The F-35 Joint Strike Fighters in the operational test fleet at California’s Edwards Air Force Base are suffering from low readiness rates that may threaten the successful completion of the crucial combat-testing phase of the program, as shown in a chart created by the Joint Program Office’s Integrated Test Force and obtained by the Project On Government Oversight (POGO).

The revelation that the F-35 program is struggling to overcome the last hurdle before it can legally move into full-rate production follows numerous recent reports, including by POGO as well as the Government Accountability Office, indicating the most expensive weapon system in history is far from ready to face current or future threats.

The 23 aircraft in the test fleet achieved an abysmal “fully mission capable” rate of 8.7 percent in June 2019 according to the chart, which covers December 2018 through mid-July 2019. A fully mission capable aircraft can perform all of its assigned missions, a particularly important readiness measure for multi-mission programs such as the F-35. The June rate was actually an improvement over the previous month, when the fleet managed a rate of just 4.7 percent. Since the beginning of operational testing in December 2018, the fleet has had an average fully mission capable rate of just 11 percent.

The Pentagon’s operational testing
According to the program director, the F-35s in the test fleet need at least an 80% availability rate; but testing data shows that the fleet is far below that goal, as of June 2019.

The F-35 program, a frequently failing component is the Distributed Aperture System. This system provides the pilot warnings of incoming missiles and generates the imagery for the $400,000 helmet that the pilot wears. The F-35 can still fly with problems like this, and, using the data links between aircraft, some of the information from a functioning system on another F-35 can fill in a blind spot in a degraded one. But this only works up to a point, and to fully test the program’s capabilities, all systems must function properly.

Pentagon officials declined to comment on this report.

The operational test fleet’s low readiness rates are surprising, considering the high-profile nature of the fleet’s mission. Under federal law, a major defense acquisition program cannot legally proceed to full-rate production until the director of operational test and evaluation (DOT&E) submits a final report to the secretary of defense and Congress following the conclusion of the testing process. Because of this, the operational testing fleet receives extra support in the form of larger maintenance crews, and is presumably higher on the priority list to receive spare parts.

The operational test fleet readiness chart shows that aircraft being used for operational testing are actually performing worse than the rest of the F-35 fleet, which could achieve only a 27 percent fully mission capable rate, according to the latest available figures.

This comes on the heels of a recent Air Force Times report showing that readiness figures across all of the Air Force’s aircraft programs have steadily decreased over the past eight years. In 2012, all 5,400 aircraft averaged a “mission capable” rate of 77.9 percent. By 2018, that figure had slid to 69.97 percent. A mission capable aircraft can perform at least one of its assigned tasks.

Last September, recognizing the brewing aircraft-readiness crisis, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis issued a directive ordering the services to achieve an 80 percent mission capable rate by the end of September 2019. The Air Force figures indicate the service is unlikely to meet that goal.

While the former secretary’s directive was a step in the right direction, he set a relatively low bar for the services. He stipulated a goal for mission capable rates, rather than for fully mission capable rates, the far more
relevant measure of a fleet’s readiness for combat.

The Air Force provided several explanations for the poor rates. A spokesman told the Air Force Times the main reason for the declining rates is the age of the fleet, currently an average of 28 years. A perusal of the figures in the Air Force Times article casts doubt on that claim. Newer aircraft like the F-22 and F-35 are averaging lower mission capable rates than the legacy aircraft they are slated to replace. For example, the F-22 fleet had a mission capable rate of 51.74 percent in 2018, while the older F-15E had a rate of 71.16 percent. The F-35A fleet averaged a mission capable rate of 49.55 percent, while the F-16D had a rate of 66.24 percent, and the A-10C had a 72.51 mission capable rate.

Colonel Bill Maxwell, head of the Air Force’s maintenance division, also attempted to allay concerns, telling the Air Force Times that the Air Force’s overall mission capable rate is just a “snapshot in time.”

Be that as it may, the F-35 operational test fleet readiness chart POGO obtained clearly shows six months’ worth of data for the aircraft program at the center of all the services’ future plans. It shows fluctuations in the relative rates throughout the reporting period, but the readiness rates during this critical combat-testing process have been consistently bad.

