

## Guard Seeks Remedy for Fighter Shortfall

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By Sam LaGrone  
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The Air Force will be replacing its fighter fleet with fifth-generation fighters in the coming years but so far doesn't have a firm plan to give any to the Air National Guard, reneging on a promise to shore up homeland security and leaving the Guard to figure out how to fill the looming gap in its fleet.

The Defense Department's 2010 budget accelerates the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program, allocating 30 for the Navy and the Air Force. The Air Force will get 10 for \$2.3 billion. Over the next five years, the U.S. plans to buy 2,443 of the F-35, known as a fifth-generation fighter.

The Guard needs fighters — at least by 2015 — to replace its aging F-15s and F-16s, which have patrolled the skies over and around cities since the 2001 terrorist attacks. Decommissioning the 495 F-16s is scheduled to start in two years — when the oldest ones will have been in service 30 years — and wrap up by 2026.

Desperate to restock its fleet of fighter aircraft, State Guard leaders at a February meeting came up with options if the Air Force doesn't lend a hand.

- \* Begin a service life extension program for the aging F-16s and F-15s.
- \* Buy close to 200 fighters, which could include a mix of F-16s or F-15s.
- \* Work to revise the F-35 road map so that the Defense Department acquires 110 of the fighters a year, starting in fiscal 2010. The Guard would get 30 in fiscal 2015.

"I'm passionate about not walking away from this mission," Gen. Craig McKinley, National Guard chief, said of the lack of a recapitalization plan in a May 13 speech at the Heritage Foundation.

"It's an affordability issue," McKinley said, "but you don't necessarily need a fifth-generation fighter to do air sovereignty."

### **Congressional Concern**

Equally worried about the Guard's capabilities and upset with the Defense Department's seeming indifference, a contingent in the House is pushing the Air Force to buy legacy fighters to fill the iron shortfall.

The Defense Department had promised lawmakers in January that it would lay out a plan for Guard recapitalization as part of the fiscal 2010 budget, a response to a scathing report from the Government Accountability Office that accused the Air Force of neglecting the domestic air sovereignty mission.

In the last month, members of the House Armed Services Committee have held hearings on the posture of the Guard and the plan that has yet to materialize.

Most of the representatives have not been pleased.

If the F-16s are decommissioned without replacements, the Guard could lose a significant number of pilots and maintainers, Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., said at a hearing in late April.

Giffords also argued that the Air Force is relying too much on the F-35. The Air Force's newest fighter, she said, "only flies in the world of PowerPoint," although in reality the aircraft has made myriad test flights at lead manufacturer Lockheed Martin's plant in Texas and Edwards Air Force Base, Calif.

Giffords is one of several lawmakers who want a so-called 4.5 generation fighter, an F-16 or F-15 upgraded with advanced avionics that would fly until the F-35 came online.

Both F-16s and F-15s are still in production for foreign military sales.

Boeing produces the F-15 Silent Eagle, a souped-up variant of the Strike Eagle. Lockheed Martin builds the F-16 along with the F-35.

Boeing spokesman Patricia Frost said the \$100 million Silent Eagle so far was slated for international sales only.

"They know what we have and we're happy to talk to them," Frost said.

Air Force Times tried unsuccessfully to reach Lockheed Martin three times. Two telephone calls went unanswered; one went through, but a message seeking comment was not returned.

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