



Chairman Rodney Frelinghuysen

Subcommittee on Defense, House Committee on Appropriations

Air Force Posture Hearing March 2, 2016 Opening Statement As Prepared

The Committee will come to order.

This morning the subcommittee continues a series of open defense posture and budget hearings with our military services and today we focus on the fiscal year 2017 Air Force budget request.

Our two witnesses are not strangers to us.

Secretary Deborah James has been Secretary of the Air Force since 2013 and we always appreciate her candid and informed counsel. Welcome Secretary James.

Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Mark Welsh, is appearing before this Committee for the last time. In coming weeks, he will be retiring from the Air Force after 40 years of dedicated service to our Nation. General, you are a skilled and valuable advocate for the Air Force and we all owe you and your family (I see you are joined by your wife today) a debt of gratitude. Godspeed in your future endeavors.

General Welsh, you caught our attention with your remarks before the recent Air Warfare Symposium. You addressed the possibility of the Air Force being called upon to fight a major theater war in Eastern Europe or Asia against a well-trained and well-equipped enemy. (Translated: either Russia or China.)

You said—and I quote—“we’re not very ready for that. And it’s going to be ugly.”

An assessment like that, from someone with your experience, should be of great concern to this Committee and to the Nation.

But the facts are the facts: we now have the oldest Air Force aircraft in history and the smallest Air Force in years.

At the same time:

- The Chinese Air Force, the third largest Air Force in the world, is “rapidly closing the gap” with ours across a broad spectrum of capabilities: quality of their aircraft, command and control, radar, electronic warfare, and data links. China also possesses one of the largest forces of advanced long-range surface-to-air missiles in the world and some pretty sophisticated space infrastructure.

- Russia is procuring new Su-35S Flanker fighters and developing the fifth generation PAK FA fighter. The Kremlin also plans to build 56 long-range advanced S-400 surface-to-air missile battalions. They've put down markers for a lot of firepower, both in Syria and Iran, and deployed air forces to protect it;
- Elsewhere, Iran and other nations are working to buy additional advanced air defense missile systems from Russia.

And while you are focusing on these rising threats, our Air Force (and those of coalition nations) are actively engaged with ISIS and al Qaeda in the Middle East and the Taliban and ISIS in Afghanistan.

While paying tribute to the bravery and skill of our aviators, some suggest that air power alone will not destroy these forces or even bring them to their knees – that “boots on the ground” will only assure that.

Of course, we need to keep all of these challenges in mind as we go through this year's budget process. And, the Committee is anxious to hear your perspective on how the Air Force will maintain its aging fleet of bombers and fighters amidst growing demand for their services, and the readiness of those who operate them.

And I am sure Members will have questions about J-STARS and Russian rocket engines, the A-10 and the nuclear enterprise.

But a major issue hovering over the Air Force (and DOD) these days is the looming “bow wave” of major acquisition programs, which I am sure you will address in your testimony.

We all saw a headline recently which read “The Coming Dogfight Between the F-35 and the New Bomber.” These are the two most sophisticated and expensive planes ever and we need to hear how the Air Force proposes to fund both.

In closing, Secretary James, General Welsh, the Committee hopes you will convey to your airmen – officers and enlisted - (and their families) the gratitude of this Committee for their daily dedication and selfless service to the Nation.

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