

Pentagon Faces Huge Bill for Jet Fighters

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*Strategic Needs,
Budget Are Obstacles*

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In the air wars of tomorrow, the Pentagon expects U.S. jet fighters to roam largely invisible to tracking radar. They will spot targets on cockpit scanners long before the naked eye can see them and shoot "smart" missiles at enemies over the horizon.

To get there from here, the Defense Department has embarked on the most ambitious overhaul of the nation's air combat force in more than two decades. It plans to replace its jet fighter fleet with three basic new models now under development—the F/A-18E/F, F-22 and Joint Strike Fighter—that promise leaps in stealth, agility and endurance over current-generation aircraft.

But the \$300 billion-plus investment effort, the most expensive set of projects now on the Pentagon's books, comes at a time of mounting doubts about America's ability to fulfill its defense spending goals and still balance the federal budget. The spending plan has sparked tensions between the Air Force and Navy over whose aviation programs should survive a budget squeeze. Such independent review groups as the General Accounting Office and Congressional Budget Office regard the proposed package of new planes as ultimately unaffordable, particularly at the quantities planned.

Moreover, with the Soviet Union's collapse, the strategic need for another generation of such super high-tech jets also is being questioned.

Counting new types of precision-guided missiles, and improved communications and intelligence systems to support the combat jets, the Pentagon's tactical aviation program is due to consume fully a quarter of the defense procurement budget at the peak of production about a decade from now.

"The military services argue that the advanced technology in these

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NEW PHASE OF FIGHTERS

The Pentagon is developing a new generation of jet fighters to replace its aging fleet. At more than \$300 billion, the plan would require the military to increase its procurement budget significantly at a time critics—including in the General Accounting Office and Congressional Budget Office—say the United States cannot afford it.

F-22

The Air Force wants this plane to replace the F-15 for these reasons:

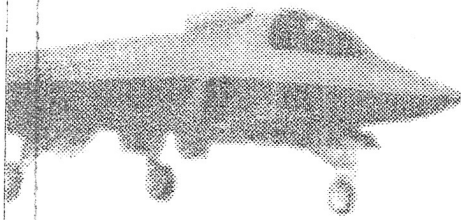
- Can detect and shoot enemy aircraft before it is detected.
- Superior in agility, ability to evade radar and sustained supersonic speeds.
- More reliable and easier to maintain.



JOINT STRIKE FIGHTER

The Air Force wants this plane to replace the F-16; the Navy to augment its F/A-18 force; and the Marines to replace the AV-8B and F/A-18. Advantages include:

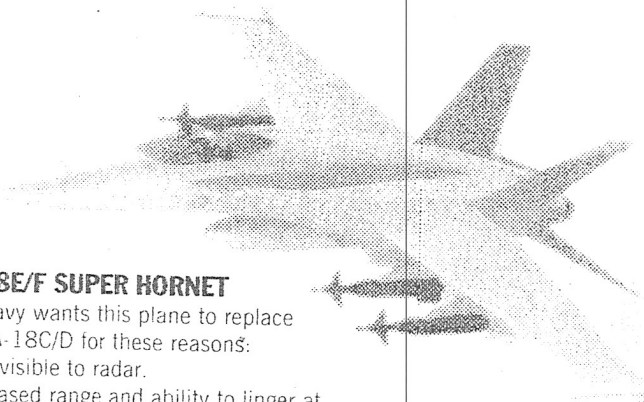
- Improved stealth.
- Ability to fulfill several roles.
- Capacity for short takeoffs and vertical landings.
- Relatively low cost.



F/A-18E/F SUPER HORNET

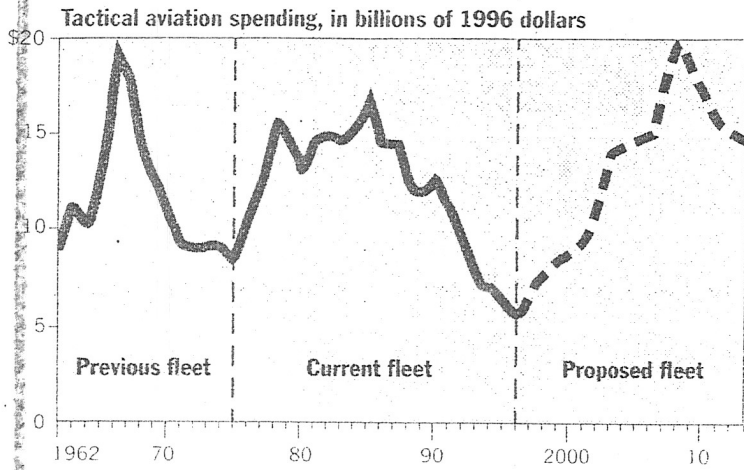
The Navy wants this plane to replace the F/A-18C/D for these reasons:

- Less visible to radar.
- Increased range and ability to linger at a battle scene.
- Increased weapons capacity.



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U.S. AIR FORCE AND U.S. NAVY

The new tactical aviation plan would bring the United States from its lowest spending level to its highest.



SOURCE: Department of Defense

FIGHTERS, From A1

new planes is necessary so that we may maintain an edge over potential threats." Cindy Williams of the Congressional Budget Office told a House panel in June. "But no other country's fighter fleet comes close to that of the United States in either numbers or capability, nor does it seem likely that any country will be able to challenge us, either with their fighter fleets or their air defenses, for the foreseeable future."

Pentagon leaders take issue with this confident view of U.S. warplanes as still lords of the skies. They say America's premier jet fighter, the F-15, already trails Russian competitors in range and lacks the stealthy characteristics promised by coming European models. U.S. warplanes also are vulnerable to increasingly sophisticated foreign missiles and air defense systems, Pentagon officials say.

