The Military’s Technology Leadership Problem

Leadership, not technology, failures are at the root of most wasteful Pentagon programs

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BY DAN GRAZIER AND LIZ HEMPOWICZ

News about the F-35 nearly always focuses on technical issues: what is working or not at that particular time. Constant reporting along those lines sets the narrative that at the most fundamental level, the F-35 program’s faults are the result of deeply flawed technologies. Longtime readers know the Project On Government Oversight and its Center for Defense Information is as guilty of this as anyone.1 But that reporting leaves out the real fundamental issue: a leadership problem closely tied to the infamous “revolving door” between the military’s senior ranks and defense contractor boardrooms.

The Revolving Door

Why do senior Pentagon leaders demonstrate such poor leadership? The culture of the senior ranks certainly plays a big part. National security journalist Thomas Ricks wrote about this in his book, The Generals.2 He described how most senior officers today aspire to be viewed as “good guys.” Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army colonel and historian, described the type this way:

The good guy projects the right attitude, strikes the right pose, and recites all the right clichés. Good guys are team players. They don’t rock the boat.

They get ahead by going along. In practical terms, demonstrated adherence to orthodoxy becomes the premier qualification for admission. Heretics need not apply.

Perhaps the fastest way for an officer to be ostracized from this exclusive fraternity is to do anything to interrupt the smooth transfer of taxpayer dollars from the Treasury through the Pentagon into the coffers of a defense contractor—say by raising questions about the need for or the efficacy of a Service’s new pet weapons program. An officer doing so would doubtlessly offend his team-playing superiors within the Service, risking promotions and desirable assignments. An officer who did so would also find few defense contractors willing to offer lucrative sinecures upon his or her retirement.

Because of course it is only a coincidence that Raytheon elected retired Marine General James Cartwright to its board six months after he retired and a mere two years after he came to the rescue of the Raytheon-built JLENS, the failed $2.7 billion balloon-based radar system that famously went for an off-the-leash joyride over Pennsylvania in October 2015. This program consumed 17 years’ worth of time, effort, and money with little to show for it other than amusing headlines. The Army deactivated the unit in June 2017.

And clearly it’s also coincidence that Northrop Grumman elected former Air Force Chief of Staff Mark Welsh to its board six months after he retired and only a little more than a year after the Air Force selected Northrop Grumman for the $55 billion B-21 bomber contract.

These are only two of the most recent and well-known examples of the Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex’s “revolving door.” This is where retired generals and admirals take highly paid positions in the defense industry. Their status as retired flag officers lends credibility and access to the companies.

As POGO reported in 2004 in *The Politics of Contracting*:

The revolving door is a story of money, information, influence, and access—access that ensures that phone calls get through to policymakers and meetings get scheduled. The American taxpayer is left with a system that sometimes compromises the way the government buys goods and services from its contractors.

Senior officers used to consider behavior like this to be deeply shameful. Following World War II, the most senior Army generals—George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, Hap Arnold, and Omar Bradley—all turned down many lucrative offers in the defense industry. Upon retiring after serving as

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Secretary of State and Defense, Marshall led the Red Cross. Eisenhower became President of the United States, but before that led Columbia University. Arnold created a think tank and wrote his memoirs. Bradley served on the board of the Bulova Watch Company. Even the imperious MacArthur went to work for a typewriter manufacturer.

Alas, those days are long gone.

**The F-35 Case Study**
The F-35 was conceived to be a multi-mission aircraft that would meet the very different requirements of three separate services. Add to that the needs of eight partner countries and various foreign military sales customers, and no one should be surprised by the results. In attempting to be all things to all people, the F-35 can’t perform any single mission particularly well, and the entire thing ends up costing a fortune.

The problems with creating a one-size-fits-all aircraft should have been well known to the decision-makers at the time. The Pentagon tried to do the same thing in the 1960s with the F-111 program, when then-Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara converted the Air Force’s single mission F-111 nuclear bomber project into a multi-mission, multi-Service aircraft for the Air Force and Navy. The results pleased no one and the Navy dropped out of the program before it went into production. The Air Force cut short the number of F-111s it bought and quickly initiated a single-mission air-to-air fighter that became the F-15 program.

The technical shortcomings of the F-111 were secondary to the main shortcoming of the program: the leadership’s decision to build a one-size-fits-all aircraft. When they came up with the idea, at least those in charge then might not have known better because they did not have a glaring historical failure staring them down as they made their decision; the DoD political appointees and the general officers in charge of acquisition at the inception of the F-35 have no such cover. They had the clear example of the F-111 that most of them had lived through (specifically, Les Aspin and all the generals and admirals), but they chose to push ahead with an acquisition concept they should have known was flawed.

