STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

OF THE 21ST CENTURY

STATE OF THE AIR FORCE AND SPACE FORCE

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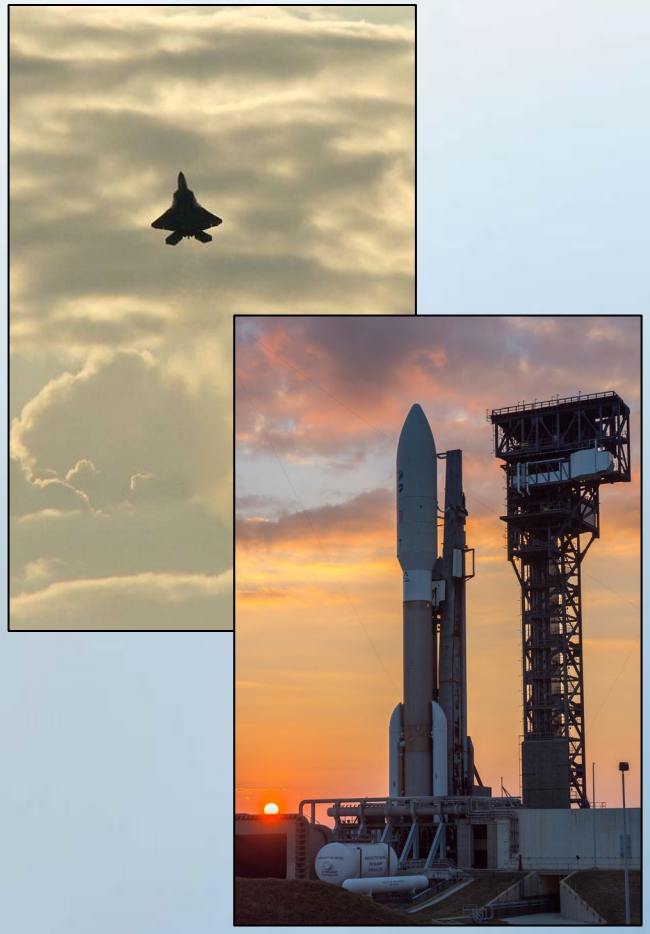
July 2025

Overview

- Threats & Principles
- State of the Air Force
- State of the Space Force
- Priorities for SECAF Meink
- Bottom Lines



Threats & Fundamental Principles

"The threats the United States faces are the most serious and most challenging the nation has encountered since 1945 and include the potential for near-term major war."

2024 National Defense Strategy Commission

https://vimeo.com/1078302228/3face8a733

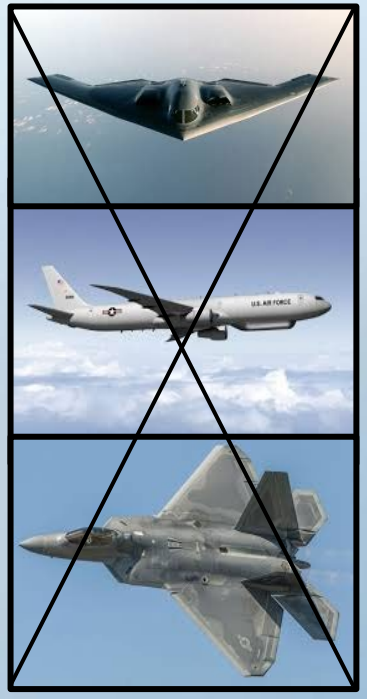
China's DF-21D

- **Threats, fiscal, and political realities demand DOD focus on what matters most:**
  - Building a strong military to accomplish:
    - Competing with peer adversaries
    - Strengthening alliances and partnerships
    - Protecting global access
    - Providing nuclear deterrence
    - Realistically adapting new technologies

However: The Air Force is in a Force Structure Nosedive

Today, the USAF is the Oldest, the Smallest, and the Least Ready in its 78 Year History... At the same time, the Chinese AF is the newest, largest, and most ready in its history

