U.S. Air Force

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Introduction

Air superiority is a precondition for all U.S. military operations, and while each airman takes pride in his or her contributions to and in being part of the great air superiority legacy, today's readiness and capacity for that mission are nowhere close to what America needs. Unfortunately, the Air Force's lack of readiness and capacity is not limited to its air superiority portfolio. For far too long, we have asked the Air Force to do too much with too little. For years, budgets have been insufficiently scoped, and strategic risk has accumulated quietly but dangerously.

As a result, the Air Force is now the oldest, smallest, and least ready it has ever been, despite the determination of countries like China and Russia to challenge the status quo. The more risk the Air Force is forced to absorb, the more likely it becomes that a competitor will choose to act against America. A properly sized, capable, and ready Air Force is essential to reducing strategic risk and deterring peer conflict.

During President Trump's first term, his National Defense Strategy (NDS) called for America's military to prepare to fight a peer competitor. But for our servicemembers to be prepared for such an eventuality, we must properly resource and equip our military.

Unfortunately, at programmed funding levels, the Air Force cannot sustain today's operational tempo while also building the capability and capacity needed to compete with China. The strategic environment no longer permits delay: Continued underinvestment will only deepen the problem. Thankfully, the reconciliation bill, or One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), that Congress passed in July 2025 is an important step toward resourcing the Air Force so that it can execute the nation's missions and be ready to "fly, fight, and win" anytime and anywhere.[1]

History

Congress established the U.S. Air Force in 1947 and charged it with the fundamental role of controlling and exploiting the air domain. Space's rise to prominence in the early 1950s brought with it a host of capabilities that would expand the service's portfolio over time. When Congress created the Space Force in December 2019, the Air Force was able to return to its air-breathing roots and refocus its efforts on the air domain.

Despite this refocus, however, the U.S. Air Force is smaller, older, and less ready today than at any other point in its history. This matters because America's military advantage is predicated on its ability to own the skies and hold adversary targets at risk across the globe with timely and pinpoint accuracy, using either conventional or nuclear weapons. No other military service is uniquely charged with achieving air superiority and executing global strike. The Air Force's responsibility to America is to field an appropriately sized, capable, and ready force that can execute these critical, Joint Force–enabling military functions.

Yet for decades since the end of the Cold War, this responsibility has gradually been marginalized. The current situation for the Air Force is not due to any single mistake or decision; it is the cumulative result of insufficient resourcing, force structure divestments, trade-offs favoring efficiency over effectiveness, and continual demand on the service for lower-end support rather than high-end warfighting readiness.

In March 2025, then-Lieutenant General Adrian Spain, who is now the four-star commander of

U.S. AIR FORCE AT A GLANCE

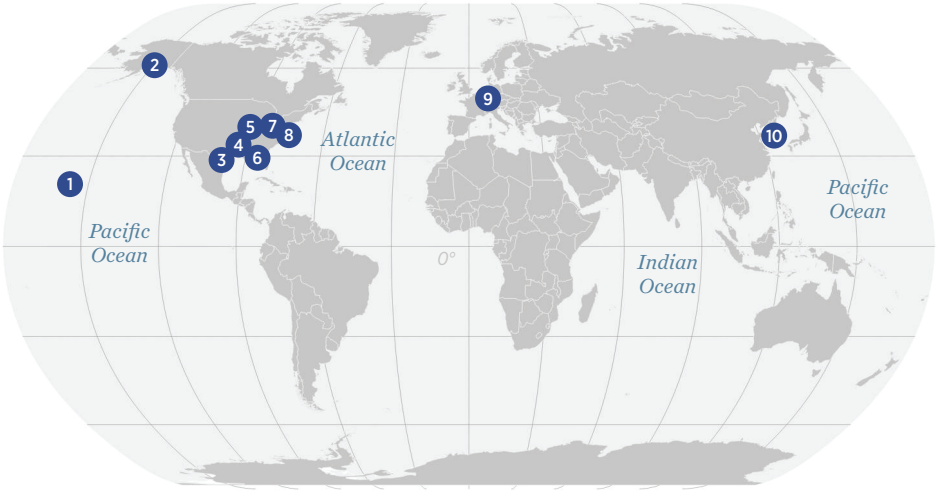
EST. 1947

MOTTO
"Aim High ... Fly-Fight-Win"

Dr. Troy E. Meink
Secretary of the Air Force

Gen. Kenneth S. Wilsbach
Chief of Staff

MAJOR BASES



1. Hickam Air Force Base
2. Elmendorf Air Force Base
3. Randolph Air Force Base
4. Barksdale Air Force Base
5. Scott Air Force Base
6. Hurlburt Field
7. Wright-Patterson Air Force Base
8. Langley Air Force Base
9. Ramstein Air Base
10. Osan Air Base

CURRENT BUDGET

IN BILLIONS FOR FY 2025

$184.1

CURRENT PERSONNEL

ACTIVE-DUTY MILITARY

317,000

CIVILIAN

176,000

KEY EQUIPMENT (estimated current inventory)


F-35A (526)


F-16C/D (830)


B-52H (78)


B-2 (19)


B-1B (42)


KC-135R/T (370)


KC-46A (96)


C-5M (52)


C-130J (165)


F-22A (153)


MQ-9/B5 (231)

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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the Air Force's Air Combat Command, said that the "strategic environment, mostly permissive and without a significant challenger, allowed the luxury of segmented attention, priority, and risk."[2] These trends began at the end of the Cold War, were accelerated following the September 11 terrorist attacks, and were further intensified by the budgetary and operational impacts of sequestration.

For example, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States emerged as the world's policeman, conducting operations in such countries as (among others) Kuwait, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Somalia. The United States soon embarked upon a global war on terrorism. During this time, the service was skewed toward intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions and counter-terrorism operations. Unfortunately, while combatant commanders' demand for Air Force supporting capabilities soared, supply dwindled and got older, particularly for higher-end warfighting functions.

To fulfill operational requirements without causing budgets to soar, the Air Force traded a larger inventory of aging aircraft for a smaller, more modern fleet while maintaining a high level of readiness. This was arguably the right decision at the time, balancing the immediate demands of a permissive conflict with the long-term need to remain prepared for high-end, contested warfare. The service hoped to keep decades-long modernization programs on track while sustaining global operational commitments. Initially, this strategy worked as the service sustained operations, kept modernization on track, and the force was ready.

With the arrival of sequestration in 2013, the Air Force made greater cuts.[3] As a consequence, by 2016, the Air Force was left with just 55 total force fighter squadrons—the aggregate of Active Component (AC) and Reserve Component (RC) squadrons—and the readiness levels within those squadrons were very low. Only four of the Air Force's 32 active-duty fighter squadrons were ready for conflict with a near-peer competitor.[4]

Sequestration was not the only problem. Over the past 20 years, funding has been inconsistent with Congress adopting 58 continuing resolutions (CRs) from FY 2010–FY 2024.[5] In his March 2025 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Spain stated that without anomalies, the impact of the March 2025 CR would be, practically speaking, a $4 billion cut to the Air Force and could reach approximately $14 billion if one included the impact of the 2023 Fiscal Responsibility Act.[6] To put the magnitude of the budgetary impact into perspective, $14 billion is nearly double the Air Force's fiscal year (FY) 2025 nuclear recapitalization total.

Furthermore, while these budgetary pressures were significant, something more significant was happening within the service. During the early years of the war on terrorism, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) leadership increasingly directed the Air Force to prioritize support for low-end conflict over its foundational mission to deter and, if necessary, set conditions to win major combat operations by achieving air dominance. Over time, the Air Force drifted away from a service focused primarily on achieving dominance in major combat and drifted toward a service focused primarily on supporting the Joint Force. Given the strategic and budgetary environment, trade-offs had to be made. Nowhere was this reality felt more than it was in the fact that air superiority—the ability to operate without the threat of airborne attack and a precondition upon which all U.S. military operations rest—was taken for granted during the war on terrorism's permissive air environment. This shift in emphasis resulted in a misalignment with the far more contested and competitive strategic environment the United States faces today.