The Pentagon is expected to decide in October whether the F-35 program is ready to move to full-rate production. In light of the disclosure of the testing fleet’s struggles, it is difficult to see how the current testing program can be completed on time.

This could be a revealing moment for Robert Behler, the operational testing director. He could, in order to meet the Pentagon’s arbitrary schedule, call a halt to the tests and give the go-ahead to move to full-rate production without completing the approved testing plan. But such a move would call into question the integrity of the testing process and the purpose of his office. And the troops who must trust their lives to this aircraft would have reason to question its combat-worthiness, while the American people would have all the more reason to doubt that a program they have funded for the past 17-plus years can actually perform as advertised.

This article and its sources can be found at: https://www.pogo.org/investigation/2019/08/f-35-test-fleet-struggling-with-low-readiness-rates/

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Déjà Chopper: Why the Marines Are Buying a Troubled Aircraft Again

It’s one way to keep their hold on a mission they haven’t carried out in nearly 70 years

BY MARK THOMPSON

The Navy’s fleet of H-53 helicopters has a terrible safety record. That’s been made clear in a new documentary film, *Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?*, which dives into the welter of wrongs that led to the 2014 death of Wes Van Dorn, a 2007 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy who left behind a widow and their two children when his MH-53E crashed into the Atlantic Ocean moments after a worn electrical wire ignited an on-board inferno. The movie is a searing indictment of the Pentagon’s business-as-usual attitude that too often lurks behind the deaths of the young men and women wearing their nation’s military uniforms. In this case, 132 deaths aboard both the Navy’s MH-53E mine-sweeping chopper and its near-identical twin, the Marines’ troop-and-cargo carrying CH-53E.

The film makes clear that Van Dorn and more than 100 others made the ultimate sacrifice for what the Pentagon itself conceded in 2015 was an “appalling state of readiness.” Among other problems, frayed wires, flammable fuel lines, and flawed bearings had made the chopper too dangerous to fly. “It was a failure of leadership. It was a failure of maintenance. It was a failure of operations,” Navy Captain Todd Flannery, an MH-53 com-

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

JASON PALADINO

This fall, we hired Jason Paladino as a national security investigator. Before coming to POGO, Jason won top journalism awards for his investigation into a troubled Navy and Marine Corps helicopter program, and was an associate producer for the documentary film *Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?* based on his original reporting. In December 2018, Mark Thompson wrote about the film (republished below).
mander, told Virginian-Pilot reporter Mike Hixenbaugh in the fall of 2013. As the military tried to keep its choppers airborne on the front lines over Afghanistan and Iraq, it shortchanged those flying back home. Meanwhile, Van Dorn would keep piloting his ailing aircraft until he perished, along with two others, several months after Flannery’s statement.

When I wrote about a similar rash of helicopter crashes 35 years ago, the Army was already moving beyond its Vietnam-era AH-1 Cobras and UH-1 Huey helicopters to a new generation of UH-60 Black Hawks and AH-64 Apaches. To their credit, Army leaders took action in the wake of that investigation. They appointed a blue-ribbon panel, which led to the grounding of hundreds of helicopters, and ordered a fix that has all but eliminated the deadly problem that had killed nearly 250 troops. But the Marines, in their relentless push to remain relevant and keep the hopes of a glorious replay of an amphibious assault alive, have doubled down: instead of buying new, safer choppers, they’re simply replacing their CH-53Es with beefier CH-53Ks, and hoping history doesn’t repeat itself when it comes to crashes.

In addition to this new class of H-53s (the Marines got their first one in May, and a second is due in early 2019), there are two kinds of H-53s still flying: the Marines’ cargo-carrying CH-53E Super Stallions (capable of carrying 55 troops) and the Navy’s minesweeping MH-53E Sea Dragon. Historically, the Navy’s MH-53Es have been crashing at a rate about three times the service average (the Navy recently has stopped providing such information on its website). The Marines plan to keep their CH-53Es flying until at least 2030.

The new CH-53K King Stallion boasts three 7,500 horsepower engines and a so-called fly-by-wire “glass cockpit,” and is capable of cruising at 172 miles an hour. It’s the Pentagon’s biggest (99 feet long) and heaviest (44 tons fully loaded) helicopter. Its drive train, which sends the engines’ power to the rotor blades, weighs more, by itself, than one of the Army’s medium-lift UH-60 Black Hawk choppers.

