

NOT FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL RELEASED
BY THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT
UNITED STATES SENATE

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

PRESENTATION TO THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT
UNITED STATES SENATE

SUBJECT: The Fiscal Year 2024 U.S. Air Force Budget Request for Military Readiness

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Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force

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INTRODUCTION

Chairwoman Hirono, Ranking Member Sullivan, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, on behalf of the Secretary of the Air Force, the Honorable Frank R. Kendall III, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Charles Q. Brown, Jr., thank you for another opportunity to testify on Air Force readiness.

Our Air Force is an indispensable contributor to national security in an increasingly complex international strategic environment. We exist to defend the homeland, rapidly deploy combat power globally, and fight as part of a joint, allied, and partner team. We are responsible for two-thirds of the Nation's strategic nuclear triad, which is foundational to defense priorities. Our conventional and nuclear capabilities provide unique options for our Nation's leaders, with the inherent attributes of speed, range, agility, and lethality. We remain the world's premier responder in conflict, crisis, and contingency. Our mission—to “Fly, Fight, & Win...Airpower Anytime, Anywhere”—is underwritten by our readiness, today and in the future. With the strong support of this Congress for FY23, we continued advancing on initiatives and operational imperatives to strengthen and reimagine readiness to adapt to the changing character of war. However, the pace of progress remains insufficient to meet our changing and complex security environment.

Key to our readiness is predictability in providing the resources and tools to execute our strategy. Adequately funding our readiness accounts while pursuing the right investments to develop advanced capabilities to meet future threats must be done thoughtfully. We believe we have struck a responsible balance. Our plan does involve ‘new starts,’ which will be threatened with a Continuing Resolution, thus delivering a gift to our strategic competitors and potential adversaries we cannot afford—time. We will continue to work with Congress to provide all that is required for a timely, year-long appropriation for FY24.

Secretary Kendall has stated that we must make tough choices in the short term to meet our pacing challenge – the People's Republic of China (PRC). As our Air Force balances to ensure sufficient readiness for today and tomorrow, four additional factors stand out among many that influence our ability to do so. The first factor is our aging fleet of aircraft and aging Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) forces. The average age of our aircraft is 29 years old, with 53 percent of those well past their expected service life. Pair this with these

assets' continued high utilization rate in joint force missions, and the challenge gets more costly. The Minuteman III ICBM, first deployed in 1970, is the world's oldest land-based strategic missile system. We appreciate the support of Congress to enable us to begin this necessary transition from less relevant capabilities and look forward to continued collaboration in the future. The second is the pace at which the People's Republic of China (PRC) advances its capabilities. The PRC continues its seemingly uninhibited advancements in capabilities designed to put the U.S. in a reactive position with respect to pursuing our national interests. Third, due to various factors such as inflation, a tight labor market, unanticipated cost growth, experienced maintenance personnel, and other factors, we continue to face challenges maintaining the viability of our legacy systems that prove less relevant in the face of advancing threats. Fourth, reaching and recruiting our youth and attracting a new generation of inspired Americans is critical and increasingly challenging in a world where shrinking familiarity with military service negatively affects the propensity to serve. Airmen are our greatest asset – if we lag in recruiting great Americans, readiness will suffer in the very near future. The cumulative effects of these four factors provide the undercurrent for enhancing our state of readiness, operational agility, and long-term strategic readiness investments.

RECRUITING

Our success as an Air Force starts and ends with our Airmen. Over the years, we have been fortunate to attract the best of America's youth in sufficient numbers to fill our formations. Recent realities have increasingly challenged the recruiting landscape. Among them were the limitations for our recruiters to access schools and interact with youth in those schools during the pandemic. The tight job market and reduced familiarity with the military further reduce the appreciation of the value of service and the opportunities we provide. As a result, the active duty component barely met recruiting goals in FY23, with the guard and reserves falling short. While we estimate that all three components will not meet goals this year (active duty will likely be short by at least 10%, while the Guard and Reserves may be closer to 30% short), we are aggressively attacking the issue.

