



COMPTROLLER

UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
1100 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1100



AUG 21 1998

Honorable Norman Dicks  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Dicks:

I am responding to your letter of August 5, 1998, concerning funding for the SR-71 Blackbird. Your letter urges that \$39 million of the funds that recently became available as a result of the Supreme Court decision to overturn the Line Item Veto Act be applied to operation of the SR-71 program and that the authority to spend these funds be extended through FY 1999.

While I fully understand your thoughts on the matter, unfortunately, it is no longer a course that is open to us. In March 1998, the Secretary of Defense, after a review of options for SR-71 program termination, approved permanent retirement of the SR-71. In response to inquiries from Senators Byrd and Levin, the Secretary explained the reason for his decision as follows:

"However, in the current fiscally-constrained defense environment, we must ensure maximum return for every dollar we invest in our Nation's defense. The SR-71 no longer meets this criterion. In today's post-Cold War era, the SR-71's penetration capability does not justify its cost. Our imagery requirements are better met with current and planned airborne and space-based systems."

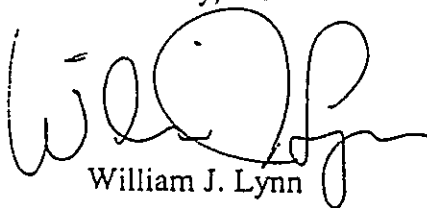
Based on this decision, the Air Force began the process of retiring the Aircraft in April. To reverse this process now would require much more than the \$39 million appropriated in FY 1998 and could not be done in the short time remaining in FY 1998. (It is not within DoD's ability to extend the funds through FY 1999. This could only be done by legislation.) It would also require additional funds in FY 1999 that are not in our budget request or the congressional markups.

In view of this situation, the Air Force would like to reapply the \$30 million of operation and maintenance funds (the remaining \$9 million are procurement funds to modify SR-71 aircraft) to other high priority readiness requirements. The Air Force identified \$578 million in priority operation and maintenance requirements in the Omnibus Reprogramming request, but Congress only approved \$490.3 million of the proposed Air Force sources leaving a shortfall of \$87.7 million. In addition, the Air Force has continued to incur unforeseen O&M expenses including significant maintenance costs associated with aircraft returning from Southwest Asia. The Department has concluded that our priority must be to use the \$30 million to address these unfunded readiness related requirements.

I appreciate your concern for the SR-71. It was an extremely valuable reconnaissance asset and we plan to retire these aircraft in a manner befitting their outstanding contributions to our Nation's defense.

A similar letter has been sent to your colleagues who joined you in writing regarding this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William J. Lynn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop for the letter "W" and a long, sweeping tail for the "y".

William J. Lynn