Leadership, or the lack thereof, is the most serious factor in what is perhaps the most pervasive and expensive of all flawed acquisition strategies, concurrency. This is the term for the deliberate overlap of development, testing, and production. The F-35 will likely go down in history as one of the most egregious examples of this form of “acquisition malpractice.” At the current rate, the services will have nearly 800 deficiency-laden F-35s in production before the fixes have been completed and fully tested.

Senior leaders knew this was a bad idea.

Concurrency, as a RAND Corporation analyst explained in testimony before the House Committee on Government Reform on May 10, 2000, is rooted “in the politics of the acquisition process.” This practice serves to limit the available political options for restructuring programs experiencing significant test failures or cost overruns. When the Pentagon makes substantial procurement commitments well before development or testing is complete, it severely in-

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12 Strategic-Air-Command.com, “General Dynamics F-111 Aardvark.”
15 Statements of Dr. Thomas L. McNaugher, Deputy Director, Arroyo Center, Rand; Rodney Larkins, Business Development Manager, 3M Corp.; and Dr. Wesley Harris, Professor, Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics before the House Committee on Government Reform’s Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans Affairs, and International Relations’ Hearing on “Joint Strike Fighter Acquisition Reform: Will it Fly?” May 10, 2000, p. 102. (Hereinafter “Joint Strike Fighter Acquisition Reform: Will it Fly?”)
creases the political costs of cancelling the program due to all the money already invested and all the jobs already created.

What makes this even worse is that these production commitments are made at the point in the process when the programs are most likely to need revision or restructuring due to unanticipated technical problems. During the phase of the development process when prototypes are being tested, “the data almost always is going to contradict the optimism of early assessments.”

This means the airplane, tank, ship, or other weapon system may well not be performing up to the level promised when votes were being solicited to get the program off the ground. And it is precisely at this point that Congress and the taxpayer are stymied from exercising the reasonable options of either cancelling the buy or slowing the program to implement fixes. Instead, they are forced to continue buying the early production units of the airplane or tank or ship, exactly the ones that invariably have the highest price tags. As Air Force cost analyst and whistleblower A. Ernest Fitzgerald often bemoaned, “It’s either too early to tell, or too late to do anything about it.”

Another example of this is the USS Ford aircraft carrier. In order to secure significant new funding, the Navy claimed the new design would outperform existing carriers and save money in the long-term. Both claims remain dubious. The Service scrapped the long-proven technology of steam-powered catapults and hydraulic arresting gear, and replaced them with the brand new and wholly untested Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS) and “water twister” arresting-gear technology. Those two systems, in turn, required an all-new ship design to support their radically different space and electrical requirements. Because of the massive electrical charge and the reduced steam supply the EMALS requires, the Ford-class ships needed a newly designed nuclear reactor, new turbine generators, and a new electrical distribution system. And the water twister arresting gear required the entire aft end of the carrier to be reconfigured. In the event of failure, neither the EMALS nor the water twister can be replaced by their steam or hydraulic predecessors without tearing the entire carrier apart. But the Navy committed to all of that while EMALS and the water twister were still only engineering sketches.

The Service took an enormous gamble by building a $13 billion ship around technology that had never been demonstrated. That is an incredibly and unnecessarily risky acquisition strategy. There is the question about whether the advertised performance improvement of 25 percent improved sortie rate, which would be marginal at best (it is still an aircraft carrier), is worth the investment. The last Nimitz-class aircraft carrier cost $6.9 billion. The Navy claims it will save $5 billion over the lifetime of the Ford due to manpower savings (which may never be realized).

So the American people are paying upfront an extra $6 billion before overruns to save an unproven $5 billion over 50 years.

That is not a technology problem. That is a leadership problem. No admiral and no senior civilian in the acquisition chain of command stood up to put a stop to such a risky scheme or to even raise an objection to the kind of arithmetic that only makes sense to a defense contractor looking for business.

Possible Solutions

A four-star general who retires after 30 years receives a pension of more than $250,000 a year (sometimes earning more than while they were on active duty). They also receive generous health care benefits through TRICARE, and base privileges that allow them to shop tax-free in the commissaries and base exchanges. These are benefits retired admirals and generals earn for the years of sacrifice and service on behalf of the American people. Doubtless few citizens would seriously take issue with the government rewarding honorable service in such a manner.