We have focused on simple adjustments to open to a broader pool of American applicants ages 17 to 21 due to 77 percent of that cohort not meeting current eligibility requirements but

possessing the necessary talents we need for the future. We continue to evolve pre-existing restrictions to remove barriers to service. For example, policy changes on body composition during accession and tattoos have already proved beneficial within the first few months. Changes to body composition standards to match DoD standards have yielded over 300 newly eligible recruits in less than three months. Tattoos are the third highest disqualification factor for enlisted accessions. Under the new tattoo policy, 43 applicants enlisted who would have previously needed a waiver to serve. This initiative is on track to add approximately 2,500 recruits in 12 months. We increased initial enlistment bonuses and put \$15 million in FY23 towards reinvigorating the Enlisted College Loan Repayment Program, making the service a more attractive option after higher education. Additionally, Members of Congress are uniquely positioned to support recruiting efforts by nominating talented future cadets to the U.S. Air Force Academy, amplifying stories within communities, and meeting with service members. This essential teamwork is necessary to reach our upcoming youth and share that service is a viable, advantageous, and honorable choice for our great Americans.

CURRENT READINESS

Aircrew Manning

The national pilot shortage continues to challenge our Air Force. In FY22, our Total Force crewed pilot numbers decreased by roughly 250, leaving the Total Force 1,900 pilots short of the 21,000 required to meet global requirements. The persistence of this challenge is based on several factors. Robust airline hiring continues to draw away experienced pilots critical to producing, training, and developing new pilots. The loss of experience will negatively impact production and retention because this loss is most prevalent in the Field Grade Officer pilot year groups. However, we are taking prudent risks in reducing rated staff manning to not take risks in front-line combat capability or pilot production. Said another way, to date our pilot production challenges have not increased risk in our combat readiness. The reduced rated staff manning will affect individual professional development but ensures we have placed experience and talent in the right place to maintain combat-ready forces.

To improve retention and production, we persistently consider and invest in several monetary and non-monetary incentive programs to address our aircrew's quality of life and

service concerns. Monetarily, we sustain the Aviator Bonus, Aviator Incentive Pay, Special Duty Pay, and Critical Skills Pay. These include long and short-term contracts, with the former offering more money upfront for a longer commitment. We restructured our Aviator Bonus to focus on crewed pilots and our most experienced aviators, offering lump sums to initial eligible crewed pilots and assignment of preference incentives for early sign-ups. The bonus maximum increased for longer commitments – specifically to \$50,000 a year. We also highly value the non-monetary incentives for retention and are pursuing various quality-of-life initiatives that address the all-important needs of our Airmen and families. We appreciate this committee’s steady support for these vital retention programs.

Along with aircrew retention, we are continuing pilot production investments. In FY22, Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT) programs produced 1,276 pilots—105 less than the previous year and 224 pilots short of the 1,500 total goal. Maintenance and supply challenges for aging training aircraft compound the throughput timelines. T-38 engine shortages, T-6 and T-38 cartridge and propellant-activated devices (ejection seats) issues, and low GS civilian simulator instructor manning all challenged our ability to meet pilot production quotas. PB24 pursues investments to tackle the sustainment and availability issues (\$12.6M T-38 Safety and Sustainment, \$11.3M T-6 modifications). To mitigate these challenges, we continue to investigate creative solutions to these persistent challenges and develop accelerated training paths. The force has implemented numerous transformational programs to accomplish this production increase through non-traditional means. Initiatives include measures that integrate a spectrum of immersive technology and devices to increase effectiveness during the airborne portion of flight training and improve the readiness of graduates for the challenges of 5th-generation aviation. 19th Air Force pursues avenues and technology to accelerate training timelines while sustaining the integrity of the force’s premier pilot training program.

