

Episode_88- Congress_View_on_Air_Force_Modernization_Nukes_an...

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SPEAKERS

Todd "Sledge" Harmer, Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula, Doug Birkey, John "Slick" Baum, Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski

J John "Slick" Baum 00:01

Welcome to the Aerospace Advantage podcast. I'm your host, John "Slick" Baum. This week it's time for the Rendezvous, our monthly installment where the Mitchell team digs into stories you've seen in the headlines. And this time around, we are rolling with a new set of voices. We've invited Anthony Lazarski, who goes by Lazer, and Todd Harmer, who we all know as Sledge, to join our bench. They are super unique players here in DC, because both are combat pilots. They represented the Air Force on Capitol Hill later in their careers. They each worked in the Senate after retiring from the Air Force. And now they represent a variety of folks on the Hill as lobbyists. So not only are these guys airmen at heart, but they get Washington like few others. And they also track details regarding what matters to the Air Force, Space Force and the rest of the defense enterprise in extreme detail. So with that, Lazer, thanks so much for being here.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 00:55

Thank you for the invite. I'm excited to take part in the Rendezvous today.

J John "Slick" Baum 01:00

Sledge, you and I go way back. We'll talk about that later. But thank you so much for joining us.

T Todd "Sledge" Harmer 01:05

Thank you Slick. Glad to be here.

J John "Slick" Baum 01:07

All right, Lazer. Let's start with you. Can you bring folks up to speed on your background?

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 01:11

Sure. So 25 years Air Force, flew fighters, -111s. Most of my fighters I flew are now retired. But -111s, -117s, and then -15Es at the end. The last job in the Air Force, I was chief of the Air Force Senate office. And that's how I wound up in Senator Inhofe's office, I was asked if I'd retire and go work for him. Worked for Senator

Inhofe for 10 years, from 2007 to 2017, both on his personal staff as well as a professional staffer on the Armed Services Committee. And then came over to Cornerstone government affairs and I've been over here for five years now.

J John "Slick" Baum 01:47

Thanks, Lazer. I really appreciate that and really appreciate the short bio. Now Sledge, what about you?

T Todd "Sledge" Harmer 01:52

I spent 26 years on active duty in the Air Force primarily flying the F-16. But I also have some time in the F-15C as well. My last job in the Air Force, I was the liaison to the House of Representatives. Retired in 2012, and then had the opportunity to work for Senator Saxby Chambliss from Georgia as his national security policy adviser. I've been at American Defense International, or ADI, since 2014, great opportunity for me to stay involved in the national security issues and connected with the with the Air Force as well.

L Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula 02:19

Just for our audience, I want to let you know that I've known Sledge and Lazer while we were all on active duty together, and for many years afterwards. They're dedicated airmen who are committed to advocating for the benefits of exploiting the aerospace domains to meet our nation's security needs. So we can't thank you guys enough for being here. And I look forward to your participation.

D Doug Birkey 02:43

I want to second that. I've gotten to know both you for really your tenures at Air Force LO and the years after that. It's amazing. I mean, you're citing those years and how long it's been. And it's just been an honor to work with you over these years. And thanks for being here today.

J John "Slick" Baum 02:58

Alright, guys, thank you so much for that. And for our audience, it is our intent to have Lazer and Sledge join us as much as possible on the rendezvous. So sometimes schedules may get in the way of that. But that's our goal. And I think it's going to take what are already pretty insightful conversations to a whole new level. And I also want to point out, if you have questions for Lazer, Sledge or the rest of the team, if you want those questions address, please send them our way. The contact information is in the show notes and we'll try to answer those questions in the next installment. Okay, so on with the rest of the content for this week, the defense bills have been working their way through the House and the Senate. So gentlemen, please bring us up to speed on where things stand from a process perspective.

T Todd "Sledge" Harmer 03:38

Yeah, I'll go first to talking about the National Defense Authorization Act, the annual defense policy. Current Congress is slowly working the process on that. The House has completed their consideration of the NDAA. They passed it off the House floor about three weeks ago and they added \$37 billion to the top line in the President's budget request. So fairly robust spending there. The Senate Armed Services Committee is also working on their bill passed out of committee in June. They've just filed to go to the floor. We're not sure when that bill will go to the floor, probably sometime in mid-September. And like the House, they also added significant money. The Senate marked an additional \$45 billion in defense spending, much of that simply to keep up with inflation from the prior year. The big question, though, is going to be when the bill does go to the floor, there are a lot of competing priorities. I know Senator Reed and Senator Inhofe do not have an

agreement from leader Schumer yet to bring it to the floor. But hopefully by mid-September, and then the committees can conference the bill, we will not get it done before the end of the fiscal year, or the end of this fiscal year. So I think sometime after the election in November before Christmas, so we'll finally see the FY23 Defense Authorization Act.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 04:50

