



F-35 Lightning II Program

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CSAF OUTLINES JOINT STRIKE FIGHTER'S VALUE

On the day that Lockheed-Martin delivered its 100th F-35 Lightning II joint strike fighter to the Air Force, the service's leaders today marked the milestone and outlined the aircraft's value.

The F-35 will be delivered to Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., where it will serve as the first training aircraft for pilots of the fifth-generation fighter.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III called the event "a big deal for the Air Force" during a Pentagon news conference this morning.

Welsh discussed the service's need for the JSF, a need that became even more acute, he said, after the Defense Department truncated the total buy of F-22 Raptor fighters.

The F-22 was to provide theaterwide air superiority, Welsh said. But with too few F-22s to provide this umbrella, F-35s must pick up the slack. "You have to have the F-35 to augment the F-22 to do the air superiority fight at the beginning of a high-end conflict to survive against the fifth-generation threats we believe will be in the world at that point in time."

Even with upgrades, Welsh said, current air superiority fighters, F-15 Eagles and F-16 Fighting Falcons, cannot survive against a fifth-generation threat.

"Operationally, it's just a fact," he added. "I am certainly not willing to go to my secretary or the secretary of defense or to the chairman (of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and say, 'I would recommend that we keep our old equipment and update it, and just accept more losses and count on the incredible ability of our aviators to win the fight anyway.'"

The joint strike fighter program is the most expensive in American military history. The Air Force will fly the F-35A variant, the Navy will fly the F-35C, and the Marine Corps will fly the F-35B. The initial operating capability for the Air Force is set for December 2016.

The program has had growing pains. Costs have risen, and the flyaway cost for the Air Force version is around \$150 million per aircraft.

But now, the production rate for the aircraft is rising and production costs are dropping, Welsh said. "Since 2011, the program has met milestones consistently. We have allies buying into the program and committing to purchasing aircraft, which will keep being more and more of a financial benefit for us over time."

Welsh said now is not the time to cut the joint strike fighter program.

"I don't believe this is a good time to talk about truncating the buy -- capping it at some number," he said. "I think that will put the program at risk of financially costing us even more."



Acting Secretary of the Air Force Eric K. Fanning and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III present the "State of the Air Force," during a Pentagon press briefing Dec. 13, 2013. During the briefing, Fanning and Welsh addressed current Air Force challenges, to include sequestration's impacts to readiness, modernization and force structure, and their efforts to plan for a credible capable force over the next 10 years. (U.S. Air Force photo/Scott M. Ash)