



**Opening Statement (As Prepared)**  
**Chairman Donald Norcross**  
Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces  
*"Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request of the Department of  
Defense for Fixed-Wing Tactical and Training Aircraft  
Programs"*  
April 27, 2022

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I want to thank all the witnesses for their time and look forward to our discussions today.

In reviewing this year's services' requests for tactical aircraft, clearly there have been significant changes to programs, plans, underpinning analysis, and new retirement of force structure proposals in this budget that require close scrutiny.

Last year, I believe the Committee was mostly supportive of General Brown's new force structure plan coined "4+1" and his goal to logically reduce the types and models of aircraft to make fleets more similar and to simplify current ownership cost and maintenance challenges.

The framework of that plan made sense by right-sizing the A-10 fleet at 218 for steady state and lesser contingency operations, supporting its safe and effective operation into the late 2030s; keeping the F-22 fleet relevant in the inventory until Next Generation Air Dominance began fielding; buying a sufficient number of new F-15EXs with advanced technology and increased weapons capacity to replace the aging F-15C fleet, while keeping options open to recapitalize a portion of F-15E Strike Eagles; and, not accelerating F-35 until TR-3 and Block 4 can overcome the abundant development challenges.

However, this year it seems as though the "4+1" framework has now been shattered and retirements significantly accelerated.

New to everyone this year is that the Air Force proposes over the next 5 years to retire 646 tactical fighter aircraft while only purchasing 246 new aircraft, leaving a significant capacity and capability gap of 400 aircraft.

A-10s are now completely out of the inventory by 2028; the new F-15EX buy has been cut nearly in half at only 80 aircraft; one-half of the F-15E fleet, about 105 aircraft, will be retired without a plan to replace a similar quantity of aircraft; new F-35 aircraft purchases have been reduced by 42 aircraft; and a capable portion of the F-22 fleet the Air Force has neglected over the years is being retired as the Next Generation Air Dominance program is delayed years beyond original plans briefed to this committee.

Bottom line, these proposals are a dramatic shift from how "4+1" was initially communicated and understood by this Committee last year.

For the Navy and Marine Corps, the force structure plans and analysis seem to be just as challenging, and a coherent message just as elusive.

Two years ago, the Navy's strike-fighter shortfall would last until 2030. However, last year the Navy told us that their strike-fighter shortfall would be resolved to zero in 2025, primarily to have solid justification for terminating the new F-18 Super Hornet production line.

Honestly, we were skeptical of last year's analysis given the assumptions related to overly optimistic F-35C procurement rates, lackluster F/A-18 Super Hornet service-life modification program performance, and non-rapid development of the Navy's Next Generation Air Dominance program.

Hedging our analysis of last year's data, we authorized an additional 12 new F-18s as risk mitigation, having seen this play out before back in the 2012 timeframe when the Navy tried to convince Congress that F-35 was on track to meet their force structure needs.

And just one year later, our skepticism proved warranted, and the Navy now informs us their strike-fighter shortfall will not be resolved until 6 years later in 2031 because of further unplanned reductions in F-35 purchases and reduced aircraft inductions into the F-18 modification program.

Finally, the Navy is illogically proposing to divest its entire fleet of land-based EA-18G Growler electronic attack aircraft that are currently deployed in the European theater supporting NATO deterrence and force posture activities against Russian aggression.

For the Marine Corps, the Commandant's Force Design 2030 plan issued two years ago significantly reduces the number of tactical fighter aircraft in their squadrons and brings into question the current program of record plans to purchase 420 F-35 aircraft.

The Committee has been waiting for over two years to officially see the analysis justifying this mandated reduction and remains frustrated the Marine Corps has been unable to communicate a final decision on this aspect of its 2030 Force Design plan.

Finally, transitioning to the F-35 program, I think it's widely known that Mrs. Hartzler's and my views are closely aligned on the occasional accomplishments and the many enduring challenges this program has endeavored to overcome during the greater than 20 years now since the F-35 program began.

We know there are many talented people working on this program, but our longstanding concern remains with the program's high-risk approach to planning and execution that have proven unrealistic, costing taxpayers much more than planned and fielding capabilities later than needed by our warfighters.

All services declared their original Initial Operating Capability status many years later than planned. System Design and Development was completed years later than planned and the program has yet to finish Initial Operational Test and Evaluation activities, which is now on track to be nearly 5 years late. TR-3 and Block 4 development and fielding has slipped later than planned, and TR-3, which was just re-baselined last summer, is not meeting its new schedule today and has overrun its estimated cost by nearly \$550 million dollars. The full transition of the legacy ALIS to new ODIN maintenance system, briefed to our Subcommittee in November 2019 and January 2020 by F-35 program leadership, was supposed to be fully fielded in Dec 2022 this year, but that is now not occurring.

And finally, immature and poorly written mission systems software has been rushed through development and testing and fielded with many bugs and instability issues—issues discovered by the warfighters, not the testers—thus causing the reissue of many

unplanned and time-consuming software updates.

Finally, we have an existing F-35 propulsion system that was not designed to meet the power and thermal management specifications required to adequately support Block 4 capabilities, nor is the engine currently meeting the mission capability, cost, and maintenance enterprise metrics the services can afford and need long-term.

Bottom line: with many difficult and challenging acquisition and sustainment objectives occurring this decade, I'd like to understand what adjustments the program's leadership is undertaking to achieve realistic schedules and reliable cost estimates that deliver an affordable and full warfighting capability that many nations are relying upon to support their national security requirements.

I now yield to my Tactical Air and Land oversight partner and good friend from Missouri, Mrs. Hartzler.

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