Robert M. Farley
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Do you think there was ever a time when we needed an independent air force?
No. I think it was a mistake to give the Army Air Force its independence in 1947, just as it was a mistake to make the Royal Air Force independent in 1918. The experience of the U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II demonstrated that American airpower could win decisive victories as a part of pre-existing military organizations.

What do you think the Air Force has gotten right?
The Air Force has gotten a lot right. Especially in the period between 1972 and 1991, when it identified many of the internal problems that had caused difficulties in Vietnam, and engaged in the slow, hard process of reform that was necessary to create an organization that could act as a partner for the Army and the Navy. This included training reform, procurement reform, and doctrinal reform.

Why do you think we should take the radical step of abolishing the Air Force?
Airpower is more important than ever, but it’s also more integrated than ever with other forms of military power. B-1Bs provide small teams of U.S. soldiers and Marines with what amounts to close air support. It’s a degree of integration that would be difficult to imagine in 1947. Our institutions can—under pressure of war—adapt to this new need for force integration, but they don’t adapt easily. The resource advantage that the United States has enjoyed over its rivals since the end of the cold war is waning. It’s easy to overstate the threat, but it’s imaginable within our lifetime that Chinese military spending will exceed American. This means we won’t always have the luxury of an unwieldy structure for managing our military.

How long would it take to integrate the existing Air Force into the Navy and Army?
Years, but less than a decade. The Air Force was larger in 1947 than it is today, and faced a more serious set of procurement decisions, yet the military and civilian establishment pulled off major reforms in a fairly short period of time. Right now the Russians are reconfiguring their airpower institutions—in the wrong direction, I think—and it hasn’t proven all that disruptive thus far.

What has been the reaction to your book?
The book has met a lot of resistance, but in general the resistance has been respectful and productive. The people pushing back against the argument have been willing to revisit and make clear some core assumptions about why we need an air force, and that’s been a useful intellectual exercise. I’ve received a few private emails from connected people who find the argument compelling, but no one is waving the book on the floor of the Senate. My hope is that the book will find its way into the hands of think-tankers, low-level staffers, and students, who could eventually have an impact on policy.

Read the entire interview with Farley at airspacemag.com/farley