An overemphasis on cost efficiency over combat effectiveness was another consequence for the Air Force during the war on terrorism. One such example was the transformation of the Reserve Component, which includes the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserves, from an actual "reserve" of forces to "more of" an operationally ready force. The reason for adding the qualifier "more of" is deploy-to-dwell differences between the Active and Reserve Components. The RC operates on a 1:5 deploy-to-dwell ratio, meaning that for every year deployed, members remain home for five years. By contrast, the AC deploys at a 1:2 ratio. Over a 10-year span, the RC can contribute roughly two years of deployment time compared to five years for the AC. The AC and RC cannot be considered equally ready from an operational standpoint, but the AC no longer has the resources to go it alone.

Additionally, mobilizing takes longer for the RC than it does for the AC. Longer RC mobilization timelines have always been a planning

consideration, but the impact is more acute in today's strategic environment. During the Cold War, the AC was more robust and therefore capable of absorbing delays as the RC mobilized. During the war on terrorism, the Air Force compensated for RC mobilization times by forecasting deployments months or even years in advance. By contrast, AC operational units must be ready to go within days. In today's strategic context, the AC is not big enough to fight a peer without the RC, but the RC cannot respond with the immediacy that modern threats demand.

One final example of the prioritizing of cost efficiency over effectiveness is Total Force Integration (TFI) units, which blend Active and Reserve Components. TFI does offer cost efficiencies on paper, but in practice, it disproportionately burdens junior active-duty officers with essential non-flying duties and strains readiness.

In total, these critiques are not critiques of the RC; the RC is an invaluable repository of talent and experience upon which America has always depended and will always depend. But these critiques are examples of the cost-driven decisions made in the previous era that compromise effectiveness in today's era. In other words, some war on terrorism–era efficiencies have become liabilities in today's strategic context.[7]

During President Trump's first term, the Administration finally said what many experts already knew: China is the only potential adversary that can change the U.S.-led free and open world order, and America needs to focus on strengthening its military to address the evolving threat environment. Specifically, the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) directed the services to prepare for a large-scale, high-intensity conventional conflict with a peer adversary.[8] To support the NDS, the Air Force released "The Air Force We Need" (TAFWN) concept later that year. TAFWN was a study of the capacity the service would need to fight and help the U.S. win a war in this changing threat environment. Based on thousands of war-game simulations, TAFWN found that to execute that strategy, the service needed to grow by 25 percent from 312 to 386 squadrons.[9] The focus on China is also foundational in the 2022 NDS and 2026 NDS,[10] indicating that the recent emphasis on China crosses party lines.

Unfortunately—and despite clear guidance from the NDS—China has yet to become the strategic focal point it should be. One persistent impediment to China's becoming the Air Force's focus has been the continued deployment of Air Force assets to the Middle East even when it is well understood that this undermines the service's ability to deter China and meet Indo-Pacific operational plan (OPLAN) requirements. The decisions to deploy assets are often accompanied by little more than a footnote on a briefing slide with something like "this SDOB (Secretary of Defense Orders Book) presents high risk to [insert OPLAN]" rather than driving a meaningful discussion or course correction.

One cumulative effect of decades of incremental cuts and risk acceptance is that Air Force mission-capable rates are very low, which suggests that aircrew are flying less. The data support the claim. In fact, over the past 20 years, the Air Force has reduced its fleet size by 12 percent but its annual flight hours by 37 percent. Additionally, in the first decade of the 2000s, service fighter pilots averaged more than 15 flight hours per month each year (except for FY 2008, when the average was 14.4 flight hours), but since 2011, there has not been a single year in which Air Force fighter pilots reached 15 flight hours per month on average. This kind of risk remains abstract until the shooting starts. As noted, the more risk the Air Force is forced to absorb, the more likely it becomes that a competitor will choose to act against America.

Yet despite this bleak reality, the Air Force continues to deliver results and combat wins in lower-intensity conflicts alongside its Joint Force teammates. A few recent examples: In April 2024, Air Force F-15Es helped to defend Israel against a barrage of drones; in June 2025, the Air Force led the way on Operation Midnight Hammer, when B-2 stealth bombers obliterated Iranian nuclear facilities; in January 2026, the Air Force did its part in Operation Absolute Resolve and supported the successful capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro. Despite the great skill and airmanship required to perform so remarkably, these missions were still nowhere close to the challenge that China could present. The Air Force is not sufficiently prepared to fight China when it is older, smaller, and less ready than it has ever been.

Thankfully, encouraging signs suggest that Congress will sufficiently resource defense for today's strategic environment. For example, passage of President Trump's OBBBA was an immediate shot

in the arm for the military services, and it provided billions of dollars for aircraft development, production, and maintenance. The OBBBA also provided significant funding for recapitalizing the service's nuclear portfolio. Unfortunately, it will take several years of OBBBA-like funding for the Air Force to fully rebuild and compete with China as the demand for air power will remain high and unrelenting.

Capability

The *Index of U.S. Military Strength* evaluates military capability based on several key factors: whether the force possesses the right tools to succeed in combat; whether it has enough aircraft, spare aircraft, parts, equipment, and weapons to prevail against an adversary; whether it offers a diverse set of options to avoid strategic vulnerabilities; and how well its various components complement one another to mitigate potential weaknesses. Although the *2026 Index* measures Air Force capacity primarily by the number of fighter aircraft, it is appropriate to begin a broader capability assessment with the service's nuclear forces, given their strategic significance and substantial budgetary impact, followed by an analysis of fighter aircraft, supporting aircraft, and munitions.

The Air Force's contribution to nuclear deterrence is ready and capable with programmed help on the way, albeit later and at a much greater cost than originally planned. The service has 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in service, but the LGM-30 Minuteman III is over 40 years old and beyond its planned service life. The Air Force "expects the [LGM-30] system will begin falling below readiness standards as early as 2026 if not replaced."[11] The good news is that the Air Force is preparing to replace the Minuteman III with the LGM-35A Sentinel; the bad news is that the Sentinel has slipped to no earlier than 2029, and the first flight tests have slipped from 2023 to 2026.[12] The Sentinel will arrive later and cost considerably more than planned, but given its strategic importance to national security, it is a must-pay bill.

The other leg of the nuclear triad for which the Air Force is responsible is the nation's strategic bombers. In addition to 20 B-2s and 76 B-52s, the B-21 is a top-priority program. The B-21 first flew in November 2023, and the Air Force has said repeatedly that the program is moving along nicely.[13] Then-Chief of Staff General David Allvin said in May 2025 that 100 B-21s were the "absolute minimum," and the former commanders of U.S. Strategic Command and U.S. Global Strike Command have said that 145 is the new target.[14] The FY 2026 budget requests $4.739 billion for the B-21, an increase of 76 percent from FY 2025.[15] For context, roughly half of the B-21 funding for FY 2026 is from the OBBBA that Congress passed in July 2025.

The Air Force is proceeding with the B-2 until enough B-21s are in service and plans to ensure that this penetrating bomber remains viable in highly contested environments, keeping it fully mission-capable until it is replaced by the B-21.[16] The B-52s average more than 60 years old, and modernization efforts are also underway to keep them flying and relevant. The FY 2018 budget funded the re-engineering of this fleet with upgrades that include a new nuclear-armed Long-Range Stand-Off cruise missile, improved radar, new computers, new communication links, and a new suite of electronic warfare countermeasures. The aircraft will remain in the inventory through 2050,[17] at which time a significant portion of the U.S. bomber fleet will be more than 80 years old.

To round out the nuclear forces, another priority program is the Survivable Airborne Operations Center (SAOC). The SAOC is the Air Force's planned replacement for the E-4B, or National Airborne Operations Center. The mission for the E-4B and soon for the SAOC is to keep the government running in the event of a nuclear attack. The Air Force awarded a $13 billion contract in spring 2024 for the SAOC to replace the aging E-4B.[18]

With respect to fighter jets, the Air Force has placed greater importance on capability as it has downsized the fleet. The capability-over-capacity strategy is based on the idea that we need to develop and maintain a *more* capable force that can win against the advanced warfighting capabilities such as stealth fighters, ballistic and cruise missiles, electronic warfare, and surface-to-air missile systems that are now being developed by potential adversaries like China and Russia.

