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Defense Primer: The United States Air Force

The National Security Act of 1947 (P.L. 80-253, Title II, §207), enacted on July 26, 1947, established the U.S. Air Force as an Armed Force under the Department of the Air Force (DAF). An executive order signed by then-President Harry S. Truman on the same day (EO 9877; 12 *Federal Register* 5005) prescribed functions of the U.S. Air Force to be “organized, trained, and equipped primarily for prompt and sustained air offensive and defensive operations.” The order states in part that the U.S. Air Force “is responsible for the preparation of the air forces necessary for the effective prosecution of war except as otherwise assigned.” The National Defense Authorization Act for FY2020 (NDAA; P.L. 116-92, Title IX, Subtitle D) established the U.S. Space Force as an Armed Force under the DAF.

The DAF is a single military department with two Armed Forces: the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Space Force. The Air Force is led by a civilian leader, the Secretary of the Air Force. The Air Force Chief of Staff, a four-star general, reports to the Air Force Secretary, as does the Space Force Chief of Space Operations, also a four-star general.

Air Force Core Functions

Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Operations*, lists core functions of the service as air superiority; global intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); rapid global mobility; global precision attack; and command and control.

Air Superiority

Air superiority means establishing and maintaining control of the skies over conflict areas. The Air Force seeks to achieve air superiority using combat aircraft, electronic warfare, integrated air and missile defense, and other capabilities to destroy enemy aircraft, infrastructure, and air defenses to restrict an opponent’s ability to conduct air operations. Air superiority allows air forces to provide direct support to ground forces, helping to identify and destroy targets and to prevent enemy air and missile threats from interfering with operations. Air Force officials have said that the proliferation of air defense systems, uncrewed aerial systems, and missiles have prompted the service to rethink how it achieves air superiority.

Global ISR (Including Targeting)

Using aircraft, satellites, and other technologies, the Air Force collects, exploits, and disseminates information about adversaries and their capabilities. Air Force leaders have stated that emerging technologies, such as cyber and electronic attacks, may threaten future ISR collection in part by targeting various technologies involved in the process (e.g., jamming, spoofing, or destroying sensors).

Rapid Global Mobility

The Air Force’s mobility forces include cargo aircraft that move cargo and personnel for a range of operations and missions around the world. Air Force aeromedical transport provides evacuation and treatment of injured servicemembers. Mobility forces support military operations, humanitarian missions, and disaster-response efforts. The Air Force’s aerial refueling tanker fleet delivers fuel to other aircraft in flight to enable long-range and long-endurance operations.

Global Precision Attack

Some Air Force global precision attack missions include those involving the U.S. nuclear deterrent force. The Air Force develops and maintains two legs of the nuclear triad: bombers and land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles. Other global strike missions include providing close-air support for ground forces, interdicting enemy forces, and inserting special operations forces.

Command and Control (C2)

According to Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-0, command and control systems coordinate joint operations using “centralized command,” “distributed control,” and “decentralized execution.” To counter emerging adversary threats, Air Force officials have stated that they are integrating command, control, communications, and battle management programs; replacing outdated systems; and incorporating artificial intelligence technologies.

Organization

Air Force Secretary Troy Meink is the service’s civilian leader; Chief of Staff of the Air Force General David Allvin, the service’s top officer, reports to Meink.

In 2024, the Air Force began reorganizing its command structure as part of an initiative to respond to potential threats from China and Russia. Under the reorganization, the Air Force maintained service component commands responsible for preparing personnel to conduct operations under the command of regional or functional combatant commanders, but aligned under the commands’ numbered air forces (which are supported by wings, which are supported by groups, which are supported by squadrons). Under the reorganization, the Air Force also changed what had been called “major commands” into “institutional commands,” in part to focus on organizing, training, and equipping personnel. As examples of “institutional commands,” the Air Force created a new command called Integrated Capabilities Command and renamed Air Education and Training Command as Airman Development Command. In February 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete

Hegseth reportedly paused the initiative to allow new civilian leadership to review the reorganization.