Able to ferry nearly 14 tons of Marines or the armor needed to protect them, the Marines say the CH-53K is critical to their ability to storm enemy shores. “The new heavy lifter will allow the U.S. Marine Corps and international militaries to move troops and equipment from ship to shore, and to higher altitude terrain, more quickly and effectively than ever before,” says Sikorsky, which since 2015 has been part of Lockheed Martin, the Pentagon’s number-one supplier. “I am very proud of the work accomplished to deliver the most powerful helicopter ever designed into the hands of our Marines,” Lieutenant General Steven Rudder, the Marines’ top pilot, said in May when the Corps received its first CH-53K.

The Marines have long feared becoming simply a smaller version of the Army. Those concerns have grown since 9/11, when the Marines fought far from any shoreline in Afghanistan and Iraq (although Marines have

While the Marines have long boasted about being the cheapest military service, that’s not true of the service’s latest helicopter. The Marine Corps wants 200 CH-53Ks for $31 billion. That works out to $156 million each—the world’s most costly chopper.
in 2010. “Looking ahead, I do think it is proper to ask whether large-scale amphibious assault landings along the lines of Inchon are feasible,” he said, citing the 1950 Marine-led invasion that tilted the Korean War in favor of the U.S. and its UN allies. The next year, Gates killed the Marines’ so-called “swimming tank”—the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle—but only after taxpayers had been soaked for $3 billion.

The CH-53K—another key in any Marine amphibious assault—is projected to cost ten times as much. It now has an estimated price tag of $31 billion for 200 copies—an eye-watering $156 million each. In development since 2006, the CH-53Ks were originally slated to begin operational service in 2015, but that date has slipped to late next year. There are storm clouds on the horizon about future schedule slips, which inexorably would drive up its eventual cost. The growing price of the helicopter is likely to make officers leery of sending it into harm’s way. Cautious commanders might prefer to keep costly airframes protected by dropping Marines where it’s relatively safe and forcing them to hike into combat.

The CH-53K program has followed a familiar and vexing Pentagon procurement path. In its most recent assessment, issued in late 2017, the Pentagon’s testing office noted that its blueprints were still in flux—despite being under development for more than a decade, and a derivative of a helicopter that has been flying since the 1960s. “Sikorsky is working on but has not yet resolved multiple problems discovered during testing,” the testers noted. “These include airspeed indication anomalies, main rotor gearbox low reliability, hot gas impingement on aircraft structures, tail boom and tail rotor structural problems, main rotor dampers overheating, fuel system anomalies, high temperatures in the #2 engine bay, and hot gas ingestion by the #2 engine reducing available power.”

There are echoes of the earlier H-53Es’ woes in these shortcomings. “Unexpected vibrations” in the helicopter’s tail threaten nearby hydraulic lines—key ingredients for an onboard fire like the one that killed Van Dorn.
The tail rotor is cracking and the main rotor is over-heating. One of the chopper’s engines can lose power while hovering as it gulps a second engine’s hot exhaust, jeopardizing its ability to lift heavy loads. “The CH-53E experiences similar degradations under similar hover conditions,” Pentagon testers reported. On top of these issues, testing of the CH-53K’s ability to withstand enemy threats “is not funded,” the Pentagon testing office said, with key tests of the main and tail rotor systems not slated to happen until after it has begun flying real-world missions. Any shortcomings that surface “will need to be addressed later with engineering change proposals”—a fancy way of saying taxpayers will almost certainly be footing the bill.

Beyond that, its flight-test plan was only 10 percent complete and slipping “due to technical problems discovered during testing.” And—replicating what the Corps did with its F-35B fighter—the Marines plan to declare the aircraft operational before its initial operational test and evaluation is finished. Critical “air survivability equipment” won’t be ready when the CH-53Ks begin flying operational missions. The Navy, which is in charge of buying Marine aircraft, plans to “retrofit it to the fleet as it becomes available.” (So much for the Marines’ perpetual claim that they take all necessary steps to keep their young troops as safe as possible. Another clue that they’re skimping: while the Army was spending $1.2 million—and 6,000 hours of wrench-turning—to bring each of its choppers up to snuff after punishing tours in the Middle East, the Marines spent only $100,000 and 935 hours doing the same for their CH-53Es).

