

# WebMemo



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## Move to Hastily Retire Legacy Fighter Aircraft Puts Air Sovereignty at Risk

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Today, the American military's air superiority is at greater risk than any time since World War II. With two major ground wars consuming America's military, it is easy for many to overlook the current contributions from U.S. air and naval forces. Unfortunately, it is more tempting for policymakers to use high-profile U.S. Air Force and Navy programs as billpayers for ground forces' priorities instead of advocating for more resources in defense and a higher topline budget, both of which would maintain America's air superiority while funding troops on the ground.

No service is under as much current fiscal duress as the U.S. Air Force. This year, the President's fiscal year (FY) 2010 defense budget proposed eliminating the following major Air Force programs:

- F-22 fifth-generation fighter aircraft;
- Combat search and rescue helicopter;
- C-17 cargo airlifter; and
- Next-generation bomber.

Even though Congress went along with the President's shortsighted and risky decision to end production of the F-22 prematurely, Members were wise to halt Air Force plans to retire 250 legacy fighter aircraft without the provision of more necessary and important information first.

The FY 2010 defense appropriations bill has passed both chambers and is awaiting final passage. In this legislation, there is essential language sponsored by Senator Christopher Bond (R-MO) and Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) that would prevent

the Pentagon from retiring many Air National Guard legacy fighter aircraft before there is a viable plan to replace them with a sufficient number of new fighters.

**The Fighter Shortfalls in President Obama's Budget Request.** The mass retirement of so many legacy fighters in one year should raise red flags for Congress, because the Navy and Air Force fighter gaps are only growing more quickly by the day. The 2010 President's defense budget request sought to cut the number of F-15C/D fighters in the Air National Guard to 179 and to phase out the remaining 126 F-15A/Bs. These cuts would have resulted in a smaller Air Force and a dramatic reduction in the number of operational Air National Guard units over and above the significant downsizing that has occurred already over the past decade.

By comparison, the Air National Guard had nine F-15 squadrons in 1999, yet this year the number has fallen by nearly one-half to just five squadrons. The additional reductions planned in President Obama's budget request would have left the Guard with only 48 F-15C/Ds for air sovereignty alert missions until 2025—barring the purchase of additional fourth-generation fighters or the production

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of additional F-22A fifth-generation fighters. The program cuts would harm homeland defense efforts and expose the nation to greater security risks.

If the Air Force were to retire 250 fighters without a clear plan, the impact on homeland defense missions would be felt immediately. Indeed, a Government Accountability Office report from January 2009 states:

The Air Force faces two challenges to sustaining its air sovereignty alert (ASA) capabilities over the long term:

1. Replacing or extending the service life of aging fighter aircraft; and
2. Replacing ASA units with equipment and trained personnel when they deploy.

For example, if aircraft are not replaced by 2020, 11 of the 18 current air sovereignty alert sites could be without aircraft. The Air Force has not developed plans to mitigate these challenges because it has been focused on other priorities. Plans addressing these force reductions would provide the Air Force information that could assist it in ensuring the long-term sustainability of ASA operations and the capability of ASA units to protect U.S. airspace.

Fortunately, the Senate language would partially alleviate the fighter deficit by limiting the Pentagon's ability to retire more fourth-generation aircraft until officials certify that Air National Guard ASA missions will continue without interruption. The amendment was overwhelmingly approved by a vote of 91–7 because Members are concerned that Guard aircraft are reaching the end of their service lives and replacements are not being bought in sufficient numbers.

**Do Not Worsen Shortfall by Prematurely Retiring Legacy Fighters.** Members of Congress and Pentagon officials have warned for years of an impending fighter gap facing the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps—as well as the implications of such a gap for national security.

In April 2008, Lieutenant General Daniel Darnell testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Air Force could have a requirement gap of over 800 fighters by 2024. However, after the release of the President's FY 2010 budget, Air

Force leaders announced a combat Air Force restructuring plan to “eliminate excessive overmatch in our tactical fighter force and consider alternatives in our capabilities.”

Instead of addressing the projected fighter gap through the accelerated purchase of replacement fighters, the Air Force plans to hasten the retirement of 250 legacy fighters, including 112 F-15s and 134 F-16s. The Air Force believes it can save \$3.5 billion over the next five years and reinvest those funds to reduce current capability gaps. However, immediate budgetary restrictions—not a changing threat environment—appear to be driving this fundamental shift in security policy.

This decision to retire aircraft is premature because it exacerbates the tactical aircraft shortfalls in the Air Force, particularly the Air National Guard. The majority of these aircraft are used in support of homeland defense missions, such as the air sovereignty alert mission that defends America's skies against another 9/11 attack and other similar aerial threats.

Given that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Air Force leaders have stated that the Pentagon's top priority is to secure the homeland, the Department of Defense should not retire aircraft without first identifying a follow-on mission. Otherwise, the service could be accused of engaging in a back-door base realignment and closure without Congressional input or an informed public.

As part of floor debate during consideration of the FY 2010 defense appropriations bill, the Senate adopted language (S.A. 2596) cosponsored by the Senate's National Guard Caucus co-chairmen to delay the retirement of 250 fourth generation aircraft—of which most reside in the Air National Guard—until the Secretary of Defense submits a detailed plan (within 90 days) describing:

- How the Air Force will replace the disappearing force structure resulting from the mass retirement;
- Proposed follow-on missions for each Air Force installation that would lose planes; and
- An estimate of cost avoidance achieved by the planned retirement.

Congress was right to provide robust oversight and demand additional answers from the Pentagon before agreeing to such a sweeping change with massive implications for homeland security. In a clear signal to the Pentagon, Members should stand firm in their quest for more information.

**The Future of the U.S. Fighter Force.** Congress needs a multifaceted agenda to remedy the services' fighter gaps throughout the next decade. Congress must continue to demand that the nation's military planners ensure that replacement aircraft are available before legacy fighters are retired en masse.

In addition, Congress should continue to authorize the purchase of supplementary fourth- or fifth-generation fighters for the Air National Guard to

bridge the immediate requirement gap for air sovereignty alert missions.

Finally, Congress should retain its language in the final defense appropriations bill to prevent legacy fighter retirements without a clear way forward. Next year, Congress will need to be more proactive and not merely prevent the depletion of the Armed Forces but significantly advance the services' long-overdue modernization plans.

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