



## UNMANNED AERIAL VEHICLES

# Major Management Issues Facing DOD's Development and Fielding Efforts

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The current generation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has been under development since the 1980s. UAVs were used in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2002 and 2003 to observe, track, target, and strike enemy forces. These successes have heightened interest in UAVs within the Department of Defense (DOD). Congress has been particularly interested in DOD's approach to managing the growing number of UAV programs. GAO was asked to summarize (1) the results of its most current report on DOD's approach to developing and fielding UAVs<sup>1</sup> and the extent to which the approach provides reasonable assurance that its investment will lead to effective integration of UAVs into the force structure, and (2) the major management issues GAO has identified in prior reports on UAV research and development.

GAO's most recent report points out that while DOD has taken some positive steps, its approach to UAV planning still does not provide reasonable assurance that the significant Congressional investment in UAVs will result in their effective integration into the force structure. In 2001, DOD established the joint UAV Planning Task Force in the Office of the Secretary of Defense to promote a common vision for UAV-related efforts and to establish interoperability standards. To communicate its vision and promote UAV interoperability, the task force issued the 2002 UAV Roadmap. While the Roadmap provides some strategic guidance for the development of UAV technology, neither the Roadmap nor other documents represent a comprehensive strategic plan to ensure that the services and other DOD agencies focus development efforts on systems that complement each other, will perform the range of priority missions needed, and avoid duplication. Moreover, the Task Force has only advisory authority and, as such, cannot compel the services to adopt its suggestions. GAO's prior work supports the need for effective oversight of individual UAV programs at the departmental level. UAVs have suffered from requirements growth, risky acquisition strategies, and uncertain funding support within the services. Some programs have been terminated. Success has been achieved as a result of top-level intervention and innovative acquisition approaches. For example, in 2003, the Office of the Secretary of Defense had to intervene to keep the Unmanned Combat Air Vehicle program viable. As UAV programs grow in the future, they will face challenges in the form of increased funding competition, greater demand for capabilities, and spectrum and airspace limitations. Moreover, UAVs are no longer an additional "nice-to-have" capability; they are becoming essential to the services' ability to conduct modern warfare. Meeting these challenges will require continued strong leadership, building on the UAV Roadmap and Planning Task Force as GAO has recommended.

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