Budget

The DAF requested \$249.5 billion for FY2026, including \$209.6 billion for the Air Force and \$39.9 billion for the Space Force. The request assumed 38.6 billion from FY2025 reconciliation legislation (P.L. 119-21), sometimes referred to as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

Personnel

The DAF requested an FY2026 end strength, the proposed number of authorized personnel for the service on September 30, 2026, of 610,254 military personnel, including 321,500 in the active Air Force, 10,400 in the active Space Force, 67,500 in the Air Force Reserve, and 106,300 in the Air National Guard. A budget overview stated that more than 176,000 civilians support the DAF.

Basing Decisions

In the FY2025 NDAA (P.L. 118-159, §2803), Congress codified (10 U.S.C. §2392) the DAF process for strategic basing actions, in part to prohibit the Secretary of the Air Force from making decisions during certain planning processes and to require quarterly briefings to the congressional defense committees on certain proposed actions. The DAF in July 2025 updated its procedures for basing decisions. The document describes processes that result from numeric changes in personnel or weapons systems, as well as movement of units, missions, or weapons systems to DAF property. Under these procedures, the service considers mission and strategic factors, installation capacity, and environmental impacts.

Air Force Aircraft Inventory

The Air Force defines Total Aircraft Inventory (TAI) as “aircraft assigned to operating forces for mission, training, test, or maintenance functions.” The Air Force FY2026 budget proposes reductions to the aircraft fleet, including accelerating retirement of A-10 combat aircraft, purchasing fewer F-35 fighters than planned, and halting development of the E-7 airborne warning and control aircraft. See **Table 1** for TAI by aircraft type. The Air Force’s fleet of aircraft is reportedly less ready to perform core missions than in previous years.

Table 1. Air Force Total Aircraft Inventory, FY2025-FY2026

Aircraft Type	FY2025	FY2026 (Req.)
Bomber	139	140
Fighter/Attack	1,933	1,734
Rotorcraft	241	233
Special Mission Aircraft	359	307
Mobility	1,191	1,191
Trainer	969	996
Total	4,832	4,601

Source: CRS analysis of estimated FY2025 and FY2026 Total Aircraft Inventory listed in *DAF FY2026 Budget Overview*, accompanying the FY2026 budget request.

Note: Special Mission Aircraft includes intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; battle management; electronic attack; and command, control, and communications aircraft.

Selected Acquisition Programs

The Air Force is developing certain major weapons systems designed in part to meet potential future security challenges, including the following:

- The **LGM-35 Sentinel** is a program to design, develop, produce, and deploy an arsenal of new intercontinental ballistic missile to replace the Minuteman III. The Air Force plans to eventually purchase 634 of the missiles.
- The **Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD)** fighter is a program to replace the F-22 Raptor. The Air Force in March 2025 awarded a contract to Boeing to develop the F-47 fighter.
- The **Collaborative Combat Aircraft** is a program to develop uncrewed aircraft to fly alongside NGAD or F-35 fighters or other traditionally piloted aircraft. The service has said it plans to fly CCA prototypes in 2025.

The Air Force is procuring certain major weapons systems, including the following:

- The **B-21 Raider** stealth bomber made its first flight on November 10, 2023. Funding for the B-21 in P.L. 119-21 and requested in FY2026 reportedly aims to expand production of the aircraft. Air Force officials have said the service plans to acquire at least 100 B-21 bombers.
- The **F-35A Lightning II** fighter is the Air Force’s leading strike fighter. The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps operate variants of this fighter, and the aircraft has been sold to 19 nations. The Air Force’s F-35 program of record calls for an eventual fleet of 1,763 F-35As; the service currently has 564 such aircraft.
- The **KC-46A** refueling tanker is replacing aging KC-135 aircraft. The Air Force has said it plans to purchase 183 of the aircraft; it currently has 110.

Issues for Congress

Congress may consider whether or not to provide more, less, or the same amount of funding than was requested for FY2026 to develop, procure, and/or sustain certain aircraft. Congress may consider whether or not to review the potential effect of proposed fleet reductions in FY2026 on operational capability, training activities, and individual air bases, as well as any proposed basing decisions. Congress may consider whether or not to conduct oversight of the Air Force’s reorganizational efforts, including the reported pause to the reorganization.

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