

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 2, 2014

The Honorable Dick Durbin
Chairman, Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Dirksen 122 Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Vice Chairman, Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Dirksen 117 Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Durbin and Ranking Member Cochran:

We are united in our belief that when we send our troops into harm's way, we have a solemn obligation to ensure they have the very best support possible so they can accomplish their missions and return home safely. While we recognize that the Air Force confronts difficult budget decisions, we believe the decision to prematurely divest the A-10 would put our ground forces in serious additional danger in future conflicts. For that reason, we respectfully ask that you join us in opposing the Air Force's proposal and instead provide the necessary funding in fiscal year (FY) 2015 to maintain the current A-10 fleet.

When it comes to close air support (CAS), there is no question which aircraft is best. In a November 7, 2013 Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) hearing, General Raymond Odierno, the Army Chief of Staff, said, "The A-10 is the best close air support platform we have today...it's performed incredibly well in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our soldiers are very confident in the system." General Odierno repeated that assertion in an April 3, 2014, SASC hearing and again reiterated his confidence in the A-10 on April 8, 2014, "Obviously, we prefer the A-10." On April 10, 2014, General Mark Welsh admitted in a SASC hearing that the A-10 is a "combat-tested aircraft optimized to conduct the close air support mission..." The unique and life-saving capabilities of the A-10 were on full display last summer in Afghanistan when—according to an Air Force report—the A-10 saved the lives of 60 Americans.

Countless soldiers, airmen, Marines, and special operators up and down the chain of command also echo this praise of the A-10's capabilities. For example, Air Force Master Sergeant (retired) Eric Brandenburg—an Afghanistan and Iraq combat veteran and former Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) who earned a Silver Star and five Bronze Star medals for actions during combat related to close air support—says, "The A-10 is a uniquely capable close air support aircraft and the best in DoD's inventory. I am—like many of my former colleagues—alive today because of the A-10. If the A-10 had been divested the last time the Air Force wanted to do so, I would likely have not returned home from combat to my family. When our troops are in danger of being overrun, we must send the best assets to help them. If the A-10 is not available in future conflicts when our ground troops call for help, Americans will needlessly be injured and killed."

In addition to being our nation's best CAS aircraft, the A-10 is also the Air Force's most cost-efficient CAS aircraft. According to the Air Force, the operational cost per flying hour for

the A-10—which takes into account sustainment costs—is significantly below the F-15E, F-16, B-1, AC-130, or the B-52.

There is no doubt that the Air Force confronts difficult budget decisions. However, cutting the Air Force's most combat-effective and cost-efficient CAS aircraft is not the best way to address those challenges.

The Air Force leadership has asserted that the A-10 is a single mission aircraft, and that the Air Force cannot afford to maintain aircraft that do not have more than one mission. However, the A-10 is not a single mission aircraft. It has other primary missions including forward air controller-airborne (FAC-A) and combat search and rescue (CSAR). Admittedly, it is true that the A-10 was designed with CAS in mind and A-10 pilots focus intensely on the CAS mission. As the 60 soldiers saved during the engagement in Afghanistan last summer undoubtedly would attest, CAS is a particularly important mission.

The Air Force asserts that other aircraft (such as the F-15, F-16, or B-1) can cover the CAS mission for the A-10—emphasizing that these aircraft conduct the majority of CAS missions. The Air Force leadership has said that 80% of CAS missions in Afghanistan have been conducted by other aircraft.

That statistic is misleading. According to U.S. Air Forces Central Command, the 80% statistic includes aircraft that fly CAS missions but never attack targets on the ground and does not take into account how many passes are used. In other words, a B-1 flying at thousands of feet that never drops a bomb is counted the same as an A-10 that flies at low levels above the enemy position, conducts multiple gun passes within meters of friendly ground forces, and uses a 30 millimeter nose cannon to fire hundreds of rounds at enemy forces about to overrun a U.S. position. On April 10, in a SASC hearing, General Welsh confirmed that the 80% statistic counts CAS missions that never attack targets on the ground.