PLAAF H-20



- **Not a criticism, but a fact...**
- **Multiple administrations cut the Air Force to net a "peace dividend" and later to fund the Army's COIN strategy**
- **There was a recapitalization plan, but...**
  - OEF, OIF and OIR dramatically altered this plan
  - Army received $65 Billion a year more than the AF for 20 years post 9/11—a total of $1.3 Trillion more than the AF...
  - The Air Force was downsized to provide offsets for the Army
  - F-22s canceled; KC-46, B-21, F-35 delayed; F-35 rate reduced
- **Legacy aircraft are at the end of their structural lives...**

The USAF is programmed to lose more planes over the next five years than it will replace—continuing its decline...

The Numbers Tell the Story

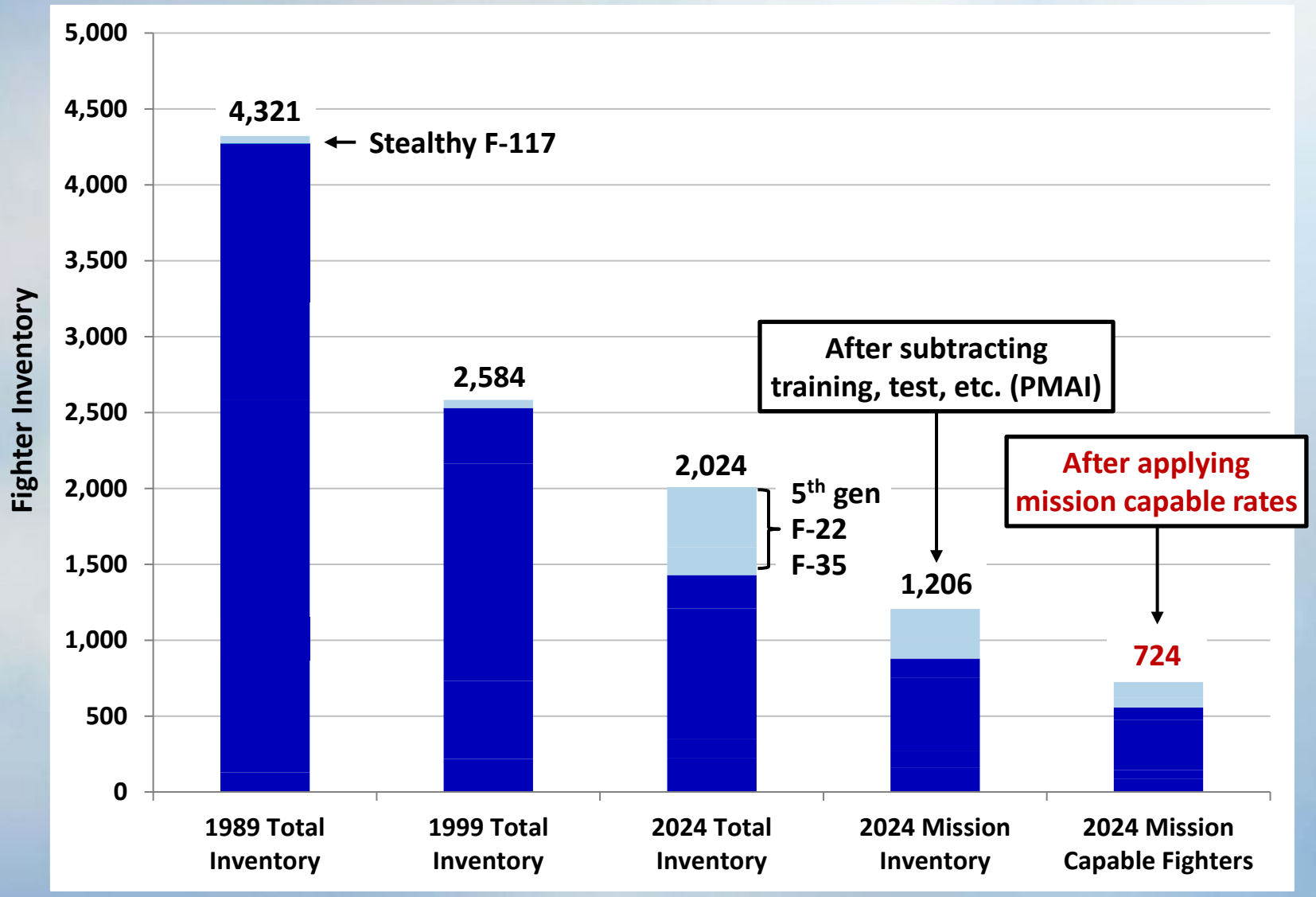
- **Airmen are undertaking missions with aircraft that average well over a quarter of a century in age**
  - KC-135 tankers and B-52 bombers pre-date the Cuban Missile Crisis ("youngest" B-52 today is over 63 years old!)
  - F-15, F-16, and A-10 date from the Nixon & Ford days
- **The 2020's are a make-or-break window**
  - Legacy airframes are increasingly non-survivable
  - F-22 and B-2 face longevity challenges as high-demand, low-density assets
  - F-35 procurement is well below requirements
- **10 aircraft types first flew *over 50 years ago***
  - Those 10 aircraft types account for over 2,600 Air Force aircraft or two-thirds of its entire force
- **In comparison, the Navy has only one operational warship on duty over 50 years old**

