

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 27, 2015

Honorable Thad Cochran  
Chairman  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Honorable Barbara Mikulski  
Vice Chairwoman  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chairman Cochran and Vice Chairwoman Mikulski,

When we send our troops into harm's way, we have a solemn obligation to ensure that they have the very best support possible so they can accomplish their missions and return home safely. This is certainly true when it comes to close air support (CAS), which provides ground troops with the decisive firepower they need when they are engaged in close combat with the enemy. Unfortunately, the Air Force is again pursuing its premature, misguided, and dangerous divestment of the A-10. We respectfully request that the Appropriations Committee appropriate the necessary funding for the A-10 for fiscal year (FY) 2016.

There is an overwhelming consensus among our ground troops, special operators, and Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) that the A-10 is the Air Force's best close air support aircraft and that it provides CAS capabilities that no other current aircraft can. For that reason, we remain concerned that if the Air Force is permitted to prematurely divest the A-10 before an equally capable replacement reaches full operational capability, the quality of CAS available to our ground forces will decline and Americans will be killed and injured unnecessarily.

Charlie Keebaugh, President of the Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) Association, which represents approximately 3,300 current and former Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs), told Secretary Carter in a letter earlier this year, "We believe that F-15s, F-16s, and B-1s cannot replicate the CAS capabilities of the A-10, and we know from combat experience that the elimination of the A-10 before a viable replacement achieves full operational capability will cost American lives."

Master Sergeant (Retired) Eric Brandenburg—an Air Force combat veteran, Silver Star recipient, and former JTAC—said last year, "Our troops need the A-10. If our government truly has our troop's safety and best interest at heart then retiring the A-10 wouldn't even be an

option. Even considering retiring the A-10 in my opinion is telling me and my brothers in arms that leadership is willing to trade politics over lethality on the battlefield.”

Master Sergeant Brandenburg’s views are not an anomaly—they represent an overwhelming consensus among JTACs. During the annual TACP Association gathering in October, the attending JTACs were asked about the Air Force’s attempts to divest the A-10, and 100% of the responses were against the divestment. No one knows more about CAS than our JTACs, and it would be unwise for Congress to ignore their pleas and not protect the A-10 from premature divestment.

JTACs are not the only ones who have expressed support for the A-10 and said other existing aircraft are not the same. Last year, when asked if the F-16 is the same as the A-10, with respect to close air support, General Raymond Odierno, the Army Chief of Staff, testified that, “It’s not the same.” He has also testified that “...we prefer the A-10.” On March 17, 2015, General Odierno testified that the A-10 has been the best close air support platform in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When confronted with these statements by our nation’s CAS experts, the Air Force points to future capabilities and the F-35A as reasons not to be concerned about the premature divestment of the A-10. Someday, new technology may allow aircraft flying miles away at 10,000 feet to use high-tech munitions to safely and effectively target enemy forces in bad weather that are only a few dozen meters away from friendly ground troops. However, that day has not yet arrived. We still need CAS aircraft that can fly low and slow, beneath bad weather, close enough to the point of ground combat, and survive. We still need CAS aircraft that allow the pilot, in close coordination with the JTAC, to visually identify friendly and enemy positions and engage the enemy using rockets and guns. Likewise, the CAS capabilities of the F-35A remain to be seen, and the F-35A is not expected to achieve full operational capability until 2021 at the earliest—two years after the Air Force would like to send the last A-10 to the boneyard.

The Air Force recently held a close air support conference that was highly managed by the Air Force leadership to support the pre-determined policy outcome regarding the A-10. Despite this, General Hawk Carlisle, the head of Air Force Combat Command, reportedly admitted that once the A-10 is gone and the F-35 is fielded, the Air Force “may need more [CAS] capacity at a lower cost.” It is notable that the Air Force is trying to divest its CAS aircraft with the least operational cost per flying hour to save money when it knows that such a course of action will result in a capacity shortfall.

In its arguments in favor of A-10 divestment, as well as with data the Air Force has used to support its case, the Air Force consistently conflates air interdiction and CAS missions and ignores the unique challenges associated with many CAS missions, including moving targets, bad weather, and the particularly close proximity of friendly and enemy forces (“danger close missions”).

This is not the Air Force’s first attempt to get rid of the A-10. According to a 1988 General Accounting Office (GAO) report, the Air Force—citing concerns about the survivability

of the A-10—wanted to replace the A-10 with a modified F-16 beginning in 1993. According to the GAO report, the Department of Defense expressed concern about this Air Force proposal and suggested that the Air Force had not “adequately emphasized the close air support mission...” The A-10’s subsequent performance in Iraq and Afghanistan vindicated the Department of Defense’s decision to oppose the Air Force’s proposal. Many Americans would have not returned home from those wars if the Air Force had gotten its way then.

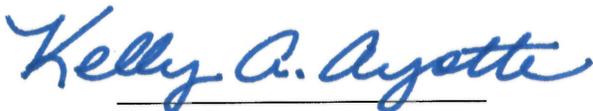
Today’s A-10, extensively modernized and even more lethal, remains our nation’s best CAS platform. This year, the A-10’s performance in Iraq and Syria against ISIS and its deployment to Europe to deter additional aggression there underscore the A-10’s continued lethality, survivability, and effectiveness.

For these reasons, we respectfully request that the Appropriations Committee appropriate the necessary funding for the A-10 for FY 2016. We stand ready to work with you and your staffs to identify appropriate offsets for this A-10 funding. With a proposed FY 2016 Air Force budget of \$122 billion, it is not difficult to identify offsets for A-10 funding that will not exceed \$737 million.

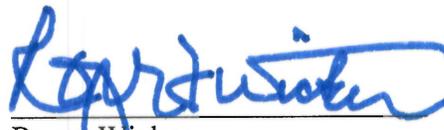
The Air Force has not persuaded us that it can prematurely divest the A-10—our nation’s most combat-effective and cost-efficient CAS aircraft—without putting our ground troops in serious additional danger. For that reason, we look forward to working with you to prohibit the additional divestment of A-10 aircraft before an equally capable close air support aircraft achieves full operational capability.

Thank you for your distinguished service to our country.

Sincerely,



Kelly A. Ayotte  
United States Senator



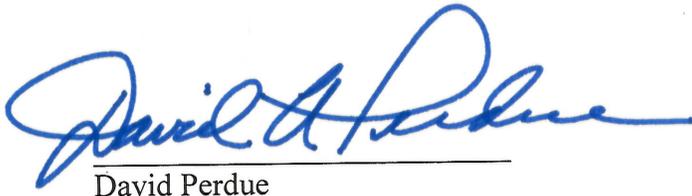
Roger Wicker  
United States Senator



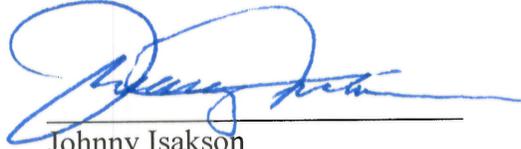
Thom Tillis  
United States Senator



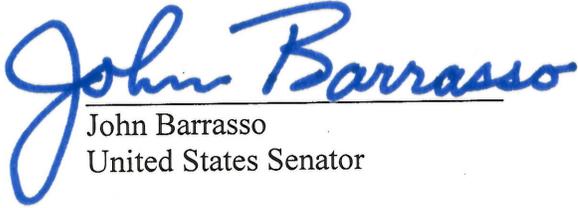
Michael Crapo  
United States Senator



David Perdue  
United States Senator



Johnny Isakson  
United States Senator



John Barrasso  
United States Senator



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