Yeah, I'll take the appropriations portion of it. So I guess, good thing is that the House went ahead and passed all its 12, or six of the 12 appropriations bills. So they got them all out of committee. And then they brought six to the floor because agriculture, energy, water, we had Interior, big things for us, military construction, VA and then there's FUD. What didn't come to the floor is defense bill as well as Homeland Security and a few others because there just wasn't an agreement, and they weren't sure they were going to be able to get the votes on the floor. So the House is essentially done. They've got the approach bills that they were going to get to the floor pass. And they're going to have to wait until after the elections are done and start working a conference. On the Senate side, they weren't able to bring any of the bills to the floor. So they just posted the 12 bills in the chairman's mark. And if you look at the House, the House essentially passed the President's budget numbers. On the Senate side, the Senate appropriators added \$47 billion, and as we've seen in the past, both the authorizers or appropriators have been working together on the Senate side. But as Sledge just said, this 47 billion is going to help inflation as well as additional funding for defense spending. About 20 of that is probably going to be for inflation as we go forward. But for both of these bills, nothing will happen for conferences. They're going to wait till after the election, see what happens and who's going to have a majority in the next Congress. And then it's really going to be a tough negotiation. As we go forward, you've got Senator Leahy, he's retiring. Senator Shelby, he's retiring. Obviously going to want to get this bill, these bills done as they do every year, but it's probably going to take until Christmas, potentially until the end of the calendar year. And if they're having problems, which obviously we're hoping they don't, there is a possibility of kicking it into the next Congress. And that could push this back all the way to March because the bills will have to get refiled. But right now we're hearing that they're going to try to get this done there. We have a reconciliation bill that is going on the Senate floor right now. And that's causing some some disagreement on the Senate between the Republicans and Democrats as they go forward. So fingers crossed. Hopefully the all the approps bills will get done by the end of the year. That will be a CR that they'll work on in September, after they come back from recess.

J John "Slick" Baum 07:10

Alright, guys, thanks so much for that rundown. Now one of the key requests from the Air Force made in this year's bill was to try and retire the Block 20 F-22s which are about a squadrons worth of jets. General Deptula, can you give us some background on this?

L Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula 07:25

Yeah, sure, Slick, let me kind of hit macro level first. And from that perspective, it's instructive that our audience understand that there are only about 186 Total F-22s in existence. And there are two versions of F-22s, the Block 30/35s that are the combat capable F-22s, and then the Block 20s, which are used for introductory training into the F-22. Now, to give you a set of perspectives on what's actually usable using Air Force data, and considering the F-22s that are assigned for training, development, and what's called backup aircraft inventory, there are about 123 F-22s that remain as combat capable. If you use the current F-22 mission capable rates in other words, which ones on any given day can be generated for combat, that number is about 50%. So that then gives you about 62 combat capable F-22s on any given day. Now to be, you know, candid in an honest and lending here, or in descriptions when deployed for combat, mission capable rates generally average well above 80%, because that's all those deployed guys and gals are doing, that's keeping those airplanes available. So that, using that rate, the higher 80% rate generates about 90 or, say 100 mission capable aircraft. From a combat perspective, if you look at mission planning assumptions, you can think about a third in the fight, a third preparing to launch or enroute, and about a third recovering, refuelling and rearming. Taking that into consideration, you're really looking at a maximum of about 33, 34 F-22s in the fight at any one time. And that's using the entire Air Force F-22 inventory. All right, so what does that mean? What

it means is that for a pure fight, we've got a severe shortfall of the nation's top fighter aircraft before 2030. Now if you put into context that only about 20% of our Air Force fighter force is stealthy, you can see that there's some significant risk between now and 2030. And so we need to fill this bathtub with capacity, the best we can. So all that is background. That's why there's a House Armed Services Committee proposal that calls on the Air Force to keep those 33 Block 20 F-22s in the Air Force. And not only that, they'd like to see them upgraded to the same standard as the combat coded jets, because what that would give you is an additional squadron of F-22s that are absolutely critical for ensuring that we have deterrent, and war-winning if necessary, air superiority capability between now and 2030. Now, all of that said, fact of the matter is, you know, money counts, and the Air Force needs the money appropriated to do that. As right now, and I think we'll talk about this a little bit later, there's simply too many demands on the entire spectrum of capabilities that the Air Force provides, and frankly, that's why they want to retire the Block 20s. But from an actual combat capability perspective, we ought to seriously consider upgrading those jets to Block 30/35 status.

J John "Slick" Baum 11:17

All right, Doug, anything to add?