Aircraft	Average Age*
A-10	43 years (72) 53 261
F-15C	39 years (72) 53 127
F-15E	32 years (86) 39
F-16C	34 years (74) 51 862
F-22	17 years (97) 28 183
F-35	6 Years (06) 19 469
B-1B	38 years (74) 51 45
B-2A	30 years (89) 36
B-52H	63 years (52) 73 76
KC-10A	Retired
KC-135	63 years (56) 69 325
KC-46	4 years
U-2	41 years (55) 68 27
C-17A	21 years (91) 34
C-130 (cargo)	22 years (54) 71 406
T-38C	57 years (59) 66 495
AWACS	44 years (75) 50 15

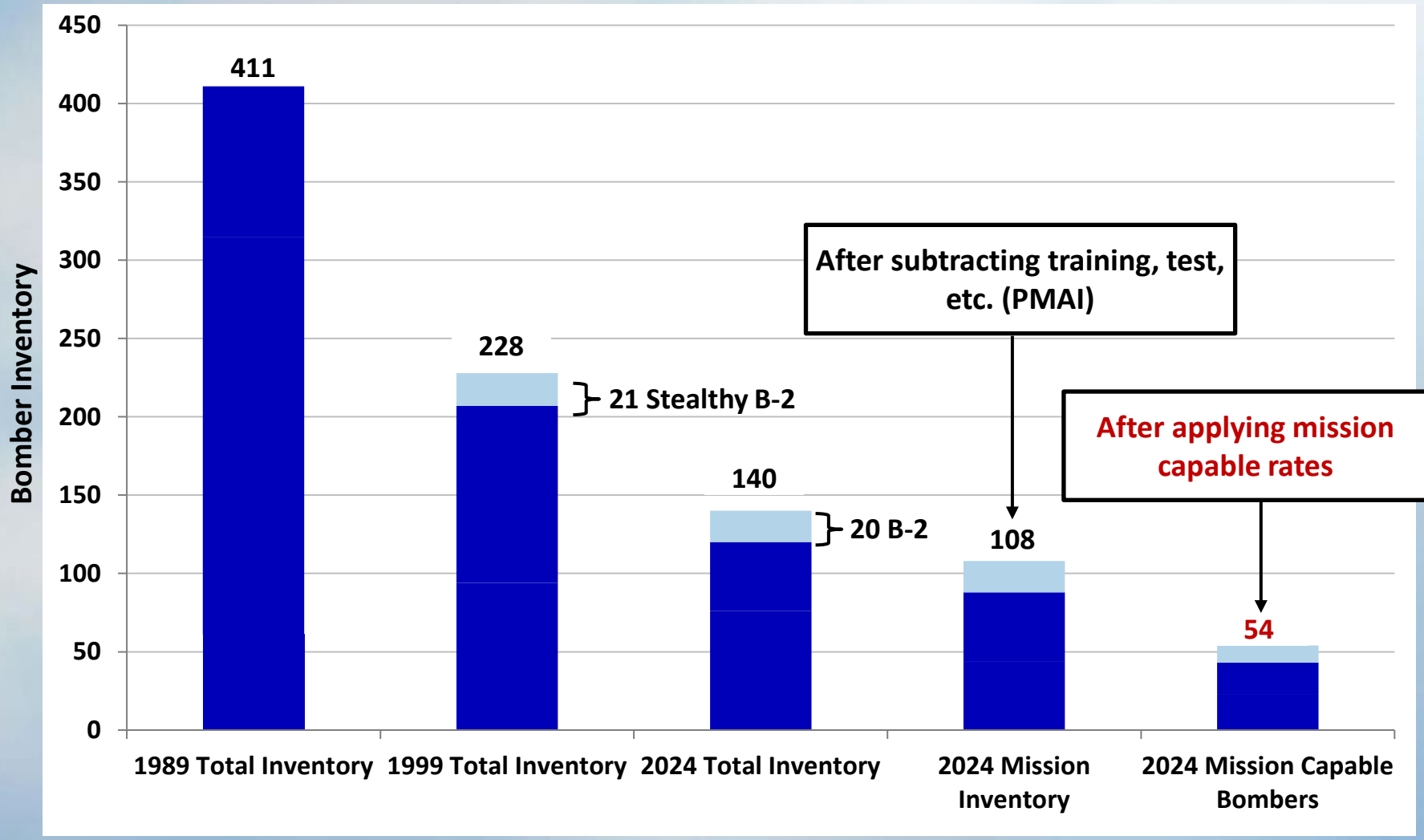
*(Year of 1st flight); yrs since first flight; inventory)

While AF recapitalization has been on pause for 30+ years, the rest of the world continues to evolve.

