

Opening Statement on Air Force Posture
Chairman John McCain
March 3, 2016

This Committee meets today to consider the posture of the Air Force in the context of our review and oversight of the Fiscal Year 2017 defense budget request. I welcome our witnesses, Secretary of the Air Force Deborah James, and Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Mark Welsh.

General Welsh, I understand this may be the last time you will appear before this committee. Thank you for not cheering. I just want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to you and your family for 40 years of service and sacrifice in the defense of our Nation, and wish you Godspeed in your future endeavors.

Twenty-five years of continuous deployments, troubled acquisition programs, and frequent aircraft divestments have left us with the oldest and smallest Air Force in history. And the combination of relentless operational tempo and misguided reductions in defense spending in recent years has depleted readiness: Today less than half of Air Force fighter squadrons are fully combat mission ready, and the Air Force does not anticipate a return to full spectrum readiness for another decade.

Meanwhile, potential adversaries are developing and fielding fifth-generation fighters, advanced air defense systems, and sophisticated space, cyber and electronic warfare capabilities that are rapidly shrinking America's military technological advantage and holding our aircraft at greater risk over greater distances.

Despite temporary relief from the arbitrary spending caps imposed by the Budget Control Act, including through last year's Bipartisan Budget Act, we are still placing an unnecessary and dangerous burden on the backs of our Airmen.

Given the obvious needs of our Air Force to restore readiness, recapitalize our combat aircraft fleet, and invest in modernization, the President should have requested a defense budget that reflects the scale and scope of the national security threats we face and the growing demands they impose on our Airmen.

Instead, he chose to request the lowest level of defense spending authorized by last year's budget agreement and submit a defense budget that is actually less in real dollars than last year—despite the fact that operational requirements have grown.

This leaves the Air Force \$3.4 billion short of what the Air Force said last year it would need for fiscal year 2017. Given this budgetary shortfall, I am concerned the Air Force will not be able to meet the requirement outlined in the 2014 QDR: to simultaneously defeat an adversary while denying the objectives of another.

The shortfall in this year's budget has forced the Air Force to make a number of painful and undesirable decisions. The most significant was to slow procurement of the F-35A by 45 aircraft over the next five years. This budget-driven decision will likely increase the cost of this already costly aircraft, while exacerbating what defense experts call the modernization "bow wave" for other critical Air Force programs over the next ten years, which the Air Force admits it cannot afford at current funding levels. It also means that it will take even longer for the Air Force to address the tactical fighter shortfall looming in the next decade.

While we recognize the need for additional resources, this committee will continue to exercise rigorous oversight on Air Force acquisition programs, including the KC-46A tanker program, the Presidential Aircraft Replacement, and the GPS Operational Control System, recently labeled the Air Force's "number one troubled program." If the Air Force, and the Department of Defense more broadly, wish to convince the American people that they need more taxpayer dollars, they must show that they are efficiently and wisely using the resources they already have.

In particular, questions persist about the validity of the F-35 program of record quantity. Just consider that 815 F-35As have been deferred from delivery to the Air Force since 2002, and the service's latest procurement profile now projects the last F-35A to be delivered in the year 2040. At a certain point, a 38-year acquisition program runs the risk of producing obsolescence, especially when our adversaries are accelerating technological developments to counter the F-35. I look forward to reviewing the Secretary of Defense's decision on revalidation of the total F-35 program of record quantity, which is due to this Committee by May 25, 2016.

The decision to further delay F-35 procurement also underscores the folly of the Air Force's plan to retire the A-10 fleet before a proven close air support replacement is fielded. Much fanfare was made about the Air Force's decision not to divest A-10 aircraft in fiscal year 2017. But beginning in fiscal year 2018, the Air Force again plans to retire the entire A-10 fleet by 2021.

As the Air Force proceeds with needed modernization, I recognize the need for a new bomber to replace our aging fleet of B-52, B-1, and B-2 aircraft. A long range,

penetrating strike capability is vital to deterring our enemies and reassuring our allies in increasingly contested environments in Europe and the Asia-Pacific.

However, I remain seriously concerned about the acquisition strategy for the B-21 Long Range Strike Bomber, especially the use of a cost-plus contract for the development of this aircraft. I am still not convinced that this program will not repeat the failures of past acquisition programs such as the F-35. I will carefully examine every legislative option to ensure that the Congress can fulfill our dual obligations to the American people—providing our warfighters with the necessary capability to defend this country, and to do so at the lowest possible cost and shortest period of time.

Similarly, ending the use of Russian rocket engines remains a top priority for this committee. Department leaders have correctly drawn attention to Russia's growing development of military capabilities to threaten U.S. national security in space. And yet, the greatest risk in this regard is that Vladimir Putin continues to hold our national security space launch capability in the palm of his hand through the Department's continued dependence on Russian rocket engines. This is a national security threat, in addition to a moral outrage, at a time when Russian forces continue to destabilize Ukraine – including nearly 500 attacks in the past week, as General Breedlove, the Commander of European Command, testified on Tuesday.

And yet, the Treasury Department remains unwilling to sanction Roscosmos, the Russian parent company of the manufacturer of the RD-180, which is controlled by two sanctioned cronies of Vladimir Putin. This suggests a level of hypocrisy in U.S. sanctions policy that will only make it harder to convince our European allies to renew their own sanctions on Russia this summer.

This Committee wants to find a constructive solution to eliminate our dependence on Russian rocket engines immediately without compromising future competition, a goal that Secretary James admitted was possible in testimony in January.

Finally, I want to express my continuing concern with the Air Force's mismanagement of its remotely piloted aircraft, or RPA, enterprise. The Air Force's MQ-1 and MQ-9 community remains undermanned and overworked. Yet despite the Air Force's stated need for an additional 3,000 RPA manpower authorizations, the Air Force's end strength remains the same as last year.

And while the Congress authorized greater retention bonuses for RPA pilots, the Air Force not to provide them out of a sense of "fairness." After years of warnings

that RPA pilots and maintainers are leaving in droves, this was a missed opportunity and a damaging mistake. I look forward to your explanation for this action.

Senator Reed.