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C-17 Shortfall More Evidence of a Hollow Force

By James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.

A military is “hollow” when it lacks the resources to fund current operations, maintain a trained and ready force, and invest in the equipment and technology it will need in the future. A hollow force puts national security at risk, leaving the country with troops who are not ready to respond to the next challenge. Congress should be concerned that America’s armed forces are already showing signs that they do not have the all the resources they need to sustain the force, act today, and prepare for tomorrow. The determination of the Air Force to cut off production of the C-17, the backbone of the military air transport fleet, is the latest evidence that America’s force is hollowing. Only sustained and robust defense spending in the years ahead will prevent the sounds of a hollow force from ringing true.

Not-So-Wild Blue Yonder

The C-17 is a long-range transport aircraft that can traverse oceans to deliver supplies and people to unimproved airstrips in the middle of a combat zone. It is a mainstay of the Air Force’s fleet. In Iraq, almost three-quarters of the materials moved by air traveled in the bays of C-17s.

Despite the C-17’s enormous utility and the fact that C-17 airframes are wearing out faster than expected because of the heavy demand for transport to support current U.S. military operations around the world, the Air Force plans to halt the plane’s production at 180.

This decision makes no sense. The Pentagon’s original estimate concluded that the Air Force could use another 40 or so planes—and that judgment was made before the United States entered a long war that routinely requires it to send troops from Afghanistan to Iraq, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Penny-Wise, Pound-Foolish

The decision to cut off C-17 production will free money for the Air Force to pay its bills in the short term, but this trade-off is a Hobson’s choice. The United States will probably need more planes in the future. But last week the C-17’s manufacturer announced that it is beginning to close its production line. Once that line is closed, the cost of restarting it will make C-17s much more expensive—maybe unaffordable—when the military finally realizes that it does need more planes.

Stop the Insanity

Only Congress can pull the Pentagon out of its death spiral of bad decisions that are mortgaging the future of the force to pay its bills today. The solution is to get the federal budget under control (this means dealing with ballooning entitlement

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spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid), to implement tax reforms that help grow the economy, and to ensure robust defense budgets—not just this year but for the next decade.

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