D Doug Birkey 11:18

I would agree with General Deptula, what he's saying. This is really monetarily driven. I mean, if you look at the combatant command demand around the world, air superiority is number one precondition for any successful military operation. You know, ships at sea, aircraft in the sky, you know, especially tankers, airlifters, things like that, command and control assets, space control stations, cyber centers, you know, all of this stuff, none of it survives without control of the sky. And we are relying tremendously on a very, very small force. And so you parse it out, like Gen Deputla said, and there's just not enough Schlitz. And so if we were to take out those Block 20s, which are really handling the training, load it further doubles up the demand that's on those Block 30/35, You're gonna run them into the ground, and they're already getting flogged to death by just tremendous demand. So then you add on to the fact that we're not buying F-35s is fast enough, F-15Cs are running out of life really fast, and are going to come out of the force, F-16s aren't far behind them. And the Next Generation Air Dominance aircraft is going to probably take additional time, it's going to be pretty costly. According what Secretary of the Air Force said, we're taking away all of the backstops, we have to fill this capacity piece throughout the 2020s. And to pull these options now, I think is just incredibly imprudent when we look at a world that's literally on fire, both in Europe and the Pacific.

J John "Slick" Baum 12:44

Yeah, Doug, I really appreciate that. Now, Sledge and Lazer. You guys are the experts. How is the Hill looking at this one?

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 12:50

Yeah, Sledge? I'll tell you what, I'll jump in on this one first, Doug, General Deptula. You guys hit it right on the nose. If you if you know, the members, both Sledge and I have worked with both on the House and the Senate side are looking at this, as how does this impact national security? What's the increased risk? And this goes all the way back, you know, both when Sledge and I were on the Hill, when we were trying to we went through one period where we reduced the number of personnel back in 2006. And we've reduced a bunch of assets and aircraft of 2015-ish. And when it was coming up to us and getting briefed, they were just basically accepting more and more risk. And so with this retirement, the Air Force has come in and said, Listen, we want to retire these aircraft, we're, you know, they're not combat capable, we can save this amount of money for not upgrading. And we're going to accept this additional risk. And what Congress is coming back, which you've seen both in the House and the Senate authorization bills, is both of them have prohibited from retiring. Senate wants report that basically says it's not going to impact combat capability and not going to impact training. And as you said, the House wants to upgrade them. And what they're really looking at is, as

you said, there, you know, we were supposed to buy what 750 F-22s, came down to 381. Finally we had a fight for 187. And that's well, you know, that's all we wound up having, we do not have enough assets. And that's why you're seeing pushback from Congress, is because they're saying that they do not want to accept that much risk. And therefore they want more information before they're going to let let the Air Force retire these assets. And I'll turn it over to you Sledge.

T Todd "Sledge" Harmer 14:31

Yeah, the only thing I would add, there is I think, you know, having seen and again, the budget request is simply that, it's a request for Congress to take action on. And being on the receiving end of the budget requests, you're going to look at it in terms of capabilities. And you realize that the Air Force this is this is a spreadsheet. This is a numbers game for the Air Force, and they've got to look at ways to make the budget balance. But to Doug's earlier point, April 15, 1953, was the last time that US ground forces were attacked by the enemy from the air. And we have for too long taken air superiority for granted. And we can't forget that that is a capability that enables all other successes on the battlefield. And I would say if if Congress doesn't like the fact that the Air Force believes that they need to retire F-22s to balance the budget, or balance their books, rather, then perhaps it's time for us to look at how defense spending is parsed out amongst the services. I'm not saying we need another commission on roles and missions. But I think a hard look at the blue passthrough a really hard look at the traditional 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 split for the departments, in particular now that there's a Space Force. And the recent announcement that Deputy Secretary of Defense Hicks has assigned the cruise missile defense mission to the United States Air Force, there's not enough money to do the things the Air Force is asked to do. And we've got to properly resource those capabilities.

J John "Slick" Baum 15:52

Yeah, it's really well said, I appreciate that gents. Now, General Deptula or Doug, any thoughts add here?

L Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula 15:57

Yeah, I got some thoughts to add. First, I do believe it's time for a commission on roles and missions again, because if in fact, there's no appetite for raising the Department of Defense's overall top line budget, or there's no appetite for reducing the demands of the national security strategy, then the only option is to do better allocation of the resources the Department of Defense has. And I would suggest that means evaluating systems and capabilities across all the services in the context of costs per desired effect. And that means a serious look at who does what, amongst the services. None of the services want to go into this kind of a review. But as long as we keep arbitrarily restricted top lines to what we spend on defense, if we don't do it smarter, we're going to lose the next time we get engaged in a major regional conflict.

