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Bush nominates official cited in Air Force leasing scandal

By Matt Kelley, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — President Bush's choice to head the Air Force is a longtime Pentagon official whose nomination will get strong scrutiny because of his role in a scuttled airplane lease deal that resulted in a prison term for a former top Defense Department official.



Nominee
Defense
Undersecretary
Michael
Wynne is
expected to
face scrutiny.

By Bill Clark, Gannett
News Service

The nomination of Michael Wynne to be Air Force secretary comes amid a continuing struggle by the Bush administration to win approval from the Senate for its top Pentagon nominees. If confirmed, Wynne would replace James Roche, who quit in January after his nomination to head the Army stalled in the Senate because of a series of Air Force scandals.

Those scandals included allegations of rape and sexual harassment among students at the Air Force Academy and charges of a hostile climate at the school against those who are not evangelical Christians.

The Air Force has jettisoned a \$23.5 billion plan to lease jets from the Boeing Co. for use as air refueling tankers. Boeing's former chief financial officer and a former top Air Force official were sentenced to prison on corruption charges related to the deal.

The former Air Force official, Darleen Druyun, is serving a nine-month term at a federal prison in Florida. She admitted inflating the lease price as a "parting gift" to Boeing before leaving the Pentagon for a job at the aircraft giant in 2002.

Wynne was a deputy, then head of the Pentagon's acquisition office. A report by the Defense Department's inspector general in May faulted Wynne for not requiring the Air Force to follow proper procedures for the Boeing leases.

The report said Wynne told the White House budget office that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld approved the lease idea "after comprehensive and deliberative review by the Leasing Review Panel" when that panel had not finished its deliberations or made recommendations.

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"He wasn't a bad guy, particularly, but he wasn't a good guy, either," says Danielle Brian of the non-profit Project on Government Oversight, a critic of the lease plan. "You would have hoped someone in his position would have stopped it."

Chris Bolkcom, a military analyst at the Congressional Research Service, says Wynne's nomination could generate new scrutiny of Air Force acquisition practices.

"It doesn't do the Air Force any good if the confirmation hearing is a battle," Bolkcom said. "I think it has the potential to exacerbate the painful position the Air Force is in."

One of the strongest critics of the tanker plan was Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona, a member of the Armed Services Committee, which handles Pentagon appointments. McCain could not be reached for comment.

Wynne's nomination comes as the Bush administration continues to have difficulty winning approval for its Pentagon nominees. Earlier this month, Bush used recess appointments to install top policy and international security officials at the Defense Department whose nominations had been blocked on Capitol Hill. If Bush appoints a nominee during a congressional break to a position that normally requires Senate confirmation, that person can hold office until the current Congress ends in January 2007.

The administration has had particular problems with its picks for civilian heads of the military services:

- Former Enron executive Thomas White was forced to quit as Army secretary in April 2003 after clashing with Rumsfeld over the Crusader mobile artillery system. Rumsfeld canceled the program, saying the big gun was too heavy, slow and expensive. The Securities and Exchange Commission has accused Enron of improperly shifting profits to the struggling Enron Energy Services division, where White was an executive. White has not been charged with wrongdoing.
- Roche was Bush's first pick to replace White, but he withdrew from consideration in March 2004 after it became clear the Senate would not confirm him.
- Navy Secretary Gordon England has been waiting for months to be confirmed as Rumsfeld's top deputy. England is in his second tour as civilian head of the Navy, having returned in 2003 after eight months at the Department of Homeland Security when his nominated successor committed suicide.

Contributing: Dave Moniz

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