Undergraduate Helicopter Training-Next departs from the traditional paradigm of requiring initial fixed-wing training before proceeding to rotary-wing training. We expect this to yield more than 90 additional graduates annually and meaningful savings without impacting quality. Air Mobility Fundamentals – Simulator (AMF-S), a simulator-only course now being deployed at scale, provides modern and cost-effective crew and multi-engine fundamentals training, allowing for the divestment of and transition from the T-1 legacy platform. AMF-S will be deployed at all UPT bases by the end of CY23.

The GS Civilian Simulator Instructor (CSI) manning has been a chronic challenge in increasing training throughput. We are pursuing an initiative to offer several incentives to recruit and retain CSIs, including Direct Hire Authority; Recruitment, Relocation, and Retention incentives; and Special Salary Rates.

Combining these transformational programs, the Air Force continues to target a steady-state pilot production potential of 1,580 pilots annually. We will continue to monitor, assess, and improve to ensure we are getting the maximum production in quantity and quality that our current resources enable.

Flying Hour Program (FHP)

The FHP continues to be a valuable metric of aircrew readiness. In FY22, the Air Force executed 100 percent of resourced flight hours, meeting 92 percent of requirements. While we met a high percentage, several factors challenged our ability to fly programmed hours. For example, 6,642 of our total force maintenance positions are currently unfunded, approximately 50 percent of our aircraft maintenance personnel have less than six years of experience, and we face significant supply part shortages and longer-than-expected depot timelines. Timely divestments of less relevant legacy systems will enable us to transfer this qualified maintenance manpower to the appropriate new platforms. Additionally, unforeseen events such as natural disasters, downtime for time compliance technical orders (TCTOs), and other unanticipated contingencies also influence our ability to satisfy our FHP requirements.

The FY24 budget is consistent with FY23 flying hour programming and reflects the hours the Air Force can reasonably fly given existing constraints. Despite the challenges with executing FHP, we continue to search for innovative ways to generate aircraft and quality aircrew training. These include virtual and synthetic training environments to complement real-world training and replicate complex scenarios.

Weapon System Sustainment (WSS)

WSS metrics illustrate a meaningful story regarding divestment to invest in modern technology to bolster readiness. The Air Force maintains substantial capabilities through the WSS portfolio. WSS spans 100 weapon systems, from the oldest B-52 to emerging cyber systems. For FY24, the United States Air Force WSS funding request is \$17.9 billion,

representing an increase of \$1.1 billion over FY23. The FY24 budget funds 87 percent of all WSS requirements, which is the highest in four years [FY23 (86%), FY22 (85%), FY21 (86%).] The WSS portfolio continues to grow as a result of sustaining old aircraft beyond design life, fielding new weapon systems with increased technical complexity, increasing operational requirements in Contract Logistics Support platforms, and navigating above-inflation increases in labor and material costs.

The Air Force's overall objective is to balance future readiness (modernization and recapitalization) and current readiness to support the National Defense Strategy. Competition for finite resources necessitates prioritizing weapon systems most relevant for deterring and defeating a peer adversary in a future conflict. Our requested WSS funding level has been carefully crafted to ensure near-term capabilities are assured while allowing investment in future capabilities.

ENHANCED OPERATIONAL READINESS AND AGILITY

Air Force Force Generation (AFFORGEN) Model

Over the past few years, the Air Force has developed an AFFORGEN model in coordination with the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff. The AFFORGEN model is designed to align how we present forces to combatant commanders with the ability to have predictable, readiness-building training for our Airmen. Over the past two decades, we have offered forces to the joint force in an unsustainable manner, and the readiness impact is becoming more apparent in the face of our pacing challenge. Through AFFORGEN, the USAF has matured and refined what it means to provide combat-credible forces that heighten deterrence and assurance. Doing this refinement better demonstrates the responsiveness and flexibility inherent in airpower and does so in a manner that enables us to sustain readiness today and tomorrow.