Without a new generation of aircraft, U.S. military planners contend, American pilots will not be able to eliminate the enemy as easily as they did in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, overcoming Iraq's extensive air defense system.

"Our program is designed to maintain this air dominance that was achieved five years ago," explained Gen. Joseph Ralston, an Air Force fighter pilot now serving as vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "We had it, we liked it and we want to keep it."

One fact not in dispute: America's fighter fleet is aging, and a strategy for renewing it must be decided

soon, allowing enough time to field new models, if that is the choice, or continue with production of existing models and find other uses for the billions of dollars earmarked for development of new aircraft.

Historically, the Pentagon has retired jet fighters after about 20 years in the air. The average age now of Air Force and Navy squadrons is 10 years, and current timetables for introducing the new aircraft would require retaining some older models into their thirties and even forties, Pentagon officials say.

At the root of the Defense Department's drive for new jet fighters is a desire to overwhelm any enemy aircraft in future conflicts. Where military commanders used to speak simply of attaining "air superiority," the current Pentagon buzzword is "air dominance."

The distinction may be subtle, but "dominance" suggests a bigger edge than "superiority." Winning is no longer sufficient; now victory must come quickly and with few casualties.

"We do believe the American people will not stand for a lot of casualties," said Maj. Gen. John Hawley, who oversees acquisition of Air Force combat planes and other systems. "So to preclude that, you have to dominate from Day One."

But to pay for dominance, the Pentagon's annual procurement budget will have to rise from its current 50-year low of about \$38 billion to at least \$60 billion, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Getting there by 2001, as planned, assumes future savings from military base closings and more efficient purchasing practices—assumptions that are proving more difficult to achieve than top defense officials had anticipated.

Even if the procurement account grows as projected, the new aircraft programs will have to compete for funds with other major acquisition efforts, including plans to double the annual purchases of Navy ships after 2002 and double spending on new Army helicopters.

Already the new programs may be too far along to stop. About \$2.1 billion is in the 1997 defense spending bill before Congress to begin limited production of the Navy's new fighter, the F/A-18E/F, intended to supersede the current F/A-18C/D Hornet and equip the bulk of aircraft carrier squadrons. Another \$2 billion is in the budget—on top of about \$15 billion spent so far—for work on the stealthy, maneuverable F-22 to replace the F-15 as the Air Force's most capable fighter.

Least developed is the Joint Strike Fighter, which has \$600 million set aside for it in the 1997 budget. But this multirole plane—really several versions deriving from a single basic design—has riding on it the hopes of three military services. The Air Force wants it to supplant the F-16 for air-to-ground attacks; the Marine Corps is depending on it to replace the AV-8B Harrier for short takeoffs and vertical landings, and the Navy is looking to it to eliminate the F-14 Tomcat and augment the new F/A-18E/F.

Because major aircraft programs mean tens of thousands of jobs in congressional districts around the

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country, all three new planes also have powerful political interests behind them, led by the home states of prime contractors.

"The F/A-18E/F appeals to California, Missouri and, to a lesser extent, Massachusetts," a House Democratic staff member said. "The F-22 appeals to Texas, Georgia and Washington state. And the Joint Strike Fighter appeals to nearly everyone, because no one knows yet who's going to win the contracts."

So far, the Republican-led Congress has been happy to go along with the Pentagon's costly tactical aviation plan. In fact, about \$500 million of the more than \$11 billion added by Senate appropriators to the 1997 defense spending bill would go to buy more F/A-18 fighters, not the new E/F model, but a dozen of the older, C/D models to round out existing squadrons even as low-rate production begins of the E/F.

Defense officials insist the new-generation aircraft are being developed with greater attention to containing costs and promoting cross-service operability than ever. Since the Persian Gulf War, the Pentagon has shrunk its aviation force 35 percent—from 8,200 to 5,900 planes—to free up dollars for modernization.

But even if the Defense Department can keep costs down and efficiency up, questions persist about the need for several new jet fighter models given the potential foreign threat.

China has less than two-thirds the number of U.S. military planes; Russia has even fewer; Iran, Iraq and

North Korea combined have less than one-third the U.S. inventory. Further, most foreign military aircraft are older-generation models, and plans to build or buy new ones capable of challenging U.S. dominance have run into budget constraints.

Here, the General Accounting Office recently raised questions about

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—Air Force Maj. Gen. John Hawley

the added value of higher-tech aircraft and precision-guided munitions, saying their effectiveness during the gulf war was exaggerated.

In a separate report, the GAO also argued the new, E/F version of the Navy's F/A-18 represented only a marginal improvement over the current C/D model, at substantially greater cost. The report suggested the Navy could achieve the same advantages promised by the new plane—greater range and higher carrier landing weight allowing aircraft to return with unused bombs—by expanding the C/D's fuel capacity and strengthening its landing gear.

Navy officials say making such changes in the C/D would require other structural adjustments, leading ultimately to the E/F design. "If we thought the C/D could meet our requirements, we'd continue to buy it," said Rear Adm. Denny McGinn, head of naval air warfare. "The simple fact is, it can't."

Many in the defense community predict a reckoning in the tactical aviation program as early as next year, after the start of a new presidential term, when defense officials are due to reassess the nation's military strategy and structure of forces.

"Most folks are holding their cards close to their chests until they get asked to the table for a program review next year," an Air Force general said. "Until the reality of the guns-versus-butter debate hits, the pressure won't be great enough for people to sit down at the table and offer to give up anything."

Even then, it is unlikely any of the three new aircraft will be canceled.

"What will ultimately happen, if history is any guide," said Steve Kosiak of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, "is they'll end up buying fewer planes and stretching out production to save money."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For detailed performance statistics on the new jet fighters, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>