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## Panel Urges Air Force to Unify Nuclear Command

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Pentagon advisory group condemned the [Air Force](#) for a drastic deterioration in managing the nation's nuclear arsenal and recommended Friday that it consolidate nuclear responsibilities under one command.

The decline has eroded international confidence in the United States' ability to provide a nuclear umbrella of protection, the task force said in rolling out more than 30 recommended changes in the structure, financing, inspections and staffing of the Air Force's nuclear responsibilities.

Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) told reporters on Friday at the Pentagon that the advisory group had made a strong argument for unifying its nuclear management.

"One of the concerns that I had," based on previous revelations about shortcomings in the Air Force's stewardship of its nuclear arsenal, "is the lack of unity of command and not having one person or organization accountable for the overall mission," Mr. Gates said.

He added that while he was not sure what the right answer was, the Air Force was considering the idea.

The latest review is one of several studies and reports coming after a series of Air Force blunders in its handling of nuclear-related materials — missteps that prompted Mr. Gates to dismiss the top civilian and military leaders of the service earlier this year.

After Mr. Gates spoke, [James R. Schlesinger](#), a former defense and energy secretary who was chairman of the advisory panel, told reporters that the Air Force's division of command over nuclear matters had led to a deterioration in control, staffing and resources.

The panel's report concluded that there had been "an unambiguous, dramatic and unacceptable decline in the Air Force's commitment to perform the nuclear mission and, until very recently, little has been done to reverse it."

Panel members, Mr. Schlesinger said, were surprised that the situation had declined more than they had anticipated.

Mr. Schlesinger said a main recommendation of his group was that the Air Force convert its existing Air Force Space Command, which has responsibility for the service's land-based nuclear missiles but not other nuclear weapons, into an organization called Air Force Strategic Command. That entity would "be held accountable for the efficacy of the nuclear mission," he said.

Under the existing Air Force structure, responsibility for the bombers and fighters that can deliver nuclear weapons is held by Air Combat Command, and Air Mobility Command has responsibility for the refueling aircraft used to operate with the nuclear bombers and fighters.

Mr. Schlesinger said the new plan would also shift control of the supply chain from the Defense Logistics Agency to the Air Force.

In early June, Mr. Gates dismissed the Air Force chief of staff, Gen. T. Michael Moseley, and the Air Force secretary, Michael W. Wynne, blaming them for failing to fully address several nuclear-related incidents, including the mistaken shipment to Taiwan of four electrical fuses for ballistic missile warheads.

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