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SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE  
ON READINESS AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT,  
UNITED STATES SENATE

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

PRESENTATION TO SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT  
UNITED STATES SENATE

SUBJECT: Current Readiness of the Joint Force

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## **Introduction**

Chairman Dan Sullivan, Ranking Member Mazie Hirono, and distinguished members of this committee, on behalf of the Secretary of the Air Force, the Honorable Troy E. Meink, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Ken S. Wilsbach, thank you for an opportunity to testify on the readiness of the United States Air Force (USAF).

As you have heard from our Air Force Chief of Staff, the most important thing the United States Air Force does for the joint force and for the nation is to fly and fix aircraft. Capable platforms operated and maintained by talented Airmen are essential components in the deterrence of America's adversaries and winning the nation's wars should deterrence fail. The USAF's focus is enhancing readiness for today and modernizing our aircraft and missiles to provide capabilities to the joint force across the range of future timelines and across the spectrum of conflict. Every day, Airmen in nuclear missile launch facilities and in nuclear capable bombers deter enemies and offer unparalleled options for America's leaders. Moreover, Operation MIDNIGHT HAMMER and Operation ABSOLUTE RESOLVE demonstrate our readiness to fight and play a decisive role as part of the joint force.

The USAF looks at readiness from the perspective of the recruiting and training of Airmen, the capability of its weapons, and the ability to sustain both over time. Likewise, the fleet of modern aircraft are proving their value in operations with additional procurements securing the long-term viability of American air dominance. The combination of Air Force Airmen trained at the highest level along with modern weaponry will keep us the most dominant air force in the world.

## **Ready Airmen**

Airmen are our most precious resource. We are committed to investing in them to strengthen the foundation of the force. A visible portion of that effort is in the modernization of

physical fitness standards. Unfortunately, after decades of improvement before 2020, the USAF identified a decline in personnel fitness over the last five years. The USAF is updating our physical fitness requirements to ensure our Airmen are healthy, resilient, and ready to fight in the most austere of environments. Our Airmen will stand shoulder to shoulder with our joint partners on the toughest battlefields to defend the nation.

The Air Force is currently below its desired flying personnel level by 2,470 pilots and is taking decisive action to rebuild the pilot cadre. Over the past few years, the USAF reformed the pilot training pipeline to increase pilot production. The Air Force engaged with commercial training partners to leverage their expertise in airmanship while the Air Force focuses on training the military aspects of flight. Using the reformed pipeline, the USAF seeks to train 1,500 pilots per year. Pilot production will play a key role in reducing pilot shortages and ensuring the United States has the pilots needed to fly, fight, and win.

Increasing pilot production is not enough to address the pilot shortage, we must also retain more of our talented aviators. The USAF is exploring changes to the compensation structure that addresses retention concerns and targets an acute shortage in fighter pilots. We are tackling quality of life and quality of service issues, such as unpredictable schedules and non-flying administrative duties, which drive pilots to separate from the service. One important initiative is the consecutive assignment-in-place policy that would provide stability to the pilots who desire to keep their families in a specific location longer and reduce moving costs.

The numbers of planes and personnel do not capture the whole of an Air Force's ability to perform. Readiness comes down to the ability to use the tools effectively. For this reason, General Wilsbach is challenging commanders to ensure our fighter pilots fly three times a week to improve tactical proficiency and that their maintainers have the parts they need to support this

increased tempo. He also directed his general officers to fly so we can see the state of flight lines and aircraft firsthand. He is invested in taking a capable team and making it better through high standards, experience, and strengthening the warrior ethos.

In addition to pilots, the Air Force is committed to recruiting and retaining professional personnel in the world. Every Airman, regardless of career field is essential to our success. We surpassed our recruiting goal in 2025 and are on track to meeting our goal for 2026. We are seeking to modernize our training to put the most capable Airmen in the field, faster. Once they reach their first base, the Air Force is updating housing and base support functions like childcare to make sure the Air Force is a place where they can thrive.

The future fight requires the Air Force to be more flexible than ever before. To that end, the Air Force continues to leverage our Agile Combat Employment scheme of maneuver to complicate potential adversaries' long-range precision-attack capabilities. Although the Air Force is reliant on facilities and installations from which we project combat power, train our forces, and sustain our weapon systems, we can make those facilities harder to disrupt through agile employment of force. Agile Combat Employment (ACE), emphasizing rapid mobility and dispersal, will complicate an adversary's calculus and make us a more lethal force.

The USAF is leveraging simulations and exercises to enhance the quality of training. The Joint Simulation Environment allows Airmen to practice complex operations in ways that we cannot replicate with live-fly exercises. Additionally, wings and squadrons are putting their learning to the test in Combat Readiness Inspections that verify our units' ability to execute the mission. Several wings finished their Combat Readiness Inspections in conjunction with the 2025 Department of the Air Force Level Exercise in the Indo-Pacific theater. The Air Force moved more than 400 aircraft and 15,000 personnel into 50 different locations across the Pacific.

This exercise pushed readiness to the limit, testing logistics, intelligence, and base support functions in as real an environment as possible.

These high-end exercises require the right facilities for training. The USAF is modernizing the Nevada Test and Training Range and the Joint Pacific Alaska Range Complex to replicate a near-peer environment. Investments in those ranges enable warfighters to train in a contested environment against relevant and realistic threats with training assets that can be continually upgraded. The USAF has substantial, planned investments during the next fiscal years to sustain, modernize, and add training infrastructure to strengthen this capability.