The air superiority fleet is severely strained: The FY 2026 budget request would result in zero F-15Cs and 169 F-22As for the total force.[19] The F-22's availability is also affected by low mission capability rates. The stealthy air superiority fighter fleet will be further strained until 2031 by a program that is intended to refurbish the low-observable coatings

on the F-22's engine inlets and overhaul the aircraft's flight control system.[20] As discussed in the next section, the *Index of Military Strength* does not define a specific requirement for the number of air superiority fighters, but numbers have a quality of their own, and the Air Force's air superiority portfolio is extremely thin. For example, while the F-22 is very capable, the Air Force had at least 650 dedicated air superiority fighters in 1987, the last time it was prepared to fight major combat against a peer adversary.[21]

Even though the Air Force has not officially designated it as such, the F-15EX should also be included in discussions surrounding the air superiority fleet.[22] The F-15EX possesses significant aerial combat capabilities that may potentially include integrating Collaborative Combat Aircraft (CCA). The FY 2026 budget requests an additional 21 F-15EXs (all funded by the OBBBA).[23] Furthermore, even though the F-35A is dual-role, its fifth-generation faculties will also be formidable in an air-to-air role, allowing it to augment the F-22 in many scenarios.

While much of the CCA program remains classified, it would be a disservice to assess Air Force capability without mentioning it. In the words of former Air Force Chief of Staff General Allvin, the Air Force is "leaning into a new chapter of aerial warfare."[24] Additionally, the service has said that CCA will have a larger combat radius than the F-22 or F-35, which will be well suited for a potential conflict with China in the Pacific.[25] General Allvin has repeatedly referred to CCA as a "fighter" with the first two prototypes designated YFQ-42A and YFQ-44A.[26] The FY 2026 budget requests nearly $800 million in RDT&E funding for CCA.[27]

Another top-priority program is Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD). In March 2025, General Allvin unveiled a depiction of what the Air Force is calling one element of NGAD: the F-47, which will be the service's first sixth-generation fighter.[28] On the same day, the Air Force released an official message saying that prototype F-47 aircraft have been flying hundreds of hours for five years, implying that the service should be able to procure the aircraft relatively rapidly. Similarly, officials have said the F-47 will fly "before the end of the Trump Administration."[29] In May 2025, the Air Force announced on social media that the F-47 will have a significantly larger combat radius than previous fighters, which, like the CCA, is timely given today's strategic context.[30] The FY 2026 RDT&E budget request of $3.479 billion funding ($2.579 billion discretionary and $900 million mandatory) increases the F-47 funding by 43.5 percent over FY 2025 enacted.[31]

The dual-role fighter fleet is in a slightly better position than the air superiority fleet, largely because new F-35s continue to roll off the production line. However, the F-35 is not without its challenges, and some are significant. For example, Tech Refresh 3 (TR-3), originally slated to field in spring 2023, is currently not scheduled to release until late summer 2026.[32] TR-3 is a set of hardware and software improvements to improve the F-35's combat capability. Unfortunately, the delay in TR-3 is "having cascading effects on subsequent improvements to the F-35—particularly another modernization program called Block 4—which is intended to allow the jet to carry more weapons, better recognize targets and improve its electronic warfare capabilities."[33] The FY 2026 budget request halves the number of F-35s for the Air Force from 48 to 24, which is partly why the OBBBA increases the F-15EX buy. Given the F-35's programmatically poor performance to date, reducing the buy and hedging with a formidable alternative is a prudent move. The F-35 is a dynamic aircraft when it is available, so the pressure of reducing the 2026 buy could move the program in the right direction.

The F-15E is a dependable dual-role aircraft with an upgraded radar and Eagle Passive/Active Warning and Survivability System (EPAWSS),[34] but the need to install system upgrades will reduce aircraft availability over the coming years. The Air Force has started to divest the oldest (and most heavily flown) F-15Es; it divested 26 in FY 2025 and plans to retire 21 in FY 2026.[35]

The Air Force is also working to extend the life of 300 F-16Cs by executing a major service life extension program (SLEP) that will allow them to fly through 2050.[36] It also is "undergoing the largest modification work in [the F-16's] history with the Post Block Integration Team project" to "improve lethality and ensure the fourth-generation fighter remains effective in meeting current and future threats."[37] However, despite service life extensions, there is still a direct correlation between aircraft age and the maintainability of those platforms. The dual-role fighters, other than the F-35 (and the F-15EX if counted as dual-role), continue to age to

the point where the Air Force must either invest significant funding to keep them operationally relevant or divest them.

Acquisition of the KC-46A air refueling tanker is a critical enabler for the service. The KC-46 has experienced a series of problems and delays, the most recent of which grounded the fleet for nearly three months "after cracks were found in brand new aircraft."[38] The cracks and their root cause were repaired relatively quickly, but it is estimated that the tanker's remote vision system (RVS) will not be fielded until the summer of 2027, "nearly two years longer than previously anticipated, and four years later than originally expected."[39] Although the RVS had prevented the tanker from being able to refuel during combat operations, "[a]irmen have developed workarounds and the Air Force has cleared the KC-46 for operations worldwide."[40] The Air Force plans to procure 15 KC-46s in FY 2026, which would bring the total to 110.[41] That will leave the service with more than 350 aging KC-135s (already averaging 61 years old) that still need to be recapitalized.[42]

The Air Force is maintaining the status quo for its strategic airlift fleet while modestly improving its tactical fleet by replacing C-130Hs with newer C-130Js.[43] The average age of the C-17 is approximately 22 years, and the demands of the war on terrorism significantly exceeded planned flight hours.[44] Given these factors, if other portfolios were on a more solid footing, the Air Force would likely be recapitalizing strategic airlift, but it remains a lower near-term priority compared to other more urgent readiness and modernization needs. However, this is a bill the Air Force will soon have to pay, particularly when considering the logistical challenges in the Pacific.

The Air Force's ISR capabilities face problems that affect both capability and capacity. Many of the Air Force's ISR aircraft are now remotely piloted aircraft (RPA). The service divested the last of its MQ-9 Block-1 aircraft last year and plans to scale back its Block-5 fleet from 231 to 189 in FY 2026.[45]

For manned ISR, the service needs to replace its aging E-3 AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) and the already divested E-8 J-STARS (Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System), but efforts to realize JADC2 (Joint All Domain Command and Control) are complicated. Through JADC2, the War Department is moving away from a platform approach to command and control to disaggregated sensors (a system of systems) with the Advanced Battle Management System (ABMS) as the Air Force's contribution to the effort.[46] The Department of the Air Force has already stated that the E-8's ground moving target indicator (GMTI) mission will be moving to the Space Force.

As debate on the FY 2026 budget continues, there is significant discussion of whether the Air Force should acquire the E-7 Wedgetail as a gap filler or whether space-based assets are ready to fully execute the AWACS' mission. In August 2025, Lieutenant General Deanna M. Burt, U.S. Space Force Deputy Chief of Operations, stated that "[a]n analysis of alternatives for air moving target indication is 'supposed to deliver this fall.'"[47] The Air Force's FY 2026 budget request does not include any E-7 aircraft, but nearly two dozen retired general officers, including General Kevin P. Chilton, former head of Air Force Space Command and U.S. Strategic Command, are encouraging Congress to fund the E-7, "arguing that space-based targeting is not ready for prime time."[48]

Any discussion of capability must include an assessment of the ability of the service's weapons to complete the kill chain and destroy the intended target whether in the air, on the ground, or on the sea.

As recent air actions have demonstrated, the venerable AIM-120 air-to-air missile still has formidable beyond-visual-range capabilities, and the Air Force has continued to update it over the years. The service is also working on the AIM-120's replacement, the AIM-260. Details of the AIM-260 are limited, but reporting suggests that the new missile is well suited to competing with China.[49] The FY 2026 budget request—the first time the missile has been identified in the unclassified budget—seeks to acquire 112 AIM-260 missiles.[50]

From an air-to-surface perspective, jamming of Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS) like the Global Positioning System (GPS) has advanced significantly over the past two decades. Russia has used these increasingly capable and widespread systems extensively since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine to disrupt the effectiveness of Ukrainian (allied) GPS-guided weapons. The ability of such systems to degrade the accuracy of smart munitions would make them a substantial advantage in any conflict with a peer adversary.

The U.S. military and its supporting research arms have done significant work focused on making munitions less susceptible to the effects of GPS jammers, and the Air Force has been buying munitions and sensors with this in mind for more than a decade. However, inventories of advanced munitions remain limited, and GPS degradation will reduce strike precision, which means that more weapons and sorties will be needed to achieve desired effects. On the plus side, modern GPS antennas are more resistant to jamming, and multi-mode seekers such as those using laser, infrared, or optical guidance help to reduce reliance on GPS. For instance, the GBU-53 SDB (Small Diameter Bomb) II uses "Link 16 and ultra-high frequency datalinks, along with infrared guidance, to provide course corrections"[51] and is an example of a multi-pronged effort to mitigate GPS jamming.