There is no doubt that other aircraft have an important role to play in other missions and can perform some close air support missions. However, as our ground troops and A-10 pilots understand, not all CAS missions are the same. For example, dropping a precision munition from thousands of feet in the air on a stationary target looking at a video display is not the same as conducting low level strafing runs in bad weather or rough terrain against a moving target that is within a few dozen meters of friendly troops. The ability to operate low and loiter safely within eyesight of the ground engagement is part of the reason the A-10 has a faster re-attack time compared to other aircraft. It is also part of the reason why the A-10 is especially good at avoiding fratricide and civilian casualties.

It is important to recognize that the proposal to retire the A-10 fleet is, like other elements of the DoD proposed budget, based in part upon broader assumptions regarding the types of conflicts the nation may face in the future. While we certainly hope we will not have to fight wars in the future that require the CAS provided by the A-10, history suggests we would be wise to be prepared.

For us, this is not about the A-10; it is about the uniquely capable protection the A-10 provides for our troops on the ground. We do not believe the A-10 can serve in the inventory

forever—it will eventually be replaced. However, we should not divest the A-10 until a capable replacement reaches full operational capability. The Air Force believes the F-35A will assume the current roles of the F-16 and the A-10 as it replaces them in the fleet. Yet, the F-35A is not scheduled to achieve full operational capability before 2021—leaving at least a two year gap between the final divestment of the A-10 and its planned replacement achieving full operational capability.

We have a responsibility to ensure our ground troops receive the best possible CAS so that brave service members like MSG (retired) Brandenburg can return home to their families after future conflicts. When we fail to fulfill that responsibility, the cost is measured in the lives of our troops.

For these reasons, we respectfully request that you oppose the Air Force’s proposal to divest the A-10 and instead provide the necessary funding in FY 2015 to maintain the current A-10 fleet.

Thank you for your leadership and service in the United States Senate.

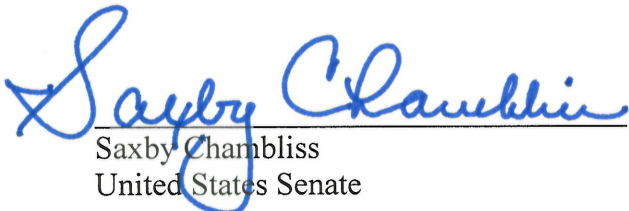
Sincerely,



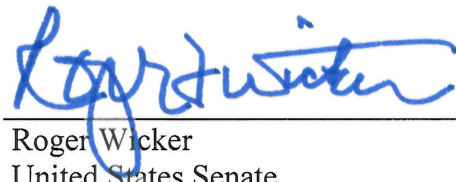
Kelly A. Ayotte
United States Senate



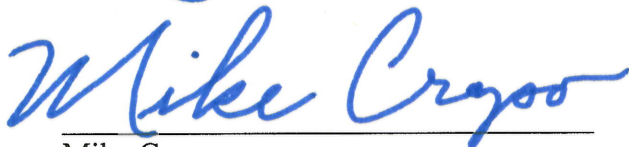
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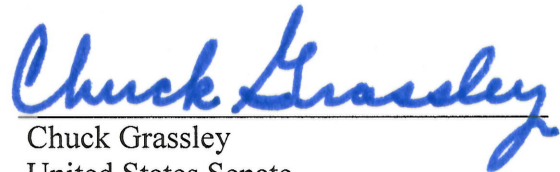
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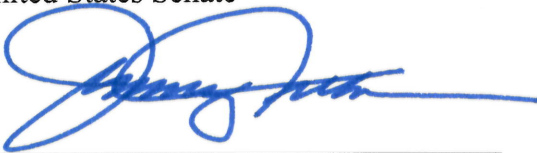
Roger Wicker
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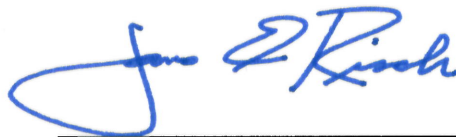
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Chuck Grassley
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