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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Dear Friends of CDI,

I want to thank you for your continued support and dedication to this institution and its legacy.

Since 1971, the Center for Defense Information has been fighting to build the most effective and pragmatic national security strategy possible, regardless of politics, partisanship, or parochial interests. Since CDI joined POGO in 2012, our dedicated staff has pushed Congress to build a smarter defense budget that puts the needs of our nation and the members of our armed services before those of corporations and their shareholders.

Right now, decisions are being made in the halls of Congress that will affect our nation's security and our society for a generation to come. Services are in the process of retiring battle-tested and reliable programs that have demonstrated their ability to keep U.S. service members safe and supported in combat, and replacing them with costly high-tech corporate boondoggles that are less capable and less ready by almost every standard.

Our leaders debate whether we can increase defense spending but pay little to no attention to whether we should; and all the while they continue to throw good money after bad at planes that don't fly, ships that don't sail, and weapons that don't fight in order to posture as being "strong on defense."

But we cannot simply spend our way out of these problems and into meaningful national security.

Every dollar spent on defense must be met with an equal drive to ensure the money is spent accountably; that it is not simply being squandered by defense contractors, which are continuing to post record profits, while the Pentagon remains incapable of accounting for more than 60% of its \$3.5 trillion in assets.

We owe this to every service member in uniform and to every one of us who relies on our government to keep them safe.

CDI is hard at work pushing for this accountability. As POGO's executive director, I want to let you all know that I am deeply committed to that same cause that began in 1971. My team is fighting to hold leaders to account and to build the best national security policy possible.

You have my sincerest gratitude for your own commitment to this cause. Nothing CDI does would be possible without you. Thank you again for your continued support.

Sincerely,

Danielle Brian
Executive Director



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Why the A-10 Warthog Retirement is a Disaster

The fight to save the A-10 has never been about the airplane. It has always been about saving the capability and the institutional knowledge of the attack pilot community.

BY DAN GRAZIER

The Air Force brass has finally achieved one of their highest ambitions: They have successfully begun to weasel their way out of a mission they have traditionally considered a distraction, namely, providing ground troops with effective close air support.

Recently, the Air Force has transferred two A-10 “Warthogs” out of service and over to the boneyard at Arizona’s Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. They are among the first 42 A-10s to be retired this year, with the remaining 260 aircraft slated to follow over the next few years.

U.S. ground forces depend on U.S. pilots to supply accurate and sustained fires so they can gain a battlefield advantage. Just as importantly, the ground forces frequently depend on those accurate and sustained fires when they’re under enemy attack and need to be rescued.

For troops on the ground, effective close air support can literally mean the difference between life and death.

The A-10 is the only combat-proven attack aircraft, and it’s

loved by ground troops for its ability to unleash hell against entrenched enemy positions. Unlike the F-35 — which, despite being sold as a viable replacement to perform the close air support mission, has yet to demonstrate its effectiveness — the A-10 is the only aircraft that was designed from the very beginning for the close air support, airborne forward air control, and combat search and rescue roles. The heavily armed and armored A-10 demonstrated its ability as a “tank-buster” during the 1991 Gulf War and as a highly effective close air support platform during its frequent deployments in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And despite the retirements, A-10s are still being actively deployed today to beef up America’s military presence in the Middle East.

The A-10 is undoubtedly an impressive aircraft, but its real value to the national defense isn’t its impressive cannon, triple redundant systems, or the “titanium bathtub” surrounding the cockpit to keep the pilot safe from intense ground fire. Rather, it is the specialized A-10 pilots, who have developed and nurtured the attack pilot culture, who have proven to be

the key to the program’s success. The introduction of the A-10 into the Air Force created an enduring community of pilots dedicated to supporting ground troops. Nothing like that existed in the Air Force before. It is that culture and that institutional knowledge which will quickly vanish as the retired A-10s molder under the desert sun in the coming years.

It does not take long for a capability like close air support to vanish.

During World War II, the Army Air Forces developed highly effective coordination measures to work with their ground counterparts, many of which are still used today. Immediately after the war, however, the newly established United States Air Force scrapped almost all its tactical aviation units in favor of prioritizing a strategic bombing doctrine. When the Korean War began less than five years later, Air Force close air support was virtually non-existent when it was most needed. This was especially true during the first few months of that war, when the North Koreans very nearly pushed the defending South Korean and American forces into the sea around Pusan. The Army and

Marine Corps fighting in Korea for the next three years had to largely rely on Navy flyers for close air support because the Air Force's big bombers were not up to the task.