One way to goose production of new aircraft is to let your older ones fall apart. That’s the result, if not the aim, of the Marines’ approach to their older H-53Es. Shortchanging maintenance accounts left only one out of every five CH-53Es able to fly at any one time in 2015. That caused a deadly snowball: fewer helicopters flying meant less training for pilots, aircrews and mechanics, which contributed to accidents like the one that killed Lieut. Van Dorn. “The aircraft has a poor safety record for crashes and other mishaps,” Navy Captain Pat Everly, who commanded three squadrons of the choppers at Norfolk, Va., told Bloomberg Businessweek in 2016. “It’s a challenge” to keep them flying, he added, “but once they’re in the air, they’re safe.”

While Sikorsky built the first four CH-53K test choppers in Florida, it decided to move production to Sikorsky’s home plant in Connecticut after several states competed to land the prize. Connecticut snared it in 2016 with a $220 million package of taxpayer-funded grants and tax breaks to Lockheed Martin. The deal includes $140 million from Connecticut to Sikorsky that Hartford will borrow at an estimated cost of $30 million in interest. Connecticut lawmakers approved the deal by a margin of 171 to 7; two weeks later Sikorsky’s unionized workforce voted 2,104 to 140 in favor of contract concessions sought by Sikorsky to keep their jobs in Connecticut (the average job at Sikorsky paid $94,000 in 2016).

Lockheed had warned Connecticut that building the choppers in the Nutmeg State would cost the company $400 million more than in other states seeking the deal, which included Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and Texas.

So Connecticut coughed up the cash, borrowed or otherwise, to seal the deal. The program “is expected to pump an estimated $69.2 billion into the state’s economy” through 2032.

That’s a lot of money.

It’s just too bad that so much of that money is going to an antiquated, all-but-obsolete mission. And that too much of it is going to pay for shiny new aircraft rolling off the production line and into the air, while too little is likely to be spent on keeping them flying safely after take-off.
The Pentagon insists it needs its Cold War-era nuclear triad of bombers, submarines, and land-based missiles to ensure at least one of those legs will survive following a surprise enemy attack. That's so the U.S. can respond to such a bolt-out-of-the-blue strike with an atomic rejoinder of its own. It's a long-standing, although dubious, refrain.

“We found that the Soviet threat to the weapon systems of the land and sea legs had ... been overstated,” a top Government Accounting Office official at the time told Congress 26 years ago. “For the sea leg, this was reflected in unsubstantiated allegations about likely future breakthroughs in Soviet submarine detection technologies.”

The Pentagon's logic undergirding the triad, such as it is, is in danger of falling apart: The U.S. military is on the cusp of putting all of those nuclear eggs into a single basket.

Northrop Grumman is developing the Air Force's B-21, the nation's only new strategic bomber, as well as the motors that power the nuclear missiles launched by Navy submarines. And now, as of July 25, it is the lone American company seeking to build a new generation of land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). That's the day Boeing, which has built the nation's ICBMs for 60 years, announced it was junking its bid to build the newest such missiles. It contends that Northrop's 2018 purchase of Orbital ATK, the maker of the nation's largest rocket motor, gives it an unfair advantage.

Why we're here—and how we got here—is a tale of a once-massive military-industrial complex melting down into a handful of firms. That has made competition, which too often proves scarce when it comes to military procurement, an even rarer commodity. And, as it stands right now in the case of the nuclear triad, non-existent.

If you're a true hawk—or even just a taxpayer—this is no way to prepare for nuclear war.

Boeing's decision to abandon its effort to build the next generation ICBM sent a jolt through the nation's rocket business. It signals an apparent end to Boeing's critical role in the production of ICBMs. It has built all three generations of the Minuteman, the first of which was deployed during the Kennedy administration. It has also played a key role in keeping them ready to launch within five minutes of a presidential order ever since.

For decades, the Pentagon has named its various ICBM forces after their missiles—Atlas, Titan, Minuteman I, II, and III, along with the MX Peacekeeper (only 400 Minuteman IIs, buried in silos near Air Force bases in Montana, North Dakota, and Wyoming, remain on duty). But the ICBM force now under development is known, grandiosely, as the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD), kind of like a newborn human baby without a name. (“Right now, the GBSD procurement is open, so I'm not going to comment on that,” chief Pentagon weapons buyer Ellen Lord said August 26 when asked what impact Boeing's withdrawal from the ICBM competition might have.)

