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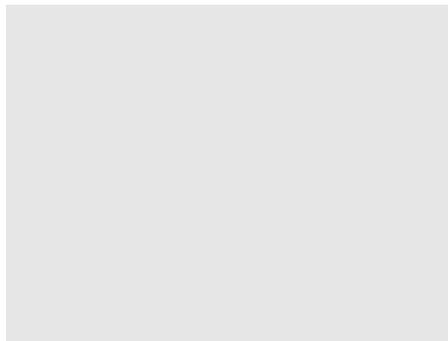
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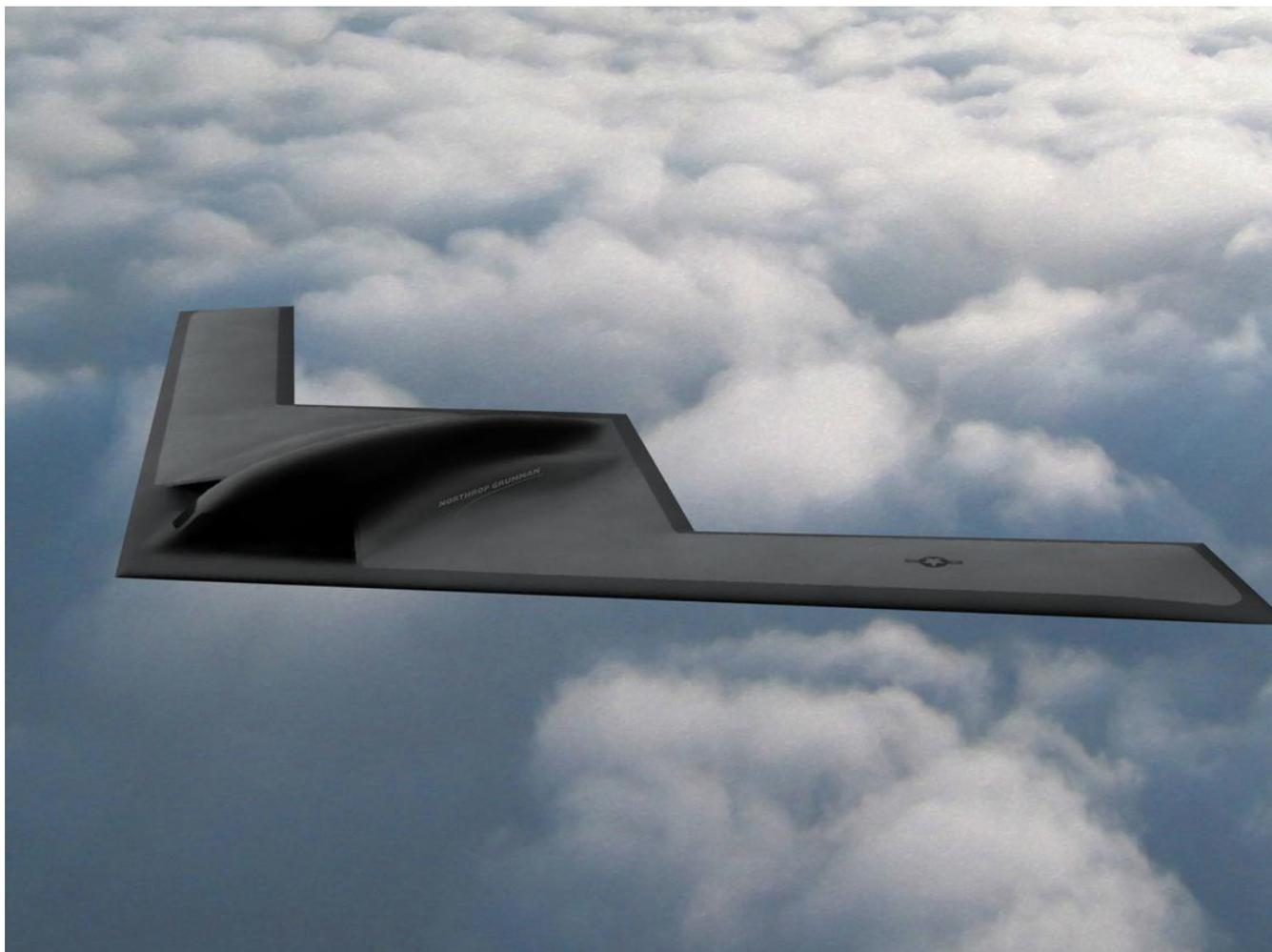
Ellsworth chosen as training base, first to receive B-21 nuclear bombers

Arielle Zionts Journal staff Mar 27, 2019 Updated 5 min ago



Rounds

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A Northrop Grumman rendering of the B-21 bomber.

