A Few Unresolved Joint Strike Fighter Issues

Introduction – This week the House Armed Services’ Tactical Air and Land Forces subcommittee is holding a hearing: “Update on the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program.” Here are five issues that could and should be discussed.

1. Ejection Seat Issues Put Pilots at Risk. Recent reports have detailed the fatal risks the Martin-Baker US16E ejection seat poses to pilots should they have to eject from the plane. The military services grounded pilots weighing less than 136 pounds until the problem is resolved. F-35 program manager Lt. Gen. Christopher Bogdan signed a document on September 14 allowing pilots weighing between 136 and 165 pounds to continue flying despite the fact that there is a 23 percent chance they would sustain a fatal neck injury during ejection. General Bogdan, why did you sign off on such a scheme rather than demanding more safety and reliability? Why did we only learn of this after it appeared in the press? Please explain why we were not informed, nor, apparently, the pilots potentially impacted by this.

2. F-35 Program Costs Driving Premature Fleet Retirement. The F-35 will not have full combat capability until 2022 at the earliest. Yet the Air Force continues to push for the retirement of the A-10 and has even threatened to cancel F-16s and B-1s to divert funding to F-35 development. The F-35 is the most complex fighter aircraft in history, with nearly 30 million lines of computer code. The aircraft fielded thus far are only partially combat capable because the software necessary to employ the majority of its weapons is not yet ready. Lt. Gen. Bogdan has said many of these problems are already behind the program, but many of its most significant technological challenges still lie ahead. The F-35 has struggled to meet any of its stated performance standards. Explain how the Air Force will meet key combat capabilities, like close air support, if we retire proven platforms before the F-35 is truly combat ready.

3. Readiness Issues Jeopardize Suitability for Combat. The Marine Corps wanted to prove their version of the F-35 could operate from the LHD amphibious assault ships earlier this year by conducting a demonstration on the USS Wasp. What they ended up proving was the unreliability of the F-35 due to extreme maintenance problems. The planes were only able to fly 70 percent of planned flight hours, and achieved a readiness rate of 50 percent, far below the 80 percent required to meet combat needs. This seems to indicate little progress beyond the 28 to 50 percent availability rate reported by DOT&E earlier this year. We are now nearly 20 years into this program. Is a 50 percent readiness rate really where we should be at this point? Who should lose their job for this? What are the penalties for you or the contractor if the aircraft doesn’t meet a certain readiness rate?

4. Lightning Issues Continue to be a Problem. In testimony before this committee in April, Lt. Gen. Bogdan said lightning was a “last year problem.” But in May DOT&E reported that during the USS Wasp demonstration two missions were cancelled due to the potential for lightening. Ground troops have to fight in all kinds of weather. They don’t get to stay in the barracks when it is raining. Please explain why we still have a plane that can’t fly when there is a threat of bad weather. If this isn’t resolved, what steps will you have to take in some future conflict when the weather turns bad?

5. Logistics System Creating More Work for Maintainers. The Autonomic Logistics Information System has been described as “cumbersome to use and inefficient, and requires the use of workarounds.” Marine maintenance personnel were forced to use lengthy workarounds to transfer aircraft data files during the USS Wasp demonstration, including burning files to a CD and sending them over a commercial Wi-Fi network off-base. Just weeks ago, Lockheed Martin was awarded a $430 million dollar contract in part for hardware and software upgrades for ALIS. What assurances can you give this committee that we aren’t wasting millions of dollars only to hear further stories about our young men and women forced to work around yet another boondoggle program?

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