

Election Year Turbulence

Control of the Senate is up for grabs as Election Day nears, with two influential Armed Services Committee leaders among the GOP senators fighting for their political lives in an election year that appears to be strongly favoring Democrats.

SASC Chairman John McCain of Arizona, perhaps the most influential hawk on Capitol Hill, and Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, one of his top deputies, may very well lose their seats on Nov. 8. If they both lose, it could be as part of the Democrats seizing the majority in the Senate and sharply changing the tone and tenor of the Armed Services Committee, including the panel's handling of Air Force oversight.

McCain and Ayotte have teamed up repeatedly to advocate for more money for the Defense Department, often criticizing the Obama Administration for making sharp cuts to military programs despite mandated spending caps. But the two have not been always supportive of USAF's leadership or service priorities.

Caught in the crosshairs have been a number of cost-cutting proposals—perhaps most notably the Air Force's efforts to retire the A-10 attack aircraft, though the Warthog is far from the only issue these two lawmakers have left their imprint on. Ayotte, who chairs the readiness subcommittee, has been one of the fiercest opponents of the Administration's plans for another round of base closures, which the Air Force says it desperately needs to rid itself of excess capacity.

Ayotte, who is running against popular New Hampshire Gov. Maggie Hassan, has also been among those most critical of the Administration's plans to close the Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, detention facility, and has worked to try to strengthen restrictions on transfers or construction of a new facility in the United States. Ayotte's efforts have helped keep Guantanamo's possible closure a key source of debate during annual defense authorization bill negotiations.

McCain, meanwhile, is the dean of the defense hawks on Capitol Hill. His policy reach stretches from Pentagon acquisition reform to the intractable Syrian civil war. He can easily pivot from trying to shut down the F-35 joint program office or the department's acquisition shop (as he did in this year's authorization measure) to grilling Administration officials on arming Syrian rebels.

A loss to Democratic Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick would change not only the Armed Services Committee, but also potentially Republican hawks' power, already marginalized with the rise of the Tea Party in recent years.

For hawks, losing McCain would almost certainly weaken their hand in negotiations on the size of the Pentagon budget, regardless of who the next Commander in Chief is. And that, in turn, could force the services to make many more difficult and politically unpalatable decisions, like the Air Force did on the A-10.

USAF officials have argued that sending the Warthogs to the boneyard would save \$4.2 billion over the next several years, money that could then be invested in other priorities, including the F-35 strike fighter. Other fighters and bombers in the Air Force's inventory already perform many aspects of the A-10's primary close air support mission. This would eventually become the job of the multirole F-35.

Keeping the A-10s flying now, the Air Force has argued, would mean sacrificing some other priorities down the road as the service tries to squeeze its budget into the preordained spending limits.

But the Air Force's plan never got off the ground. McCain and Ayotte promptly shot down those proposals several years in a row, and the service ultimately shelved the effort in its Fiscal 2017 budget request, proposing putting off retirements until 2018. McCain and Ayotte's arguments only intensified with the aircraft's heavy recent use in the fight against ISIS.

For McCain, the A-10 is a home-state issue, with 83 of the attack jets stationed at Arizona's Davis-Monthan AFB. Both he and Republican Rep. Martha McSally, an Air Force veteran and former A-10 fighter pilot whose district includes Davis-Monthan, have fought vigorously to block the Warthog's retirement. (The House Armed Services Committee, on which McSally serves, probably won't see a changeover in leadership. The HASC has been far more receptive to the Air Force's proposal on the Warthog, potentially paving the way to the ultimate retirement of the aircraft.)

For Ayotte, the A-10's status is also a personal issue. Her husband flew A-10 missions over Iraq, and she has worked closely with a vocal group of retired joint terminal attack controllers, who have pushed to keep the Warthog flying.

If neither Senator returns to Capitol Hill next year, A-10 supporters will have lost their two most influential advocates. ★

Megan Scully is a reporter for CQ Roll Call.

An A-10 at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz. The Warthog has vociferous Arizona advocates on the hill.



USAF photo by A1C Ashley N. Steffen