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New Handguns: The Wrong Priority for the U.S. Air Force

Mackenzie Eaglen and Oliver Horn

As ongoing military operations strain the defense budget, the Air Force's proposed Handgun Replacement Program is a gross mismanagement of resources. Replacing 80,000 9mm Beretta M9 handguns with a yet to be determined .45 model would not offer increased protection to pilots and airmen and could easily cost more than \$100 million. The Air Force would be better off spending that money on more urgent priorities, including recapitalization and modernization.

Dire Fiscal Straits. Operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere around the world have strained the U.S. military's ability to operate, maintain, and modernize simultaneously. With the fleet wearing out and Air Force personnel in higher demand, service leaders consistently bemoan having to choose between modernization and increasing the size of their force. General T. Michael Moseley, Air Force Chief of Staff, recently estimated that the Air Force needs an additional \$20 billion annually to repair and replace aging aircraft. The severity of this dilemma ultimately threatens the operational capability of the Air Force.

Given budget realities, Air Force leaders' focus on replacing handguns is puzzling. The program's starting price of \$89 million conveniently leaves out costs for spare parts, support equipment, and personnel training. These factors would drive the price tag to well over \$100 million. From that point, costs would likely continue to grow, as the Department of Defense (DoD) would have to maintain two support lines for two different handguns and procure new

.45 ammunition if the standard .45 ammunition is not already qualified.

Back to the Future. Ironically, the M9 pistol replaced the M1911 "Colt" .45 in the 1980s after the Air Force's Joint Service Small Arms Program overwhelmingly concluded that the M9 was the best pistol available. With scant evidence, Air Force officials now claim that advances in handgun technology warrant a switch back to the .45. However, the only major changes in handgun technology since the adoption of the M9 are the introduction of polymer frames and recoil dampening devices. A polymer frame makes the pistol only a few ounces lighter, and the recoil of the M9 has never been an issue. These technologies do not warrant the Handgun Replacement Program and its hefty price tag.

Air Force leaders allege that the larger rounds of the .45 will inflict more damage, or "stopping power." The "Marshall and Sanow" study, often cited as the definitive study on stopping power, concluded that the larger .45 jacketed ball does more damage than the 9mm round.¹ This bonus, however, is so minimal as to be negligible at best. In fact, a recent study by the National Institute of Justice concluded that the 9mm actually penetrates

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body armor more effectively than the .45. Furthermore, switching from the M9 to a .45 would actually cause a net reduction in firepower, as it would reduce the number of rounds per magazine from 15 to nine.²

More troubling is that the Air Force is ignoring technological advances pertaining to the M9's 9mm round. New technology has improved the round's stopping power and could be deployed immediately to frontline airmen and other troops. Adopting new ammunition rather than handguns would save precious time and resources. If the past is any indicator, the switch from M9 to the .45 would likely take years to complete. The Army spent eight years evaluating the Colt .45 in the early 1900s and the Joint Service Small Arms Program spent seven years reviewing the M9 in the 1980s.

Finally, the Army and the Marine Corps—the services most likely to use the weapon in combat—have shown no desire to switch back to a .45 model. In fact, both the U.S. Special Operations Command and the U.S. Army have conducted limited reviews of handgun options in the last few years and have decided to stay with the 9mm.

Handguns Vs. Airlift. The Air Force should redirect the money requested for the Handgun Replacement Program to maintaining and modernizing its rapidly aging fleet of aircraft. The M9, first procured in 1988, is relatively new compared to the majority of the Air Force's current fleet. The average age of aircraft is 24 years old. Coupled with the wear and tear of the increased operational tempo in recent years, the Air Force's readiness to perform its missions has declined by 17 percent since 2001.

Of particular concern is the Air Force's ability to meet the military's airlift requirements. With

increased deployment of ground forces to Iraq and the projected growth of the Army and Marine Corps, the Air Force will likely have to bolster its fleet of C-17 and C-5A aircraft and support for ground forces. Yet, with aging aircraft and the service's plans to dramatically reduce endstrength over the next two years, senior Air Force officials acknowledge that airlift capabilities may not be sufficient to meet the needs of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps. Thus, the Handgun Replacement Program could result in Air Force pilots being less effectively armed and unable to provide airlift to the nation's ground forces.

Conclusion. The Air Force cannot have it both ways. General Moseley has clearly stated that there needs to be a national debate about robust and sustained defense spending, saying that "It may be time to have a discussion about what percentage of [gross domestic product] is needed for defense." Given the importance of that debate, it is crucial that the services make prudent budgetary decisions that withstand fierce scrutiny. Faced with a budgetary dilemma severe enough to disrupt its operational capabilities, the Air Force should not devote its limited resources to an unnecessary program. Instead, Air Force leaders should focus on recapitalizing the aging fleet and maintaining the ability to meet the airlift demands of America's ground forces. Even if budget pressures did not exist, there are no significant advancements in weapon technology to ultimately justify devoting resources to replace the Air Force's M9 with a new .45 model.

—Mackenzie Eaglen is Senior Policy Analyst for National Security, and Oliver Horn is Research Assistant in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

1. Evan P. Marshall and Edwin J. Sanow, *Handgun Stopping Power: The Definitive Study*, (Paladin Press, 1992) pp. 14–15.
2. "45 ACP Ammunition," M1911.org, at www.m1911.org/full_ammo.htm (July 15, 2007).