The GBSD is part of the Pentagon’s
mammoth plan to replace all three legs of the nuclear triad. In addition to the roughly $100 billion price tag on the new crop of ICBMs, the U.S. military wants to replace its B-52 and B-2 bombers with Northrop’s new B-21 Raider (estimated cost: $100 billion). It is retiring its Ohio-class “boomer” subs with a new Columbia-class fleet (estimated cost: $128 billion), both of which are outfitted with the Northrop-powered Trident missiles. The cost of buying and operating these weapons is estimated at an eye-watering $1.7 trillion between now and 2046, according to the independent Arms Control Association.

The Pentagon’s acquisition strategy “must address the unfair advantage that Northrop holds as a result of its control of solid rocket motors, the essential component of the GBSD missile system,” Leanne Caret, chief of Boeing’s defense division, told the Air Force in a July 23 letter. “We lack confidence in the fairness of any procurement that does not correct this basic imbalance between competitors.”

Over the past 24 years, the number of American companies producing such motors has fallen from six to two. Aerojet Rocketdyne is the only other U.S. firm making solid-rocket motors. The motors represent roughly 90 percent of an ICBM’s mass, and about half its cost.

This outcome shouldn’t come as a shock. “In the very near future all the large SRMs [solid-rocket motors] for strategic missiles and space launch will be produced by OATK [Orbital ATK],” the Pentagon warned Congress in a 2017 formal report on the dwindling number of suppliers of key military technologies (Northrop has since renamed Orbital ATK as Northrop Grumman Innovation Systems). “This potentially leaves the United States with a single large SRM supplier, which can lead to cost increases due to lack of competition, decreases in internal research and development efforts, and risk of security of supply if a catastrophic accident should occur.”

The Pentagon has pegged the program’s cost as high as $100 billion, 61 percent more than the Air Force’s initial $62 billion estimate, for 666 missiles. The Air Force, according to then-Pentagon cost czar Jamie Morin, used older data to develop its lower estimate. “They used a blended model that looked at strategic launch vehicles from 1960 to I think about 1990,” Morin told Defense News in 2016. “The newest data is 25 years old. So it turns out there has been cost increases in a lot of the segments, a lot of the industries that we are talking about here.
from the 1990s to present. So we are introducing some of the more current stuff tended to push our estimate up.” Imagine that.

In April, three months before Boeing quit the program, a top Air Force general said he was counting on the head-to-head competition between Boeing and Northrop to shave “billions” off the program’s cost. Never mind.

If the 21st century need for the 20th century triad is questionable, the ICBM procurement pickle the Air Force now faces makes it even more challenging. “Delays and increasing costs will … provide grist for those who would cancel the program entirely,” Rick Berger of the American Enterprise Institute wrote on the Defense One website on August 5. Congressional opposition, he added, “intends to throw enough sand in the program's gears so that a Democratic president might kill it in 2021.”

Besides, he added, the new ICBM program is not all that costly: “Even at the high end of its cost estimate, the entire GBSD program would cost less than Americans spend annually on fast food or beer.”

But other outside experts insist there is no need for brand-new, land-based missiles. “ICBMs are redundant and dangerous,” says William Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Project at the non-profit Center for International Policy. “They are redundant because invulnerable submarine-launched ballistic missiles are sufficient for deterring other countries from attacking the United States. They are dangerous because they operate on hair trigger alert, with launch decisions needing to be made in some cases within minutes. This increases the risk of an accidental nuclear war.”

Even former defense secretary William Perry has said they’re no longer needed. “Any reasonable definition of deterrence will not require that third leg,” he told me in 2015. “Deterrence is deterrence, and you can achieve it with an asymmetrical force, and you can achieve it with fewer numbers.” Experts also say ICBMs are “uniquely destabilizing, uniquely dangerous,” in Perry’s words, because their fixed location makes them sitting ducks, strategically speaking. Unlike moving subs and bombers, their locations are known. That’s why the Pentagon spent so much time and effort in the 1980s to develop mobile ICBMs—railcars for MX missiles and trucks for Midgetman missiles. An ICBM “is destabilizing because it invites an attack.”

