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MATTER OF FACT

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That All-Weather Fighter

WASHINGTON.

For several different reasons, chiefly secret, the intelligence branches of the American armed services have now agreed that the Soviets are producing a good all-weather jet fighter, fully equipped with tracking radar.

This is a rather belated recognition of a fact which the Air Force, particularly, has been reluctant to face. British intelligence sources began to report the existence of a Soviet all-weather jet long before this. Various vital indices, such as the progress of the Soviet electronics industry, have long pointed in the same direction. Other indices, such as the enormous expansion of Soviet aluminum output, have equally pointed toward a major increase in Soviet aircraft production that would make room for new types.

The role of the Soviet all-weather jet will be to replace the MiG-15, a day fighter without tracking radar, as the main weapon of the Soviet air defense system. The Kremlin's home defense force is currently composed of from 3,500 to 4,000 MiGs (as compared with 1,800 aerial cats and dogs in this country). The process of replacement will take at least two years, probably three years, and perhaps four years. As the all-weather jets are phased into the home defense air force, the MiG-15s will no doubt be phased out to the satellites, for tactical air and forward air defense uses.

Soviet Net Elaborate

The effect of this replacement will be far-reaching indeed. Even today, the Soviet air warning net is dense and elaborate (as compared with our own rickety and penetrable "radar fence"). The weakness is the MiG-15; for the MiG, being a day fighter, leaves the Soviet Union gravely exposed to night and bad weather attacks. The weakness will be transformed into a source of strength, when the MiG-15s are replaced by the

new all-weather jets. And this new situation must be expected and prepared for by 1955-'56, or 1956-'57 at the latest.

No development could have more bearing on American military planning, which squarely hinges upon the Strategic Air Command. SAC is the "retaliatory striking force" that is counted upon to deter Soviet aggression. SAC's big planes are our chief means of exploiting our only real military advantage, the American lead in atomic and thermo-nuclear weapons. If SAC ceases to be able to deliver those weapons to enemy targets, our military planning will simply cease to make sense.

The meaning of the Soviet all-weather fighter is all too simple. SAC will no longer be able to do its assigned job before very long, unless a much greater effort is made to improve SAC in step with the improvement of Soviet air defenses.

As of today, SAC comprises forty air groups, instead of the fifty-seven groups set as the

SAC minimum in the 143-group Air Force program. Of these forty groups, moreover, only three groups now have modern jet bombers—medium range B-47s. Our long-range jet bomber, the B-52, is still far from the stage of operational usefulness. Thus the main strength of SAC is now composed of obsolescent B-50s and obsolete B-29s in the medium-range category, and of obsolescent B-36s in the vital long-range category.

Penetration Doubtful

Such a SAC force can get past an air defense that does not work at night or in bad weather. But it cannot get past an air defense based on speedy all-weather jets, equipped with tracking radar. The vast bulk of the existing SAC force, in short, is about to become totally obsolete.

Meanwhile, replacement rates of B-36s, B-50s and B-29s with

usable B-47s and B-52s were anything but satisfactory even under the Truman air program. In the medium-range category, the Truman program would have left us at least with two B-50 groups in 1956. Replacement of the long-range B-36s with B-52s was to have taken even longer. Indeed, the long-range groups, which are the real backbone of SAC, were not to have been fully modernized until 1959-'60.

For these reasons, our brilliant Strategic Air Commander, Gen. Curtis LeMay, began to demand an emergency effort to strengthen SAC more than a year ago. LeMay then asked for no less than fourteen new groups of B-52s, at an additional cost of \$10,000,000,000. He plumped for the more expensive B-52s instead of B-47s because of the dependence of the medium range B-47s on overseas air bases. He argued that we could no longer build all our hopes on air bases too near the centers of Soviet power, since Soviet power was growing too fast.

LeMay's request was rejected. But his argument gained strength with each passing month. News of the Soviet all-weather jet also came in. Hence one of the last decisions made by Secretary of Defense Lovett and Secretary of the Air Force, Finletter was to ask for funds for a second B-52 production line. The purpose was to speed replacement of B-36s with B-52s.

Today, however, cut-back and slow-down are the rule for strategic air as for our whole defense program. The fifty-seven group goal for SAC must inevitably go by the board, along with the 143 group air program. B-47 production facilities are likely to be reduced. A second production line for the B-52s is almost certain to be abandoned. In short, the necessary effort to improve SAC is not to be made. Just where this will leave the United States, when SAC can no longer perform its assigned task and our military planning comes utterly unstuck, no one has yet attempted to explain.

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