Munitions such as the AGM-158 Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM), AGM-154 Joint Standoff Weapon (JSOW), and AGM-158C Long Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM) are top-priority munitions for the service and are reflected as such in the FY 2026 budget request. They will be critical elements in the kill chain in future high-end contested fights. Overall, the OBBBA was a major boost for Air Force air-to-air and air-to-surface weapons, "but without detailed budgetary information beyond fiscal 2026, it's unclear whether the growth in stockpiles will be sustained."[52]

Capacity

The *Index of U.S. Military Strength* assesses capacity against 1,200 active-duty "combat-coded" fighter aircraft in order to meet the baseline requirement for two major regional conflicts (MRCs).[53] The *Index* metric lines up well with TAF-WN's fighter requirement, which the Commander of Air Combat Command has reaffirmed is the capacity requirement for today's Air Force.[54] Two of the more important factors that inform capacity are aircraft age and mission-capable (MC) rates.

Aircraft Age. Because they require increased maintenance as they age, older aircraft are generally less available than newer ones. Reduced material support or DMSMS (diminishing manufacturing sources and material shortages) also plays a significant role with aging aircraft. With time, aircraft reach thresholds that trigger inspections, overhauls, and component replacements, many of which can be performed only at centralized depot facilities. According to the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Sustainment, "depot-level maintenance entails materiel maintenance requiring the major repair, overhaul, or complete rebuilding of weapon systems, parts, and assemblies; manufacture of parts; technical assistance; and testing."[55]

Mission-Capable Rates. MC rates are defined as the percentage of a unit's aircraft that can execute its mission set. Multiplying MC rates by the actual number of aircraft within a particular fleet yields that fleet's physical operational capacity. However, MC is the percentage of a unit's possessed aircraft that are fully mission capable (FMC) or partially mission capable (PMC). The number of possessed aircraft does not include the portion of the fleet that is in depot-level maintenance and/or long-duration aircraft modernization.

Thus, using MC as a metric can mask problems if a unit does not possess large numbers of aircraft. Aircraft availability (AA) is a better measure because it is the percentage of FMC or PMC aircraft in a unit's total aircraft inventory (TAI). Unfortunately, the data that follow are based on MC and not on AA; nevertheless, as low as MC rates are for the Air Force, the reality is much worse because a consequential portion of the fleet is in depot-level maintenance and/or modernization.

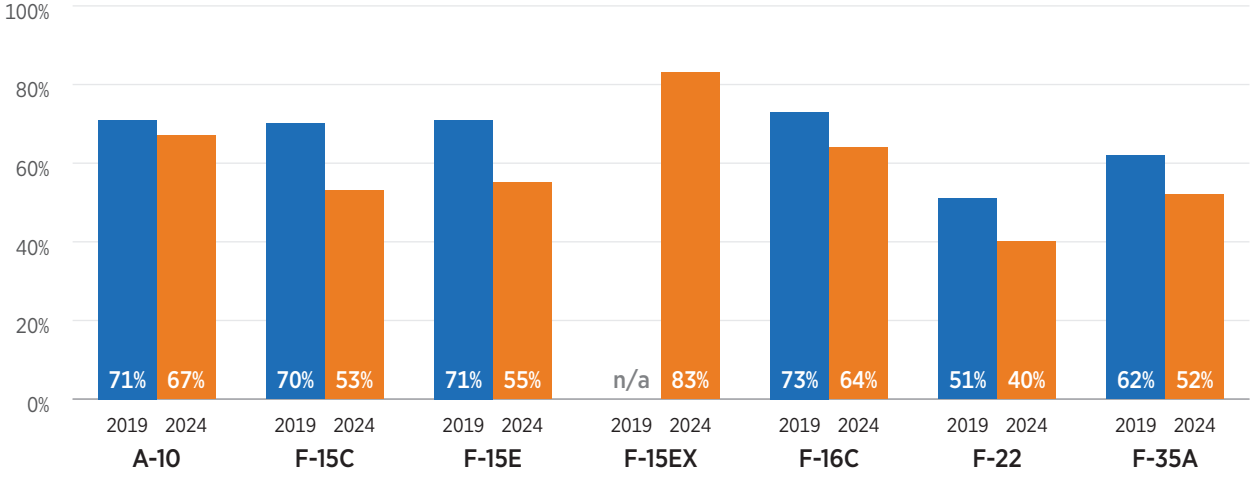
In 2018, Secretary of Defense James Mattis directed the Air Force to boost F-16, F-22, and F-35 MC rates to 80 percent by September 2019 to improve aircraft availability.[56] When the service fell short, Chief of Staff General David Goldfein asserted in the FY 2020 Posture Statement that "[m]ore than 90 percent of our 'pacing squadrons' [were] ready to 'fight tonight' with their lead force packages" and "on track to reach 80% readiness" by year's end.[57] This signaled that only a few, select frontline units had achieved sufficient readiness.

With the rollout of the President's budget for FY 2026, the service announced its plan to continue reducing the size of the fighter fleet. The FY 2026 request would leave the service with 1,706 fighters with an average age of 21.7 years (down from 1,907 with an average age of 26.4 years at the end of FY 2025).[58] The largest adjustments between the two years are the requested divestitures of the A-10 and the F-15C. It is difficult to see the size of the fleet continue to shrink, but it is positive to see the fleet age trending slightly younger.

CHART 16

Air Force Fighters: Mission-Capable Rates

MISSION-CAPABLE RATE BY FIGHTER MISSION DESIGN SERIES



NOTE: Figures shown are end-of-year totals.
SOURCES: "Air Force & Space Force Almanac 2020," *Air Force Magazine*, Vol. 103, No. 6 (June 2020), p. 65, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/app/uploads/2020/06/June2020_Fullissue5.pdf (accessed January 20, 2026), and "Air Force & Space Forces Almanac 2024," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, Vol. 108, Nos. 5 and 6 (May/June 2025), p. 67, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/app/uploads/2025/06/Almanac2025_fullissue_V6.pdf (accessed January 20, 2026).

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Combat-coded aircraft and squadrons have assigned wartime missions and do not include aircraft used for training, testing, or other roles. Other jets like those in training or test units often lack the software and/or hardware capabilities that are needed for combat, and this makes them less effective or survivable.

Despite the fact that the Air Force would not provide the number of combat-coded aircraft or a breakout of total Active Component and Reserve Component aircraft, a reasonable approximation is that the number of combat-coded fighter aircraft in the active-duty force is 800.[59] If that approximation is off, the actual number of active-duty combat-coded fighter aircraft is likely lower. While 800 is well short of 1,200, it is also worthwhile to compare the fleet in 2024 to the fleet in 1987, the last time the U.S. was prepared to face a peer competitor. In 2024, the Air Force's air-to-air fighter fleet was 78 percent smaller than the fleet in 1987 and more than twice as old on average; the dual-role fleet was 30 percent smaller and nearly three times as old on average; and the air-to-ground fleet was 82 percent smaller and nearly four times as old on average.[60]

Unfortunately, such a comparison of the size and age of the aircraft yields only part of the picture; there are also far fewer squadrons today, and that has created additional readiness challenges. Historically, for example, because of aircraft and spare availability, reliability, and limited support equipment, it has taken three active-duty fighter squadrons to deploy two forward. By drawing jets and personnel from the third squadron, a wing could quickly deploy two full-strength squadrons while retaining a small cadre at home for training and pilot replacement (such as for combat losses). During the Cold War, the Air Force typically structured wings with three squadrons to meet this need and facilitate the ease of "plussing up" the deploying squadrons with people, jets, and parts. Post–Cold War downsizing, however, has reduced many wings

to one or two squadrons, and this makes it harder to assess true deployable capacity.

Guard and Reserve units have traditionally been single-squadron wings and therefore face similar challenges, often more acutely. The predictability of the war on terrorism era helped to mitigate these issues, allowing reservists and guardsmen to adjust civilian commitments in advance. Because of potential imbalances between preparing the fleet and pilot readiness, these single-squadron wings that self-generate add a level of complexity that affects both deployability and readiness leading up to their deployments.[61]

Capacity also relies on the stockpile of available munitions and the munitions industry's production capacity. The actual number of munitions within the U.S. stockpile is classified, but there are indicators that make it possible to assess the overall health of these critical assets. The inventory of precision-guided munitions (PGM) was severely stressed by nearly 18 years of sustained combat operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere. Since 2017, funding for munitions has been relatively robust as the service has worked to restock inventories.