However, this does become an issue when retired flag officers cash in on their service by taking highly paid positions with firms attempting to do business with the Pentagon. The problem is not just what they do after they retire. It is obviously disappoint-

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18 Huntington Ingalls Industries, “The Ford-Class Carrier.”
ing to see someone betray the public trust for their own personal or financial gain. The real problem is what they had to do, or not do, while still in uniform to increase their chances of being offered the lucrative post-retirement positions. Again, how likely would a defense contractor be to hire someone who criticized or cancelled a big acquisition program?

The most drastic solution to discourage that kind of behavior in future generations of military leaders would be to strip retired generals and admirals of their rank and/or retirement benefits if they make the choice to travel through the revolving door and accept positions with defense contractors. The idea behind this is not to punish anyone (which it wouldn't anyway—a board membership at Northrop Grumman, for example, was worth an average of $260,621 per year in 2016). This is about combating the possibility of senior officers compromising their integrity while in uniform to position themselves for a big payout after taking off the uniform.

Military pensions and retirement benefits are rewards for honorable service. Officers dishonor that service by selling their influence to firms doing business with the Pentagon. Stripping those benefits sends the message in a very tangible way that such behavior is dishonorable. At the very least, this proposal would prevent the American people from subsidizing such behavior.

A less extreme solution would be to suspend rank and retirement benefits during the period of employment with a defense contractor. Either of these solutions would significantly (perhaps completely?) remove the current incentives baked into the revolving door system.

The goal is to reattach the stigma once attached to those who use their rank and position for personal gain. At best, it may remind officers that their first obligation is to the young men and women they are supposed to lead into battle, the same young people who are the very first to be hurt in combat by any bad decisions made in the pursuit of a corner office, say at Raytheon, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, or Lockheed Martin.

Documents obtained by the Project On Government Oversight name seven retired Marine Corps officers—including the Secretary of Defense and the President’s Chief of Staff—who sought and obtained permission from the Marine Corps to be paid to work on behalf of foreign governments and companies after they retired. POGO acquired the documents from the Marine Corps through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

Under current law, any retired or reserve members of the military wishing to work for a foreign government or receive emoluments (a salary or payments) from one must obtain approval from the Secretary of their military service and from the Secretary of State.1

High-ranking military officers are regularly called on by the Defense Department and Congress to provide advice about national security issues with the assumption that their sole loyalty is to the interests of the United States. It should be clear to policymakers and the public if their advice may be influenced because they are receiving money from or have had previous professional relationships with foreign governments.

“These individuals are trading on the special trust and confidence bestowed upon them by the American people for their own personal gain,” Jack Shanahan Fellow Dan Grazier, a former Marine Corps captain, said.

POGO is still waiting for responses to similar requests from the Air Force, Navy, and State Department.

**Inconsistent Disclosure**

Secretary of Defense James Mattis asked for permission to work as a military advisor to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2015. Mattis did not list this employment in his public financial disclosure form.2 Before becoming Defense Secretary, Mattis’s last position in government was as the commander of Central Command (CENTCOM) from 2010 to 2013, which included the UAE in his area of responsibility (AOR).

The Director of Defense Press Operations said that because Secretary Mattis did not receive compensation—other than reimbursement for travel expenses—the Office of Government Ethics told him he did not need to disclose the information.3 Mattis did list other uncompensated positions, however, including the U.S. Naval Institute and Center for a New American Security. His spokesman also said that even though the Secretary didn’t report this relationship to the Office of Government Ethics he did tell the Senate Armed Services Committee and included the information in his security clearance review. The Committee would not

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1 37 USC §908
confirm or deny what information it received.

The Marine Corps regularly collaborates with the UAE for training.⁴ Even before seeking permission to be an advisor to the country, Mattis spoke positively of the country’s military capabilities, referring to them as “great warriors” and “Little Sparta” to The Washington Post in 2014.⁵ The UAE similarly admires the Marine Corps, participating in a number of exchanges and requesting formal training programs from the Corps.

Secretary Mattis’s previously undisclosed relationship with the UAE could add a new dimension to recent controversies surrounding the UAE’s role in convincing President Trump to support a blockade on Qatar.

White House Chief of Staff and former Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly worked as a senior course mentor for the 2016 Australian Defense Force Joint Task Force Commanders Course before joining the current administration. But unlike Mattis, Kelly disclosed the work. In his ethics agreement Kelly said he would “not participate personally and substantially in any particular matter involving specific parties in which Australia, is a party or represents a party,” until he received his full payment unless otherwise authorized.⁶

**Officers Joining Companies Receiving Foreign Government Money**

Other retired officers working for foreign governments are not currently in government, and do not have obligations for public disclosure under current laws. A number of officers accepted positions in companies receiving funding from countries in the Middle East. For instance, after he left government former Obama National Security Advisor James L. Jones worked as an independent security consultant with Ironhand Security, LLC, which he claimed had a pending contract with the Minister of Defense for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Retired Major General Arnold Punaro, who sits on the Defense Business Board, also received permission to be an independent security consultant with the company. Even though the Defense Business Board provides the Department advice, there are no financial disclosure requirements for board members or prohibitions on them receiving money from foreign governments. Retired Major General Thomas L. Moore became a Senior Consultant for Stark Aerospace Business Development in Israel after he was Chief of Staff and Acting Deputy Commander of CENTCOM.