Air Force leaders failed to learn their lesson from Korea. Some of them attempted to justify their unpreparedness by making the argument that the Korean War was an anomaly. And so American forces fighting in Vietnam also had to go to war without effective air support.

This never should have happened.

Shortly after the Air Force gained its independence from the Army in 1947, the service chiefs gathered to divide up the roles and missions within the newly created Department of Defense. The resulting Key West Agreement, signed by President Harry

Truman, mandated the Air Force provide the Army with "close combat and logistical air support."

With the move to get rid of the A-10, Air Force leaders are not simply ridding themselves of an aircraft — they are essentially abandoning the close air support mission entirely. The Air Force's own training documents show that pilots flying other platforms receive very little training for the close air support role. Pilots flying the F-35, the program sold to the American people as the A-10's replacement, currently have no close air support training requirements whatsoever.

This is a recipe for a future disaster.

The troops who will fight the next war will not have the critical combined arms advantage provided by the A-10

and many others who sabotaged this critical warfighting capability will be remembered. The Project On Government Oversight and others have long been tracking this concerted campaign by Air Force brass to free themselves of their obligations to our ground forces. But the truth is that no matter how much the United States Air Force may wish it otherwise, no U.S. military campaign in our nation's history has ever been won through the application of airpower alone. Daily reporting from battlefields around the world continue to prove this reality today, that even in the 21st century, with all the advanced weapons, sensors, and technology, lasting and decisive action still requires the combined application of multiple land, sea, and air forces — not the reliance on one over the others.

It is not too late for Congress to take action.

The fight to save the A-10 has never been about the airplane. It has always been about saving the capability and the institutional knowledge of the attack pilot community. The A-10 fleet is an aging platform. It should have been replaced with an updated version that features many of the A-10s basic design elements. Other than the lack of will, there is no reason the Air Force couldn't procure a 21st century Warthog-like aircraft capable of rapid sortie generation, protection from ground fire, long loiter time, and plenty of firepower.

Future American warfighters deserve nothing less. ■

About the Author: Dan Grazier is the Senior Defense Policy Fellow at the Center for Defense Information at POGO.

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"This is a recipe for a future disaster. The troops who will fight the next war will not have the critical combined arms advantage provided by the A-10 Warthog and its missions, and many will pay with their lives."

Truman, mandated the Air Force provide the Army with "close combat and logistical air support."

The failure of the Air Force to fulfill its obligations prompted a small group within the Pentagon to take matters into their own hands. Their institutional insurgency clearly worked, because the A-10 entered active service in 1976. Over the nearly 50 years since then, the brave people piloting the A-10 have developed, refined, and passed along the knowledge and expertise necessary to perform the vital missions of close air support, airborne forward air control, and combat search and rescue.

Because of these specialized

Warthog and its missions, and many will pay with their lives.

As long as we have young Americans fighting it out on the ground, they will need effective air support. But in a few short years, any American troops fighting on foreign battlefields will be left hoping that the Air Force's fancy new planes have some ammunition left after conducting a long-range strike far away from their position, or enough fuel to loiter in an area that is seeing a prolonged battle between opposing ground forces.

The people who diligently worked to ditch the A-10 have earned their future scorn in the history books. Mark Welsh, James Post, C.Q. Brown,

Pentagon Can't Account for 63% of Nearly \$4 Trillion in Assets

BY JULIA GLEDHILL

The Pentagon failed its sixth audit in a row last month. One major reason the Pentagon keeps failing audits is because it can't keep track of its property. Last year, the Pentagon couldn't properly account for a whopping 61% of its \$3.5 trillion in assets. That figure increased this year, with the department insufficiently documenting 63% of its now \$3.8 trillion in assets. Military contractors possess many of these assets, but to an extent unbeknownst to the Pentagon.

The GAO has flagged this issue for the department since at least 1981. Yet the latest audit states that the Pentagon's target to correct insufficient accounting department-wide is fiscal year 2031. In the meantime, contractors are producing weapon systems and spare parts that they may already possess — an incredible waste of taxpayer dollars.