The final point regarding Airmen and readiness is the way we organize and present our teams to the joint force. Over the last decade, the USAF has been testing better ways to generate, sustain, deploy, and redeploy its formations. The past several years of exercises and deployments have led us to the Air Expeditionary Wing 2.0 (AEW 2.0) and a new force generation construct. In this system Airmen train together, deploy together, and fight together as a wing on a 1:3 deploy-to-dwell ratio. The AEW 2.0 construct significantly reduces the scale and scope of manpower changes of the previous concept, increasing the predictability and sustainability of the Air Force.

### **Ready Weapons**

Our Airmen need the right tools to fly, fight, and win. The Air Force is focused on sustaining the aircraft, missiles, and equipment we have today while expanding our future readiness through modernization. To modernize at the speed of our adversaries, the USAF is pursuing improvements in the acquisition process. Lastly, the Air Force relies on secure bases and a strong industrial base to maximize our readiness.

The Air Force is leveraging the Weapon System Sustainment (WSS) account to preserve the readiness of current fleet. WSS is essential to ensure we have the depot maintenance, engineering support, software maintenance, engine overhauls, and contractor logistic support to keep our aircraft flying. Weapon System Sustainment is directly related to the Air Force's commitment to flying more. The better logistical support we provide, the faster our maintainers get jets flying again and allow our aviators to build competence in their craft.

The USAF readiness to deter attacks and defend the homeland depends on having modernized basing and supplies to project power. Our bases, at home and abroad, are our force projection platforms and their health is key to our success. We are focused on strengthening their offensive and defensive capabilities. In the Pacific, there are three military construction projects which will increase the joint forces' ability to respond to a crisis. Defensively, we are working with Joint Interagency Task Force 401 to augment air base defenses and counter small uncrewed aerial systems. These projects create synergy with our ACE concept to build our resiliency and lethality.

Modernization is closely tied to acquisition. The USAF seeks to improve our acquisition process by reducing the bureaucracy in the system and empowering people to make decisions. We are encouraging program managers like those of the Combat Collaborative Aircraft (CCA) team to take informed risks to innovate faster with this promising platform. This department-wide effort reflects our commitment to modernization and readiness.

The 2026 National Defense Strategy directs the USAF to make the defense of our homeland and deterrence our top priorities. Deterring adversaries and defending the homeland requires a credible nuclear deterrent. The USAF is recapitalizing its nuclear capability with the Sentinel and B-21 Raider programs. A modern intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and a

robust low observable bomber fleet ensures that America's enemies are deterred from aggression against America's interests and attacks on the homeland.

The USAF is continuously integrated cutting-edge aircraft into its fleet to preserve our combat edge. Modern aircraft give our Airmen the tools they need to win against increasingly capable adversaries. The F-35, F-47, and CCA exemplify our effort to dominate the skies. We are also moving forward with T-7 which gives the Air Force a modern training aircraft to prepare our pilots for operating Fifth and Sixth Generation Aircraft.

The Air Force remains a lethal, agile, and dominant force. No other air force in the world could conduct Operation MIDNIGHT HAMMER or enable Operation ABSOLUTE RESOLVE. A core part of our continued success is the ability to gather, share, and make sense of information faster than our potential adversaries. The USAF will continue its dominance by investing in command-and-control systems that enable resilient communication and allow us to disrupt the efforts of our enemies. For example, the USAF increased the focus on the Electromagnetic Spectrum Operations to invest in critical capabilities like the EA-37B Compass Call and the 350th Spectrum Warfare Wing, which will preserve readiness and dominance in the years to come.

Modern combat is more reliant on capable smart weapons than ever before. We are partnering closely with the Department of War to get the right mix of highly technical and low-cost munitions for the force. High end munitions, like the Hypersonic Attack Cruise Missile (HACM) and Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon (ARRW) are the exquisite munitions that will allow us to execute with unmatched precision. The lower cost munitions like FALCO allow the USAF to defeat strategies of massed attack and impose problems of scale on our adversaries. The Air Force seeks to significantly increase our weapons procurement over previous

procurement levels. Expanded munition stockpiles allow joint forces to sustain the fight beyond the first night and serve as a powerful deterrent of our enemies. When our enemies know we have deep stocks of munitions, they know the United States will remain the most lethal air force on the planet. In short, our potential adversaries will know that they cannot win. Such a future force bolsters our deterrence posture for the nation.

We also understand that a ready Air Force cannot exist without a responsive and powerful defense industrial base and resilient infrastructure. The cumulative effect of reliable funding for readiness is a supercharging of the industrial base. The sustained demand communicated through multi-year contracts allow us to capitalize on the innovative American economy and encourages industry to increase the capacity for high-intensity conflict.

## **Conclusion**

The USAF is the most dominant air force in the world, and we stand ready as part of the joint force to preserve peace through strength today, tomorrow, and in the future. We are committed to increasing our lethality through improving Airmen, maintaining our platforms, and modernizing our capabilities. We believe these efforts create a virtuous cycle of investment that improves our readiness, supercharges the industrial base, and drives down costs in the future. We will fix and fly aircraft to deter our nation's wars and will win its wars should deterrence fail. I look forward to answering your questions.