

AIR FORCE: WE'RE SCREWED

The Air Force is using stimulus dollars to rebuild some family housing at Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska. Since they're using stimulus dollars, they have to get a waiver for anything they say they can't source to an American company. Among the list of items that can't be sourced in America?

Screws:

- 1" Collated Screws, Shank #10
- 2-1/2" Collated Screws
- 3" Ceramic Coated Bugle Head Course Thread Screws
- 3/4" Collated Screws, Shank #10

And it's more than screws that Americans don't make anymore, according to the Air Force. Lots of stuff that you or I might buy at Lowes (or better yet, a local hardware store). Things like "Residential Style Polished Chrome Toilet Paper Holders" and "24" Bath Vanity Light Fixtures."

Now, as Mike Mandel—who found the entry in the Federal Register where the Air Force granted this waiver to buy screws and other stuff from China—notes, the official data show that we do still make screws. So it may be the data aren't catching our decline in screw-making, or it may be the Air Force didn't look very hard for American-made screws.

I see four possibilities.

First, the Air Force could be lazy. The parts are really available, but they can't find them.

Second, U.S. manufacturers only make sophisticated parts, not towel bars and door stops.

Third, these industries were doing great through 2007, and have only gone offshore since the recession.

Fourth, the official data didn't pick up the offshoring in the 2000s.

And frankly, even if Americans no longer do make screws, that's not as big of a problem as some more complex items that we're on the verge of not making anymore: propellant chemicals, space qualified electronics, power sources for space and military applications (batteries and photovoltaics), specialty metals, hard disk drives, and flat panel displays (LCDs). Those are the kind of things that, when we stop making them, we lose the capacity to make them going forward (and open up our military machine to vulnerabilities).

Still, there's something viscerally disturbing about not making screws in this country anymore. Sure, like underwear and socks, they're probably all made in one Chinese city somewhere. But it seems like a key skill, like boiling water, that we no longer want to do anymore.