Last year, the Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General noted that the Pentagon's inability to keep track of its property could lead it to "understate its property held by contractors and potentially buy more than it needs." In September, Inspector General Robert Storch reported that in 2021, the Army's spare parts forecasting was only 20% accurate on average. As a result, the

Army overstated how many spare parts it needed by \$202 million, in addition to spending another \$148 million on spare parts it didn't anticipate needing at all. The other military services didn't do any better, overshooting their spare parts needs by \$767 million and spending \$355 million on parts they didn't know they needed. All in all, the military overshot its spare parts needs by nearly \$1 billion. It spent over half a billion on spare parts it didn't forecast.

The Pentagon could save hundreds of millions of dollars, if not more, by properly accounting for its assets. In a rare win for taxpayers, the department realized some of these savings in 2019, when the Department of Defense Inspector General flagged errors in the Navy's property and inventory records. In an effort to resolve those errors, the Navy located a warehouse that was mysteriously absent from its property records. Inside the warehouse, the Navy found \$126 million worth of spare parts for P-8 Poseidon, the P-3 Orion, and the F-14 Tomcat — the latter of which the Navy retired in 2006 (over a decade previous). Thankfully, the other parts were still useful and the Navy filled over \$20 million in spare parts orders without having to procure new ones. These savings are too scarce.

Last year, Congress allocated at least \$39.5 billion to procure aircrafts,

their spare parts, and other equipment, despite not knowing what the government already owned. But insufficient tracking of inventory property doesn't just increase the risk of overbuying spare parts, it also inhibits the Pentagon from maintaining government property in the possession of contractors. In May, the GAO revealed that in the past five years, Lockheed Martin has lost, damaged, or destroyed over a million spare parts for the F-35 worth over \$85 million. The government had visibility into less than 2% of those losses, since it relies on Lockheed to voluntarily report not only what and how much government property it possesses, but also the condition of that property.

The Pentagon clearly has a lot of work to do to properly track its property and produce auditable financial statements. It has no idea what equipment it already owns, so it can't maintain its property or anticipate what more it needs. The department is spending taxpayer money recklessly. But taxpayers cannot wait until 2031 for the Pentagon to correct its decades-old inventory problem. ■

About the Author: At the time of this publication, Julia Gledhill was an analyst for the Center for Defense Information at POGO.

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(ILLUSTRATION: REN VELEZ / POGO; PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES)

F-35: The Part-Time Fighter Jet

The F-35 fleet can only perform the full range of its combat roles 30% of the time. This unreliability renders the entire program ineffective.

BY DAN GRAZIER

The F-35 program officially began on October 26, 2001, when Lockheed Martin received the coveted development contract. That day was more than 22 years ago. The costs of the program through its anticipated lifespan have risen \$1.7 trillion since then. What the American people have so far received for that enormous financial commitment is an aircraft program where less than a third of the jets are capable of performing their combat role according to multiple government sources: The Pentagon's top testing office, the Director, Operational Test & Evaluation (DOT&E), recently released its office's annual report, which showed that the F-35 program has a fleet-wide

full mission capable rate of only 30%.

This year's unclassified version of the report is rather thin. Many details about the F-35's demonstrated performance in 2023 are presumably hidden in the classified version of the report submitted to Congress and the secretary of defense. The testing director did say that results from the testing process will be included in the F-35 program's initial operational test and evaluation report, now expected to be released before the end of March 2024.

One single detail about the program's abysmal availability rate in the unclassified version of the report says a lot about how poorly the F-35 performs. It doesn't actually matter what kind of dazzling capabilities the F-35 may one day be able to perform: If the aircraft can't be relied upon

to perform when needed, then any potential capability is useless.

AVAILABILITY

"Availability is determined by measuring the percentage of time individual aircraft are in an 'available' status, aggregated monthly over a reporting period." That is how the testing director defined aircraft availability in this year's report. Program officials set a 65% availability goal for the F-35 fleet.

The data shows the program is not coming anywhere close to meeting that goal.

For the 12-month period ending in September 2023, the F-35 fleet managed to achieve only a 51% average monthly availability rate: Only half of the 628 F-35s delivered to the Department of Defense were ready to

perform at any given time during fiscal year 2023.

