

The Dems on Defense

In an interesting twist, the most liberal candidate in the 2016 presidential field may be among the biggest backers—albeit a reluctant one—of the Pentagon's most expensive weapons program.

Vermont Independent Sen. Bernie Sanders, whose efforts to claim the Democratic presidential nomination have gained considerable traction in recent months thanks to an energized grassroots campaign, has made no bones about his reluctance to take military action, should he become the next President.

Despite Sanders' pledge to move the United States away from a policy of "unilateral military action" and his desire to trim what he deems to be unnecessary defense spending, Sanders has supported the massive F-35 strike fighter program during his time on Capitol Hill.

The fighter, after all, has home-state implications for the two-term senator, with 18 of the stealth fighters headed to the Vermont Air National Guard beginning in 2020. Like other lawmakers whose states stand to gain from the procurement program, Sanders has expressed reservations about the F-35's history of cost hikes, calling the program wasteful. But as long as the military is buying the airplanes—something he considers a foregone conclusion at this point—he wants to see them put to use in Vermont.

"For better or worse, that is the plane of record right now and it's not going to be discarded," Sanders said at a town hall in New Hampshire in June 2014. "That's the reality."

But defense spending in general—and individual programs like the F-35, in particular—have taken a back seat to domestic issues at this stage of the contest for the Democratic nomination.

When Sanders, who considers his vote against the Iraq War in 1991 one of the most important of his congressional career, has discussed these matters, he has tended to focus on diplomacy and foreign policy rather than bread-and-butter defense issues. As the former chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, he has also been particularly vocal about veterans issues, from suicide prevention to support for families.



Screenshot from CNN video

Defense policy will heat up as election time grows near.

"Sanders believes that just as planes and tanks and guns are a cost of war, so is taking care of the men and women who we sent off to fight the war," he states on his site.

Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton has the pedigree, both as former Secretary of State and a former member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, to argue she has a unique set of national security bonafides to be the next President.

But her campaign has been mired in scandal. Her handling of the deadly attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, during her tenure as Secretary of State has been a hot-button issue for many conservatives—and lingering security questions about her use of personal email to conduct official business have more broadly hurt her ability to assert herself in the security arena.

"I have tried to the best of my ability to be able to respond and if people are uncertain, if they have concerns about these questions about the emails, it's their choice to say, 'That's going to influence, you know, how I think about the election.' I understand that, I get it," Clinton said Sept. 27 on NBC's "Meet the Press."

Clinton's platform includes critical defense and security issues, including defeating ISIS, stopping Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, and standing

up to Russian President Vladimir Putin. But in her "Meet the Press" interview, Clinton quickly, and tellingly, pivoted to domestic issues, which have been her focus on the campaign trail.

"I also hope people will look at my lifelong advocacy for kids and families and women and look at what I'm proposing, the vision I have for the country to move forward on everything from raising incomes to equal pay for equal work to getting the cost of college down to dealing with high prescription drug costs," she said. "That's what I hope people focus on and people get to make their minds up," she said.

Those are the issues that have dominated the campaign season so far and have resonated with voters anxious about their own futures.

While defense issues have been largely on the backburner at this stage of the campaign, policy battles over the United States' role in the world, and how the country should pay for it, will likely play out as the primaries get closer and the candidates attempt to differentiate themselves on security matters.

They are, after all, vying to be the next Commander in Chief. ★

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