Although the current munitions stockpile may be sufficient to support a war on terrorism–era surge, it would fall short in sustaining a peer-level conflict lasting more than a few weeks. For context, during Operation Desert Storm, the U.S. military dropped more than 88,000 tons of bombs[62]—probably equivalent to more than 100,000 individual munitions—despite the operation's being relatively short and not against a peer.

Typically, there is a 24-month to 36-month lag between funding and the delivery of new munitions. Rapid expansion of production is theoretically possible, but it is difficult to envision such an increase happening quickly enough to outpace consumption before existing stockpiles were exhausted in a high-intensity conflict.

Readiness

There are many reasons why it is difficult to assess readiness, particularly in an unclassified format, but a foundational question to ask is, "ready to do what?" Before 2018, the answer was somewhat vague, but the 2018 NDS clearly stated that "long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities."[63]

Service leaders' testimony to Congress informs readiness trends. In 2017, for example, Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson and Chief of Staff General Goldfein informed Congress that "[w]e are at our lowest state of full spectrum readiness in our history."[64] In 2024, Secretary Frank Kendall stated that "[w]e are not as ready as we need to be for a war with a peer competitor like China."[65]

It is also noteworthy that the Air Force has tried to reshape the narrative surrounding readiness in recent years. For example, rather than enduring benchmarks for flying squadron readiness such as sortie rates, MC rates, and pilot flight hours, the service moved to highlight the readiness of fighter, bomber, or tanker "force elements" while arguing that MC rates do not tell the entire story.[66] General Goldfein touted the rapid deployment of a "task force" of four B-52s to the Middle East in May 2019 as an example of service readiness.[67]

Similarly, during his tenure as Chief of Staff, General Charles Brown largely avoided assigning a qualitative grade to the service's readiness and instead communicated the need to redefine the term.[68] He initiated a force presentation model called AFFORGEN (Air Force Generation) to replace the Air Expeditionary Force construct model because the service "lacked the ability to present an easily understood model that reflected all facets of air power and the ability to clearly articulate readiness impacts." Now, however, "after nearly two decades of demanding rotational deployments, we are shifting to a model that builds high-end and sustainable readiness toward future missions by balancing elements of current availability, modernization and risk."[69]

More recently, in February 2024, the Air Force announced "sweeping changes...amid Great Power Competition."[70] Through its Reoptimization for Great Power Competition initiative, the Air Force is once again shifting the narrative and declaring that the unit of action is a wing, not the flying squadron. In addition to being a fundamental departure from the service's beginnings, this does not make sense from a warfighting perspective. The real problem the Air Force is trying to solve is not in a model or presentation but in resourcing and force generation for integration into the Joint Force.

Because of the seemingly ever-moving goalposts of the service's force presentation and readiness measurements, any assessment of Air

Force readiness is difficult. However, regardless of the model, flying readiness depends on having the right mix of aircraft,[71] maintenance capability, and aircrew that are trained and qualified as well as the right infrastructure and logistics to sustain operations.

Maintenance Capability. Maintenance capability is the sum of the right number of people with the right training and the right equipment who are armed with the parts necessary to perform and keep the airplanes ready to fly. Maintenance manning remains relatively healthy across the three broad training and experience levels.[72] However, due to the age of the fleet, more maintenance touch time and greater cost are needed to keep the jets flying.

As the fleet has aged, the Air Force has had to spend increasing amounts of money on depot maintenance. It plans, for example, to spend more than four times as much money on depot-related activities in FY 2025 (inflation adjusted) as it spent in FY 2011.[73] Another concern is that the subcontractors that manufacture many of the parts needed for older weapons systems often are small businesses that last only a single generation.

Annual inflation-adjusted spending on weapons system sustainment (WSS) has remained relatively consistent at approximately 10 percent of the total annual budget. However, due to shrinking fleet sizes and fewer pilots who are flying less, it is hard to score consistent WSS spending as a win. As recently as FY 2022, in response to a senatorial inquiry about the cutback in flight hours, Lieutenant General David Nahom, Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs, said that "[WSS] is actually approaching $1 billion a year, just in increased costs. And this year, in [fiscal] '22, we were not able to fund that increase."[74] Similarly, in an April 2024 presentation to the Senate Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Readiness, Vice Chief of Staff General James Slife similarly stated that "the WSS portfolio continues to grow due to aircraft sustainment beyond design life, fielding new weapons systems with increased technical complexity, increasing requirements for Contract Logistics Support, and inflation above planned levels in labor and material costs."[75]

It is important to emphasize that the inflation-adjusted cost increases are to support a continually shrinking fleet. The Air Force continues to fight to balance its Operation and Maintenance portfolio; WSS funding in the FY 2026 budget request is 85 percent, down from 87 percent in the 2025 request,[76] but 85 percent funding means that the Air Force will likely be unable to fully execute its flying hour program. Execution of the full flying hour program will require significantly more maintenance man-hours because of the need to cannibalize parts from other jets to fix the jets they intend to fly.

Despite the maintainers' best efforts, getting the jets in the air is increasingly difficult, which is why the mission-capable rate and aircraft availability are so low. The low sortie availability has compelled some fighter squadrons to hot-pit refuel more frequently.[77] Hot-pitting is one tool that units use to overcome fleet health issues, but it has a detrimental impact on pilot and unit readiness.

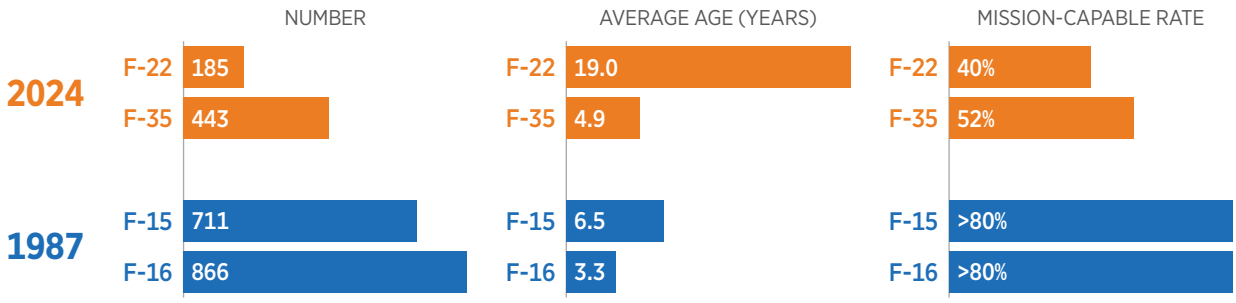
Hot-pit refueling is the practice of refueling an aircraft immediately after landing while keeping the engines running to minimize time spent on the ground. It allows sorties to be generated faster, which results in more sorties for a given amount of aircraft maintenance touch time.[78] Hot-pits should be in every commander's playbook, but they should not be overused to mask problems.[79] Not only is the practice physically demanding on the aircrew, but such sorties are less effective from a training perspective because hot-pits do not often afford sufficient time to debrief and capture lessons learned. Moreover, the Air Force's recent practice of overutilizing hot-pits has caused morale issues within the pilot force.

Aircrew. The pilot shortage may be the single most concerning challenge facing the Air Force today. It not only impacts the service from the tactical level to the operational and strategic levels, but also goes relatively unnoticed outside of the service. There are many reasons why the shortage has not received the attention that it requires, but the biggest is that the Air Force continues to execute superbly in lower-intensity conflicts despite the realities that it faces. For example, in April 2024, forward deployed F-15Es shot down more than 70 drones and missiles to protect Israel in what the Air Force called the "largest air-to-air enemy engagement in over 50 years."[80] More recently, in June 2025, the Air Force overwhelmingly struck Iranian nuclear facilities during Operation Midnight Hammer.

The airmen executing these missions performed remarkably, and all Americans should be proud of

CHART 17

Frontline Air Force Fighter Jets: Fewer, Older, and Less Ready



SOURCES: "An Air Force Almanac," *Air Force Magazine*, Vol. 70, No. 5 (May 1987), p. 87, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/app/uploads/1987/05/AFmag_1987_05.pdf (accessed January 20, 2026), and "Air Force & Space Forces Almanac 2025," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, Vol. 108, Nos. 5 and 6 (May/June 2025), pp. 58 and 60, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/app/uploads/2025/06/Almanac2025_fullissue_V6.pdf (accessed January 20, 2026).