The disclosures also show several retired officers working for Asian companies. Former Marine Corps Commandant James Amos received permission to join the board of VT Systems Inc, an engineering firm that is a subsidiary of Singapore Technologies Engineering and has offices in the UAE and Brazil. Retired Brigadier General Ronald F. Baczkowski, who was the deputy commander of Marine Corps Forces, Pacific, received permission to be the North American Business Development Director for Singapore Technologies Kinetics.

### Insufficient Disclosure of Foreign Influence

The documents provided to POGO show other officers who received permission but whose names were redacted under a “b6” exemption, which prohibits disclosure of personal information “when an individual’s privacy interest in it outweighs any public interest.” When the public interest outweighs those privacy concerns, agencies can release the information.

Current laws require public disclosure for foreign lobbying but are less transparent when it comes to other forms of foreign influence. Under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) anyone who lobbies on behalf of foreign governments and political parties must register their activities with the Department of Justice and submit regular documentation describing their activities. As POGO Investigator Lydia Dennett recently detailed in written testimony for the Senate Judiciary Committee, that law has a number of weaknesses and enforcement problems that undermine the law’s goal of shining a light on how foreign governments attempt to influence US policies.⁷ But it is a significantly more public tool than the current system for monitoring how retired and reserve military officers work for foreign governments.

As Congress investigates and evaluates the sufficiency of current foreign influence transparency laws, they may also want to look into whether others who receive money from or work for foreign governments should make that information publicly available.

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⁵ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “In the UAE, the United States has a quiet, potentially nicknamed ‘Little Sparta,’” The Washington Post, November 9, 2014.
I spent the last decade-and-a-half listening to the nation’s military leaders explaining, over bacon and eggs, how the United States was making progress in Afghanistan. Ever since 2001, senior officers would regularly stop by the Fairmont Hotel in Washington, DC, to explain to reporters how the nation’s longest war (although it didn’t reach that point until June 2010, when it eclipsed Vietnam) was going, and why it was worth pursuing.

I did that as a reporter for *Time Magazine*, where the rules of the road required a certain detachment that kept one from using barnyard epithets as their justifications for the fit-and-start war unraveled year after year. But I’m no longer constrained by such strictures, which leads me to say: poppycock. One can only take the constant spinning for so long before becoming dizzy and cynical over can-do officers who can’t-do—and lack the guts to say it can’t be done given the tools they’ve been given. Their failure to do so cheats every Afghan-bound young man and woman wearing the uniform.

As an American stung by 9/11’s horrors, I wanted the U.S. military to wipe the perpetrators out. In Pentagon hallways in late 2001 there was a belief the war would be over quickly, and it was, in terms of toppling the Taliban. I traveled to Afghanistan in the early years, charting the war’s progress. Almost imperceptibly, the U.S. charter was growing into a mammoth mission to groom a cohesive nation instead of the patchwork of warlords that Afghanistan had always been, and continues to be.

President Trump has declared his intention to stay this course. “We will always win,” he told servicemembers on August 21 at Fort Myer, just across the Potomac from the White House. “In the end, we will win.” But even
the senior member of his Cabinet acknowledged that the minor tweaks Trump is proposing are unlikely to make any real difference. “You will not win a battlefield victory,” Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told the Taliban the day after Trump spoke. “We may not win one, but neither will you.”

How’s that for a call to arms?

So now is a good time to revisit those Defense Writers Group breakfasts to recall the conflict’s gilding since President George W. Bush launched the U.S. invasion on October 7, 2001. Its aim was to punish the Taliban for sheltering Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda, which had carried out the 9/11 attacks that killed nearly 3,000 the month before. Since then, the war has cost the nation 2,304 lives so far and ultimately will cost more than $1 trillion.

It has been a 16-year roller coaster. Initially, things were going swell, then not so swell. Then they were getting better, until they weren’t. Now, by all accounts, we are locked in a bloody stalemate with the Taliban.

A little more than a month after the invasion, the Taliban were ousted from Kabul. “The Taliban was pretty entrenched in Afghanistan,” Richard Perle, chairman of the Pentagon’s Defense Advisory Board, said November 20, 2001. “Regimes that rule by terror and intimidation, when that grip is challenged, go a lot faster than we think they will.”