A shift to a “deterrence only” strategy could allow for cuts in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, converting it from a war-fighting tool into a smaller force intended only as a second-strike force. Global Zero, a non-profit group pushing for worldwide nuclear
disarmament, says such a force requires about 1,100 nuclear weapons (roughly a two-thirds’ cut, but still an amazing number) aboard submarines and bombers. Such a scaling back could “save hundreds of billions of dollars over 30 years otherwise spent on force modernization, maintenance and operations, and warhead work by the Department of Energy’s nuclear facilities,” Global Zero’s Bruce Blair wrote last September.

If the additional deterrence provided by the ICBM leg of the triad is dubious, the jobs and commerce it provides are real. Backers of the new ICBMs include the Senate Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Coalition. Not surprisingly, its members hail from states where the missiles are deployed or Utah, where the Air Force’s program office, and much of its contracting, is based.

“While we represent strong local interests in the ICBM mission, we also possess, by virtue of our close relationship to the ICBM force, years of accumulated experience on strategic matters,” the coalition said in a 2016 paper. “The ICBM leg of the nation’s nuclear triad plays a critical role in deterring 21st Century threats but must be modernized to ensure it is both effective and credible for the next several decades.”

Although some members of the coalition have left the Senate due to retirement (Orrin Hatch, a Utah Republican, who retired in 2018) or defeat (Heidi Heitkamp, a North Dakota Democrat, who lost to GOP challenger Kevin Cramer in 2018), newcomers get with the program pretty quickly. “Congress must make the modernization of our nuclear deterrent a high priority—which includes standing up the Ground Based Strategic Defense Program at Utah’s Hill Air Force Base,” Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT) (who took Hatch’s seat in January) said in a tweet following a hearing where he pushed for the program.

The choices facing the Air Force range from bad to worse. Betting everything on Northrop, as it now stands, will lead to a costly program relying on a single bidder. That’s sure to raise congressional concerns. It may also spark questions from the Federal Trade Commission, which required Northrop to provide rocket motors to competitors on “a non-discriminatory basis” as part of the federal approval for its purchase of Orbital ATK. But despite such safeguards, Boeing wasn’t interested.

As Space News detailed on July 25: Boeing told the Air Force that an arrangement with Boeing as prime and Northrop as a subcontractor would not work, sources said, and suggested the Air Force provide the ICBM engines as “government furnished equipment.” That would have required the Air Force to separately buy the solid rocket motors used in each of the three stages of the missile and provide them to both competitors. “That would largely level the playing field,” one industry source said. The Air Force did not agree to that strategy.

The Air Force could tweak the rules for the competition to lure Boeing back in. Or the two companies might work out some kind of a teaming deal to preserve as least a modicum of competition. Yet such changes would undoubtedly delay the program, now slated to become operational in about a decade.

Then again, the Pentagon could simply decide to upgrade its Minuteman III ICBMs. “The Minuteman III was put in the ground in 1973 with a plan to do two life extensions,” Air Force General Paul Selva, then the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in April (he retired in July). “We are now on the third and may have to do a fourth before we can get its replacement in the ground.”

Center for Strategic and International Studies defense budget expert Todd Harrison, an Air Force veteran with a pair of Massachusetts Institute of Technology degrees in aeronautics, said in a 2017 report that steps can be taken to keep the current ICBM force up and running. “The missiles could go through another propellant replacement program, as they did in the 2000s, to re-core the missiles and extend their lives for another 30 years,” Harrison said.

In fact, Minuteman ICBMs have been around so long that elements have been turned into museums not far from South Dakota’s Mount Rushmore. “Learn what it was like to have the awesome responsibility of thermonuclear war at your fingertips,” the National Park Service says on its website. You can visit a missile silo for free, but touring an underground launch center, where missileers controlled 10 ICBMs, will cost $12. That's a lot less than the $100 billion slated for its replacement, but it only goes to show: there’s no such thing as a free launch.

