

Action in Congress

By Megan Scully

When Arizona Republican John McCain takes the gavel of the Senate Armed Services Committee later this month, it could mark the beginning of a particularly turbulent time on Capitol Hill for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program.

Long known as an excitable watchdog of government spending, McCain has shown little patience for defense programs that have a track record of cost increases, schedule delays, and technical problems. The Lockheed Martin-built F-35 stealth fighter, which McCain has reminded military brass is the Pentagon's first \$1 trillion weapons program (a figure that includes decades of inflation and tangential life-cycle costs), has been squarely in the senator's sights for years.

"Has anybody been fired because of the cost overruns on the F-35?" McCain asked Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III during a November 2013 armed services hearing. "I don't think so," he quickly added.

That was not true, however. The former F-35 program executive officer, Marine Corps Maj. Gen. David R. Heinz, was fired by then-Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates in February 2010, for mounting problems on the fighter program.

Ashton B. Carter, nominated in December to be Defense Secretary, provided an explanation in a May speech last year. Heinz told Carter he had been approving Lockheed Martin progress payments because he liked the company's program manager and didn't want him to be fired. Carter recommended that Gates fire Heinz. Vice Adm. David J. Venlet was brought in to straighten out the program.

The Lockheed Martin program manager, Daniel J. Crowley, soon moved on to another job outside the company, and within months, virtually the whole

Lockheed Martin aeronautics company management was replaced.

McCain has been particularly critical of the Pentagon's decision to buy the aircraft, which will replace older fighters in the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps fleets, while they continue to undergo testing. The overlap of the program's procurement and development has come up repeatedly as the aircraft experienced technical problems, including a June 23 engine fire that led to the temporary grounding of the entire fleet.



McCain criticized the F-35 but now credits the program as being "more stable."

"Even though the DOD has not completed developmental testing, ... that program is already well into production, exposing it to the risk of cost retrofits late in production," McCain said in a May 5 speech, adding that the program has had its share of "costly failures."

Indeed, during an April hearing with the current F-35 program executive officer, Air Force Lt. Gen. Christopher C. Bogdan, McCain admonished the Pentagon for not sticking with a "fly before you buy" approach.

"If we had adhered to that principle, we probably would not have found ourselves in the situation we are in," he said.

For his part, Bogdan acknowledged the so-called concurrency issues associated with buying the planes while they are still undergoing testing.

"Every time you find something new in flight test, you now have to not only

go back and fix the airplanes you have already produced, but you have to cut all those fixes into the production line," Bogdan told McCain. "That creates a complexity that is pretty significant and it costs some money."

While McCain has sharply criticized the F-35 program, he has not moved to scuttle it and likely would not do so as chairman. His focus will likely be on driving down costs and improving the performance of the planes.

McCain, a former naval aviator, is a hawk at heart and wants the military to have the most modern equipment possible, and that includes the F-35.

What's more, it would be in his state's best interests for the program to succeed.

Local and state officials in Arizona vigorously campaigned for the F-35 mission and were rewarded with the Air Force's decision to bed down 144 of the aircraft at Luke Air Force Base.

McCain, however, has given the F-35 program credit for being on a "more stable" path to success, has said he is "cautiously optimistic" about the program's future and has

generally been pleased with Bogdan's leadership on the program.

But even with home state interest in the program, McCain has been hesitant to heap too much praise on the program. When USAF unveiled the first F-35 at Luke in March, for instance, McCain applauded the base's attributes, rather than the F-35 itself.

"It is no coincidence that the Air Force chose Luke for the stationing of initial F-35s: The flying weather is perfect, the nearby Barry M. Goldwater Range is the premier military aircraft training range in the United States, and our communities' support for the military is unparalleled," McCain said. ✪

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