

To Retire or Not Retire, Continued

The Air Force's cost-saving effort to retire its venerable fleet of A-10 Warthogs has gotten quite a bit more difficult following the release of a government report chiding defense officials for not fully studying the effects of sending the jets to the boneyard.

The Government Accountability Office report, released in August, is expected to fuel renewed congressional opposition to the Air Force plan that begins divestment of the close air support aircraft in Fiscal 2018 and stands down the entire fleet by 2022.

Lawmakers, led by A-10 supporters on the Senate Armed Services Committee, have already rejected previous requests for the fleet's retirement, which Air Force officials have said would save \$4.2 billion over several years and allow the service to invest its limited funds in higher-priority items, like the F-35 strike fighter.

The report only strengthens arguments that retiring the A-10 would shortchange the critical close air support mission, leading to less protection overhead for combat troops on the ground just as the low-flying fighters have been tapped for missions against ISIS and supporting NATO's assurance efforts in Eastern Europe.

Neither the Air Force nor the Defense Department had "quality information" on the full implications of standing down the A-10, including mission gaps created by the loss of the aircraft and options to mitigate those capability shortfalls, the report states.

"The nonpartisan GAO has concluded what we've been arguing for years: There is no justification for the Air Force to prematurely retire the A-10 fleet, and doing so could leave the military with a serious capability gap our military needs to confront complex security challenges around the world," Senate Armed Services Chairman John McCain (R-Ariz.) said in an August statement.

What's more, the report challenges the Air Force's savings projections, concluding it did not strictly follow best practices. Pentagon officials have argued that cost—coupled with the need to invest in multimission aircraft—was the driving factor behind the decision to divest the A-10s.

Indeed, the Air Force's 2014 budget request included plans to retain all 283 A-10s through at least 2035. Just one year later, the service sought to scrap the fleet as it grappled with the effects of budget gaps.

The GAO report suggests the about-face came with little thought about what would take the place of the A-10. The Air Force has a number of aircraft, including F-15s and F-16s, capable of the close air support mission, but the A-10 attack jet is perhaps best suited for the task.

Air Force plans indicate it would replace A-10 squadrons one-for-one with F-35 squadrons. But according to the GAO, the loss of A-10 squadrons will outpace the fielding of the F-35, with four fewer squadrons by the end of the five-year budget plan.

Critics of USAF's plan say the Army and Marine Corps rely on overhead coverage the A-10 provides, and these ground forces would feel the pinch of its absence. This is an argument McCain and other A-10 supporters have put forth again and again.

"The Air Force's rush to divest the A-10 before a fully operational replacement is available puts our ground troops and our nation's close air support capabilities at risk," New Hampshire Republican Sen. Kelly Ayotte said in a statement. Her husband flew A-10 missions in Iraq.

The report acknowledges that the Air Force is not blind to the capability shortfalls and is taking a number of steps to address them, including creating an Air Force group focused on close air support, developing new weapons, and responding to the needs of joint terminal attack controllers. USAF has also noted that other aircraft, such as F-16 fighters and B-1 bombers, ably perform CAS missions thanks to advanced targeting, data links, and precision weapons. But these fast-and-high flyers lack the emotional appeal offered by the slow, rugged, and highly visible Warthog.

Air Force officials haven't yet determined the extent to which the service will change or reprioritize training requirements for other aircraft—a decision that could have reverberating effects on other missions.

It's safe to say that all of the concerns raised by GAO will be highlighted again as Congress gets to work on the Fiscal 2018 budget request early next year.

"At a time of growing threats to our national security, any divestment of this critical aircraft without the fielding of a suitable replacement would leave our men and women in uniform without the best close air support weapon in our arsenal that is needed now more than ever to meet the challenges of a more dangerous world," McCain said. ★

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A-10s over Arizona, Sen. John McCain's home state.



USAF photo by SrA. Chris Massey