

Action in Congress

By Megan Scully

With its refusal to retire aircraft and accept other difficult belt-tightening choices within the Defense Department's budget proposal, Congress is quickly becoming the biggest adversary in the Air Force's campaign to cut long-term costs.

Lawmakers, particularly those on the four congressional defense committees, have traditionally been loath to make painful budget decisions that affect favored programs and, in many cases, jobs in their districts and states.

But stringent budget caps—from which the department received a brief reprieve in 2014 and 2015—are expected to make a return in Fiscal 2016, further pinching the Pentagon's pocketbook.

The decisions that lawmakers make in the Fiscal 2015 budget cycle, which has yet to be completed a month into the fiscal year, will lay the foundation for spending decisions in 2016 and beyond. If Congress rejects the biggest cost-saving proposals, as it appears poised to do, the Air Force will have a more difficult budget job next year.

For example, the Air Force's decision to stand down its venerable fleet of 334 A-10 Warthogs, a move that officials estimate would save \$4.2 billion over the next five years, has fallen flat on Capitol Hill. While some key lawmakers have supported the A-10 retirement, the vast majority have voted to reject it amid concerns that the military needs to keep the close air support aircraft in service to protect troops on the ground.

"What we have said to the opponents of the proposal is, 'If we're not allowed to retire the A-10,' ... please, please, please, you must give us the money to add back,'" Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said June 18. "And by the way, when you find the money, please don't take it out of readiness. ... I don't know where you're going to find it."

Indeed, finding the money will be the challenge. The 2011 Budget Control Act

set strict limits on defense and nondefense discretionary spending. Late last year, Congress agreed to raise those caps for Fiscal 2014 and 2015. Absent another agreement—which so far has remained elusive—the BCA caps will go back into effect next year.

If that happens, DOD will likely be forced to propose even more drastic cuts, most of which will not be palatable on Capitol Hill. Those include the



USAF photo by SSgt. Aaron Allmon

Congress has the A-10 stuck in la-la land.

retirement of the entire KC-10 tanker fleet and Global Hawk Block 40 remotely piloted aircraft and cuts to the F-35 fighter program.

Refusal to accept the cuts already proposed for Fiscal 2015 will only exacerbate the department's long-term budgeting problem. Continued spending now increases the likelihood of indiscriminate cuts known as sequestration if the budgets for 2016 and beyond exceed the mandated BCA levels.

With its potential to save billions, the A-10 proposal has become the poster child for the budget battles playing out on both sides of the Potomac. But it is just one of many examples of Congress refusing a cut DOD says it needs to make to pay for other priorities.

Lawmakers have balked at the Air Force's proposal to retire the U-2 spy-plane, which the Pentagon requested after several failed attempts to stand down the much newer Global Hawk Block 30 surveillance aircraft, an unmanned system that offers capabilities similar to but different from the U-2. The House and Senate armed services committees have also moved to limit or block the retirements of E-3 AWACS aircraft.

Deputy Defense Secretary Robert O. Work estimates that Congress's refusal to accept DOD's proposals, including the retirements of the A-10 and the U-2, will ultimately cost the department \$70 billion.

"Do we have to reshuffle the deck to the tune of \$70 billion? I mean, this is la-la land," Work said Sept. 30. "I have never been in a situation where we are faced with such strictures on the way we should go about it."

But aircraft are not the only area where budget cuts were soundly rejected. Lawmakers have, for instance, once again refused proposals to cut the military's rising health care costs, and the Pentagon's latest request for a new base closure round fell on deaf ears.

The Air Force, which has cut the size of its fleet by 500 aircraft since the last BRAC nearly a decade ago, has been the most vocal of the military services about needing to consolidate infrastructure. But lawmakers are worried base closures could cost jobs in their home districts and say the military cannot afford the upfront costs of base closures, even if the process ultimately saves money.

Some on Capitol Hill, however, recognize the problems that Congress' reluctance will cause.

"We have got to stop saying 'no' to everything," Rep. Peter Visclosky of Indiana, the top Democrat on the House Defense Appropriations subcommittee, said on the House floor in June. "We have got to start saying 'yes' to some things." ★

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