

Opening Statement of Senator John McCain Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee

**Room SD-106
Dirksen Senate Office Building
Wednesday, March 18, 2015**

To receive testimony on the postures of the Department of the Army and the Department of the Air Force in review of the Defense Authorization Request.

This Committee meets today to consider the posture of the Army and Air Force in the context of our review and oversight of the FY2016 defense budget request.

Both of these services, tested by years of war, are confronting growing threats and increasing demands with shrinking forces and aging equipment. By the end of this fiscal year, the Army will decline from a peak of about 570,000 to 490,000 active-duty personnel. In the next few years, the Army will continue cutting its end-strength down to 450,000 soldiers, a budget-driven force level reduction that predated the rise of ISIL, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Ebola crisis. And if mindless sequestration cuts are allowed to return, the Army will shrink to 420,000 troops, increasing the risk that in a crisis, we will have too few soldiers who could enter a fight without proper training or equipment. With global instability only increasing, and with just 33 percent of the Army's brigade combat teams ready for deployment and decisive operations, I simply do not see any strategic basis for the Army active force structure to be reduced below the pre-9/11 level of 490,000.

The Air Force posture statement makes clear that there is, quote, "[a] fundamental disconnect between [America's] airpower expectations and its airpower capability." A quarter-century of near-continuous deployments, frequent aircraft divestments, and a decades-long procurement holiday has left us with the oldest and smallest Air Force in history. The service's current 54 fighter squadrons represent just one-third of the combat power mustered for Operation Desert Storm. Less than half of today's already insufficient number of fighter squadrons are completely combat ready, and they are not expected to return to full readiness until 2023, due to the damaging effects of sequestration suffered in 2013. Meanwhile, the service is increasingly challenged by potential adversaries who are fielding fifth-generation fighters and advanced air defense systems.

The Air Force posture statement also indicates that, "there was a time when the Air Force could trade some capacity in order to retain capability. But we have reached the point where the two are inextricable; lose any more capacity, and the capability will cease to exist." This statement makes the proposal in the Air Force budget request to retire 164 A-10 aircraft in FY16 before the F-35 is fully operational all the more confusing. If the Air Force cannot afford to lose capacity, why is it volunteering to retire its most proven aircraft for close air support missions?

Meanwhile, both services have critical modernization needs that must be met if they are to meet future threats and challenges.

The Army remains reliant on shrinking wartime OCO funding to replace, repair, and recondition equipment that has been lost, damaged, or used extensively in more than a decade of war in Iraq and

Afghanistan. We must ensure this reset is placed on a firm fiscal footing, which requires the Army to learn the lessons of its failed acquisition programs of recent years. These lessons, together with the experience of more than a decade of war, must guide the procurement of the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle and Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicle by enhancing tactical mobility, command and control, medical evacuation, and other critical combat functions, while significantly improving the protection and safety of our soldiers.

The future of American air power rests on a number of current Air Force modernization programs. With program costs approaching \$400 billion, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is the Department's most costly and ambitious acquisition program in history. After suffering years of unacceptable cost growth and schedule delays, the program appears to have started to stabilize. Still, cost, affordability, and technological challenges remain. The plan to increase production at the same time that development and testing continue will likely add risk to this program, and could result in further cost growth and schedule delays in the future. This Committee will continue to closely scrutinize the overall management and performance of the F-35 program, and we will hold individuals accountable.

This Committee will provide the same close oversight to other critical programs such as the Long Range Strike Bomber, the KC-46A tanker, and the Presidential Airlift Replacement programs. These very expensive programs must be kept on cost and on schedule, and deliver the capabilities the American taxpayer deserves at the best possible value. In particular, the Committee will closely monitor the Air Force's ambitious \$550 million unit cost target for the Long Range Strike Bomber. This program is essential to overcoming growing operational risk to our ability to project power in anti-access and denied environments, and it must be delivered on time and on budget.

I must also note my concern with the Air Force's troubling lack of urgency in ending our reliance on the Russian RD-180 rocket engine. Russia annexed Crimea over a year ago, yet the Air Force does not even have an acquisition strategy yet for a new rocket engine. Congress gave the Air Force \$220 million in FY15 and set a deadline of 2019. Instead of giving this effort the level of attention needed, the Air Force has wasted a year doing very little to end our reliance on Russian rocket engines. If the Air Force is unwilling to do what's necessary to meet the 2019 deadline, they are going to have to figure out how to meet our space launch needs without the RD-180. Continued reliance on Russian rocket engines is unacceptable, and it's time the Air Force conduct itself accordingly.

I am gravely concerned about the dangerous choice we are forcing upon our military, especially the Army and Air Force. With the present operational tempo and drastic reductions to defense spending, we will inevitably confront depleted readiness, chronic modernization problems, and deteriorating morale. We must chart a different course, or else continue the downward spiral of Army and Air Force capacity and readiness that will compromise each service's ability to execute the Administration's stated defense strategy at a time of accumulating danger to America's national security. Such a course is within our power. The President's budget request is a start. But I believe this Congress can and must do better.