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U.S. Air Power Needs an F-22 Upgrade

Congress should consider resurrecting the jet or finding a suitable replacement.



An F-22 Raptor over Europe, April 25. *PHOTO: REUTERS*

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During his long tenure at the Pentagon, former Defense Secretary Robert Gates made many good decisions that helped soldiers and enhanced U.S. security. But his choice to truncate the Air Force's F-22 Raptor program at 187 jets was an exception. With threats to American air superiority growing, it is time for Congress to consider resurrecting the jet or finding a suitable replacement.

Conceived in the 1980s, the F-22 Raptor was designed to secure dominance of the skies for decades. America needed fighters that could outperform the newest Soviet models from Sukhoi and MiG. To counter them, the Raptor incorporated cutting-edge technologies that had never been combined in a single aircraft: composite materials, computer avionics, thrust-vectoring engine nozzles, and radar countermeasures. It became the first "fifth generation" fighter, a high-speed, super-maneuverable stealth aircraft that still outclasses everything else in air-to-air combat.

Yet by the time the Raptor started rolling off the production line in 2002, the high-tech threats it had been designed to defeat had faded from view. Instead of Russian MiGs, Pentagon leaders were worried about improvised explosive devices.

When Mr. Gates took over the Pentagon in 2006, he found it suffering from what he called “next-war-itis”—an unhealthy focus on preparing for future conflicts and buying high-tech weapons. In response to changing threats, the Air Force had scaled back the F-22 program from 750 to 381 aircraft. In 2009, however, Mr. Gates canceled a number of defense-procurement programs and limited F-22 production to 187 jets.

Today the U.S. Air Force’s fleet is the smallest and the oldest it has ever been. Meanwhile, Russia and China have been fielding and exporting new fighters and sophisticated air defenses to countries like Iran. Russia rolled out its first fifth-generation stealth fighter, the PAK-FA, in 2010. China followed in 2011, flight-testing the J-20, an F-22 look-alike, while Secretary Gates was visiting Beijing. Gen. Mark Welsh, the Air Force’s chief of staff, warned last year that future Russian and Chinese jets “will be better than anything we have today.”

Critics correctly point out that bringing back the F-22 would be expensive. But no one knows exactly how expensive: The only public figures come from the nonprofit [Rand Corp.](#), which estimated in 2010 that it would cost over \$500 million (in 2008 dollars) to restart production. If the Air Force ordered 75 additional jets, Rand estimated they would cost \$179 million each.

While high, these prices are nothing compared with the costs of losing air superiority in future conflicts. Command of the skies has saved countless lives and has been a major source of tactical and strategic advantage. When the Air Force considers future procurement, policy makers and the public ought to know how much it would cost to resurrect the Raptor. That is why language in the House Armed Services Committee’s annual defense-policy bill directed the Air Force to assess the costs of resuming manufacturing of the F-22, or some updated variant.

Restarting F-22 production may not be the answer to the challenges we face in the air. Changes in technology, the industrial base, the export market and the operating environment must be evaluated. But with the end of the Obama administration in sight, it is high time to begin crafting a strategy informed by facts. American airmen should be given the planes they need in the quantities that will provide a winning edge in a future fight—the opposite of what this administration has provided.

Mr. Forbes, a Republican congressman from Virginia, sits on the House Armed Services Committee. Mr. Wynne served as secretary of the Air Force from 2005-08.