

AIR FORCE DELAY ON RADAR PLANE FIX HURTS SOLDIERS

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Every day, one of the Air Force's 17 Joint Stars radar planes takes off from a base in Southwest Asia to conduct secret intelligence-gathering missions. A multimode radar installed on the plane's belly monitors ground movements over a 35,000 square-mile area, and can focus in on specific targets such as suspicious Toyota SUVs to track their movement and take pictures. The intelligence is shared as it is collected with combatant commanders, soldiers in the field, and other folks who would prefer not to be identified.

Joint Stars -- the official name is the E-8C Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System -- is one of America's premier intelligence assets. Its ability to collect several distinctly different types of intelligence at the same time, and then merge them into a composite picture of what's happening on the ground, is unique. Unmanned aerial vehicles are too small and under-powered to generate equivalent breadth and depth in their collections, while reconnaissance satellites are too far away. The quality is so good that during the Iraq conflict, U.S. warfighters were able to find and kill enemy armored vehicles in a raging sandstorm without harming nearby civilians.

So of course the Air Force is doing everything it can to support this perfect example of how airborne intelligence can support soldiers on the ground, right? Well, guess again. The service has repeatedly short-changed Joint Stars while pouring money into other projects nowhere near as relevant to the current fight. During the Bush years, Air Force leaders pushed for an overpriced replacement plane that even Rumsfeld wasn't willing to fund. Then, after Secretary Gates took over, the service decided not to install software and hardware upgrades that would have enhanced the radar's sensitivity -- even though a billion dollars had been spent on developing the upgrades. Now, it can't even find money to replace the plane's failing engines.

The latter problem is a remarkable example of bureaucratic foot-dragging, when you consider that defense authorizing and appropriations committees in both chambers of Congress have already approved the money. Somehow, though, the Air Force can't manage to spend it. As a result, about once every ten days the Joint Stars fleet has to abort a mission due to malfunctioning engines, and half the time an in-flight emergency is declared. Needless to say, this tends to reduce the readiness of the plane while greatly increasing maintenance bills.

The Air Force's own estimates show that if it replaced the E-8's decrepit engines with new ones, it could avoid about a million dollars a day in maintenance costs. In fact, the replacement program would pay for itself in eight years, and eventually save \$10 billion, because the Joint Stars airframe is good for another 40 years. But without new engines, it will probably become unflyable in the next decade. So why hasn't the service coughed up the money to keep this key intelligence asset in the air? Maybe because soldiers don't have a seat at the table when airmen decide how to spend their money