D Doug Birkey 17:00

I'll just add in we talk a lot about what retaining these Block 20s Would would cost it's time to start asking what is it going to cost without them on the frontlines? And that's going to be lives lost, and some pretty catastrophic failure. And so it's time to focus on the real requirements that the COCOMs have.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 17:17

This is Lazer. I'll just add one other thing. I mean, Congress is also looking at what we're playing, if we get rid of these aircraft, what what's the next aircraft coming off the line? What are we producing? And it's only the F-35 right now, and as you know, we're not producing enough of those. And if I look at the next generation fighter that's out there, when is that going to come online? And that's why Congress is looking and the professional staff that are sitting on the committees are looking at, there's just too much risk.

J John "Slick" Baum 17:45

All right, Lazer, you actually teed me up for this next question. All right, the whole notion of the F-22 inventory size cuts to another key program, the F-35. We went from an environment in the past years, when Congress seemed to automatically plus up those jets to one where members and professional staff are pulling back on the throttles. And they're doing this at the very time the program should be ramping capacity fast. That's just the way the program was designed. So Doug, kick us off with this, give us some context here.

D Doug Birkey 18:14

First off, fifth generation is an imperative for surviving and successfully executing your mission in modern air combat against a competent threat. And what competent is defined as these days is everything from a small mid-tier threat upwards. And so if you're going against Iran and North Korea, or China, Russia, any of that, you need this. If you don't have you're not coming back alive. And if you look at the operation to Ukraine, right now, look at where the Russians have rolled their their surface to air missiles and other defense systems, nothing else would survive very well. What we saw early in the conflict, they didn't have those systems in there. They learned from that, they have changed fast. So if you look at the Air Force fleet, our leaders knew this. And that's why they started the F-22 program, the F-35. And they pushed for them aggressively. And we're supposed to sunset out the older legacy fleet that we designed in the wake of Vietnam War and procured in the 70s and 80s mainly. They're supposed to be gone by now. And so if you kind of look at the tables that were generated in late 90s, early 2000s, I mean, we were supposed to be on a trajectory where 80% was fifth gen, we would have 20% fourth gen. And then by the end of this decade, which we're closing in on fast, entirely fifth gen. To do that, we were supposed to be buying 110 F-35s a year. We only requested, the Air Force only requested 33 this year. And so we're in this zone where the legacy iron that was really bought by, you know, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan and George HW Bush, that's running out of life. And so that's cascading down fast. We're not putting in fifth gen fast enough to backfill, the demand spike around the globe is really out of sight. You really can't handle a European, Pacific threat concurrently, not to mention if Iran and North Korea kicks up. And so this is a zone where we got to get real and start producing in volume.

L Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula 20:09

Yeah, let me just add one other point for context there. As mentioned earlier, the nation's taking huge risks with the Air Force over the next five years, forced to retire about 1500 aircraft, while only buying 500 new ones, for a loss of 1000 aircraft to an Air Force that's already the smallest, the oldest and the least ready in its entire history. Now, the prior Indo-Pacific Command commander came out not too long ago, with the fact that the Chinese most likely will be ready, both in terms of capacity and capability to successfully invade Taiwan about the 2027 timeframe. So you know, that's, that is sort of the period over which we lose these 1000 aircraft, when, frankly, that's when we're going to need more aircraft. So it kind of underlines the importance of rapidly ramping up the buy of the open production lines that we have today. And that means more F-35s, as Doug talked about/

J John "Slick" Baum 21:29

Alright, Lazer and Sledge, obviously General Deptula and Doug gave us the Mitchell take. So what do you guys think? What is going to take to get this program back on track in the eyes of the Hill? I mean, is there a plan B, for fifth gen options in the next several years? Or, you know, how's this going to work? And what can we do here?

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 21:46

Sledge? I'll let you go first on this one. I'll follow you.

T Todd "Sledge" Harmer 21:50

Yeah, I'm not really sure that Congress is the problem here. I think a lot of it has to do with with a request that comes from the department. You know, as Doug mentioned, the number I was going to quote, I seem to remember from a War College paper, I did almost 20 years ago, the the max ramp rate production for the F-35 was supposed to be 120 aircraft per year starting in FY15. That was eight years ago. And in the '23 requests there were only 33 airplanes. So you've got to ask your question why? Every year Congress adds more airplanes. And that number gets whittled down. And that's because there's conversations between the professional staff and the members. And there's a logical reason why they can't either absorb or they can't procure that rate. So I don't, again, I don't think that's really Congress's fault. And I would say, over the course of probably the last 15 or 20 years TAC air has been a bill payer for other priorities in the Air Force. And you see that in the age and the size of the fighter fleet in particular. And you know, the question is why? Developmental delays in the F-35, late getting into IOT&E, problems with a joint synthetic environment, sustainment costs are going to be eating the Air Force alive. And again, in a zero sum game where your budgets are limited, you've got to balance the opportunity costs of buying one thing against another, I would say, you know, that the Air Force needs to look hard at what their budget priorities are to deliver the capabilities. And at the end of the day, if the F-35 program is successful, everybody's going to love it, and we're gonna buy it and the Air Force is gonna fly.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 23:22

