F-35 soars past cost overruns, controversy

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Despite cost overruns, delays, and controversy, the F-35 program is surging forward. Recently, Lockheed Martin received a $522 million contract [1] from the U.S. Department of Defense towards development of the “Joint Strike Fighter.” Funds will cover materials and supplies involved in the next production order, which amounts to 42 more jets. One thing’s certain—for better or worse, we’re putting all our eggs in one basket.

According to the Orlando Sentinel, the 42 aircraft include 22 F-35A conventional takeoff and landing (CTOL) jets for the Air Force, 13 F-35B short takeoff/vertical landing (STOVL) jets for the Marine Corps, and 7 F-35Cs [2] (carrier variant) for the Navy.

In other news, the F-35A variant took its first test flight [3] on Tuesday, becoming the second jet to fly with the next-gen avionics package common to all F-35s. Test Pilot Bill Gigliotti took off at 6:20 p.m., and the F-35A variant, AF-3, stayed aloft for 42 minutes (methinks someone at DoD or Lockheed is a fan of Douglas Adams).

The Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II fighter known as AF-3 takes off Tuesday evening, July 6, on its first flight. Courtesy of Lockheed Martin.

The F-35 has had a rocky history to say the least. One of the original advocates of the JSF, Defense Secretary Gates, claimed the F-35 would be “less than half the total cost of the F-22”—the F-22 being the “premier air-superiority fighter,” and thus better-suited for dogfights. Yet due to the inevitable “requirements creep” (a fixture of defense programs), costs have soared out of control.

The cost/plane, ranging from $80-135 million [4], is now more than 50% higher [5] than nine years ago (when development began). Cost overruns recently triggered a “Nunn–McCurdy Review [6].” Under the Nunn–McCurdy Amendment [7], congressional notification is required for cost overruns in defense programs of greater than 15%. In February, Secretary Gates fired the JSF program manager [8] due to these same cost overruns. According to an internal Pentagon report, “affordability is no longer embraced as a core pillar”—an ironic conclusion given that the F-35, as Time mentions [4], “was supposed to be the cheap end of the military's high-low warplane mix of F-22s and F-35s.”

Despite egregious cost overruns, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program will continue—the Nunn-McCurdy Review was but a formality. By replacing the F-16, A-10, F/A-18, and AV-8B (Harrier) jets, and standardizing airpower across the services (and throughout the world), the F-35 has become absolutely critical for national security. We have no choice but to continue work on the F-35.

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