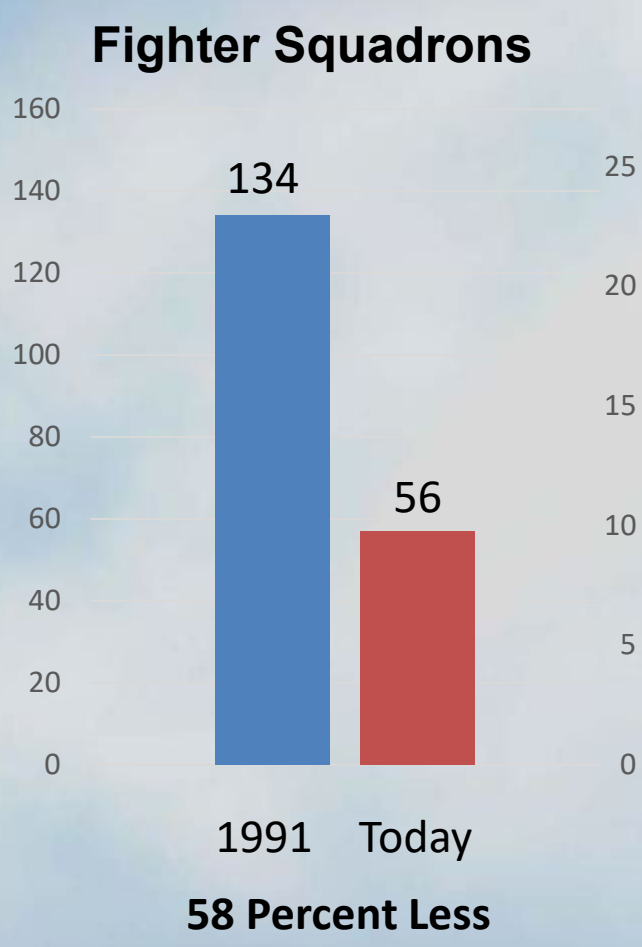
Current State of the Force: Fighters



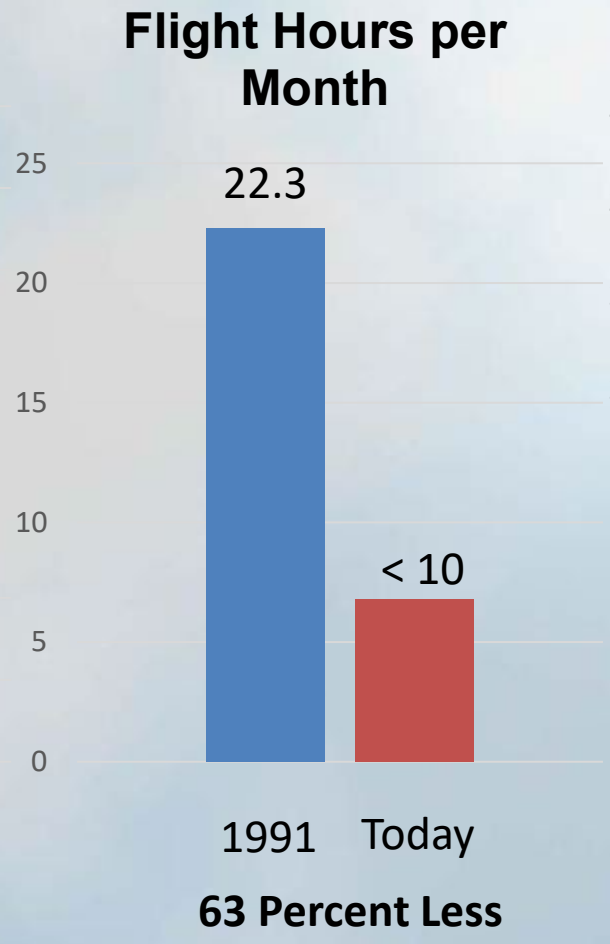
Current State of the Force: Bombers



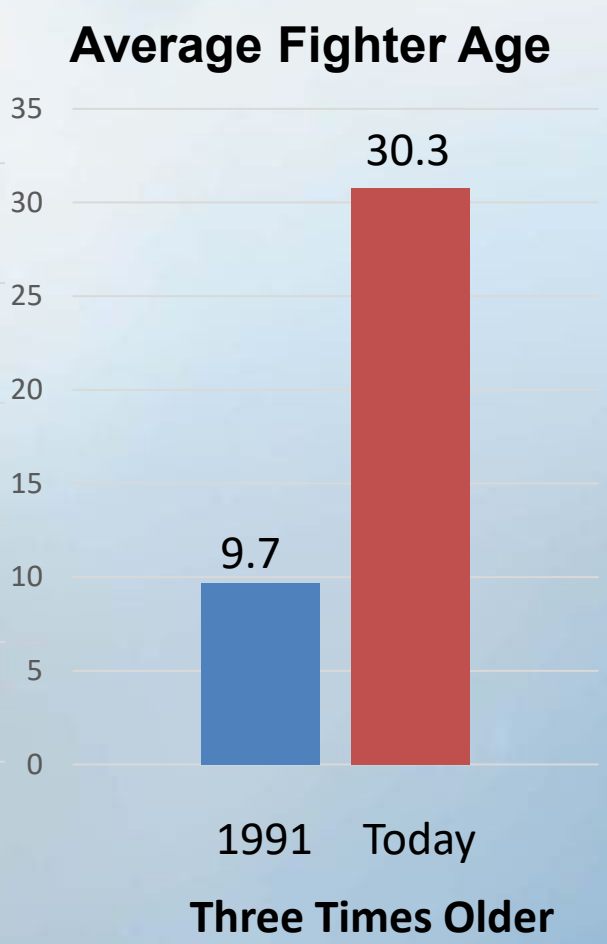