Across the force, training and doctrine development focuses on the assumption that our forces will operate in complex, disconnected, and decentralized environments. AFFORGEN provides discipline to the process, ensuring we have sufficient time to train against the highest end threat, avoid over-utilization of the force (crews and platforms), and clarify to the Joint Force what the Air Force can provide to the fight. The AFFORGEN model expands the

traditional 1:2 deploy-to-dwell rotational model to a 1:3 model, thereby creating sustainable capacity that satisfies the requirements of the National Defense Strategy.

AFFORGEN also optimizes resources for appropriate allocation to training and preparation cycles to best ready our forces. We expect all AFFORGEN Force Elements to reach Initial Operating Capability in FY24, at which time the Air Force will fill Combatant Commander requirements using Force Elements.

STRATEGIC READINESS INVESTMENTS

Nuclear Modernization

As the threat to international stability continues to grow and the pace with which the PRC and others develop, the importance of strategic deterrence and long-range strike cannot be understated. The USAF remains fully committed to the recapitalization of the nuclear enterprise. The service's sacred duty is to ensure the President of the United States has flexible and responsive deterrence options in this increasingly adversarial environment. We must provide a robust nuclear readiness portfolio to continue upholding our promise to the Nation.

To deter both large-scale and limited nuclear attacks against the United States, our allies, and partners, the DAF is recapitalizing our two legs of the nuclear triad, our nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) systems, and capabilities to further strengthen regional deterrence. We are modernizing our ICBM forces, bombers, and the F35-A dual-capable fighter aircraft. We are replacing the nearly 50-year-old Minuteman III ICBM with the critically needed LGM-35A Sentinel system. The service recently unveiled the B-21 Raider for the bomber leg, a testament to America's enduring advantages in ingenuity and innovation and proof of our commitment to building advanced deterrence capabilities. Our stalwart B-52 forces, which we are modernizing, and the development of the Long-Range Standoff Weapon bolster the bomber leg. Additionally, the F-35's nuclear certification is on schedule and supports both U.S. and NATO countries. These weapon systems and our robust nuclear command and control provide the flexible and responsive nuclear capabilities needed to deter strategic attacks, assure Allies and partners, and achieve U.S. objectives if deterrence fails. The \$23.1 billion FY24 President's Budget supports these critical efforts and continues to get significant technologies into the hands of the warfighter by the end of the decade.

Modernizing the ICBM leg of the triad includes a heavy reliance on DoD Military Construction (MILCON) as we synchronize new weapons delivery platforms and support facilities. MILCON is consistently affected by the volatility of inflation, tight labor markets, and supply chain issues, as is the case across the country. The DAF will remain transparent in communicating necessary costs and investments to nuclear modernization. However, stable and consistent Congressional funding remains vital to ensuring a safe, secure, and credible nuclear deterrent.

Operational Test and Training Infrastructure (OTTI)

The Air Force uses several physical training ranges to sharpen the combat effectiveness of aircrews; however, the current operational training infrastructure does not deliver the high-end training capability the Air Force and the joint force need. The Air Force is modernizing select ranges based on the Threat Matrix Framework to address this shortfall. The FY24 President's Budget will allow us to continue the FY23 plan to modernize the Nevada Test and Training Range and the Joint Pacific Alaska Range Complex to emulate a peer or near-peer adversary environment by FY30. In addition, we plan to upgrade six primary test ranges and maximize operational airspace for 5th-generation tests and training while maintaining flexibility to accommodate military, public, and environmental concerns. The planned improvements include high-fidelity threat emitters, jammers, and improved targets, as part of an integrated system that allows ranges to function as realistic and reactive adversaries.

The Air Force requires additional investment in synthetic training capabilities to meet the National Defense Strategy priorities. For example, using a robust, dependable, and cost-effective synthetic training capability, the Air Force Joint Simulation Environment (JSE) effort will enable aircrew and other operators to train and maintain readiness against our near-peer adversaries. JSE also helps us overcome live-fly training limitations, such as range size constraints restricting our ability to replicate threats and allowing potential adversaries to observe our training. While we will always leverage the opportunities for synthetic training, we believe that some airmanship can only be gained in the air, and we will continue to refine the balance.

