

The Warthog Lives On

Sen. Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.) won a decisive victory in February when Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter announced plans to keep the Air Force's fleet of A-10 Warthogs flying until 2022, reversing the military's cost-saving effort to send the ground attack aircraft to the boneyard.

The New Hampshire Republican, whose husband was an A-10 pilot, had led efforts on Capitol Hill to keep the Warthog in the Air Force's inventory despite assertions from defense officials that the cost of maintaining the single-mission airframes was simply too high in an era of constrained budgets.

Ayotte, a vocal member of the Senate Armed Services Committee who has emerged as a leading hawk, wasted no time declaring victory and pivoting to preserve the mission in the future.

"We should now get to work on the development and procurement of an aircraft that can eventually replace the A-10 and provide even better close air support capabilities for our troops," she said in a Feb. 2 statement. "Technology will continue to advance and threats will continue to evolve, but our ground troops will always need effective, lethal, and precise close air support—and as long as I am in the Senate I will fight to ensure they have it."

The key to the statement, however, is how long she will be in the Senate. While she won her much-publicized fight over the A-10, her own battle for re-election is in considerably more doubt.

As the 2016 congressional campaigns begin to heat up, control of the Senate is up for grabs, and Ayotte is one of the most vulnerable senators going into the November elections. She has a formidable challenger in popular Democratic Gov. Maggie Hassan.

In 2010, Ayotte won her seat with a healthy 60 percent margin, but New Hampshire has trended more Democratic in statewide elections in recent years. Indeed, the state's senior senator, Jeanne Shaheen, was one of only a handful of vulnerable Democrats in 2014 to survive that election cycle, which thrust control of the Senate into the hands of Republicans.

Ayotte is considered a rising star in GOP circles, particularly as she has partnered with Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sen. John McCain of Arizona and Sen. Lindsey O. Graham of South Carolina to promote hawkish defense policies and higher Pentagon spending levels. However, she is a

moderate and has worked with Democrats on a range of issues, including military sexual assault.

Her election will likely hinge more on domestic issues, like funding for Planned Parenthood, on which she has had to stray from conservatives, than on matters of national security. And in a state that has voted for Democrats in most recent presidential elections, the timing of Ayotte's re-election bid in a presidential year could hurt her chances.

Ayotte isn't the only lawmaker with deep national security interests fighting for her political life in what could be one of the most interesting congressional election cycles in recent memory.

Even McCain, a formidable presence in the Senate who is seeking a sixth term in the chamber, has a fight on his hands. He won re-election in 2010 with 59 percent of the vote, but he has perhaps his fiercest general-election challenger in Democratic Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick, a three-term House member whose district includes Flagstaff and the southern Phoenix suburbs.

For McCain, however, it's not just his re-election that is at stake. He could lose his gavel as well.

If Democrats regain control of the Senate but McCain maintains his own seat, GOP rules would prohibit the Arizona Republican from serving as the powerful panel's ranking Republican, a job he has already held for six years.

Among those Republicans who hope to prevent a Democratic takeover of the upper chamber is Rep. Joe Heck of Nevada, a one-star general in the Army Reserve who is running for the seat left open by retiring Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.). Heck, a military physician, currently serves as the House Armed Services military personnel subcommittee chair and would likely angle for a Senate Armed Services slot, should he win in November.

But his victory, like many other competitions for Senate seats this year, is far from certain. Democrats have recruited Catherine Cortez Masto, a former state attorney general, to run against Heck, and they are pulling out all the stops to hold onto that seat—a necessary win if they have any hope to regain control of the Senate. ★

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Congress has kept the A-10 flying, but will pro-military lawmakers win re-election?

USAF photo by TSgt. Jason Robertson