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them, but even though the challenges the airmen faced required great skill and airmanship, these missions took place in relatively permissive air environments. In other words, even if these missions were something different from the war on terrorism, they were still nowhere close to the challenge that China could present.

Despite the high operational tempo over the years, service leadership has continued to emphasize the need for more flight time for aircrews. In 2018, for example, Secretary Wilson "noted that even when aircrew go abroad and fly combat missions, such as those against violent extremists such as the Islamic State, they're not practicing skills that would be required for a high-end fight against an advanced adversary such as Russia."[81]

Even with Air Force leadership acknowledging the need for more high-end flight training, the number of flight hours executed has remained flat at best. In fact, a thorough review of Air Force budget requests for the past 20 years reveals that the number of budgeted flight hours has decreased much more sharply than the fleet size has. Over the past 20 years, the Air Force has reduced fleet size by roughly 12 percent, but it has reduced its annual flight hours by 37 percent.[82] Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Air Force has not executed more than 1.1 million hours.[83] The 2024 budget request was a low-water mark with the service requesting only 877,000 hours.[84] The FY 2026 budget request seeks 1.098 million flight hours, down by 7.5 percent from the number in the FY 2025 budget request.[85]

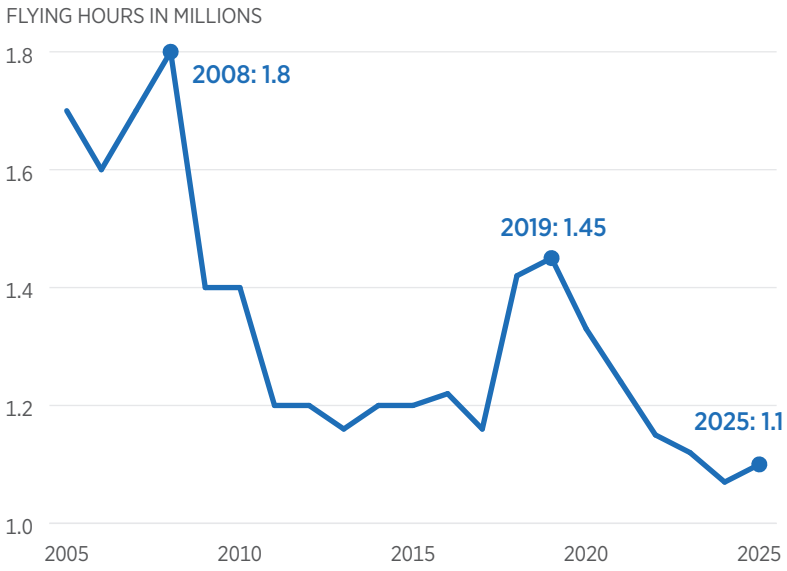
The 20-year data also reveal that the first time the Air Force caveated the number of requested flight hours was in 2017 when it stated that 1.16 million hours "caps flying hours at executable levels."[86] Since then, the service has made similar qualifying statements about capping hours in most subsequent budget requests. The 2017 flying hour alibi coincides with testimony from Lieutenant General Gina M. Grosso, Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services, that the Air Force had a shortfall of 1,555 pilots.[87]

Since declaring the pilot shortage, the Air Force has been trying to increase annual production to approximately 1,500 pilots per year, because the service considers that to be a healthy level of production.[88] However, 1,500 remains an elusive goal for reasons that include the training aircraft fleet's MC rates.[89] In fact, the Air Force continues to struggle to replace its T-38 training aircraft, which is nearly 60 years old. It was slated to receive its first production T-7, which is the T-38's replacement, in 2023, but now the new trainer will not begin to arrive at pilot training bases until 2026 at the earliest.[90] The Air Force is seeking to acquire eight T-7As in its 2026 budget request.[91]

Not inflexibly resistant to change, the Air Force has experimented by tweaking its pilot training

CHART 18

Air Force Flying Hours Down 24 Percent Since 2019



SOURCE: U.S. Air Force, Financial Management and Comptroller, "Department of the Air Force President's Budget Request," various years, https://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/FM-Resources/Budget/Air-Force-Presidents-Budget-FY25/ (accessed January 20, 2026).

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program. A few years ago, there was an attempt to use synthetic and simulated means to increase pilot training, but the service ultimately determined that this approach was flawed. In its latest innovation, the service is now looking to outsource the first 110 hours of pilot training to commercial flight schools at which point the Air Force would continue training to develop combat aviator skills.[92] Although it is too early for a definitive assessment, the service has said this approach is showing promise.

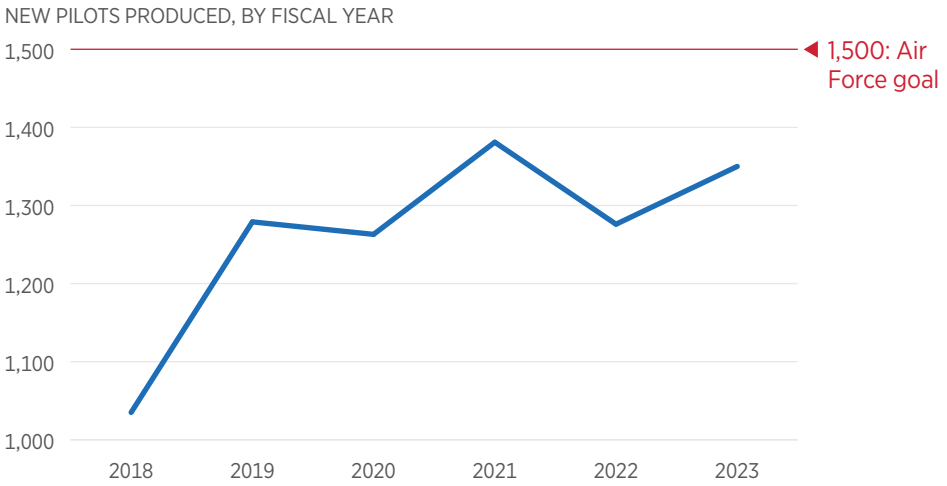
Until the pilot production problem is solved, the Air Force will continue to feel the shortage in several ways. For one thing, fighter squadron manning is below even peacetime requirements, which are themselves insufficient to meet the demands of sustained combat operations. The Air Force would not release fighter manning data, but these data are almost certainly below the standard peacetime ratio of 1.25 pilots per aircraft. In combat, however, the demands on flight hours, sortie rates, mission planning, and supervision increase significantly, and the manning ratios increase to at least 1.5 pilots per aircraft. Pulling pilots from other units and inserting them into the deploying squadrons could help to mitigate this shortfall, just as it helps to stretch limited aircraft, parts, and support equipment, but it is not currently a viable option. In the past, the Air Force could "plus up" by pulling experienced pilots from non-flying assignments, but because the service has already reassigned most available fighter pilots from non-flying billets back to operational units, there is no one left to pull. While not germane to tactical flying readiness, pulling the fighter pilots from staffs, even though necessary, comes at a cost to strategic readiness by leaving higher headquarters with critical shortfalls in rated officer expertise.

Finally, because of the relatively low availability of aircraft cockpits, increasing the number of pilots in each operational squadron after increasing pilot production merely trades one problem (not enough pilots) for another problem (too many pilots who subsequently fly too few sorties). The Air Force refers to this combination of factors as "absorption." Rather than pulling non-flying pilots from their staff positions to fill operational cockpits, one might suggest keeping them in place and instead assigning new pilots to those flying roles. However, that approach fails because squadrons require a balanced mix of experience levels and cannot function effectively if they are disproportionately saturated with unseasoned pilots.

CHART 19

Air Force Pilot Production Remains Below Stated Goal

The Air Force has been facing a pilot shortage since 2018, yet progress toward its 1,500-pilot goal remains meager.