This article and its sources can be found at: https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2019/09/the-broken-leg-of-americas-nuclear-triad/

ABOUT: The Military-Industrial Circus is a regular column by Pulitzer Prize winning National Security Analyst Mark Thompson for the Center for Defense Information at POGO.
WASTE

Officers Advocating for More F-35s Often Had Financial Stakes

Letter signed by retired military brass doesn’t note connections to F-35 program contractors

BY MANDY SMITHBERGER

This year’s Department of Defense budget request included six fewer F-35 Joint Strike Fighters than planned, setting off a firestorm of protests from the program’s boosters. Part of that pushback, organized by the Congressional F-35 Caucus, was a letter in support of the program signed by 128 retired senior military officers. The letter failed to disclose that 50 of the signatories stand to benefit if Congress authorizes more F-35 purchases because of their actual or potential personal or financial ties to the program.

The F-35 program is the ultimate case study of pervasive and long-standing problems in the defense acquisition system. The program is the most expensive in history, is a decade behind schedule, has breached cost caps multiple times, and is unsustainable in the long-term.

As POGO recently discovered, even the high-profile test fleet of F-35s can only perform at maximum capacity 11 percent of the time. Yet the program still enjoys widespread Congressional support. The program claims to be responsible for jobs in 45 states. Spreading contracts across so many Congressional districts—a practice known as political engineering—is one way the Pentagon tries to insulate major weapons programs from accountability. And leveraging retired military officers with links to defense contractors is just another example of how the military-industrial-Congressional complex peddles influence.

The main beneficiary of F-35 spending is Lockheed Martin, the program’s
prime contractor. Retired officers who currently work or previously worked on behalf of Lockheed lobbying Congress for the program include:

- Lieutenant General Harold Blot (USMC Ret.), who was deputy program director at Lockheed for the F-35 program;
- Rear Admiral Stanley Bozin (USN Ret.), who was vice president of naval systems and vice president of government relations at Lockheed Martin;
- General Donald Cook (USAF Ret.), who has been a consultant for Lockheed;
- Major General Gregory Feest (USAF Ret.), who was an executive at Lockheed;
- Major General Kenneth Israel (USAF Ret.), who is a vice president at Lockheed;
- Rear Admiral Jim Lair (USN Ret.), who worked on the Navy variant for Lockheed;
- Brigadier General James Latham (USAF Ret.), who was an executive at Lockheed; and
- Rear Admiral Steven Tomaszewski (USN Ret.), who is a vice president at Lockheed.

“Former military leaders often provide their insight and opinion to Congress on military procurement,” a spokesperson for Lockheed Martin told POGO via email. The spokesperson did not respond to questions about any role the company had in soliciting individuals to sign the letter.

This $1.5 trillion program has a number of other contractors, which would benefit from Congress buying more F-35s. For example, Pratt & Whitney is the prime contractor for the F-35’s engine. So some of the company’s former executives and consultants signed on to the letter, including:

- General William Begert (USAF Ret.), who was a vice president for business development at Pratt & Whitney;
- General Carrol “Howie” Chandler (USAF Ret.), who was a vice president at Pratt & Whitney;
- General Lloyd Newton (USAF Ret.), who was also a vice president at Pratt & Whitney; and
- General John Michael Loh (USAF Ret.), who has consulted for Pratt & Whitney.

Northrop Grumman is another major partner in the program, building the central fuselage and avionics for the program. Its coterie of retired officer signatories includes:

- General Charles Horner (USAF Ret.), who has been a consultant for Northrop Grumman;
- Lieutenant General Daniel P. Leaf (USAF Ret.), who became a vice president at Northrop Grumman;
- Major General H.D. Polumbo (USAF Ret.) and Major General Robert Polumbo (USAF Ret.), who both work at consulting firm Two Blue Aces, which counts Northrop Grumman as a client; and
- Major General Douglas Raaberg (USAF Ret.), who went into business development at Northrop Grumman.

Rolls-Royce provides the vertical-lift technology for the Marine Corps variant of the F-35. Board members and former executives from the company included on the letter were:

- Lieutenant General Jon Davis (USMC Ret.), who is a board member at Rolls-Royce North America;
- Lieutenant General Earl Hailston (USMC Ret.), who was a vice president at Rolls-Royce North America;
- Lieutenant General Fred McCorkle (USMC Ret.), who is a board member at Rolls-Royce North America;
- Major General Michael Ryan (USMC Ret.), who was a vice president of government business at Rolls-Royce North America.

