

Air Force draws fire in bid to control UAVs

Congressman warns Pentagon to settle conflict among branches

By Bruce Rolfsen
Navy Times
April 23, 2007

The split between the Air Force and Army over the future of remote-controlled aircraft is widening. Now the Navy and Marine Corps are joining the fray — and siding with the Army.

At issue is the Air Force proposal to the Defense Department suggesting it become the lead agency for developing and fielding unmanned aircraft that primarily fly above 3,500 feet. What the Air Force sees as a bid for efficiency, the other services see as a mission grab.

The dispute was the center of attention April 19 during a congressional hearing officially called to review the services' budget requests for unmanned aerial vehicles and other reconnaissance aircraft. But much of the nearly 2½-hour session focused on the Air Force's UAV proposal.

Like a parent watching squabbling children, the chairman of the House Armed Services air and land forces subcommittee, Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, promised to settle the differences if the services don't.

"Who's in charge? Where is the authority?" Abercrombie asked in a hearing room packed with general officers, colonels and experts from the Government Accountability Office, Congress' watchdog agency.

The answer from the GAO is that no one in the Defense Department is exercising effective control over the services' competing programs.

"This is a long-standing problem in the acquisition process we have," said Michael Sullivan, director of acquisition management issues for the GAO. "It is the stovepipe nature of our services."

Abercrombie advised the service brass that he may choose for them. "I can make arbitrary decisions," warned the congressman.

The Air Force has three models of UAVs that operate above 3,500 feet, the MQ-1 Predator, a larger version of the Predator called the MQ-9 Reaper, and the RQ-4 Global Hawk.

The Air Force argues that the Army's new Warrior UAV, built by General Atomics, the same firm that makes the Predator and Reaper, duplicates capabilities the Air Force provides to ground forces. The Warrior, Reaper and Predator can attack targets and provide live pictures of what is happening on the ground.

But Army Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Sorenson, deputy for acquisition and systems management at Army headquarters, defended the 2005 decision to find an alternative to the Predator.

"We looked at it. It didn't meet the requirements," Sorenson said of the Predator.

The decision to go with the Warrior program was approved by the Defense Department's Joint Requirements Oversight Council, he pointed out.

The Army now wants to buy 132 Warriors for more than \$1 billion. Each UAV would carry up to four Hellfire missiles, twice the weapons load of the Predator but far less than the mix of bombs and missiles carried by the Reaper.