But Afghanistan’s progress soon slowed, in part because the American military was preoccupied by a second war it had launched in Iraq. The breakfast chats became markedly less sunny. By early in the Obama administration—after nearly eight years of war—Marine General John Kelly (now Trump’s chief of staff) said the United States would not be able to kill its way to victory. “Chasing the bad guy is not the answer,” he said in February 2009. “We can win the 10-second firefight every time,” said Kelly, whose son, Robert, would be killed in Afghanistan the following year. “But the real solution is connecting with the people, and protecting the people, and more importantly, helping the people protect themselves.”

Later that year, Obama ordered a surge of 30,000 more troops into Afghanistan, boosting U.S. forces to their peak of 100,000 in 2011. Good news followed. “We saw positive progress across the board, whether it be the tactical situation on the battlefield or the capability and competence of the Afghan security forces, the development of governance, both at a district and provincial level,” Major General Richard Mills said in May 2011 after spending a year as the senior Marine there. “I think it is important that we ensure that the American people understand that there is progress being made in a very difficult war.”

Yet that ended with Obama’s decision to bring the troops home. He declared combat over in 2014, cut U.S. forces by 90 percent, and the Taliban have been regaining ground ever since. He, and the American people, had lost the will to keep fighting. The war went from a full boil to a steady simmer, with U.S. casualties low enough to keep fighting ad infinitum.

As a result, after a decade of war, the breakfast reports became incredible—literally, fiction. “In Afghanistan, I think we have a tremendous opportunity...to give the Afghan people a chance at a future they deserve, which is much better than the horror they’ve had to live through in the last several decades,” Army Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, now Trump’s national security adviser, said in February 2015. “I think you can quickly see the dramatic changes and positive change in Afghanistan.”

Well now. Afghanistan is nothing but a treadmill. The United States has no will to win. If it did, Congress would declare war, with the backing of the American people. As it is, they can’t be bothered: 40 million people watched Obama’s televised address on Afghanistan in 2009; only 28 million—8.7 percent of the country—watched Trump’s.

The idea of building a nation that can stamp out terrorism only makes sense if you ignore the fact that several of the 9/11 hijackers plotted in Germany, and that the United States has its own homegrown terrorists. There is no move by the United States to attack Germany, or itself. Today’s terrorists don’t need bases and camps that can be destroyed by drones. They can meet in cyberspace, hidden in kitchens and dens the world over. Thousands of troops fighting for decades don’t deal with that.

Before winning the White House, Trump repeatedly called for the United States to pull out of Afghanistan. But he bent to the will of his troika of generals—Kelly, McMaster, and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis—and his words echoed the sunny-side up optimism of his top military officers.

“The military-industrial complex wins,” conservative firebrand and Trump ally Ann Coulter groused following Trump’s speech.

Now if it would only start telling the truth.
The Light Attack Trickery?
Yet another Air Force effort to kill the A-10

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BY DAN GRAZIER

The Air Force is putting on a great publicity show for their impending Light Attack (OA-X) experiment.1 Officially, this small-scale experiment is meant only to demonstrate the capabilities of four low-cost, off-the-shelf, lightly armed aircraft against lightly defended enemies like ISIS or the Taliban. Quite unusually, General David Goldfein, the Air Force chief of staff, is planning on personally attending later this summer when the A-29 Super Tucano, AT-802L Longsword, Textron Scorpion, and AT-6 Wolverine compete to potentially become the newest addition to the fleet.

The recent media blitz for this summer’s experiment is not coming out of the blue. For more than two years Air Force headquarters staff officers and others have been laying the foundation for the light attack program, lauding a buy of 300 or so light attack aircraft to relieve the expensive operating-cost burden of the A-10s, F-16s, and F-15s currently flying attack missions in permissive air defense environments like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.2 Responding to the Air Force’s encouragement, three defense contractors—Sierra Nevada, Textron, and Beechcraft—started publicity and lobbying campaigns for their respective light attack

Embracing Light Attack for Political, not Combat Reasons

It is rather strange to see the Air Force suddenly taking an interest in low speed, cheap turboprop and turbofan planes, especially in light of their having killed a nearly identical OA-X program in 2008. There is good reason to believe that, coming on the heels of their do-or-die efforts to fund the $150 million F-35 and $550 million B-21, the Air Force’s newfound interest in the $20 million OA-X is not really about saving the taxpayer a few flying-hour dollars in the ongoing war budgets. Instead, official enthusiasm for the OA-X appears to be the newest wrinkle in the Air Force’s relentless campaign to shut down the A-10 fleet and quash forever the concept of a dedicated close air support force with truly expert pilots.

