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SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS,
UNITED STATES SENATE

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

PRESENTATION TO COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS
UNITED STATES SENATE

SUBJECT: The Fiscal Year 2025 U.S. Air Force Budget Request for Readiness

STATEMENT OF: General James C. Slife
Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force

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INTRODUCTION

The Air Force, as an indispensable contributor to our Nation's security, stands ready to defend the homeland, rapidly deploy and employ combat power globally, and contribute to the success of our Joint and Coalition teammates. With Airpower's speed, range, and flexibility—as well as two-thirds of the Nation's nuclear triad—we offer powerful options for our Nation's leaders. Our mission—to “Fly, Fight, & Win...Airpower Anytime, Anywhere”—is underpinned by our readiness today and in the future.

The President's Fiscal Year 2025 budget request continues the Air Force's implementation of the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and aligns with the 2023 Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA). The Service's global commitments have not changed and the urgent need for modernization has not abated. The costs associated with maintaining our readiness have increased while the FRA limits on the budget request do not keep pace with inflation. Our need to provide a safe, strong, secure, and credible deterrent to opportunistic challengers remains as vital as ever. These factors place enormous pressure on our budget.

Funding is such that today's readiness is at the highest level of risk deemed acceptable, balancing today's requirements with the need to modernize to maintain readiness in the future. The Air Force is being deliberate and thoughtful in managing short-term risk to readiness to prepare our forces for both enduring competition as well as acute and persistent threats.

CURRENT READINESS

End Strength and Retention

The Air Force's success hinges on our Airmen. By balancing budgetary constraints with the risk inherent in carrying shortages in some fields, our objective is to sustain a 320,000 person active-duty force as was authorized in the FY24 National Defense Authorization Act. The FY25 budget request proposes reducing the Air Force End Strength (E/S) from the 324,700 requested

in FY24 to 320,000 active duty members. These reductions accompany the proposed divestment of legacy platforms in order to fund necessary operational capabilities required to deter—and fight and win if necessary—in the strategic environment of today and tomorrow.

Retention rates of both officers and enlisted personnel are declining to projected stabilization points. For FY25, we project a personnel inventory increase as we apply the full impact of our recruitment improvements, including Initial Enlisted Bonuses and an additional 191 Recruiters. Furthermore, we are increasing the number of enlisted retention programs under our FY24 Selective Retention Bonuses (SRB) program, adding a retention bonus to 19 new enlisted career fields, for a total of 83 career fields under the program.

Aircrew Manning

The national pilot shortage continues to challenge our Air Force. In FY24, the Total Force was approximately 1,900 pilots short of the 19,136 required to meet global requirements. Robust airline hiring practices continue to draw away experienced pilots at the Field Grade Officer level, who are critical to training the next generation. We have prioritized rated manning in operations, test, and training units by reducing rated staff manning, alleviating risks in front-line combat capability and pilot production in order to maintain combat readiness.

To improve retention and production, we continue to invest in several monetary and non-monetary incentive programs. Monetarily, we sustain the Aviator Bonus, Aviator Incentive Pay, Special Duty Pay, and Critical Skills Pay. The Aviator Bonus includes long and short-term contracts, with some offering more money up front for a longer commitment (up to \$50,000 annually). We have also implemented non-monetary incentives, such as base of preference in-lieu-of a bonus, for retention and are pursuing various quality-of-life initiatives, improving Child Development Centers, and spousal licensure. that address the needs of our Airmen and families.

The Air Force is also continuing pilot production investments. In FY23, the Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT) program produced 1,315 pilots, 39 more than the previous year but 185 short of the annual pilot production goal of 1,500. Maintenance and supply challenges for aging training aircraft and low civil service simulator instructor manning compound to undermine production totals. The Air Force is addressing the Civilian Simulator Instructor (CSI) manning issue by pursuing all available authorities, including contract options, alternate civilian pay scales, and the recently approved up to 50 percent Group Retention waiver. The FY24 budget tackled the sustainment and availability issues for training aircraft and we are already beginning to see an uptick in throughput based on work using the “Theory of Constraints” methodology. Additionally, we have implemented several non-traditional means of pilot production, including integration of immersive technology, to increase effectiveness during the airborne portion of flight training and better prepare graduates for 5th-generation aviation.