Ellsworth Air Force Base will be the sole training center and first site to receive the new B-21 bomber, which will be capable of launching thermonuclear weapons.

The next-generation bomber, also called the Raider, will bring "hundreds" of new airmen, support personnel and their families as well as a building boom to the Rapid City area once construction begins in Fiscal Year 2021, Sens. John Thune and Mike Rounds said Wednesday of the Air Force's announcement.

The planes are expected to arrive in the mid-2020s, Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson said in a press release.

I'm "absolutely thrilled," Thune said. "It will mean nothing but good news for the economy of the Black Hills."

In 2005, Ellsworth was briefly added to the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) list, the Pentagon's list of military bases that should be closed or relocated. Since then, the area has taken a number of steps to keep the base open and ultimately to be the first site to host the B-21, which Rounds said would cost an average of \$564 million in 2016 dollars.

"It's been quite a ride. We've gone from BRAC to the B-21" in a short time, Thune said.

Rounds compared the economic impact of the decision to the opening of the Sanford Lab in Lead and Citibank's move to Sioux Falls in the 1980s.

"This is a major, major event for the community," Rounds said.

Ellsworth, Dyess Air Force Base in Texas and Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri had been chosen in May as the three sites to receive the new bombers, but the decision to make Ellsworth the first to receive them and the sole training site wasn't announced until Wednesday.

At least 100 of the B-21 planes, designed by Northrop Grumman, are being built, Rounds said. He said the number of planes heading to Ellsworth and the timing of their arrival is classified.

But no matter how many planes the base receives, Ellsworth will need to prepare infrastructure, such as hangars, training areas, and facilities to store the thermonuclear weapons, according to Rounds and Thune. Security will also need to be upgraded at the base.

"Obviously that has ripple effect throughout the entire economy," Thune said.

The area will need to expand its housing, schools and utilities, the senators said. Some of the jobs will be technical, high-paying ones, Rounds said.

"Do you want the good news or the good news," Thune said Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson asked when she informed him about the decision.

Thune said he believes Wilson's experience as the former president of the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology in Rapid City helped Ellsworth secure its role as the B-21 training site.

Wilson "having been there and seeing firsthand the quality of the workforce and the commitment to excellence" at the base was beneficial, he said.

But Thune and Rounds stressed that the selection of Ellsworth is the result of "team effort" thanks to the work of politicians, governments and organizations — such as the Ellsworth Development Authority — throughout the Black Hills and South Dakota.

Ever since Ellsworth was placed on the BRAC list, Thune said, Ellsworth and the community have addressed the base's potential shortcomings.

"We tried to shore up some of those weaknesses" by improving training capabilities such as expanding the Powder River training complex, Thune said. "It's hard to overstate how far we've come. Everybody pulled together."

In 2015, The Federal Aviation Administration approved a plan to expand the Powder River Training Complex, located northwest of Rapid City over the Dakotas, Montana and Wyoming. The move nearly quadrupled the training airspace to span about 35,000 square miles, making it the largest training airspace over the continental United States.

Ellsworth was chosen because it has the space and facilities "to accommodate B-21 and B-1 missions simultaneously at the lowest cost and with the least operational impact,": the Air Force said in a press release.

The Air Force was also attracted to Ellsworth due to more intangible benefits such as the reputation of the base's leadership and crew and the healthy relationship between Ellsworth and the community, Rounds and Thune said.

"A huge amount of this is because of the local support for that base," Rounds said.

He said Air Force officials told him that airmen are attracted to the "quality of life and the support of the community."

"That cannot be overstated," Rounds said. "They want to be at some place where they are welcome and where they think the community is prepared and wants to be the location."

"We sort of checked all the boxes" and being chosen is a "validation" of our efforts, Thune said.

The Air Force said the B-1 and B-2 bombers will be incrementally retired as B-21s are delivered.

"We are designing the B-21 Raider to replace our aging bombers as a long-range, highly-survivable aircraft capable of carrying mixed conventional and nuclear payloads, to strike any target worldwide," Gen. David Goldfein, Air Force chief of staff, said in a news release.

The B-21 modernizes the Air Force, Thune said. The next-generation stealth bombers will fly faster and farther than comparable existing jets, with the ability to accurately strike targets from very long distances. He called their nuclear capability an "important

deterrent."

"It's designed with an eye toward the threats of the future," he said.

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