



# F-35 Lightning II Program

Public Affairs Release – 2014 11 11

## AIR FORCE DISCUSSING A-10 COMPROMISE WITH CONGRESS

By Aaron Mehta, Staff writer 8:03 p.m. EST November 11, 2014

WASHINGTON - The Air Force is trying to work out a compromise with Congress to retire a percentage of the A-10 fleet in order to move maintainers to the F-35 joint strike fighter, according to two service officials.

The Air Force is in discussion with congressional leaders about the possibility of retiring three active-duty squadrons, or roughly 72 A-10 aircraft. While that is well short of retiring the whole fleet, even this targeted retirement would help with what the service is describing as a major crunch in available maintenance personnel.

One service official said the idea is "getting some positive feedback" from staffers on the Hill.

The Air Force has spent most of 2014 fighting with Congress over the proposed retirement of the A-10. While service leaders argue the cut would save significant funds, those on the Hill have expressed deep concerns over retiring the plane, beloved by soldiers on the ground, at a time of ongoing conflict around the globe.

A new issue has emerged in the last month, however, with the service saying the planned operational date for its F-35A joint strike fighters may be threatened if the A-10 is not retired.

In order to reach initial operational capability (IOC), the F-35A needs 1,100 trained maintainers. The bulk of those were being drawn from the A-10 fleet. Until the A-10s are retired, those maintainers cannot be trained and shifted over to the complicated F-35, leaving that IOC date at risk.

"I am very worried now that my promise to [the Air Force] to give them all the things they need to declare IOC on Aug. 1 of 2016 I might not be able to give them," Lt. Gen. Chris Bogdan, the F-35 program executive, told reporters Oct. 30 in what amounted to the first public acknowledgment of the maintainer issue.

But that argument isn't finding much traction, at least publicly, in Congress. The most vocal protector of the A-10, Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., called Bogdan's comments "a false choice." Meanwhile, Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona, all but assured to take over the chairmanship of the Senate Armed Services Committee come January, has already pledged to protect the plane.

Indeed, Ayotte and others continue to say the service has other options, including drawing on maintainers from other sources. And while the Air Force had a backup plan to do just that, increased demand for legacy fighters in Europe, Iraq and Syria have made that impossible.

"We were anticipating not being able to retire the A-10, so we still had a plan," a second Air Force official explained. "We were going to take more manpower out of the legacy fleet. ... And the reason we thought we could take the risk was because we were pulling out of Afghanistan, and because geopolitically there wasn't as much going on as there is right now. [The Islamic State group] hadn't popped up yet, Ukraine hadn't gotten as critical as it has been."

Gen. Mark Welsh, Air Force chief of staff, has since decided the extra risk cannot be put into the legacy fleet while it is engaged in daily combat operations in Iraq and Syria, the official said, noting those operations represent a "last straw" for any flexibility.

Hence, an already tenuous maintainer supply has been stretched thin, leaving the Air Force to conclude the only real option is to either retire the A-10 delay the F-35. And unless a compromise can be reached in Congress, the F-35 is on track for a delayed IOC.



Not quite dead yet: With Congress steadfastly defending the A-10, could a compromise be in the works?

"We've really done our homework on this," the second official added. "The plan is there, it's just that Congress is preventing us from doing that."