

SPF Hearing: Update on Air Force Projection Forces

Aviation Programs and Capabilities

Thank you, Chairman Kelly. I'd also like to thank our witnesses – Mr. Bailey and Lieutenant General Tabor – for being here and for their testimony.

Since our hearing last year, the Air Force equities of this subcommittee—bombers, tankers, and airlift programs—became front and center due to operations in Iran. The war in Iran has underscored the importance of these assets and this subcommittee remains intent on ensuring our combatant commands are adequately resourced. However, platforms across our subcommittee's jurisdiction are aging, and while they continue to provide value, it is at an increased sustainment and modernization cost. The Air Force must remain steadfast in its efforts to recapitalize and modernize this aircraft.

Expanding our air refueling fleet is crucial to the joint force's continued success in the future, and I understand that Air Force is intent to get the KC-46 recapitalization process on track. Throughout recent conflicts, KC-135s have provided critical support that has enabled the success of our servicemembers. However, the average age of the fleet is 64 years. I am supportive of the continued procurement of the KC-46A and the Production Extension program but remain concerned by the timeline to resolve Category 1 deficiencies on the platform. I am pleased that the Air Force seems committed to finally resolving those deficiencies and I welcome updates from our witnesses on the timeline for these corrections. I am also interested in hearing the witnesses discuss the Air Force's plans for the future of our refueling fleet, including improving the KC-46 and KC-135 and the potential for unmanned options to augment these aircraft.

Earlier this year, General Reed testified to this subcommittee on the importance of our airlift fleet for TRANSCOM in theaters such as the Indo-Pacific. Like our tankers, the airlift fleet is aging. But the Air Force, to date, has not made strides in developing our next-generation solution. I urge the Department to be diligent in its determination of the requirements needed for such a future platform to ensure that this aircraft remains affordable and can be delivered as soon as possible. I am concerned that any further delay in developing the requirements for the next generation air lifter will result in this new platform arriving late-to-need. Given how critical the airlift fleet is to the Air Force's ability to maintain force posture across the globe, that is simply not a risk we can take.

The subcommittee continues to be focused on maintaining a steady state of B-21 development and ensuring that B-52

modernization continues apace. I am concerned that many of these modernization efforts have experienced delays and the transition to B-52Js will continue to experience cost growth and schedule creep. Now, in order to have adequate bomber inventory, B-1 and B-2 platforms have had their retirement timelines extended meaning that we have three bomber programs with significant sustainment challenges. I look forward to the delivery of the first operational B-21 and welcome witness input on Admiral Paparo's recent comments in favor of expanding the B-21 fleet.

Finally, the timeline for VC-25B, or the future 'Air Force One', remains troubling. The decision to use a "bridge aircraft" gifted from Qatar has been clouded by lack of information and oversight by Congress. Questions still loom about what will be done with this aircraft after VC-25Bs are delivered or when the

President leaves office, and the answers provided by Department have not been adequate. I look forward to continuing to work with the Air Force and utilizing the subcommittee's oversight authorities to ensure the success of our executive airlift fleet.

Thank you all for being here today, and I look forward to your opening testimony. With that I yield back.