

All Parochialism Is Local

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THE *Arizona Daily Stars*' May 4 article got right to the point: "Planned Cuts Could Threaten Davis-Monthan's Future," stated the headline. Then, "The Air Force's plan to retire its entire fleet of A-10C 'Warthogs' could make Davis-Monthan [AFB] vulnerable to the next round of base closures."

Reporter David Wichner noted "changes would affect other maintenance and support squadrons, likely eliminating some 2,000 jobs."

This is all true.

If the A-10 fleet is retired, if Davis-Monthan is not assigned a significant new mission, if a new BRAC round is approved, and if D-M is selected for closure, then thousands of Arizona jobs would eventually go away.

That is enough to turn Arizona's lawmakers into fierce A-10 defenders, and Arizona is not unique in this regard. Warthog fever also gripped politicians in Georgia, Michigan, and Missouri—other states with A-10 operating locations.

The hysteria is not limited to the A-10. Other equipment cuts, pay and compensation proposals, and the BRAC proposal in particular all generated intense opposition from lawmakers who are placing their local political interests ahead of the nation's well-being.

In early May, the House Armed Services Committee rejected most of the Air Force's cost-saving suggestions. If the HASC's priorities stand, there will be no BRAC, because lawmakers are terrified of losing local bases. The HASC rejected benefit cuts because—despite rock-solid recruiting and retention numbers—"supporting the troops" through pay and benefits sells well on Capitol Hill. There would be no U-2 retirements.

Instead of putting the nation's needs first, many lawmakers are treating defense as a tool for re-election and as a communist-style jobs program.

This is not at all unusual, but the myopic parochialism is especially damaging now. Thanks to declining defense budgets, the urgent need to realign the nation's military forces, and the restrictions sequestration places upon defense planners, every bit of flexibility is important.

USAF planners are compelled to offer large, unpopular budget cuts because of Congress' own actions. Sequestration caps military spending and protects huge swaths of the defense budget from reductions. The Air Force is left with its readiness, modernization, and force structure accounts as the only places it can cut costs.

Whole fleets must be shut down to achieve big savings. The Air Force can free up \$4.2 billion over time by retiring the A-10, and the Joint

Political myopia is damaging the Air Force and the nation.

Chiefs pledged to reinvest savings into combat readiness and force modernization.

"Although military pay and benefits account for about 33 percent of the budget, our pay and compensation proposals account for only 10 percent of the planned cuts," the Joint Chiefs of Staff noted in their combined testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee on May 6. "The remaining 90 percent of the cuts come from readiness, modernization, and force structure."

In May, House authorizers passed a bill to fund the A-10 in 2015, to the tune of \$635 million, by taking money from DOD's Overseas Contingency Operations account, which pays for ongoing combat operations. US combat operations in Afghanistan are to end this year.

The A-10's supporters adopt all manner of spurious arguments to justify keeping it in service.

■ "Soldiers love the A-10." Ground troops love the Warthog because they can see it in action during close air support runs, but this means the enemy can see the A-10 too—and target it. Other aircraft that perform CAS, such as the F-15E, F-16, and B-1 do it at higher speed or higher altitude, where the aircraft are less vulnerable to ground fire. In fact, the F-16, not the A-10, has been the primary CAS platform in Afghanistan.

■ "The A-10 is more cost-effective than other CAS platforms." This argument fails at both ends. If low operating costs are the goal, the MQ-9 Reaper is also used to destroy ground targets in benign airspace, and is much cheaper to fly than the A-10. Or, if efficiency is desired, the metric should be cost per target destroyed. In that calculation, the B-1 bomber's huge weapons payload moves it to the top of the effectiveness equation.

■ "There's no other fixed-wing aircraft that can do the job the A-10 can do." This is true in a narrow sense, not in terms of overall mission effectiveness. If the parameters are drawn narrowly enough, you can still rationalize Iowa-class battleships, SR-71 reconnaissance aircraft ... and the horse cavalry. When there's no money, however, the military needs maximum bang for its buck.

This is not an attack on the A-10, which performs an important mission very well. It must also be noted that the Air Force has little desire to retire the A-10. Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, himself a former Hawg driver, recently said of the proposal: "Nobody likes it. Not me, nobody."

It is not too late to fix this budgetary snafu. Congress can end sequestration and provide the military the money it needs to reposition itself to meet future security needs. Or, the Air Force could be freed from micromanagement and allowed to actually organize, train, and equip its airmen.

Of the four Congressional defense committees, by press time only the HASC had spoken. The other three committees can still act to support the Air Force's cost-saving proposals. They are painful, but there are only bad options available.

So far, Congress has refused to take action to end sequestration, but has eagerly tied the Air Force's hands by ordering it to keep specific portions of the force in service. And of course, no additional money is coming to pay for these mandates, so USAF is forced to cut spending on training and future systems to make ends meet.

The end result will be a force that is less ready to go to war today, and less ready to take on the challenges of the future. ■