Raytheon is responsible for the F-35’s Distributed Aperture System, which projects images captured by cameras mounted in the skin of the aircraft into the pilot’s $600,000 helmet. Lieutenant General Carol Mutter (USMC Ret.), who signed the letter, claimed to have been a consultant for the company in a press release though a Raytheon spokesperson said the company could find no evidence to substantiate the claim.

Another company, Draken International, provides support for F-35 training. Advisory board members for Draken who signed the letter include:

- Major General Joseph Anderson (USMC Ret.);
- General John D.W. Corley (USAF Ret.); and
- Lieutenant General David Deptom (USAF Ret.).
Schmidle told POGO he signed the letter because he agreed with the Department’s previous analysis to support purchasing more F-35s and did not have a financial interest in the program.

The list goes on. BAE Systems, which claims to perform 13 to 15 percent of the work for each aircraft, employs General Gene Renaurt (USAF Ret.) as a consultant and has Admiral Robert J. Natter (USN Ret.) on their board. ViaSat, which holds a contract for the F-35’s reprogramming lab, counts Major General Darryl Burke (USAF Ret.) as a vice president. General William Looney III (USAF Ret.) was on the board for Cubic Defense, which provides the F-35’s combat training system. General Robert Magnus (USMC Ret.) chairs the board of Elbit Systems, which co-manufactures the F-35 helmet display. Major General Gregg Sturdevant (USMC Ret.) was a director of sales and business development for TRU Simulation and Training, which creates maintenance training systems for the F-35.

In one case the boosterism may have been motivated by wanting to help a family member. Major General Henry Canterbury’s (USAF Ret.) son oversees operations and training for the program for the Air Force at Luke Air Force base.

Federal ethics laws include permanent restrictions on executive branch employees who participated “personally and substantially” on a “particular matter” involving a specific party influencing federal agencies, but these restrictions do not apply to attempts to influence Congress.

Some signatories previously worked on the F-35 program for the government. Major General David Heinz (USMC Ret.) was previously the F-35 program manager. Lieutenant General Terry Robling (USMC Ret.) oversaw the program as deputy Marine Corps commandant for aviation. He left government to work for PKL services, which provides support for basing and ship suitability for the Marine Corps variant of the F-35.

Other officers who signed on to the letter benefit from these companies more indirectly. For example, Lieutenant General David Deptula (USAF Ret.) and Major General Larry Stutzriem (USAF Ret.) work at the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, which receives funding from Lockheed Martin and Pratt & Whitney.

A number of others are or were paid consultants for the defense industry who have opted not to—and are not legally required to—disclose who their current or prospective clients are, making it difficult to see if they have a financial interest in signing on to the letter. They include:

- General Joseph Ashy (USAF Ret.);
- Lieutenant General John Baker (USAF Ret.);
- Vice Admiral David Dunaway (USN Ret.);
- Admiral Mark Fitzgerald (USN Ret.);
- Lieutenant General Mike Gould (USAF Ret.);
- General Richard Hawley (USAF Ret.);
- Lieutenant General Richard Natonski (USMC Ret.);
- Admiral Robert Natter (USN Ret.);
- Lieutenant General Frank Panter (USMC Ret.);
- Major General Don Sheppard (USAF Ret.);
- Lieutenant General George J. Trautman III (USMC Ret.);
- General Richard Yates (USAF Ret.).

It’s clear that many of those advocating for more F-35s are far from independent and impartial experts.

Some of the signatories to the letter are in the Project On Government Oversight’s Pentagon Revolving Door Database, and others would likely appear in the Defense Department’s own ethics database—though we have no way of knowing, because that database has not been made available to the public. Information about all of these former officials’ connections to defense contractors should be publicly available: taxpayers and lawmakers need to know who’s influencing spending decisions and what interests they’re representing.

Letters from former Defense Department officials putting pressure on Congress are commonplace, but considering that their new private sector employers are the beneficiaries, let’s not be fooled into believing this is for the good of the agency, readiness, or the troops.

This article and its sources can be found at: https://www.pogo.org/analysis/2019/08/officers-advocating-for-more-f-35-often-had-financial-stakes/

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