

# Enfeebled F-35 could impede military readiness

Jason Lomberg, Technical Editor



Picture a Swiss Army Knife with a blunted knife, rusty screwdriver, and a broken can opener. That's what the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter has become — a jack of all trades and master of none.

The F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) has — over the course of a highly tumultuous development period that personifies the phrase "requirements creep" — become the poster child for bloated government programs.

Move over, Space Shuttle. We have a new champion.

So this comes as no surprise — the recent [FY2012 Director of Operational Test and Evaluation \(DOT&E\) report](#) [1] recommended reducing the F-35's performance requirements, especially transonic acceleration and sustained g-forces.

Aviation blog Flightglobal [reports](#) [2] on the proposed changes:

"Turn performance for the US Air Force's F-35A was reduced from 5.3 sustained g's to 4.6 sustained g's. The F-35B had its sustained g's cut from five to 4.5 g's, while the US Navy variant had its turn performance truncated from 5.1 to five sustained g's. Acceleration times from Mach 0.8 to Mach 1.2 were extended by eight seconds, 16 seconds and 43 seconds for the A, B and C-models respectively."

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Sadly, this is but the latest setback for a program that should serve as a cautionary tale (but given our extreme long-term commitment to the JSF, may take decades to sink in). Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates [famously touted](#) [3] the F-35 as "the backbone of America's tactical aviation fleet for decades to come."

It's worth quoting Gates in full (italics mine):

*"If properly supported, the F-35 will be the backbone of America's tactical aviation fleet for decades to come if — and it is a big 'if' — money is not drained away to spend on other aircraft that our military leadership considers excess to our needs."*

In this case, Secretary Gates is referring to the "premier air-superiority fighter," the F-22 Raptor. Adamant that state-on-state warfare is as obsolete as the bayonet (\*ahem\*), Gates described the F-22 as a "silver-bullet solution for one or two potential scenarios — specifically the defeat of a highly advanced enemy fighter fleet."

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"The F-22, to be blunt, does not make much sense anyplace else in the spectrum of conflict," he said.

If the future portends further asymmetrical warfare, then the F-22's dogfighting capabilities are superfluous. But if we take the threat posed by the Russian [PAK-FA](#) [4] and Chinese [J-20](#) [5] seriously, then America may be clamoring for an air-superiority weapon of its own.

In any case, the DoD capped the number of operational F-22s at 187 and the F-35 program experienced a series of setbacks including a [Nunn-McCurdy Review](#) [6] (a mandatory congressional notification for any defense program that exceeds 15% of its projected cost), the [firing](#) [7] of its original program manager, and countless delays and cost overruns. This for a program that, by some estimates, could replace up to 95% of America's combat aviation fleet.

And now this — after all the delays and setbacks, the DoD is diluting the Joint Strike Fighter even further.

Regarding the decision to reduce the F-35's performance specs, an experienced fighter pilot told Flightglobal the following:

"What an embarrassment, and there will be obvious tactical implications. Having a maximum sustained turn performance of less than 5g is the equivalent of an [McDonnell Douglas] F-4 or an [Northrop] F-5."

The F-35C's reduced transonic acceleration capabilities are of particular concern:

"That [43 seconds] is a massive amount of time, and assuming you are in

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afterburner for acceleration, it's going to cost you even more gas."

Col Andy Toth, commander of the 33rd Fighter Wing at Eglin AFB, Florida (the first DOD F-35 training unit) [noted](#) [8] that pilots won't be able to fly the F-35 like an F-22 Raptor or even an F-15 (or any other fighter for that matter); it has to be flown like a JSF.

Considering the free world's commitment (read: *total reliance*) on the F-35, this is troubling news, indeed.

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### Links:

[1] <http://www.dote.osd.mil/pub/reports/FY2012/>

[2] <http://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/reduced-f-35-performance-specifications-may-have-significant-operational-impact-381683/>

[3]

<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aj694ju69myQ>

[4] <http://www.ecnmag.com/blogs/2010/04/will-united-states-lose-its-air-supremacy>

[5] <http://www.ecnmag.com/blogs/2011/01/chinese-fifth-gen-fighter-shatters-us-illusions>

[6] <http://www.ecnmag.com/blogs/2010/07/f-35-soars-past-cost-overruns-controversy>

[7] <http://www.dodbuzz.com/2010/02/01/gates-fires-jsf-program-manager/>

[8] <http://www.flightglobal.com/blogs/the-dewline/2013/01/whats-the-operational-impact-o.html>