

Fighter gap must be fixed

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Since the tragic attacks of 9/11, the responsibility for ensuring American air sovereignty has been vested in the Air National Guard, and for nearly eight years they have continuously patrolled our skies and deployed in support of overseas operations. Today, the Air Guard's mission is more multi-faceted and complex than ever before. And despite their high operational tempo and divergent mission set, they continue to sustain the most cost efficient and effective air force contingent in the world – providing a full third of our air capability with only 5 percent of the Air Force's budgetary assets.

The dedication and commitment of our Guardsmen is beyond reproach, but their equipment is at great risk. Our Guard continues to fly its aircraft to the outer bounds of their design life, and the increased operational tempo means that Air Guard aircraft will burn out faster than originally anticipated.

The Air Force's current roadmap, however, is a forecast for peril. If current plans continue, our Air Guard fleet of fighter aircraft will soon be crippled as airframes roll off the flight line with no operable replacement.

In six years, aircraft at the 162d Fighter Wing in Tucson, AZ – the country's largest Air Guard fighter wing – will be mostly depleted. Their most important mission is defending our air sovereignty along the border and over Phoenix, our nation's fifth largest city. For the 148th Fighter Wing in Duluth, MN, the border is different, but the mission and timeline are essentially the same.

In just 8 years, 80 percent of all Air National Guard fighter aircraft will become unflyable. At 15 of the Guard's 23 Fighter Wings, the aircraft will reach the end of their service life in the next 10 years.

By 2017, aircraft assigned to units in more than a dozen states ringing our country will be unflyable. The Air National Guard, the sole guarantor of our nation's air sovereignty, will be left with no operable aircraft to defend our nation's 10 largest cities or the National Capitol Region.

At more than a half dozen Armed Services Committee hearings, neither the Air Force nor the Secretary of Defense have been able to argue the certainty of these numbers or provide a plan for remedy. Hiding behind budgetary maneuvers and the Quadrennial Defense Review, they ignore this growing calamity at potentially perilous risk to the Guard and our national security.

Chief of the National Guard, Gen. McKinley, and Director of the Air Guard, Gen. Wyatt have asked the Air Force to include the Guard in the earliest phase of F-35 beddown plans. I agree. We must defend our homeland with the best assets we have available.

However, the reality remains that the F-35 program is behind schedule and Initial Operational Capability, or IOC, will not be achieved by 2013 as the Air Force had estimated, according to the Pentagon's own Office of Test and Evaluation. Full Rate Production is unlikely to produce the number of aircraft the Guard would require – nearly 300 total – to maintain, at a steady state, the Air Sovereignty Alert mission. Any plans that continue to contend that the F-35 program will smoothly dovetail with current fighter retirement projections are foolhardy and assume a level of risk that is exceedingly unacceptable.

Under the best case scenario, there will remain a significant fighter gap in our Air Guard and in our air defenses. That gap must be filled by an interim buy of advanced fourth generation fighters that will be survivable in current and future conflicts and relevant to the future force of fifth generation fighters we need. That gap must also be filled with a limited number of older aircraft through a Service Life Extension Program or SLEP. While this is, per aircraft, a costly option, it will help bridge the gap for some units awaiting new aircraft and preserve their necessary flying mission.

If we remain idle and allow the current course of action to proceed, our Air Guard will cease to remain operationally relevant and our Guardsmen – the most experienced pilots and maintainers across the force – will move on. Our country cannot afford the hollow force that would be created by the current roadmap. Our Air Guard and our citizens deserve better.