

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
PRESENTATION TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SUBJECT: MILITARY AVIATION READINESS AND SAFETY HEARING

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Today's national security challenges come from a combination of strong states that are challenging world order, weak states that cannot preserve order, and poorly governed spaces that provide sanctuary to extremists who seek to destabilize the globe. The world needs a strong American Joint Force, and since our establishment in 1947, the Air Force remains an agile responder in times of crisis, contingency and conflict. The Joint Force depends upon Air Force capabilities and requires Airpower at the beginning, middle and end of every Joint operation.

America's Air Force must be able to disrupt, degrade or destroy any target in the world, quickly and precisely, with conventional or nuclear weapons, to deter and win our Nation's wars. Undoubtedly, decisive air, space and cyberspace power—and the ability to command and control these forces—have become the oxygen the Joint Force breathes and are fundamental to American security and Joint operations. Whether in support of global counter-terror operations or near-peer deterrence, your Air Force remains constantly committed, as we have for the past 25 years.

However, 25 years of continuous combat operations and reductions to our Total Force, coupled with budget instability and lower-than-planned funding levels, have contributed to one of the smallest, oldest and least ready forces across the full-spectrum of operations in our history. The Budget Control Act (BCA) further degraded our readiness. There is simply no way to recover without time, funding and people. While the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015 provides some space to recover readiness and continue modernization efforts, your Air Force needs permanent relief from the BCA, consistent, flexible funding, increased manpower, and time to recover readiness.

What does your Air Force need to be ready to do?

The Air Force must be ready to conduct full spectrum operations. That includes the continued conduct of nuclear deterrence operations, continued support of counter terror operations (CT), and readiness for potential conflict with a near-peer competitor. Nuclear deterrence operations remain our top priority. With Congressional support, we will continue to modernize our nuclear force structure to sustain our deterrent capability well into the future. Regarding our support of CT operations, the Air Force has deployed Airmen throughout the Middle East and other regions for 25 years. I was the beneficiary in

Afghanistan. I recently returned from a one-year posting in Kabul where I coordinated air operations in support of counter-terrorism and train, advise and assist tasks with the Afghan military. Your deployed Airmen were trained, equipped, motivated and ready to work. Soldiers, sailors and Marines counted on us to do our jobs. We delivered. However, we must also be ready to conduct operations against a near-peer competitor.

Today, nation-states challenge America's freedom of maneuver in air, space and cyberspace, and near the borders of our Allies. As examples, China has increased its military capabilities and is expanding its influence in the Pacific. Its military actions are contrary to efforts to maintain stability, and they increase the risk of miscalculation and conflict in a region where instability could cause a significant negative impact on the global economy. Russian military actions are front and center with our NATO Allies who keep a wary eye to the east. Iran possesses significant military capacity and supports activities that are contrary to our interests and those of our partners in the region. An unpredictable North Korea continues to conduct nuclear and ballistic missiles tests in the face of international condemnation.

Accordingly, while we continue deterrence assurance operations and support of CT operations, we have to be prepared for conflict in the contested end of the spectrum. Combined with our joint partners, our readiness assures Allies and helps to deter aggressive military actions that would degrade stability in many regions of the world. Our service partners expect us to be prepared for all contingencies.

To do so, a minimum of 80% of the Air Force needs to be ready. Today, less than 50% of the Air Force is ready to conduct the full spectrum of combat tasks. While we are able to conduct nuclear deterrence operations and support CT operations, operations against a near-peer competitor would require a significant amount of training. The associated delay would pose a significant risk to mission. Conversely, deploying Airman to fight alongside soldiers, sailors and Marines, in their current readiness state, would significantly increase the risk to the success of the joint force.

In sum, our readiness is imbalanced at a time when the Air Force is small, old and heavily tasked.

What needs to be done?

We need to address readiness shortfalls in five areas: critical personnel skills, weapons systems sustainment, training resources, flying hours and operations tempo. All five must be addressed in a synchronized and balanced manner. First, we must address personnel shortfalls in critical skills. Human capital takes the longest to develop. We also need to stabilize weapons system sustainment funding and improve our training infrastructure. Finally, we need to increase our training flying hours and reduce operations tempo to provide the training our Airman deserve to be ready for full-spectrum operations. Each area is briefly described below.