Installation and Infrastructure Resilience with Agile Combat Employment (ACE)

The Air Force is committed to protecting our Airmen, civilians, contractors, families, and resources and the forward operating locations from which they will operate in a future threat environment. We currently rely on a limited number of isolated, forward air bases in the Western Pacific and several fixed bases in Eastern Europe. Advances in potential adversary long-range precision strike capability increasingly threaten these bases. Competitors who continue to invest in weapon magazine depth, range, and accuracy hold our locations, as well as our allies and partners, at risk. Additionally, potential adversaries confront U.S. efforts to gain allied and partner access, basing, and overflight. As a result, we must define and acquire a mixture of cost-effective responses to these threats that enable resilient forward basing.

In concert with Secretary Kendall's Operational Imperatives, the Air Force has developed multiple initiatives to bolster resilient forward basing in a contested environment. Specifically, the Agile Combat Employment (ACE) scheme of maneuver increases readiness by dispersing operations from large bases to networks of smaller locations. ACE complicates the adversary's wartime calculus and denies them the lucrative targeting opportunities known, fixed, and unprotected locations provide. Through ACE, the Air Force is transitioning from an extensive, centralized, unhardened infrastructure to smaller, dispersed, resilient, and adaptive basing that includes active and passive defenses. Refining ACE continues to be worked at all echelons of the force, including updating Air Force Doctrine, testing in ongoing exercises and worldwide training, and innovating at the unit level. In FY24, \$1.2 billion funds the resilient forward-basing operational imperative, including ACE funding. We continue our work on identifying and creating capabilities and formalized training programs to field an agile force that sets the theater and establishes distributed command and control.

ACE requires a sound mixture of investments to ensure its effectiveness. The force must invest in and acquire prepositioned essential supplies and fuel, improved agile expeditionary communications, and active and passive defenses of distributed operating bases. We must expand the number of bases from which we can operate and provide a mix of defenses, concealment, and hardening, as well as the ability to maintain logistics support from multiple locations. In key areas, ACE also requires war reserve materiel, aircraft support, and other logistics. Additionally, a critical enabler of ACE is the development and training of multi-

capable Airmen. Supplying today's Airmen with modernized training programs and tools is paramount to actualizing this development.

Without support from Congress and our regional Allies and partners, our investments are not assured. We must continue to develop and build partner nation capabilities to defend our air and space bases and guarantee the means to effectively communicate with our allies so we may all be ready for the future as one team.

CONCLUSION

As we head into a pivotal year, our Airmen continue to innovate against the challenges they confront and remain our greatest asset. Airmen deliver airpower time and again despite manning challenges, aging fleets, and cumbersome supply and technical issues. Their devotion to duty, resilience in the face of adversity, collective enthusiasm, and innovative spirit deserves our admiration and unwavering support. Our Airmen answer our Nation's call in an era of strategic uncertainty that demands unprecedented agility. Our team has the intellect and energy required to overcome any challenge—at home or abroad.

What is important here is an investment in readiness will ensure that our force will have what they need for the fight tomorrow and be well-equipped to meet the future. Modernization is readiness—tomorrow's readiness. Investing in modernization is necessary to prepare our homeland defenses for existing threats and anticipated threats for tomorrow. We understand that hard decisions must still be made, which require some significant risk-taking at levels we might not be used to shouldering. The committee, the Department of Defense, and the Air Force share the tough decisions and risks. We will work collectively across the Department of Defense and look forward to the continued partnership with this committee and this Congress to accurately assess the impact of our decisions and to deliberately assume and mitigate risks accordingly.

On behalf of the 689,000 Total Force Airmen and their families, thank you for helping us optimize and ready our force to defend this great Nation.