

U.S. must protect air supremacy

Canceling funds for up-to-date F-22 fighter would be shortsighted

By E.J. Smith



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I, along with my family, attended the Rhode Island National Guard Air Show, as did 60,000 others during the Saturday and Sunday showings. Entering the gate, I donated \$10 for parking. As it turns out, that donation allowed us to witness firsthand the best insurance policy America has to offer for the safety of my family and yours. It's called the F-22 Raptor jet fighter, and its entire program may be canceled.

President Barack Obama, who campaigned as being strong on national defense, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates want to end F-22 production at the existing 187 jets, a third of what was initially requested to replace the aging and no-longer-dominant F-15 fleet. The White House has threatened to veto the defense budget if more F-22s are part of the final proposal, citing its lack of relevance in today's smaller, unconventional wars.

The F-22 program received support over the last two weeks in the form of amendments to the budget proposed by Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah. The House Armed Services Committee in a vote of 31-30 passed the amendments to provide initial funding for 12 more F-22s. "There is no study or analysis we have been able to see at the

committee in support of Secretary Gates' assertion that 187 aircraft is sufficient to meet future air threats to our homeland a decade from now," Bishop said.

And the Senate Armed Services Committee recently voted to add funding for seven more F-22s with a 13-11 vote. Both committee Chairman Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., and ranking member Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., voted against adding the F-22s. The budget will go before the president later this year.

Air supremacy by the United States is the reason we no longer fight conventional wars. But air supremacy is not a birthright. And as time goes by, fewer and fewer generations of Americans appreciate what it feels like not to own the air in a conflict. After all, the oldest of the 75 million baby boomers was only 6 years old the last time an American soldier was killed by an enemy aircraft. That was in Korea

on April 15, 1953.

Our air supremacy over the past 25 years is due in great part to the F-15, which has never been shot down by enemy fire. This may change. Mark Bowden, author of the best-seller "Black Hawk Down," writes in the March issue of *The Atlantic*: "Our technological edge is eroding — Russia, China, India, North Korea, and Pakistan all now fly fighter jets with capabilities equal or superior to those of the F-15, the backbone of the American air power since the Carter era."

As you enjoy the summer with your family, take a moment to consider how many attacks the mere existence of the fourth-generation F-15 has prevented and how many its obsolescence may now invite. How many attacks will a fully funded fifth-generation F-22 program prevent? If it's up to Obama and Gates, we'll never know.

Watching the F-22 perform on Saturday is something I'll never forget, surrounded by thousands watching its demonstration with pride, respect and fear. I kept wondering who else around the world is watching with respect and fear, but not pride. This group will be watching to see how our government votes the Department of Defense budget later this year, hoping the F-22 program ends.