Key Trends All In the Wrong Direction



58 Percent Less



63 Percent Less

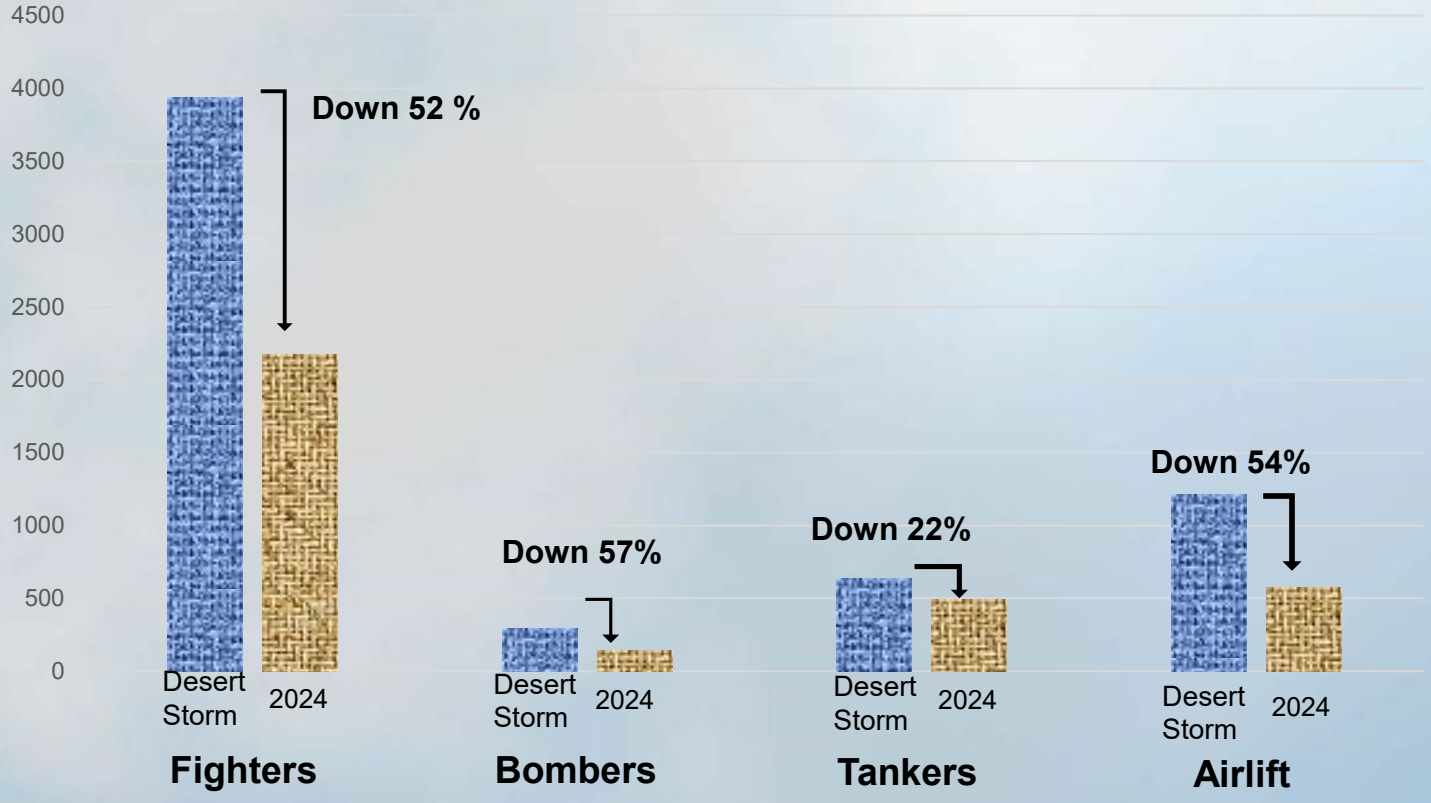


Three Times Older

Data from ACC