Flying Hour Program (FHP)

The FY25 budget is consistent with FY24 flying hour programming, with an increase in 5th-generation flying hours. Although this programming falls below our desired training requirement, this budget reflects the hours the Air Force can reasonably fly due to increasing sustainment requirements of legacy systems outpacing the Air Force’s ability to resource them. We continue to search for innovative ways, such as virtual reality technology and synthetic training environments, to ensure quality aircrew training in the face of shortfalls in our ability to put aircraft in the air.

Weapon System Sustainment (WSS)

The real cost of force sustainment and flying operations is outpacing inflation planning factors, which challenges our ability to produce the ready, lethal force required by the National

Defense Strategy. For FY25, the Air Force WSS funding request is \$18.8 billion—an increase of \$886 million over FY24—which funds 87 percent of all WSS requirements, keeping pace with rising depot maintenance costs and inflation. The WSS portfolio continues to grow due to aircraft sustainment beyond design life, fielding new weapons systems with increased technical complexity, increasing requirements for Contract Logistics Support, and inflation above planned levels in labor and material costs. Competition for finite resources necessitates prioritizing weapons systems most relevant to deterring and defeating a peer adversary in a future conflict. The FY25 request continues to ensure near-term capabilities are sustained at an acceptable level of risk while allowing investment in future capabilities to mitigate future risk.

ENHANCED OPERATIONAL READINESS AND AGILITY

Air Force's Force Generation (AFFORGEN) Model

The operational demands on our force over the past two decades detrimentally impacted readiness. Thus, AFFORGEN, a model to enable the Air Force to meet warfighter requirements, is evolving to meet the challenges of the present and future strategic environments. Through AFFORGEN, the Air Force can provide a sustainable force offering to meet rotational requirements, generate readiness to underwrite a credible deterrence, and establish a predictable deployment flow for our Airmen. We have already received positive feedback from our Airmen regarding their ability to work and train together prior to deploying under this model.

Air Task Force (ATF)

In concert with AFFORGEN, the Air Force is also evolving our force presentation model. Over the past 20 years, the Air Force provided forces by aggregating Airmen from many different bases at a deployed location and forming them into units while deployed. Airmen typically were unacquainted with each other or did not train together before arriving at their

deployed location. This approach was efficient and generally acceptable because we fought from large, fixed bases with relative sanctuary and engaged the adversary at the time and place of our choosing. Future conflicts will not allow for such luxuries—our Airmen must have the opportunity to train together as a team and be ready to fight as a cohesive unit on their first day in theater. The ATF provides that opportunity.

The Air Force's force presentation model is ultimately moving toward a single complete, cohesive fighting force from a single wing at a single base. The Expeditionary Air Base (XAB), now being fielded, is the first step in this process. The XAB sources the command-and-control team as well as support personnel from one base; the rest are sourced from up to 50 other locations, a 45 to 50 percent decrease from the 90-100 locations of the previous model.

The next evolution of our force presentation model, the ATF, is planned to start in the fall of 2025. ATFs will source personnel from just three or four bases, allowing teams of 80-160 Airmen to train together in the 12 months preceding deployment. ATFs provide the Joint Force with a more ready force on day one in theater and allow the Air Force to better articulate capacity, readiness, and risk.

Agile Combat Employment (ACE)

We currently rely on a limited number of isolated, forward air bases in the Western Pacific and several fixed bases in Europe and the Middle East. Advances in potential adversary long-range precision strike capability increasingly threaten these bases. Competitors will continue to invest in weapon magazine depth, range, and accuracy, putting U.S., Allied, and partner locations at risk, as well as challenging U.S. efforts to gain important regional access, basing, and overflight permissions.

