



Fact Sheet: Close Air Support Capability in Jeopardy

When ground troops are outnumbered and pinned down by the enemy, they will often call for air support to shift the engagement in their favor. In those chaotic circumstances, the pilots supporting them need to be experts in the close air support mission. Dropping bombs or firing rockets and guns at targets close enough to friendly ground troops that they can feel the blast effect is the most delicate combat role of military aviation. The A-10 Thunderbolt II is a remarkable aircraft designed specifically to perform this mission. Just as important, the mere existence of the program ensures a cadre of highly skilled close air support specialists. The U.S. military risks losing this critical capability if the A-10 program is canceled without a dedicated attack aircraft replacement.

The Problem

The [1948 Key West Agreement](#) requires the Air Force to provide close air support to U.S. troops in combat. The Air Force's efforts to retire the A-10 program without an adequate replacement will lead to unnecessary deaths in future conflicts. The A-10 is an incredible aircraft, but the cadre of close air support professionals is more important. If Air Force leaders have their way, the expertise of the attack community will evaporate as A-10 pilots are reassigned to multirole communities or retire. Preserving the A-10 is a stopgap measure until a new dedicated close air support aircraft can be fielded.

Pentagon and defense industry leaders [sold the F-35 as a direct replacement](#) for the A-10. So far, the F-35 has yet to demonstrate that it can be an effective replacement, and Air Force leaders have yet to release the results of the close air support comparative test against the A-10 that took place in 2018. Moreover, Air Force leaders are not training pilots to perform this critical mission. The most current F-35A Ready Aircrew Program Tasking Memorandum, covering [fiscal years 2023 and 2024](#), relegates close air support to the status of [a secondary mission](#). According to the memorandum, Air Force leaders do not require any close air support training sorties for F-35 pilots.

The Solution

Congress should reject the Air Force's proposal to retire the A-10 program. Congress should further require the Air Force to complete the A-10 re-winging program and appropriate funds to fully support the fleet. This is necessary to extend the fleet's service life long enough for a replacement attack program to progress through the acquisition process. Members should also demand to see the report from the close air support comparative test so they have all the information they need to make future decisions.

Another war is inevitable, and despite assertions about the changing character of warfare, wars always come down to young people fighting each other on the ground. If young Americans are sent into battle without adequate air support, many will die needlessly until Air Force leaders are compelled to improvise after the war starts. This happened during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, but such improvisations were unnecessary in our most recent wars because A-10 pilots were trained and ready.

Members of the 118th Congress have an opportunity to reassert civilian control of the military while also being on the right side of history by rejecting the Air Force's plans in this case.

Contact

Greg Williams, Director of the Center for Defense Information, Project On Government Oversight,
greg.williams@pogo.org