So everything Sledge said I 100% agree with and General Deptula, I think you'd probably agree with a procurement holiday that we've taken. So you know, and it was said at the beginning, flying aircraft or flying fleet that was built in the 80s. I mean, we've had some new -22s and -35s, but we're living off of legacy aircraft that we haven't recapitalized on and now everything, and it's not just us, it's Army, Navy, Air Force, we need to recapitalize the entire force, but the budgets that are coming down, aren't allowing us to do everything we need to do. And so instead of maybe focusing on a few things, getting the -22s, -35s where we're going to be built, building to a quantity where we can actually lower the costs and get production off the line. We're building it at min economic quantity, so everything's costing more, it's taking longer, and we're trying to, basically peanut butter, spread the money to get as many things as we can out the door at a slower rate. And that's what's causing the issues. And at the same time, all these legacy aircraft are timing out, they're tougher to sustain, costs more to operate and sustain and that and we're in this almost a death spiral of how do we get out of this?

D Doug Birkey 24:37

Now and I just want to jump in with something here too. The services have extreme frustration with the program right now. And I get it and you guys are alluding to it in various ways. The jet is lagging in some areas in terms of capabilities coming online and all that, hear a lot about Block 4 and all that, and that's not one thing. It's a rolling set of capabilities over many years. But there's an element of time here. Even if the perfect jet does not exist today, we will not have time to surge available jets when a crisis erupts. You know, if you think about the time that you issue a requirement in in OSD, and it works its way through the services and all that the budgeting process and, then it goes to the Hill, and you authorize and obligate cash, two yours. And so your decision surprise window is really about four to five years, in many ways, before you feel the operational capability. General Deputla, you've talked about this before, you were buying or you were flying F-15s in an era where those jets weren't perfect. I mean, we had engine problems at the F-15. Yet we kept buying them in volume, so that when things got sorted out, you could plug the holes, where they're missing engines and all that, and get immediate capacity back fast. And that's my concern with F-35. is that we're waiting for the perfect, but that's going to get away in good enough, in mass quantities that are going to be relevant for the fight. And we don't know when that fight's gonna happen. I mean, who could have guessed Ukraine, you know, look at the tension right now in the Pacific. If you need those capabilities, you're going to need it like a light.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 26:06

By the way, I agree with the iron. And if you also look at the F-35s we're flying today and their capabilities against fifth, you know what we have for our fourth gen, it's a great aircraft. It's not perfect, we've all been taught, not waiting for the 100% solution, I've got to get what's out there, and then we'll approve it along the way. The same thing goes with -111s and everything else. We've had problems with different aircraft, we move forward. And the F-35 program's, almost two different programs and we know it, just you know, when it first started a lot of problems, you know, we reset the program, and it's moving forward. But you're exactly right, we need to get these out the door, we need to get the quantities that are needed to go execute our wartime missions, and then move forward to see what we're gonna have with the next generation aircraft.

J John "Slick" Baum 26:51

All right, thank you for that. Now, let's look at what the service is currently doing to buy all these new aircraft, the aircraft is pursuing and often tried effort called divest to invest. So basically, the service wants to retire a bunch of jets to free up money to buy new aircraft. It makes sense in theory, but in reality, it's really complex. So please, General Deptula, kick us off here with some background on how this works.

L Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula 27:15

Yeah, well, first, I disagree that it makes sense in theory, because in reality, it doesn't work, it never has. And it never will. Let me cut to the chase here and emphasize something that Lazer said in terms of procurement holidays, and choices made by the Department of Defense. The Office of the Secretary of Defense made the decisions that resulted in the United States Air Force, having been funded last, relative to the Army and the Navy for 30 years in a row. Let me say that, again, the Air Force has been the least funded relative to the Army and the Navy for 30 years in a row. And that neglect is what's resulted in the Air Force being the smallest, oldest and least ready in its history. Now, at the same time, today, the Air Force has much more demand than resources available to accomplish those demands. So without a defense wide approach, to evaluate defense capabilities relative to meeting the needs of our defense strategy, the Air Force and to a degree, a lesser degree, the other services are obliged to do the only thing that they can do. And that's accept significant risk in the near term, by retiring current force structure in an attempt to free up funds to invest in necessary future force capabilities. And that's because they haven't been given the resources to match what's required of the strategy demands. You know, I mentioned in broad sense earlier, the example that the current FY2023 defense plan, in that defense plan, the Air Force, is planning to divest 1463 aircraft to be exact, but only buy 467. So that's a reduction of 996. Pretty close to that 1000 I talked about earlier. That's about a 25% force reduction to a service that was already evaluated as weak in a recent annual military assessment of the US armed forces. The bottom line is the divest-invest approach has never worked in the past, because simply put, the money saved is never earmarked for the Air Force. It goes back into the federal budget, and two to three years later, no one remembers that the Air Force was cut force structure. And that money, that money should come back to them. In a great example. I'll do this real quick because I know we got time constraints here. But the combat air forces reduction in 2010. Everyone thought, okay, and Air Combat Command retired 275 or so fighters, with the expectation that the monies can be used to increase priorities. One year later, what happened with the 2011 budget reduction act, all that money got sucked up to pay for sequestration, and the Air Force didn't get one cent. In addition, they lost the 275 aircraft. So it's a real world example. You know, it's it's not spin. It's not marketing. It is a fact of life that if you cut for structure today, to free up money, you're freeing up money for the federal government, not for the US Air Force.

J John "Slick" Baum 31:01

Sir, thank you so much for that. Sledge and Lazer, I gotta ask you this. What is the Hill doing with this? Are they buying this idea of divest to invest? How are the individual congressmen or congresswomen making the calculus when they decide if they're going to grant aircraft, this retirement request?

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 31:16

So Sledge I'll jump in on this one. First, I had a mentor of mine, I'll just leave him by it. But we would get

briefings on the Armed Services Committee. And we just call it the wimpy syndrome. You know, we're if you get your hamburger today, I'll gladly pay you back tomorrow. And we've seen it not just with the aircraft, General Deptula. We've seen it with personnel, we're gonna get rid of personnel, we're gonna use that money, we're gonna modernize, we're gonna get rid of legacy aircraft, we're gonna go ahead and modernize. And then all we wound up with, as you said, the smallest oldest force. And that is, the Congress has seen it. The first time when they were asked, Hey, let's get rid of some people, so we can be a leaner more modern force, they should okay. And then they got into Okay, let's let's get rid of some old assets and issue O&M on an aircraft or an aircraft carrier, whatever, does not equate to buying an \$80 million new aircraft. It doesn't match. So you're right, it doesn't work. And we've never done this before. I mean, I've never seen it until when I came up on the Hill back in 2005. And usually, when we retired, something retired after we already had the asset to replace it. So no, the Hill's not buying it. The Hill's concerned, the Hill's concerned from a national security point of view, concerned from an Air Force point of view, to make sure we have enough assets that we can meet the requirements, you know, the requirements of the COCOMs out there. And that's why you're seeing the pushback. I know there's a lot of talk about parochialism. You know, they don't want to base going away, but they are sincerely concerned across the board to make sure that we're having the assets available. So if they were trying to get U-2s or Global Hawks, it's because we don't have enough ISR to begin with. So that's why you're seeing the pushback.

T Todd "Sledge" Harmer 32:56

Yeah, I would I would agree with that. And Lazer approached it more from the policy aspect that you know, committee staffer would you know, my perspective is more in the personal office of a member. And having worked in the in the Georgia delegation, I've, you know, I've got some scar tissue still from the the JSTARS recap battles where we're, you know, the Air Force convinced the Georgia delegation that they needed to retire the E-8s, and everything would be rolled into ABMS, they'd have a capability, there'd be no job losses. And off we go. And here we are today. I don't think the Air Force has awarded a single task order author, ABMS IDIQ. So our track record for divesting to invest is spotty at best. And I would say abysmal is probably a more accurate description there. The last thing I would say though, when it, and the bottom line, again, coming from the members office, there's really three things they care about when you're trying to retire force structure and that's jobs, jobs and jobs. And if the Air Force feels that it's absolutely imperative that they retire force structure, then they need to work in advance, they need to get the members and the committee staff on board with, this is the plan that we have to provide a capability. We're going to retire this airplane, but your installation would you know, this is what our long term plan for your installation would be. And I think a great case study would be if you're going to retire the A-10, what are you going to do with Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, and that would help the Arizona delegation accept the fact that you know, the A-10 is an old airplane. It's worn out, it does its job fantastically. But it's time we need to move on to other capabilities.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 34:37

And again, and what I've seen and General Deptula and Doug, you can jump in, but we've watched, they said listen, and if you let us retire today, but I'm not going to see this capability come out three to five years and we've seen that on several different assets that were asking us to go ahead and approve retirement. And when we again matched up to what the requirements for each of those missions. That's why there's been pushback.

J John "Slick" Baum 35:05

All right, Doug, hop in. What are your thoughts here?