SOURCES: Greg Hadley, "Hundreds of Airmen Stuck Waiting to Start Pilot Training as Shortage Persists," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, September 11, 2023, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/airmen-waiting-pilot-training-shortage/ (accessed January 20, 2026); Bradley Bowman and Major Brian Leitzke, "Avoiding Empty Cockpits: Addressing the Air Force's Pilot Shortage Problem," *Breaking Defense*, August 25, 2022, https://breakingdefense.com/2022/08/avoiding-empty-cockpits-addressing-the-air-forces-pilot-shortage-problem/ (accessed January 20, 2026); and Amy Hudson, "The Pilot Shortage Quandary," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, April 25, 2018, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/the-pilot-shortage-quandary/ (accessed January 20, 2026).

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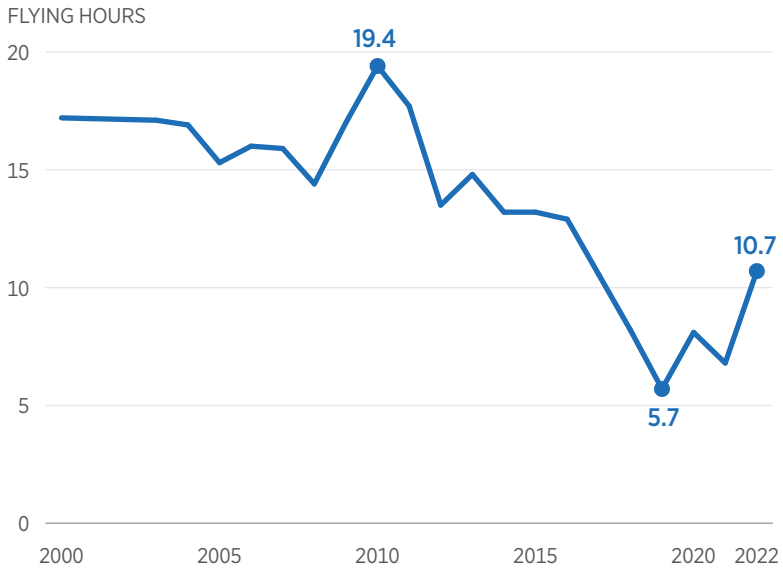
Given the downsizing of the fleet, it makes sense that the Air Force has been flying less from a macro perspective, but each individual pilot has also been flying less—considerably less than was true for previous generations. As Chart 18 depicts, monthly fighter pilot flight hours have been down substantially for more than a decade. A review of data for the past 20 years reveals that from FY 2003 until FY 2011, the number of monthly flight hours per fighter pilot was never less than 15 per month (except for FY 2008 when the average was 14.4 hours per month). Since FY 2011, there has not been one year in which Air Force fighter pilots averaged 15 flight hours per month; the data for the most recent five years show that monthly average flight hours broke double digits only once: 10.7 in FY 2022. These trends were corroborated by General Mark Kelly, Commander, Air Combat Command, on September 21, 2022, when he stated in a speech that the average fighter pilot received just 6.8 hours of flying time per month for a total of 81.6 hours in 2021.[93]

This flying time has become a reality despite the fact that Air Force regulations set minimum thresholds for sorties based on experience levels, and the Ready Aircrew Program (RAP) dictates that inexperienced fighter pilots must fly nine sorties a month (experienced must fly eight).[94] At a notional 1.3 hours per sortie, which is conservative, nine flights would equate to a monthly average flight time of 11.7 hours if each pilot was flying the minimum number of RAP-required flights. Some will say that simulators are offsetting the shortage of flight hours, but the numbers directed by the RAP account for simulators (RAP requires three simulator "sorties" per month). These numbers, combined with numerous interviews of current fighter squadron and fighter wing commanders, reflect an Air Force in which aircrews are not receiving enough quality training sorties. While the factors driving the low hours and therefore low readiness are many, the poor health of the fleet is the most significant contributor to this problem.

CHART 20

Air Force Fighter/ Attack Aircraft, Monthly Flying Hours per Pilot



NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.
SOURCE: "USAF Almanac 2017," *Air Force Magazine*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (June 2017), p. 62, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/app/uploads/2017/06/AF_June2017.pdf (accessed January 20, 2026); "Air Force & Space Forces Almanac 2022," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, "Vol. 105, Nos. 6 and 7 (June/July 2022), https://www.airandspaceforces.com/app/uploads/2022/07/Almanac2022-Fullissue_V2.pdf (accessed January 20, 2026); and "Air Force & Space Forces Almanac 2024," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, "Vol. 107, Nos. 5 and 6 (May/June 2024) p. 60, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/app/uploads/2024/06/Almanac2024_Fullissue_V11.pdf (accessed January 20, 2026).

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Scoring the U.S. Air Force

Capacity Score: Weak

As part of its overall assessment of capacity, the *2026 Index* looks for 1,200 active-duty combat-coded fighter aircraft to meet the baseline requirement for two major regional conflicts.[95] As previously noted, that number lines up well with the 2018 TAFWN's fighter requirement.

The actual number of active-duty combat-coded fighters projected for the end of FY 2025 is roughly 800, or 67 percent of the two-MRC/TAFWN benchmark. These forces are sufficient to fight and win a single MRC, but given their low mission capability rates, it would take global sourcing to field the combat fighter force required for that MRC. The rest of the world would be largely uncovered, and virtually no active-duty forces would remain to respond to a second MRC. For these reasons, the Air Force scores "weak" for capacity, unchanged from the *2024 Index*.

Capability Score: Strong

The Air Force's capability score is "strong," based on scores of "strong" for "Size of Modernization Program" and "Health of Modernization Programs," "marginal" for "Capability of Equipment," and "weak" for "Age of Equipment." This assessment is improved from the *2024 Index's* rating of "marginal" due to efforts to recapitalize the nuclear portfolio to include the B-21, the prospects of the F-47 teamed with Collaborative Combat Aircraft, and acquisitions of the F-35 and F-15EX.

Readiness Score: Very Weak

The Air Force scores "very weak" for readiness, the same grade it received in the 2024 *Index* and the lowest on the five-grade scale. The Air Force's sustained pilot deficit certainly contributes to this assessment, but aircraft age and availability, as well as low sortie rates and flight hours for its aircrew,

strongly suggest that the service is not ready for peer conflict. The FY 2025 Air Force Posture Statement states explicitly that:[96]

- "Today, the Air Force is accepting risk...in order to maintain minimally acceptable near-term operational readiness."
- "This places additional risk on the Air Force's ability to deter and defeat any adversary going forward."
- "The Air Force's operational readiness is near the minimum level acceptable for the service to meet the Nation's demands."

Overall U.S. Air Force Score: Weak

This score is a result of the Force's three scores: a capability score of "strong," a capacity score of "weak," and a readiness score of "very weak." While some positive trends are encouraging, the size and age of the fleet, coupled with low flight training hours and mission-capable rates, demand continued attention and resourcing to ensure the Air Force's ability to compete with China and deliver on what the 2026 NDS directs.

Policy Recommendations

America's ability to own the skies and hold targets at risk against a peer adversary has steadily eroded. As a result, the United States is accepting more strategic risk than it should—risk not just of conflict or not being able to deter a conflict, but risk of *losing* a conflict. Conversely, a properly sized, capable, and ready Air Force reduces strategic risk, deters conflict, and ensures that the nation can prevail if deterrence fails.

The Air Force has been on a rough glide path since the turn of the century and at programmed funding levels cannot sustain today's operational tempo while also building the capability and capacity needed to compete with China. The strategic environment no longer permits delay: Continued underinvestment will only deepen the problem. Congress must therefore significantly increase funding for the Air Force to a level that enables the service to meet both present and future mission requirements. If Congress fails to act, then the Administration must choose between prioritizing near-term readiness at the expense of future capability or shifting focus to long-term preparedness by reducing current operational commitments.

Thankfully, even though the FY 2026 budget is still being debated, encouraging signs suggest that Congress will sufficiently resource defense for today's strategic environment. For example, passage of President Trump's OBBBA was an immediate shot in the arm for the military services. For the Air Force, the OBBBA "provides billions of dollars for aircraft development, production, and maintenance, urging the Air Force to speed assembly of its new B-21 stealth bombers and buy more F-15EX fighters, as well as accelerate development of the next-generation F-47 fighter."[97] If the service gets its full request, combined with the OBBBA funding, the result will be an FY 2026 budget that is approximately 17 percent higher than the FY 2025 budget.[98]

The recommendations that follow are aligned with the 2026 National Defense Strategy and assume a necessary increase in Air Force funding to enable the service to meet today's operational demands and compete effectively with China. With sufficient funding, Congress should:

- **Significantly increase the Air Force's budget to account for the immense cost of nuclear modernization.** America's nuclear deterrent has helped to prevent global conflict on the scale of World War II. Because the readiness of America's nuclear forces is a true no-fail mission, the Air Force needs to deliver on its two legs of the triad. However, the Air Force's nuclear recapitalization bill is crippling and has forced the service to accept greater risk than it should accept in many nuclear and non-nuclear areas. For example, in its FY 2025 budget request, the Air Force prioritized the following nuclear-related programs: $3.7 billion for the Sentinel, $2.7 billion for the B-21, $1.7 billion for the SAOC, and $243 million for the ABMS for a total of $8.343 billion. For context, $8 billion would fund acquisition of approximately 80 additional F-35s per year.