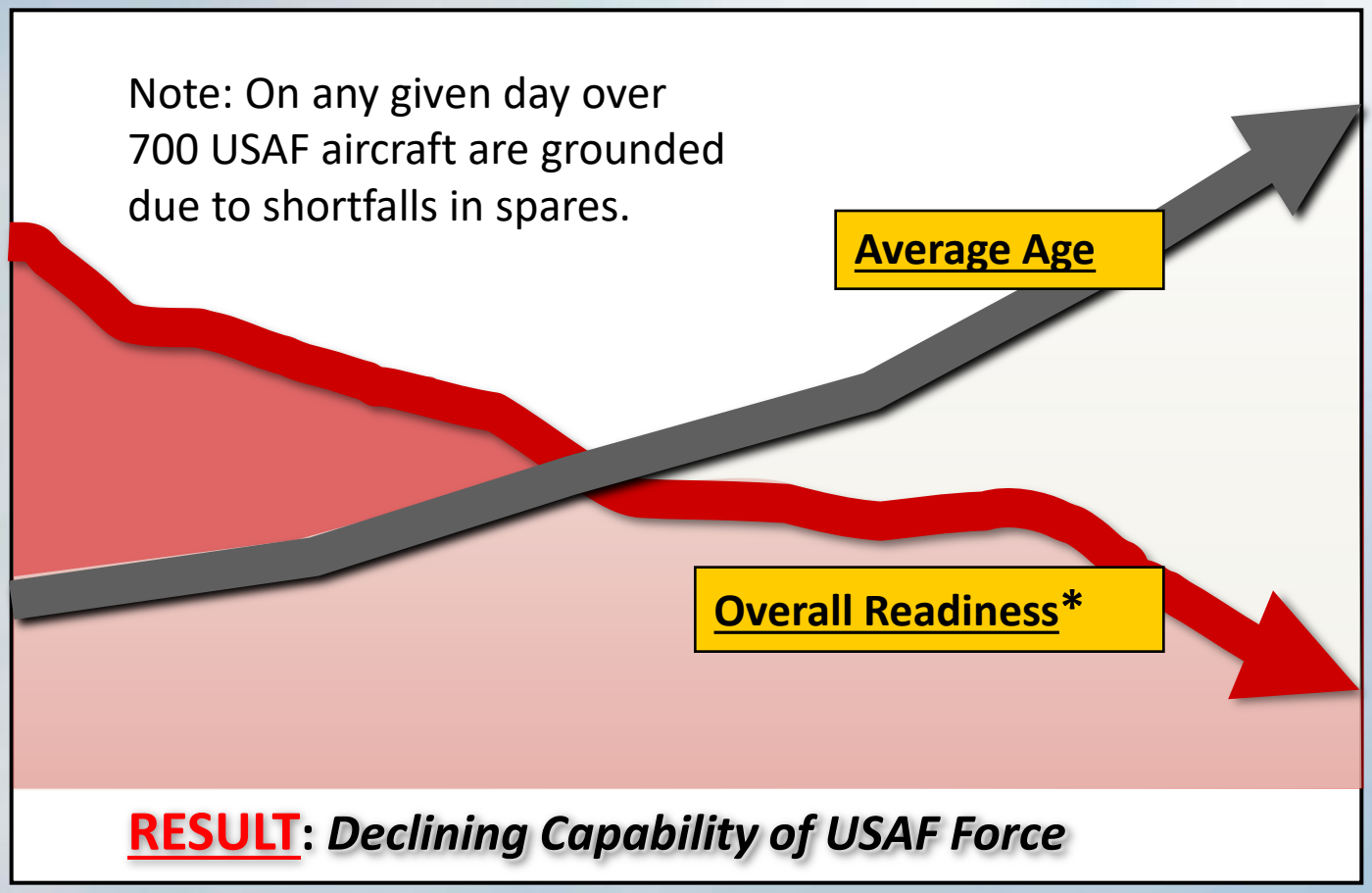
USAF in Desert Storm (1991) Compared With USAF of Today

- Air Force rated “Very Weak” in 2024 Heritage Foundation assessment
- The average age of Air Force aircraft today is over 31



Despite over 30 continuous years of combat, no enemy has done as much to harm the Air Force than the impact of arbitrary spending restrictions...

