

Sharp Slash in B-52 Bombers

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On the face of what Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara has been telling Congress, it is a good bet that at least half of the Strategic Air Command's B-52 force will soon be headed for retirement.

McNamara has described a plan to keep all but 30 of the heavy bombers flying at least through 1970.

But if one looks at the arguments he chose to offer for this plan, it seems unlikely that he really will go through with it.

The B-52s are the big intercontinental bombers that for years were the backbone of American military power. There are more than 600 of them in the force now.

In McNamara's view, as given in his congressional testimony, there are two justifications for a bomber force in addition to intercontinental missiles.

One is that keeping a bomber threat forces the Soviets to spend a lot of money on air defenses that might otherwise be put into missile defenses or offensive forces.

A second argument, which McNamara treats more as a concession to bomber advocates than as something he himself regards as very serious, is that a mixed force provides insurance against the remote possibility that the Soviets might somehow figure out a way of neutralizing the U.S. missile force.

The striking thing about both arguments is that neither provides much of a reason for needing a force of 600 B-52s.

Other Plans Available

In fact it is even questionable whether such arguments provide much of a case for any active bomber force at all.

For even without any Strategic Air Command bombers, the U.S., using Air Force fighter-bombers and Navy carrier attack aircraft, could put together a strike

Forecast Retirement of at Least Half of Them Expected

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capable of wiping dozens of the largest Soviet cities off the map.

So disbanding the whole SAC bomber force would only reduce, not relieve, the costs to the Soviets of maintaining air defenses.

And if the Soviets, in some unforeseeable way, come to believe they could neutralize the huge and varied U.S. missile force, they would still have to be desperate almost to the point

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of madness to be seriously tempted to attack even if there were not a single B-52 left.

F-111 Superior in Some Ways

These arguments will be even stronger a few years from now when the F-111 fighter-bombers begin entering the active force.

For the F-111 (or TFX as it is still often called), although designed primarily as a tactical aircraft for limited wars, happens to be superior in some ways to the B-52 as a strategic bomber.

The U.S. plans to build more than a thousand of these planes, and they will be coming into the force about the same time the

B-52s would be leaving—assuming, as seems reasonably likely, that a decision to begin retiring most of the B-52s is made in the next Defense budget.

In sum then, even without considering costs — and McNamara never forgets to consider costs—it is hard to see on the basis of McNamara's arguments why the U.S. needs a force of 600 B-52s.

\$1 Million Per Plane

When you add in the costs, the case becomes almost overwhelming.

From the censored transcripts of McNamara's testimony it appears that it costs something close to \$1 million a year to keep a B-52 bomber in business. The equivalent cost for a Minuteman intercontinental

missile is about one tenth of that, or \$100,000.

From the same sources, it appears that the cost of modernizing the oldest 300 of the 600 bomber fleet of B-52s would be well over \$1 billion.

That is enough to buy 200 new Minutemen, and when you figure in the difference in operating costs, as McNamara always does, the over-all costs of 300 brand new Minutemen is probably less than the costs of modernizing and keeping in

the force the 300 oldest B-52s.

Thus the picture that emerges from McNamara's testimony is first, that the

U.S. does not really need most of the B-52 force and, second, that if the U.S. wants to spend extra money on offensive forces it would make more sense to spend the money on additional Minutemen anyway. That is why, although the plans today call for keeping 600 B-52s indefinitely, it would be a very poor bet indeed to suppose that the plans will read the same way this time next year.