In response, the Air Force has developed multiple initiatives to bolster resilient forward basing in a contested environment. Specifically, the ACE scheme of maneuver increases readiness by dispersing operations from large bases to networks of smaller, resilient, adaptive locations. ACE complicates the adversary's wartime calculus and denies them the lucrative targeting opportunities which known, fixed, and thinly protected locations provide. Our ACE concepts continue to be deployed at all echelons of the force, and we are also updating Air Force Doctrine, testing in ongoing exercises and worldwide training, and innovating at the unit level.

The FY25 ACE investment, \$538 million, will continue to build on previous efforts. These investments include the packaging, storage, and sustainment of prepositioned essential war reserve materiel, airfield restoration around the Indo-Pacific, improved agile expeditionary communications, and "Mission Ready Airmen" training. Our airfield restoration efforts aim to 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.

The ability to defend forward air bases from increasing air and missile threats in theater remains a critical component of the ACE concept. Consequently, the Air Force increased its FY25 budget request for limited base defense by \$10.4 million to \$83.6 million, funding cost-effective capabilities to enhance the resilience and protection of dispersed bases. This investment consists primarily of passive defense, infrastructure resiliency, operational recovery measures, and sustainment of fielded Counter-small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (C-sUAS) capabilities. It also includes a limited organic Air Force Air Base Air Defense (ABAD) active defense capability to provide low-cost expeditionary protection for air bases supporting ACE that might otherwise be undefended due to Joint air and missile defense capacity shortfalls. The deployed

ABAD system is not by itself intended or sufficient to provide robust protection against all threats and does not reduce the need for additional investment in Joint defenses.

STRATEGIC READINESS INVESTMENTS

Nuclear Modernization

Nuclear deterrence is foundational for our national security. Rapid Chinese and Russian fielding of modernized nuclear weapons reinforce the importance of maintaining a strong and modernized strategic posture. Accordingly, the Air Force remains fully committed to recapitalizing the nuclear enterprise. As we await the outcome of the Nunn-McCurdy review of the LGM-35A Sentinel and delivery of the B-21 Raider, our current nuclear force and systems remain ready to respond to the Nation's needs. The FY25 budget request contains funding for significant B-52 aircraft upgrades, including urgently needed engine replacement which will allow for longer unrefueled flight ranges, freeing tanker aircraft for other high-priority operations. Additionally, several F-35A squadrons are now certified for nuclear missions. These near-term endeavors provide flexible, credible deterrence options for our Nation and reassurance to our Allies and Partners.

Operational Test and Training Infrastructure (OTTI)

The Air Force uses several physical training ranges to sharpen the combat effectiveness of aircrews. Yet, the current operational training infrastructure is insufficient for the high-end training capability the Air Force and the Joint Force need. The FY25 budget request will allow us to continue to modernize select ranges, including the Nevada Test and Training Range and the Joint Pacific Alaska Range Complex, to emulate a pacing adversary by FY30. In addition, we plan to improve six primary test ranges with high-fidelity threat emitters, jammers, and improved

targets as part of an integrated system that allows ranges to function as realistic and reactive adversaries, greatly enhancing 5th-generation training.

The Air Force's FY25 budget request includes \$346.2 million for the Joint Simulation Environment (JSE), further enabling aircrew and other operators to train and maintain readiness against potential near-peer adversaries. JSE overcomes current live-fly training limitations, such as range size, which restrict our ability to replicate threats and allows potential adversaries to observe our training. Still, some airmanship can only be gained in the air, and we will continue to strike an appropriate balance between simulated and aircraft-based training.

CONCLUSION

The Air Force is in a race to maintain its position as the world's best Air Force. The United States faces a competitor whose national purchasing power exceeds our own and is actively developing a force to defeat air power. Conflict is not inevitable—we must seek to prevent it through readiness. Modernization is also readiness—tomorrow's readiness. The budget addresses mission requirements while taking care of our most important asset—our people—and fulfilling the role of the Service as part of the Joint, Interagency, and Combined team that our Nation depends on.