D Doug Birkey 35:07

It's not just the iron, it's the people. And I get it Sledge, from an employment perspective, and you got to keep voters happy. But it's also trained personnel. So let's look at the E-3 AWACS that the Air Force is looking to retire and they have stretched it so long, the aircraft are literally falling apart. I mean, they're based on 707

airframes that airlines haven't flown in 40 years. And so they need to retire those things sooner than later. But because they've held this off so long to buy new airframes, because they just don't have enough money, the E-7, you're probably looking at a gap that could be seven years. The personnel on board those aircraft, the air battle managers, are exquisitely trained, it takes years to cultivate and hone and season that experience. What are these people supposed to do? You just can't have them hanging around for seven years doing nothing. And so I could say the same thing about bomber pilots, fighter pilots, maintenance people in any of these airframes depo personnel, all that you can't just take a knee and say, Hold on for a few years, we'll get back to you with a capability that may or may not be funded. These are high potential people, they're gonna get spirited and punch, or they're just gonna get ripped out of the service, because it bureaucracy is gonna say, Oh, we have an excess here, and the entire enterprise falls apart. And so these are really, really important things. And that's why I think the only movement you're seeing with Congress with allowing retirement is where a direct replacement comes in line. It's it's not black magic to see that all of a sudden, when KC-46 is being produced all of a sudden, okay, we can retire some KC-10s or KC-135s. But they're only allowing the retirements that are directly backfilled. It's not, you know, a secret here on how this is occurring. But I think we got to be more bold in articulating the risk and stop selling it like it's a good idea. If you're out of money, you're out of money, I get it, but then say it's just fiscally driven.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 36:58

Doug, 100% agree you, right on the money. And that's what Congress is trying to do. And again, we've never, this is, and this has only been done this way with the last maybe 17 years or so. We have always had an asset come out and backfilled with a new asset. So like you just said, the personnel can retrain and move over to the new assets.

J John "Slick" Baum 37:20

Yeah, those are all really great points. Gentlemen, this one is fast. But Representative Garamendi on the House Armed Services Committee issued a provision that would kill the Air Force's new ICBM system, which we now call the Sentinel Ground Based Strategic Deterrent and instead extended out the Minuteman III ICBM. The amendment was not adopted, but Sledge and Lazer. What does this tell you about support for the nuclear triad on the Hill right now?

T Todd "Sledge" Harmer 37:44

I'll take that one first Lazer. I think the first thing it tells us the process works. I think that there are enough members of Congress that realize that the number one job of the Department of Defense is deter war. And the only way you do that is with a credible. And I think the fact that you've got, you know, both the Chair and Ranking Member of the full committee, and in both the House and the Senate, on board saying that we need to modernize the nuclear triad. And also a realization that the Minuteman III is, there's no room to extend the service life of that, it's just, it's too cost prohibitive. So I think, you know, the nice thing is there are enough people that realize that this is the way to go.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 38:30

And everything Sledge said is 100% correct, that the only thing that this debate is going to continue. It'll continue in conference, it'll continue next year. This is a constant push, pull on, you know, modernizing the triad, keeping all the pieces of the triad. Matter of fact, I think the whole time I've been on the Hill with Sledge, we've debated this every year.

T Todd "Sledge" Harmer 38:51

And I would be willing to bet \$100 next year that Congresswoman Lee from California and Mr. Pocan from Wisconsin. will try to strike \$100 billion from the top line of the defense budget. They do it every year.

J John "Slick" Baum 39:05
Alright, General Deptula, Doug, anything else to add?

L Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula 39:07
Yeah, I'll let me just underline what both Lazer and the Sledge had to say. Fact of the matter is, it is impressive that the system does work, and that folks who understand defense support the Sentinel, as well as all the other two legs of our triad, the submarines and the B-21s.

D Doug Birkey 39:27
Now, and this is an adversary driven decision. I mean, China's in the middle of a nuclear breakout. Russia is obviously invested here aggressively, got Iran, North Korea, it's no time to take our foot off the common sense gas pedal here. And you know, we did that poll last year on public sentiment regarding this topic, and the American public does get this and that's encouraging. But we got to keep up the fight on this because everybody's saying this is going to keep coming back.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 39:50
Yeah. And I think it was a great point, Doug. I mean, Russia has woken up Europe and the United States, China, we're paying attention if you see it. If there's something bipartisan that's getting done in Congress that they understand, is the threat by China and Russia that's out there. And that is also helping with what we're trying to do on the Armed Services committees.

J John "Slick" Baum 40:13
Alright, guys, as always, we're getting tight on time here. But I want to talk about this one last provision that we saw included in the HASC version of the NDAA, to bolster air power capabilities provided to the Ukraine. So Sledge, Lazer. Rep. Kinzinger sponsor this, what are the details?