  Given U.S. military defense spending's zero-sum nature, Congress should acknowledge these exorbitant costs and temporarily enhance the Air Force's budget to cover its nuclear obligations. Once the nuclear enterprise is fully recapitalized, Congress could readjust

the Air Force's topline accordingly. This action would free resources for the service to pursue the other key budgetary efforts required to deter and defeat China. The OBBBA was a step in the right direction as it significantly increased funding for the B-21 and Sentinel ICBM, but recapitalizing the service's nuclear portfolio will take multiple years of significantly increased funding. One way Congress could fulfill this recommendation is to extend the nuclear-related OBBBA funding increases until the Air Force's nuclear capitalization is completed.

With sufficient funding, the Air Force should:

- **Prioritize funding of the core missions the service is uniquely tasked to do: air superiority and global strike.** This includes accelerating the F-47 and B-21 programs along with the munitions required to maximize their effectiveness. Recent history has shown that aircraft requirements have continually been reduced to solve budgetary challenges. For example, the number of F-22s the Air Force required in the early 1990s was 750, but production was halted in 2009 at a total of 187 aircraft. Similarly, the initial requirement for the B-2 was 132 aircraft, but the final buy was 21. Air Force leadership has stated that the minimum number of F-47s is 185 and the minimum number of B-21s is 145, but those numbers essentially only replace the existing number of F-22s, B-1s, and B-52s. Given the recent trends, it is not prudent to identify too small a number or too low a production schedule. In a June 2025 article, Shawn Barnes and Robert Peters made a compelling argument to double production capacity of the B-21; this recommendation supports the concept and recommends extending it to the F-47 so that the Air Force can acquire 400 F-47s and 250 B-21s. For context, the last time the Air Force was prepared to fight major combat against a peer (1987), the service possessed more than 650 air superiority fighters and 300 bombers.

- **Increase the size of the fleet to meet the requirements the Air Force laid out in 2018 in "The Air Force We Need" for a 2030 conflict with China.** In 2018, the service defined the requirement for such a conflict as 386 operational squadrons; it reaffirmed that requirement in 2022. The foregoing analysis further supports that requirement, which would increase the size of the fleet by one-fourth. Unfortunately, even after factoring in the OBBBA, the FY 2026 budget request continues the trend of downsizing the Air Force's fleet. Halting the drawdown would alleviate pressure on the pilot absorption pipeline, and over time, a larger, younger fleet would lower sustainment costs while improving force capacity, capability, and readiness. The Air Force must also deliver air power across the range of military operations, which makes its latest move to procure the F-15EX and F-35 simultaneously a prudent one.[99] Additionally, because the Air Force cannot have global reach without sufficient air refueling capacity, addressing persistent issues with the KC-46 should remain a priority. Aircraft divestitures cannot continue to outpace procurements. Ideally, new aircraft would exceed retirements, but even maintaining current numbers would be progress of a sort.

- **Be transparent about readiness.** The Air Force should communicate its readiness challenges clearly and stop the seemingly annual changes in its force presentation and readiness models. These changes distract from the fundamental issue: The Air Force is too small and inadequately resourced to do what America needs it to do.

- **Improve the readiness of its combat units.** History has shown that building a capable air force takes time, and readiness of both people and equipment is the foundation of air power. As observed previously, flying readiness depends on having the right mix of jets, maintenance capability, and aircrew. Pilots and aircrew need to fly to gain and maintain proficiency. As the Air Force climbs its way out of the pilot shortage by producing new pilots, it must be able to provide aircraft and flight hours to the newly created pilots. The current fleet age complicates the balance. The most cost-effective solution is to acquire new aircraft. Until it

U.S. Military Power: Air Force

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity		✓			
Capability				✓	
Readiness	✓				
OVERALL		✓			

ABOUT THE ASSESSMENT CATEGORIES

OVERALL ASSESSMENT. The overall assessment of a military service is measured against its ability to perform its respective role in a two-major regional contingency (MRC) scenario. The assessment of the U.S. Marine Corps is sized against a single major regional contingency (MRC) scenario. This benchmark is the *minimum* standard for U.S. hard-power capacity with the understanding that maintenance, operational tempo, training cycles, crisis response, treaty commitments, and/or strategic reserve considerations can cause some forces to be unavailable. Other factors that influence this assessment are the availability of logistical support to enable combat power (fueling ships, supply ships, cargo aircraft, etc.) and the ability to reconstitute combat power for protracted conflict (defense industrial base capacity, etc.).

CAPACITY. The U.S. military must have a sufficient quantity of the right capability or capabilities to meet its mission sets. Capacity (numbers) can be viewed in at least three ways:
- Compared to a stated objective for each category by each service,
- Compared to amounts required to complete various types of operations across a wide range of potential missions as measured against a potential adversary, and
- As measured against a set benchmark for total national capability.

CAPABILITY. Examining the capability of a military force requires consideration of:
- The proper tools (material and conceptual) with the design, performance characteristics, technological advancement, and suitability that the force needs to perform its function against an enemy successfully;
- The sufficiency of armored vehicles, ships, airplanes, and other equipment and weapons needed to win against the enemy;
- The appropriate variety of options to preclude strategic vulnerabilities in the force and give flexibilities to battlefield commanders; and
- The degree to which elements of the force reinforce each other in covering potential vulnerabilities, maximizing strengths, and gaining greater effectiveness through synergies that are not possible in narrowly stovepiped, linear approaches to war.

READINESS. While capacity and capability considerations are central to the warfighting ability of the U.S. military, readiness performs a crucial role in determining whether combat power is prepared when it is needed. Factors that are considered include (among others):
- Sufficient staffing levels,
- Fulfillment of training requirements, and
- Age and maintenance of equipment.

can lower the age of its fleet through recapitalization, the Air Force must fully resource the maintenance enterprise with sufficient weapons systems sustainment funding so that it can trend back toward an acceptable number of monthly flight hours for each of its pilots.

- **Start to rebuild strategic depth.** This will require action in three areas:

  1. **Pilot Production.** The pilot shortage is ubiquitous because it touches many aspects of the service. The Air Force should continue to work toward producing 1,500 pilots per year, but that will not completely solve the problem. The Air Force needed the T-7 yesterday and must take the requisite steps to ensure that the program does not slip any further than it already has.

  2. **Industrial Surge Capacity.** Investments in the infrastructure and supply chains that are needed to enable the rapid scaling of aircraft and munitions production during a conflict are essential. Surge capacity will not materialize on demand; current lead times are measured in dozens of months.

  3. **Maintenance.** The maintenance and logistics enterprise must recognize and utilize the capabilities of field-level maintenance units. Reducing reliance on depot-level work will increase aircraft availability, which is especially critical with

today's older and smaller fleet. This is not to minimize the value of the outstanding work done by the professionals in the depot maintenance community, but to be effective, the service's maintenance policies and procedures must reflect the realities of an older fleet and limited depot bandwidth.

Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise specified, when this chapter refers to the FY 2026 budget request, the detail or fact provided is a combination of information found in both the OBBBA and the budget request. The Air Force breaks down its 2026 budget data into separate mandatory (OBBBA) and discretionary (request) numbers and combines them into a single 2026 number. In addition, the Air Force did not respond to requests for information as this chapter was being written. As a result, the data used are a combination of publicly available budget information, Air & Space Force Association data, off-the-record interviews, and expert determination. It should also be noted that this builds on the prior work of John Venable, author of the Air Force chapter in several previous editions of the *Index of U.S. Military Strength*.
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99. The Air Force cannot focus solely on high-end conflict and should avoid repeating errors such as F-22s doing interdiction missions or B-1s doing close air support missions.