. For example, “The logic is that space (air) is a unique domain, that prior administrations underinvested there, and that a new bureaucracy is needed to guide development of space- (air) based capabilities,” or “America does not need a Secretary of the Space (Air) Force. Adding a Space (Air) Force Chief of Staff will not increase the lethality of the US military. The Joint Chiefs will not become wiser with the addition of an eighth four-star general.”

There are others, but why belabor the obvious? It is obvious that the Air Force is biased in favor of the air domain, just as the Army was of the land. It is organizationally incapable of providing a responsible estimate of the cost of creating a new service and it is not reasonable to ask organizations affiliated with the Air Force (such as RAND or the Air Force Association) to provide reasonable analyses as to the cost, or the need, for a new Space Force. The cost estimate from some are ludicrous (\$13B).

I have been employed by the Air Force in some capacity for 40 years, including duty as an ICBM crew commander, and I believe that it is indeed a great organization. It is not, and should not be, confused with having the needs of the space mission and capabilities

at its forefront. The services battle for missions, roles, and responsibilities, not to mention funding and allocation of personnel. The competition for funding for an F-35 with a SBIRS satellite will never be a fair one as long as pilots make the bulk of decisions as to where funds are to be allocated.

The future of this country will rely more and more on the ability of the Department of Defense to provide safe and secure space assets. Our adversaries are investing heavily in space in an attempt to overtake our advantages in air, land, and sea. Eventually the triad will require a fourth capability for the nations defense, and it will be stationed in space.

It will take true visionaries to recognize that, as the Air Force came from the Army, the Space Force will come from the Air Force. It is inevitable if the nation is to survive. Don’t wear these blinders too long.

P.S. If you want proof as to the bias against Space in the Air Force, take a look at your magazine in which this editorial was contained to see that there are no articles on the threat from space, or the history of space, or the acquisition of space weapons.

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A Day in the Life

The photo of the F-35 Elephant Walk in the Dec. 7 edition of the *Air Force Magazine Daily Report* [“F-35’s Final Milestone Before Full-Rate Production”] evoked a strong memory of mine that I’d like to share.

Elephant walk is a USAF term for taxiing airplanes in close formation before takeoff, so you can launch the most planes in the least amount of time possible.

When I was an aggressor pilot flying F-5s, simulating Soviet air tactics at Clark AB, Philippines, circa ’79-81, I remember a McDonnell Douglas F-4 elephant walk. I was driving home to my Carmenville housing area on the perimeter road, but I paused, and then escaped and evaded my lime-green BMW 2002 onto an airfield access road, and parked at the departure end

of the runway—probably no more than 150 feet from centerline and slightly past the overrun.

And watched, then stared, then stood stupefied as 44 F-4 Phantom IIs, nicknamed “Rhinos,” rumbled in the distance—obscured at the other end of the runway by the heat haze shimmering above the runway—and then sent a rooster tail upward of black JP-4 aviation smoke as full afterburners were stroked, and the beasts started a slow surge down the concrete.

Each jet in slow motion emerged from the oily smoke-and-haze stew and took on the familiar F-4 “Double Ugly” look with hovered inlets, an ominous yet sleet humpback, a bit of curve on the wingtips, and then the chicken-leg landing gear slowly folding upward and seemingly securing the crew.

The three bags of petrol on the underside of airplanes were high drag, so these were 60,000 pounds of machine that hovered in ground effect until they captured enough speed to then limp into the sky; but really only making a sliver of altitude by the time they thundered by me.

Roiling acrid-stinky smoke descending upon my cranium while I shuddered into a continuous vibration as airplane after airplane after airplane—44 times—went by with two afterburners spitting 15-foot cylinders of flames against the afternoon backdrop of a darkened tree-green Mount Pinatubo.

Wow, what a privilege to watch. A marvel of man’s making. Steel, pungent smells, roar of noise, tropical landscape, wonder of flight (how can that hunk of metal simply, slightly, lift off into the air?), and brotherhood. I was in love with it all, each separately and as a collective imprint upon my identity. But to this day I most cherish the unbounded feeling of kinship I had with the men inside those “Double Ugly” flying machines. I was on the ground, in a different squadron, and flew a different type of airplane with a different mission, but I knew I was their wingman. Fly safe, then and today. Always.

Carl Van Pelt
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