According to several sources inside the Air Force, the service will push ahead with the light attack tests and eventually select one of the airframes for procurement. The acquisition of the selected OA-X will then be dragged out over years. In the meantime, the Air Force will request permission to divert increasing numbers of A-10s to free up funds to purchase the new aircraft, while using the justification that it makes the A-10 redundant. The A-10s will be sent to the boneyard where they will quickly be scrapped, thus ensuring they can never again be brought back into service. Once the A-10’s demise is a fait accompli, the light attack plane program will be quietly canceled. This may seem rather conspiracy-minded, but the Air Force has repeatedly attempted to rid itself of the A-10 and the close air support mission only to be thwarted by public pressure and Congressional injunctions.

This dovetails perfectly with the unfolding reality as the Air Force grounds more and more A-10s by deliberately cutting off production of replacement wings (needed to extend A-10 life into the 2030s), zero-funding essential replacement spares, and underfunding A-10 depot maintenance.

An Exercise in PR Duplicity

Last September Air Force Secretary Deborah James announced that, in deference to Congressional mandates, the Air Force would delay by years the retirement of the A-10. In October, the chief of Air Materiel Command, General Ellen Pawlikowski, said the A-10 would be “…another airplane that we are sustaining indefinitely.”

In February this year, General Goldfein told Business Insider that the A-10 was safe until 2021. In the following months, other generals weighed in with similarly soothing statements. Neither the Secretary nor the generals bothered to mention that in September, at the very beginning of this crescendo of reassurances, the Air Force had already deliberately ended the contract for re-winging the A-10s at just 173 wing sets—instead of exercising the contract’s option to rewing the rest of the nine-squadron, 283-plane fleet, a life-extending fix essential to meeting the 2017 Congressional mandate to keep the 283 Warthogs flying.

Then, at a House Armed Services Committee hearing this June, the other shoe dropped. In the process of reassuring the Committee about the future of the A-10, Air Force Lt. Gen. Arnold Bunch let it slip that the Air Force planned to sustain six squadrons of A-10s. Representative Martha McSally (R-AZ), a retired A-10 pilot, caught something the rest of the committee missed: six A-10 squadrons are three less than the nine now flying. In other words, the Air Force is keeping the beloved A-10 ‘Warthog’ around for at least a few more years.

“The Air Force leadership is so intent on getting rid of A-10s that, even if re-winging funds are provided, they will be unwilling to keep A-10s flying—in direct defiance of the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, which barred the Air Force from using any money to retire any A-10s.”

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Force intended to quietly cut three squadrons.

In a follow-up formal Request for Information (RFI), McSally asked the Air Force to detail how, if given funding by the Congress, they planned to finish the re-winging project. Air Force Headquarters responded by saying they were budgeting to keep only 173 A-10s (i.e. six squadrons) in service through 2030. When and if given the funding needed, the RFI response says the Air Force must now re-compete any new re-winging contract (without mentioning that they intentionally ended the old contract, thereby hitting the taxpayer with an extra $80 million or so in new start-up costs). Allegedly selecting a source would require another two years, followed by delivery of the first new wing set in 2022 and the last in 2029. Bear in mind, this is to produce an existing replacement part that was in production at more than 16 wing sets per year until just ten months ago. The Air Force’s RFI response goes on to say that most of these slowly arriving replacement wings will be unneeded because their recipient A-10s will have been replaced, presumably by F-35s. In other words, the Air Force leadership is so intent on getting rid of A-10s that, even if re-winging funds are provided, they will be unwilling to keep A-10s flying—in direct defiance of the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, which barred the Air Force from using any money to retire any A-10s.

The Long, Long Battle for Close Air Support

Air Force contempt for the close air support mission was on clear display during an October 2015 hearing when then-F-35 program executive officer Air Force Lt. Gen. Christopher Bogdan said he didn’t want to go through with F-35/A-10 fly off, preferring instead to test the F-35 by itself “in a realistic operational environment for the CAS mission that the Air Force intends the F-35 to do.”

That statement almost perfectly encapsulates the longstanding, deeply ingrained culture of indifference to close support within the upper ranks of the Air Force, a culture that dates back to well before WWII. Hardly anything could be more irrelevant than how the Air Force “intends” to conduct close air support. Any preferences of the Air Force with regards to close air support come a distant, hazy second to the needs of the troops fighting on the ground. The needs dictated by actual ground combat are the real crux of the close support debate, something the official Air Force has been eager to suppress from early Army Air Corps days on.

