



Afghanistan Evacuation: The Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF) and the Defense Production Act (DPA)

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Created in 1951, the [Civil Reserve Air Fleet](#) (CRAF) operates under the Defense Production Act's (DPA) Title I allocations authority and is available to respond to national defense needs or other contingencies. CRAF is a cooperative emergency airlift program involving U.S. civil air carriers, DOD, and the Department of Transportation (DOT). [On August 22, 2021](#), Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III ordered the Department of Defense's (DOD) [United States Transportation Command](#) (USTRANSCOM) to activate the CRAF.

For more information on the Afghanistan withdrawal, see CRS Insight IN11730, *Afghan Aerial Evacuation in Context*, CRS Report R46879, *U.S. Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions*, and CRS Insight IN11726, *The Afghanistan Withdrawal: Military and Defense Implications*; on the DPA, see CRS Report R43767, *The Defense Production Act of 1950: History, Authorities, and Considerations for Congress*.

Background on the CRAF

After [the 1948-1949 Berlin Airlift](#), wherein U.S. and U.K. forces, plus civilian air carriers, resupplied Allied-held West Berlin during a Soviet land blockade, President Harry Truman used DPA authorities to [create](#) a federal emergency airlift capability. In December 1951, DOD and the Commerce Department established the CRAF by joint agreement; DOT took over primary management of the program in 1967.

CRAF provides additional emergency airlift capability to DOD, and the federal government as a whole, during contingencies where DOD cannot meet airlift requirements. The CRAF is authorized under the *allocations* authority in [Title I of the DPA](#), which relates to the presidential authority to control the distribution of goods, services, and materials in promotion of the national defense when the Title I *prioritization* authority is insufficient to the needs of the emergency. Under CRAF, participating U.S. civil air carriers (i.e., commercial air passenger and cargo companies) enter into a contractual relationship with TRANSCOM and receive certain preferences in providing commercial cargo and passenger services for DOD.

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CRAF Composition

DOT manages civil carriers' participation in the CRAF, while USTRANSCOM, for DOD, manages the activation of the fleet. According to [Air Mobility Command](#), the U.S. Air Force component of TRANSCOM, participating CRAF aircraft are assigned into one of two main "segments": national and international. The national segment consists of aircraft capable of meeting domestic airlift requirements. The international segment is sub-divided into long-range and short-range sections. Long-range passenger and cargo aircraft supplement long-range, inter-theater military aircraft (mainly C-5 and C-17 aircraft), while medium-sized passenger and cargo aircraft comprise the short-range international section.

To participate in international segments, according to Air Mobility Command, participating U.S.-registered carriers must be able to commit 40% of their CRAF-capable fleet and maintain four complete crews for each participating aircraft. As of [August 2021](#), a total of 24 carriers and 450 aircraft are reported to be enrolled in CRAF.

Prior to August 2021, the CRAF has been activated for emergency use twice: to support Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm from August 1990 to May 1991; and to support Operation Iraqi Freedom from February 2002 to June 2003. The Afghanistan evacuation is the third CRAF activation.

CRAF in the Afghanistan Evacuation

Although DOT manages the overall program, the USTRANSCOM commander is the activation authority for the CRAF. The CRAF has three graduated stages of emergency activation that incrementally make more airlift capacity available. Stage I is for "minor regional crises and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief efforts." Stage II is for "major theater war," and Stage III for "periods of national mobilization." As the Afghanistan evacuation is a humanitarian assistance effort, the Defense Secretary has directed a Stage I CRAF activation.

[According to DOD](#), the current CRAF activation involves aircraft from multiple domestic carriers, including three each from American Airlines, Atlas Air, Delta Air Lines, and Omni Air; two from Hawaiian Airlines; and four from United Airlines. DOD noted it "does not anticipate a major impact to commercial flights from this activation." DOD also stated that CRAF-activated aircraft will not fly into Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan. Instead, they will reportedly be used for "the onward movement of passengers from temporary safe havens and interim staging bases," which will allow military aircraft to focus on flights to and from Kabul.

Policy Issues

As is the case with most DPA authorities and their derived programs, the CRAF operates at the President's discretion—or at the discretion of the President's delegate. As such, beyond its inherent oversight powers, Congress has a limited role in shaping implementation of CRAF and other DPA-authorized programs in response to the Afghanistan evacuation. However, with regard to the DPA and the Afghanistan evacuation, there are policy considerations Congress may explore, including:

- **CRAF employment processes**, including potential activation, and other alternatives. During past contingencies, the federal government has chosen to obtain emergency airlift capabilities through other means. For example, early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) created Project Airbridge, which used privately contracted aircraft to transport overseas supplies of personal protective equipment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Resettling Afghan evacuees** under other DPA authorities. FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security have made use of Title I authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and past natural disasters, including for [development of post-disaster infrastructure](#). Similarly, outside of the CRAF, the President could use the DPA to establish domestic temporary staging areas and shelters for evacuees and procure contractual services for the facilities' staffing and maintenance.
- **Assigning interagency DPA coordination.** The CRAF's recent emergency activation, along with the DPA's employment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, suggest the executive branch's broader and more frequent use of DPA authorities. However, despite FEMA's nominal coordination role via Executive Order 13603, there is no central, interagency organization to plan and direct the implementation of DPA authorities across the federal government. The DPA Committee was authorized for this purpose in 2009, but [does not currently appear](#) to fulfill this function.

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