That is a pretty poor performance, but the story is even worse when the data is examined more closely. The 65% availability target is for aircraft that are categorized as mission capable. The services consider an aircraft as mission capable if it can perform at

such as undergoing major overhauls, during which they would not be expected to be pushed into combat service. There is some truth to that, but the testing director took that into account. The report provides the full mission capable rate for the “combat-coded” aircraft, or those assigned to active squadrons with an assigned

“It doesn’t actually matter what kind of dazzling capabilities the F-35 may one day be able to perform: If the aircraft can’t be relied upon to perform when needed, then any potential capability is useless.”

least one of the program’s assigned missions. Such a threshold may be appropriate for a program like the C-17 transport, which has essentially a single mission. For a multi-role program like the F-35, however, a different standard should be used. Because the F-35 is designed to perform many missions, from delivering nuclear weapons to supporting troops on the ground, program officials aren’t even using the right yardstick to measure the aircraft’s performance.

Fortunately, such a yardstick does exist. It is the full mission capable rate, or the percentage of aircraft available to perform all the assigned missions. The testing director said the full mission capable rate standard is “a better evaluation of combat readiness” for the F-35 program. When this higher standard is applied to the F-35 fleet, the magnitude of the program’s failure becomes clear: DOT&E reports the full mission capable rate for the F-35 fleet was 30% in 2023.

F-35 defenders will undoubtedly say the 30% fleet-wide figure doesn’t mean much because many of the aircraft counted are in a life-cycle period,

combat mission. The portion of the F-35 fleet that is supposed to be ready to fight at a moment’s notice has a full mission capable rate of only 48%.

That means that more than half of the F-35s that should be ready for combat aren’t.

...

The public has a right to be skeptical about the F-35. The program has been in development for more than 22 years. That is an incredibly long time to field an aircraft fleet. Entire programs have gone from the proverbial napkin sketches to the boneyard in less time. The B-36 program was first conceptualized in 1941, saw a full lifetime of usefulness, and was then retired 18 years later in February 1959.

The F-35 program completed the final tests for the initial operational test and evaluation phase in September 2023. The anticipated report for that process is the final legal hurdle the program has to overcome before the Pentagon’s acquisition chief can sign off on full rate production. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which that doesn’t happen at this point. Far too much time and money has already

been spent on the F-35.

But even if DOT&E signs off after nearly 23 years on the initial design of the F-35, there are plenty of new unforeseen problems requiring retrofits before these weapons will be “ready” for combat. As mentioned previously, the military is already not accepting fresh F-35s that have not been updated with the necessary equipment. There will likely be several budgetary fights this year over either designing entirely new engines and cooling systems or solving the fleet-wide power, cooling, and propulsion problems plaguing those systems. The bottom line is that this aircraft will be far from combat ready even if the Pentagon’s acquisition office authorizes full rate production.

No matter what happens, this story is far from over. The F-35 program still has years of further development work to go before the jet approaches the lofty goals set for it a generation ago. As the Pentagon and Congress begin to consider plans for the next generation of U.S. weapons systems and combat aircraft, we must learn from these serious mistakes. We cannot approach weapons development with the same sort of weak oversight, negligent accountability, and poor evaluation standards that resulted in the most expensive and least ready modern combat aircraft in our history. ■

About the Author: Dan Grazier is the Senior Defense Policy Fellow at the Center for Defense Information at POGO.

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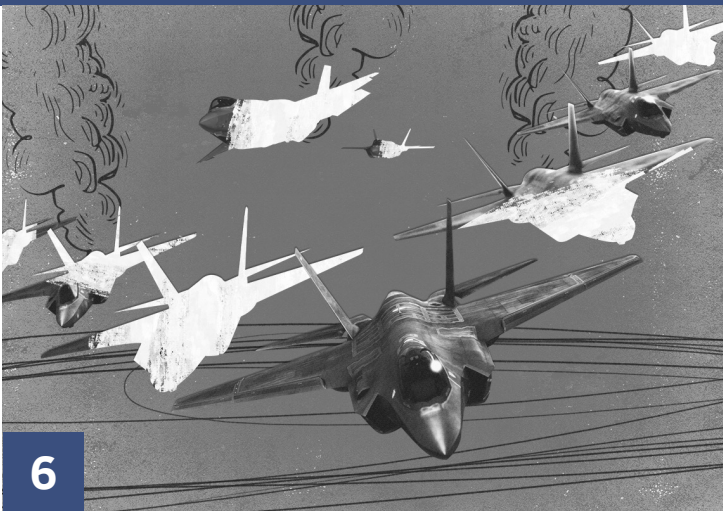


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