We now have a century’s worth of evidence that almost all Air Force general officers have no real interest in the close air support mission—and are actively hostile to procurement of dedicated, single-mission CAS planes.”

France during WWII; of the First Provisional Marine Brigade’s Corsairs, whose extraordinary tactical integration with ground Marines was critical in preventing the collapse of the Pusan Perimeter’s left flank during the Korean War; of the handful of A-1 squadrons that saved several hundred Special Forces camps and countless long range patrols from being overrun in the jungles of Vietnam; of the 144 A-10s that destroyed more tactical targets than the rest of
the Gulf War Coalition’s 1,900 fighters put together; and of the tiny half-squadrons of A-10s deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria that have saved American and allied lives for 15 years in hundreds—if not thousands—of “danger close” firefights.10

The critical common element of these close support achievements—other than adequately armed, maneuverable, and survivable planes—is that for each of these combat successes the pilots responsible were intensively trained for the primary mission of supporting ground troops. Unfortunately, because of the Air Force’s lack of peacetime priority for close support, that training had to be obtained in combat—a most costly and dangerous place to train—for the three wars before the Gulf War. But the Gulf War marked a historic change: for the first time, the Air Force actually entered a war with an extant cadre of real close support experts, both pilots and forward controllers. The simple reason was that the Air Force now had in inventory a fleet of specialized mission close support aircraft—the A-10—and the pilots and ground controllers singularly focused on that mission. This in contrast to the Air Force’s traditional and preferred multi-mission training syllabus, an approach that invariably relegates close support to lowest priority.

Professing Love for CAS While Ensuring Its Demise

To demonstrate the Air Force’s “sincere” commitment to close support, for the past year a parade of generals—including the past and the present chief of staff, and the commander of Air Combat Command—have all touted the Air Force’s three-pronged approach to close support: upgrading and sustaining the A-10, launching the light attack OA-X, and/or shaping requirements for an AX-2 heavily armed follow-on to the A-10.11 Given the ongoing logistical strangulation of the A-10 fleet as discussed above, we know the first prong is far from being pursued. The OA-X second prong, according to insiders and the available evidence, is destined for a short life after it succeeds as an excuse for getting rid of the A-10.12

As for the AX-2 specialized CAS mission follow-on to the A-10, the Chief of Staff’s recent interview with Aviation Week pours a bucket of cold water on that third prong. In that interview General Goldfein ignores the clear lessons of close support combat from WWII to Syria, explicitly downplaying the single-mission CAS platform and the specialized pilot while discoursing at length about future “families of systems,” “21st Century close-air-support discussion,” and “moving us forward into new ways of doing business.”13

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For the troops whose lives depend on the close air support mission—and for those who agree with them that the Air Force is obliged to give the troops close support that is at least as good as the A-10 in every future war—the implications of going along with the wishes of current Air Force leaders are clear. Supporting the OA-X and letting the Air Force short-change the sustainment of the A-10 fleet will enable the generals to eliminate all A-10s within 10 years. That will permanently kill any chance of a better A-10 follow-on force operated by a continuing community of pilots and controllers who are true experts in providing first-class close support. The troops who have to fight the next war will do so without effective close air support. They will have to fight harder to secure their objectives and will be more vulnerable to being overrun in situations where other ground reinforcements are too far away.

This is why any prudent Pentagon observer should be extremely suspicious of the Air Force’s motives behind the OA-X program.14 It simply does not fit within their own self-image. So what is really going on?

Nuclear Modernization
Under Obama and Trump: Costly, Mismanaged, Unnecessary

The following piece was first published in August 2017. The original can be found at http://www.pogo.org/straus/issues/nuclear-security/2017/nuclear-modernization-under-obama-and-trump.html

BY LYDIA DENNETT

The United States maintains the strongest nuclear weapons arsenal in the world. We currently have over 1,700 strategic and deadly nuclear warheads deployed at bases across the globe, with thousands more in storage plus thousands more intact and awaiting dismantlement.1

It cannot be overstated how truly terrifying their capacity for destruction is. Each warhead is hundreds of times more powerful than the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.2 And that was before the United States began the largest and most expensive nuclear modernization effort the world has ever seen.

