

July 10, 2009

The Honorable Carl Levin
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Senator Levin,

Since the 1930s, whenever our forces have come into conflict with the enemy, American combat leaders have found that the single most important thing they require is robust joint-service air power. It was critical at Midway, which turned the tide of the war in the Pacific; it was vital at Normandy, where Dwight Eisenhower remarked "If I didn't have air supremacy, I wouldn't be here."

Ike had it right. Merely "controlling" the air ("air superiority") isn't enough. It results in a punishing attritional air war, and a prolonged and bloodier ground war. In the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Israel never once technically "lost" air superiority, yet in 19 days of combat, it suffered 109 aircraft shot down (most by missiles and anti-aircraft fire), representing 35% of its prewar combat strength. On the ground, Arab forces, largely freed from the threat of Israeli air attack, took a heavy toll: Israel lost over 400 tanks. Only a massive American airlift, protected by American fighter patrols, kept the Israeli air forces and Israeli armored forces from collapsing. Nor is this a singular example: in the Falklands in 1982, Britain lost numerous ships and nearly had to withdraw its forces (which would have caused it to lose the war) because it lacked sufficient air power to prevent attacks from more numerous Argentine forces operating outdated equipment. Arguably, only the operational mistakes of the Argentine forces themselves cost them the war.

These experiences, and our own recent successes, clearly indicate that the key issue in modern war is air dominance: you have to so thoroughly dominate the air that opponents cannot exercise their own maneuver and defensive options, the kind of air war that we ran so successfully in Desert Storm. With air dominance, all other military operations are possible. Without it, all other military operations are endangered.

Pursuing an air dominant strategy has worked so well for the United States that many now seem to regard air dominance as a virtual American birthright. But, like democracy itself, it is something that must be constantly nurtured and nourished. But today it is at risk, for the first time seventy years, since the days of Hap Arnold and the late 1930s, another time of global uncertainty and crisis. Many potential foes already possess, or are in the process of acquiring, the means to pinch off and control our sea and air lines of communication, with advanced fighters that are newer and which, in some respects, outperform those in our own services, and new "double digit" surface-to-air missiles and advanced radars that endanger our older forces and place them at risk at greater distance.

We cannot know the future, but we know this: The United States must possess the ability to project power globally, even simultaneously, against opponents who only have to defend their own backyards. To do so, America must possess more advanced technology and capabilities than its potential opponents. Certainly, now is not the time to withdraw into the false comfort of "one size fits all" engagement strategies, or the illusion of believing that the era of high technology air warfare is at an end, or somehow rendered irrelevant in the cyber and terror era. Rather, every day in every theater where our forces are deployed, the critical advantages afforded by timely and dominant air and space power are everywhere evident.

We must exploit the high technology edge the American taxpayer has already paid for in getting the F-22. We must reject calls to cap F-22 production at 187, and work instead to increase its production to levels

consistent with the force structure America needs to confront the unstable world it confronts. To do any less is to endanger the historic ability of this nation to exercise its sovereign options—an ability purchased at the price of American blood and treasure--and worse, to break faith with America's best--the young men and women of our joint forces who selflessly place their lives at risk 24-7-365 for this nation. They deserve the finest—let's give it to them!

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