

CARL LEVIN, MICHIGAN, CHAIRMAN

JOSEPH I. LIEBERMAN, CONNECTICUT
JACK REED, RHODE ISLAND
DANIEL K. AKAKA, HAWAII
E. BENJAMIN NELSON, NEBRASKA
JIM WEBB, VIRGINIA
CLAIRE M. CASKILL, MISSOURI
MARK UDALL, COLORADO
KAY R. HAGAN, NORTH CAROLINA
MARK BEGICH, ALASKA
JDE MANCHIN III, WEST VIRGINIA
JEANNE SHAHEEN, NEW HAMPSHIRE
KIRSTEN E. GILLIBRAND, NEW YORK
RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, CONNECTICUT

JOHN MCCAIN, ARIZONA
JAMES M. INHOFE, OKLAHOMA
JEFF SESSIONS, ALABAMA
SAXBY CHAMBLISS, GEORGIA
ROGER F. WICKER, MISSISSIPPI
SCOTT P. BROWN, MASSACHUSETTS
ROB PORTMAN, OHIO
KELLY AYOTTE, NEW HAMPSHIRE
SUSAN M. COLLINS, MAINE
LINDSEY GRAHAM, SOUTH CAROLINA
JOHN CORNYN, TEXAS
DAVID VITTER, LOUISIANA

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6050

December 6, 2011

RICHARD D. DEBOBES, STAFF DIRECTOR
DAVID M. MORRIS, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

The Honorable Leon Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Panetta:

We are troubled by serious concerns that the Director, Operational Testing and Evaluation, Dr. J. Michael Gilmore, raised in an internal memorandum on October 21, 2011, about plans to begin training flights at Eglin Air Force Base for the conventional take-off and landing (CTOL) version of Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) this fall.

In his memorandum, Dr. Gilmore concluded that starting to train on the CTOL before it demonstrates maturity exposes the JSF program to the risk of new failures being discovered during unmonitored flight training and, therefore, the increased possibility of a “a serious mishap”. Dr. Gilmore cited several safety-related shortfalls and highlighted the safety-of-flight risk of flying unmonitored production aircraft with less than half the test hours accumulated in previous programs. Dr. Gilmore asserts that starting unmonitored flight training at such a low level of testing hours presents inherent risks regardless of the skill level of the training pilots or limitations placed on the training mission envelope.

Dr. Gilmore also pointed out that goals for achieving significant test-flight hours and reducing air-abort rates that the program had already established as benchmarks for the beginning of unmonitored flight of Lot 2 aircraft and formal flight training for operational pilots have not been met by a significant margin. He, therefore, recommended that the open safety-related items be resolved and that the CTOL aircraft accumulate more test-flight hours before flight training begins at Eglin. For this reason, he recommended that the Air Force defer CTOL training at Eglin under the program, and demonstrate the maturity of the aircraft design and its performance characteristics. He offered the option of switching flight training, at least initially, to Edwards Air Force Base where the Air Force is currently conducting its test flights of the JSF—if there is an urgency to begin such training sooner than that.

A few weeks ago, the Joint Program Office (JPO) updated the Senate Armed Services Committee staff on the status of the open safety-related items and included, in some cases, information on how the program and the Air Force intend to close-out, mitigate or otherwise address these items. While the information provided addressed some concerns from Dr. Gilmore’s memorandum, it does not satisfactorily establish how the path forward accounts for the fundamental lack of maturity of the air system. In our view, a viable response must do more than assert that experienced pilots and limited training goals mitigate risk. It is, moreover, unclear: (1) if all of the safety-related items will be resolved before flight operations and/or

training will begin at Eglin; and (2) most fundamentally, whether the path forward will, from a net perspective, ensure the safety and adequacy of operational training on the CTOL.

Given the foregoing, we request that you should review this matter and conclude to your own satisfaction that the approach proposed by the JPO and the Air Force will ensure the safety and adequacy of CTOL training when it begins and provide the Committee with the basis for your conclusion.

In so doing, we request that your response to the Committee should fully answer the following questions:

- 1) Under the JPO/Air Force's "event-driven" approach, what specific events must take place before CTOL training can begin?
- 2) Are the safety-related items to be resolved before flying and/or training in Lot 2 production aircraft? If not, why not?
- 3) Is there no opportunity to begin flying with Lot 2 production aircraft in an environment other than the training center, as suggested by Dr. Gilmore? If not, why not?
- 4) Given that the same decision-cycle must soon begin for the STOVL Lot 2 aircraft, how will the program plan for building maturity and beginning pilot training for that variant?
- 5) How are the JPO and the Services integrating DOT&E into the continuing risk assessment and associated flight release decision process?

Aside from the open safety-related items Dr. Gilmore cited in his memorandum, which we understand were originally cited by the Aeronautical Systems Center (ASC) as prerequisites to "military flight release", there are serious risks to the JSF program's ability to meet many operational requirements when the various aircraft would otherwise be ready to achieve "initial operating capability".

Please explain the Department of Defense's plan to resolve these issues and indicate whether, in your view, that plan (and schedule supporting it) is realistic. Lastly, please provide a rough estimate of how much it will cost to resolve these issues and deficiencies and to what extent the prime contractor or the taxpayer would be required to pay those costs.

Thank you for your assistance to the Committee's continuing oversight of this important program.

Sincerely,



John McCain
Ranking Member



Carl Levin
Chairman