Inverse Relationship Between Aircraft Average Age and Readiness



* ***Overall Readiness*** **represents composite result of inventory size, MC rates, effects of sustained surge/deployed ops on acft service lives, training, and personnel/retention**

Space Force Challenges

The U.S. Space Force is underfunded; undersized; and without the authorities to consolidate DOD space agencies.

- **Funding: USSF is only three percent of the DOD budget—it can't do its missions to deter or defeat threats in space without more funding.**
- **Personnel: The USSF is half the size of the Coast Guard, yet space expertise is required to support the space force, space command and the individual services unique space requirements.**
- **Organizational authorities: "Our national-security space program is spread across more than 60 departments and agencies, resulting in a glaring lack of leadership and accountability that undermines our combatant commanders and puts our war-fighters at risk." (2019 VP) Only one agency has been integrated into the Space Force (SDA).**

"We need a Space Force to deliver critical space effects for the conduct of joint military operations, and that can protect U.S. and her allies from space-enabled attack and this new mission requires new resources"

Gen Chance B. Saltzman, CSO

Impact of FY 2026 Budget on DAF

- **Air Force suffers a 1 percent budget *cut* equals actual 4 percent budget *cut* after incorporating 3 percent inflation** ***184.1 (26); 188.1 (25)***
- **The Space Force's requested budget is a 9 percent *cut* from the 2025 request and with inflation is a 12 percent budget *cut*** ***26.1 (26); 29.4 (25)***
- **The Space Force funding not aligned to the threat or mission demands**
- **The 2026 budget request cut 340 aircraft while buying only 76**
- **Over the next five years the Air Force loses more aircraft than it buys**
- **Perennial 2000 pilot shortage—fewer planes make the problem worse**
- **Spending on the Air Force was less than Army from 1994 to 2023 (30 yrs) and less than the Navy from 1970 to 2025 (56 yrs)**
- **Correcting these shortfalls requires increased awareness of the facts by Congress, OSD, and the public**

The AF is in a death spiral—retiring more aircraft than it buys will eventually collapse the AF. SF not growing fast enough.

Priorities For SECAF Meink

Macro Objectives

1. Reverse the decline in Air Force readiness and force structure.
2. Resource the Space Force to meet the demands of the National Defense Strategy
3. Urge transparency in DOD budget reporting: Move the $51.5 Billion pass-through now shown in the Dept of the Air Force budget to where it actually belongs—“Defense-wide spending."

“The Air Force requires significantly more resources to expand both its capacity and its capabilities”—2024 Commission on the National Defense Strategy

Priorities For SECAF Meink (1/2)

The Most Critical Priorities to Achieve Those Objectives:

- Fully fund the NGAD penetrating combat aircraft (F-47)
- Raise the annual buy to 74 F-35s and 24 F-15EXs
- Ramp B-21 acquisition to 20 per year by 2030.
- Restore readiness. Increase fighter pilot flying hours to of 200 hours/yr
- Fully fund Weapon System Sustainment (WSS) requirements.
- Aggressively pursue AI/autonomy realizing it has promise but we will still require both piloted and uninhabited aircraft—stay the course with CCAs.
- Build a stockpile of conventional precision munitions in advance of conflict. The defense industrial base is unable to adequately respond to crisis.

Priorities For SECAF Meink

- Fully fund Space Force programs designed to achieve space superiority
- