

Targeting the F-35

It doesn't work. It costs too much. Existing aircraft can do the job better.

2015 is shaping up to be the year in which the F-35 strike fighter takes its long-anticipated place of honor as the No. 1 target of those who love to find fault with almost every major modern military aircraft program.

It's behind schedule and over budget. It has no real mission. It's too fragile and complex.

If you think you've heard these arguments before, you have. They were leveled, in essentially the same forms, against most of the Air Force's top modernization priorities of the past 40 years.

- To hear the defense "reformers" and their allies tell it, the E-3 AWACS flying command post had no mission and existed solely to keep money flowing to defense contractors.

- The F-15 Eagle was too complex to be successful in combat, and smaller, cheaper fighters were better.

- The C-17 transport was an overpriced ugly duckling hobbled by technical problems.

- The B-2 bomber was too expensive and featured stealth coatings that would melt in the rain.

- The V-22 Osprey was designed with aerodynamic failures that made it a death trap.

- The F-22 Raptor was a gold-plated boondoggle designed to fight an enemy that no longer exists.

We could go on, but you get the point: These aircraft all experienced growing pains, some significantly. All have also gone on to become vitally important and successful machines in the most effective air force in the world.

Development and flight testing exist for good reasons, namely to find and correct the problems early on.

Test and development work is treated as a final grade by military critics, but this is akin to judging the success of a baseball team by how it does during spring training—when the roster hasn't been finalized and the games don't actually count.

Now it's the F-35's turn in the crosshairs.

Last July, *Roll Call* published a William D. Hartung commentary. "It is still unclear why the armed services need more than 2,400 of these planes," he

wrote. "The most likely US adversaries in the foreseeable future cannot compete with current generation US aircraft."

Later, on Jan. 12, the *Huffington Post* published its own Hartung column. This one neatly hit an anti-F-35 trifecta in its second sentence, calling the fighter "overpriced, underperforming, and unnecessary."

Similarly, just before the New Year, *The Daily Beast* published a string of articles by Dave Majumdar with many familiar themes. The F-35 is "actually

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worse than its predecessors at fighting today's wars," he wrote in one, adding that the fighter's targeting system is "more than a decade old and hopelessly obsolete."

"The end result is that when the F-35 finally becomes operational after its myriad technical problems, cost overruns, and massive delays, in some ways it will be less capable than current fighters in the Pentagon's inventory," Majumdar concluded.

Perhaps, but in more numerous and significant ways the F-35 will offer capabilities that current fighters never could. To offer airmen anything but the best equipment is negligent. The A-10 and F-16 continue to serve admirably and effectively, but their airframes are old and nonstealthy. They are at risk against any enemy fielding modern air defenses.

Another high-profile criticism can be found on the cover of *The Atlantic's* January/February issue. There, James Fallows offers a meandering 10,000-word commentary on today's American military. Fallows raises valid concerns but gets key airpower-related facts wrong. He declares that the nation has been at war for 13 years, when in fact the Air Force has been at war nonstop for 24. He says the last war that ended up "remotely resembling ... a victory was the brief Gulf War of 1991," overlooking successes such as the 1999 air war to free Kosovo.

Fallows' most egregious error concerns the F-35's cost. "The all-in costs

of this airplane are now estimated to be as much as \$1.5 trillion," he declares. F-35 critics love to cite an all-inclusive DOD cost estimate that includes development, production, and sustainment costs for 55 years. This covers everything from fuel to spare parts and construction costs—all inflated to "then year" dollars, which are in some cases a half-century in the future.

The current, all-inclusive F-35 cost estimate is \$921 billion in 2012 dollars (the baseline measurement year.) This is a huge figure to be sure, and one that must be carefully managed, but it is also more than a third less than \$1.5 trillion. Even the "with inflation" figure currently stands at \$1.415 trillion.

When critics round this off to \$1.5 trillion, they are actually rounding up by 85 billion dollars. That's no rounding error, and the total comes with no explanation or context. Indeed, F-35 costs declined by six percent between 2012 and 2013.

Fallows was one of the leading advocates for the reformers in the early 1980s, and he flatly declares that "many of the Pentagon's most audacious high-tech ventures have been costly and spectacular failures, including ... the major airpower project of recent years, the F-35."

Another longtime reformer, retired DOD analyst Franklin C. "Chuck" Spinney, wrote in a 2013 blog posting that "the F-35's high cost and complexity will guarantee much-reduced inventories, poor availability, and low sortie rates coupled with very high operational costs."

Yes, the F-35 is a failure before it has even entered service.

The Pentagon has made many mistakes with the F-35 program. It tried to create a jack-of-all trades family of aircraft for three services, set off on an unrealistic development program, and now has all of its future fighter eggs in this one basket. It absolutely must get the F-35 right. But similarly difficult programs have recovered and typically worked spectacularly well—and with costs brought back under control.

The F-35 still has a long way to go, but it should not be judged based upon its "spring training" performance. Remember that the next time you hear it doesn't work. ★