Critical Skills Availability:

The immediate readiness priority is end strength. Since 2010, the Air Force separated nearly 20,000 highly skilled Airmen. Simultaneously, we expanded space, cyber and remotely piloted aircraft mission sets to support full spectrum capabilities, including the global war on terrorism, while reinforcing our nuclear deterrence enterprise. Today, the Air Force is short 4,000 active duty aircraft maintainers, and the problem will grow worse every month unless we increase maintenance manpower. Although we have shortfalls in other skill sets, the current maintenance shortfall has the greatest impact on readiness. Due to budgetary constraints and manpower reductions, the Air Force maintenance manning level is at its lowest point in over 20 years. Between 2004 and 2015, active duty maintenance manpower decreased by 21% while the fleet was reduced by 11%. As maintenance manning decreased, so did mission capable rates of our aging fleets. The lack of maintainers has significant impact on readiness and our ability to train. It is also the shortfall that takes the longest to recoup which is why critical personnel skill development is our top readiness priority.

Weapon Systems Sustainment:

Weapons systems sustainment underpins our ability to conduct deterrence operations, support the global war on terrorism and train for high end conflict. It covers the support we need to maintain, supply and sustain our fleets. It involves long lead times to synchronize government and industry actions that underpin our operations. Sustainment programs have been adversely impacted by sequestration-related funding constraints and unpredictable annual budgets. Funding caps and volatility adversely impact our ability to coordinate both near and long-term sustainment actions. Accordingly, we prioritize efforts on forward-deployed units and current operations. The shortfalls are felt most at home station, which curtails the capacity of our Airmen to prepare for full spectrum combat tasks between deployments. The shortfall is exacerbated by the increased costs to maintain and sustain older fleets. Since the average age of our Air Force fleet is 27 years old, most of our aircraft require extensive maintenance. Challenges to maintain adequate supplies is growing. Both factors increase the amount of time an aircraft is in maintenance and reduce the amount of time an aircraft is available for training. Accordingly, sufficient and stable weapons system sustainment funding is paramount. Permanent relief from Budget Control Act with predictable funding is necessary to rebuild a stable, weapons system sustainment capacity—a crucial underpinning of Air Force combat readiness.

Training Resources:

Training resources include ranges, target replicators, training munitions, threat emitters and support facilities. This readiness area includes the infrastructure needed to train at home station and in large-scale, joint and combined exercises like Red Flag or Green Flags. It supports the curriculum of our Weapons School which integrates air, space and cyber training at the high end of potential conflict. It also includes simulators and the ability to conduct virtual and live training simultaneously, with our Joint partners. Most importantly, it includes the ability to conduct live and virtual training for command and control.

We need to continue to upgrade our threat system replicators and increase capacity to conduct distributed training in units that are forward-deployed or in the United States. This includes virtual replications of environmental conditions on the ground with which we can train with soldiers, sailors and Marines.

Flying Hours:

Consistent, sufficient funding for flying training underpins readiness. However, since 2008, the Air Force has lacked the capacity to fly its minimum training requirement. The flying hour program has been capped to levels that are 10% less than the minimum requirement to sustain our current readiness level. Much more is required to rebuild readiness. However, before we increase flying hours, we must invest in maintenance manning, weapons systems sustainment and training resources. Without a balanced increase in all three, Airmen will not be able to fly additional hours. More maintainers and increased logistics support are needed to generate the sorties. Further, without improvements to our infrastructure, our training intensity and relevancy will be insufficient, which is the opposite of what our Airmen need to prepare for a full spectrum, joint combat.

Operational Tempo:

Finally, our operations tempo must be balanced between the demands of combat deployments and overseas engagements, versus the capacity for Airmen to train for full spectrum scenarios. Our forward-deployed forces are arguably the best in our history at counter-terrorism and train, advise and assist missions. However, due to our high operations tempo, there is insufficient time at home station to fully prepare full-spectrum readiness. Compounded by reductions in critical personnel, sustainment challenges, infrastructure investment, and flying hours, the high operations tempo is also a limiting factor in our ability to improve readiness.

How long will a readiness recovery take?

Eight to ten years once all the reductions are addressed. Critical personnel shortages are the primary driver. It takes five to seven years to transform a high school

graduate into a 5th generation aircraft mechanic, or a college graduate into a fighter pilot with the experience to positively affect a unit's readiness.

Given current caps on end strength and the Air Force's training capacity, it will take until FY21 through FY23 until all the Airmen that are needed to fix today's personnel readiness challenges are assessed into the service. By then, new recruits will begin to positively affect our personnel readiness reductions.

What can Congress do?

Repeal the BCA. Our readiness recovery is only possible if it is repealed. Support our end-strength increase request. Continue to support near readiness and long term modernization efforts of the Air Force. Provide consistent, stable funding for necessary improvements to both to be realized.