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 40:29
Sledge, do you want to go first, or I go first? I'm easy.

T Todd "Sledge" Harmer 40:32
Go ahead Lazer.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 40:33
Alright. So again, authorization, we're, it's basically an authorization to train military pilots, and personnel on modern aircraft, our aircraft. So it's in there, it's, you know, it's not, I mean, it's not actual funding, but it's authorization to do it. And then if they decide to do it, and then this money could come from Ukraine, you know, the Ukraine bills that we passed with the additional funding for Ukraine, but it just allows us to go ahead and try to train them so that they can fly modern aircraft instead of having to continue to get them the

Russian aircraft that they're flying today. And there's a report requirement to the armed service, military committees and the House and Senate, if they're going to move forward, and what type of support they're going to get.

J John "Slick" Baum 41:16

General Deptula you've been really vocal on the need to boost air power support for Ukraine. So what are your thoughts?

L Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula 41:22

Yeah, well, thanks. What I tell you is Western combat air power could fundamentally alter the calculus in this by providing Ukraine with capable Western aircraft both manned and unmanned, I would add, the West can increase Ukraine's probability of success in reversing Russian aggression. Let's face it, the Russian military is optimized to slug it out on the ground. And by fighting from the air, Ukraine can turn that advantage, or it would empower Ukraine to target Russian logistics lines, supply depots, their artillery and missile batteries, critical command and control centers, and so on and so forth. And it would render the Russians far more vulnerable than they are today, or will be tomorrow without such assistance. Now, why? Well, Ukraine flies Soviet era jets, they're simply wearing down under their heavy use and attendant losses. Those reduced numbers have only increased reliance on the remaining aircraft. And that increases demand for parts. And that further reduces availability. So ultimately, only by replacing those fighter aircraft with Western alternatives, can Ukraine hope to defend its airspace and achieve an advantage over the Russians. And I'd suggest to you that there's already a ready solution in the US and it goes back to the congressionally approved retirement of 48 F-15 Eagles and 47 F-16 Falcons from the Air Force in 2022. And along with 21 A-10s that are approved for reduction in FY23, the US has a ready inventory of excess aircraft that can rapidly tilt the balance of power in the Russia-Ukraine war. But that's only if the US acts quickly. So this bill is a pretty important one. And hope to see to get it passed, because these aircraft along with appropriate training. And by the way, I'd also add that the US has MQ-1 Gray Eagles and MQ-9s that can add to that. With appropriate training and transferring these aircraft, they can become the nucleus of a westernized Ukrainian Air Force. And achieving that objective as soon as possible is a right and a worthy goal.

J John "Slick" Baum 43:43

Doug, any last thoughts?

D Doug Birkey 43:45

I just like to say what we've done so far is prevented Ukraine from outright losing, it's fundamentally different than winning. And this really isn't just about the fight with Russia, China's watching. And if we allow Ukraine to just suffer like this and eventually probably lose massive quantities of territory and end up with a set of conditions that are very very disadvantageous, China is going to watch that, and it's going to give them the green light to go. And this is where we have to make a stand. And it really comes down to airpower. We are not going to see the Ukrainians win this. It's a two dimensional slugfest on the ground, it's going to take the third dimension of the air.

A Anthony "Lazer" Lazarski 44:22

And just one thing to add that delta to he said, this is also long term strategic, you know, when Ukraine, you know, gets its territory back and then needs to defend that territory in the future. So this is a long term engagement plan, not just something to go ahead and take the fight today, but it's also tomorrow.



L Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula 44:40
Yeah, absolutely right Lazer.

J John "Slick" Baum 44:43
Well, I can't say thanks enough to all of you for being here. Sledge, Lazer, General Deptula and Doug, really appreciate you joining on the discussion. That's all we have time for today. So again, Lazer and Sledge, t's been awesome having you here with us and I look forward to having you back on the show. Appreciate the opportunity.

L Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula 44:59
Now let me add my thanks to both of you, and my welcome to both Sledge and Lazer. It's great to have you on board and get your perspectives.

D Doug Birkey 45:09
Guys, thanks so much for being here. This has been awesome.

J John "Slick" Baum 45:13
With that, I'd like to extend a big thank you to our guests for joining in today's discussion. I'd also like to extend a big thank you to our listeners for your continued support, and for tuning into today's show. If you like what you've heard today, don't forget to hit that like button and follow or subscribe to the Aerospace Advantage. You can also leave a comment to let us know what you think about our show or areas you think we should explore further. As always, you can join in on the conversation by following the Mitchell Institute on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook or LinkedIn. And you can always find us at mitchellaerospacepower.org Thanks again for joining us and we'll see you next time. Stay safe and check six.