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Wrong question being asked

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"Foregone fighters?" (article, Jan. 10), on fifth-generation fighters, echoes nearly every discussion I've heard on this subject.

The two primary arguments against investing in these systems are their cost and relevance in today's fight. The question not asked, however, is "What does the Air Force do for the nation?" The Air Force doesn't protect the nation all by itself, but instead is part of an incredible joint team. The Air Force-unique contribution to the fight is predominance in air and space. We have the capability to deliver more lethality, precisely where it is needed, faster, over greater distances, and sustain it longer than any other force. Our ability to do this and guarantee freedom of action is critical. Even in the current fight where ground forces dominate, retired Army Gen. Barry McCaffrey says "air power is the glue that holds together the war effort."

As important as air power is, it's not the full sum of what the Air Force does, and whether or not these two systems are used in Iraq and Afghanistan cannot define their value to a nation with global responsibilities. We enjoy air superiority today because we have earned it by learning from conflicts around the world, beginning with the Lafayette Escadrille. While no nation has produced fighters equal to the F-22 or F-35, they are developing them, and will field them. More importantly, they have already produced the surface-to-air systems that make it difficult for our fourth-generation fighters to survive in contested airspace.

There is no debate we must control the cost of weapon systems. But, not fielding fifth-generation air capabilities assumes future wars will be like current ones, and if not, we will have time to react. Both of those assumptions are likely to be wrong, and that would be much more costly than fielding these capabilities.

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