In one of President Trump’s responses to North Korea’s recent nuclear posturing he referenced plans to “renovate and modernize our nuclear arsenal.”3 He was talking about an effort to maintain and upgrade the nuclear warheads themselves, their delivery systems (like submarines and planes), and the infrastructure at nuclear weapons production facilities. It’s an effort that began under President Obama and is likely to cost taxpayers over $1.5 trillion over the next 30 years.4

But if nuclear deterrence is the goal, a $1.5 trillion modernization effort isn’t necessary. “[T]he thing about a deterrent capability is it does not matter how old it is,” the Commander of US Strategic Command told the Senate Armed Services Committee this past April. “It just matters whether it works….The stuff that we have today will work.”5

Each leg of the nuclear triad, which refers to the three ways the United States is able to fire nuclear weapons, will receive an update under the current plan. In fact, several different nuclear warhead types have already begun life extension programs to replace their components and add new capabilities. Those that are in process have followed a simpler, more traditional approach to modernization that involves replacing aging components but leaving the basic nuclear explosive package the same.6

For example, the Navy’s W76-1 nuclear warhead, which is deployed on submarine-launched ballistic missiles, has been upgraded to include a “super-fuze” device to make these warheads significantly more accurate so that they will explode close enough to hardened targets—like Russian inter-continental ballistic missile silos—and destroy them completely. Even with the addition of this new capability, the W76 life extension program is expected to finish on time in 2020 and will only cost approximately $4 billion. That’s likely because the changes were modest and didn’t include any modifications to the nuclear explosive package.7

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2 Ashley Lutz, “This chart shows the terrifying power of modern nuclear bombs,” Business Insider, June 19, 2012.
5 Testimony of General John E. Hyten, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, on “Unites States Strategic Command Programs,” April 4, 2017.
These enhancements are just the beginning of the nuclear modernization plan, a plan that extends far beyond the warheads themselves. But there are a lot of reasons to question what projects are being advanced in the name of a “modern nuclear arsenal.” The NNSA plans to take a more aggressive and expensive approach to modernizing some warhead classes despite the fact that doing so will not improve the nuclear deterrence capability or make the United States any safer. This will be incredibly expensive in and of itself, and will require huge, expensive new facilities to support that work. The agency has proposed building several new facilities to manufacture hundreds of new plutonium and uranium cores for the bombs. The NNSA’s cost estimates for these facilities have skyrocketed and would not be necessary for a more scaled-down, straight forward modernization plan.

While certain components of nuclear weapons must be manufactured and replaced, the plutonium cores have a lifetime of 150 years and can be reused, dramatically reducing the need to build a brand new plutonium pit production facility. As for the uranium portion of nuclear warheads, sources have told POGO that hundreds of warheads going through the life extension programs have not required remanufactured uranium components.

Yet, the NNSA still plans to spend billions of dollars on new facilities capable of producing these nuclear components for weapons that may not need them. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) is also concerned about the purpose of these facilities, asking the NNSA to clarify specifically what the facilities will do and why we need them, and to develop a complete and reliable cost estimate for each proposed project.

NNSA’s nuclear modernization project overall could use some justification. For example, future warhead life extension programs will involve brand new nuclear explosive packages that have never been tested. These new packages are part of a plan to replace four different missile-carried warheads, two delivered by submarine and two land-based, with three different warheads. They are known as interoperable warheads because they will have a common nuclear explosive package despite being part of different legs of the triad. Development of the first interoperable warhead began in 2012 but was halted in 2014, partially because the Navy didn’t particularly want a new warhead design. Despite their reservations, the NNSA plans to restart their work on the interoperable warheads in 2020.

A peek under the hood of the agency’s cost estimates for the entire modernization effort, which includes both the new warhead designs and the new facilities, shows that additional oversight is needed. Earlier this year, the GAO released a report on the modernization numbers and found NNSA’s plans do not meet realistic budget estimates.

The NNSA’s long history of contractor mismanagement has led to things like budget misalignments, plans to build facilities without a clear mission or complete design, and significant delays in the more ambitious aspects of the nuclear modernization plan. This could leave the NNSA without the resources to fulfill their basic mission: ensuring the US nuclear stockpile is safe and secure. “Program instability poses a significant threat to NNSA’s mission critical capabilities,” an independent advisory group concluded in their review of the nuclear modernization plan.

The NNSA has not proven themselves to be effective stewards of taxpayer dollars, yet they ask Congress to hand over billions of dollars before demonstrating what capabilities they actually need and before even submitting an accurate cost estimate. It’s time to take a look at how much of this nuclear modernization plan is truly necessary for maintaining an effective nuclear deterrent and how much is just expensive window dressing designed to give nuclear contractors something to do.

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9 Letter from Linton Brooks, Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, to Senator John Warner, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, regarding pit lifetimes, November 28, 2006.
13 Memorandum from Robert O. Work, Under Secretary of the Navy, to Chairman of the Nuclear Weapons Council, regarding the Navy perspective of W78/W88-1 Life Extension Program, September 27, 2012.
15 Government Accountability Office High-Risk Series.
16 Government Accountability Office High-Risk Series.
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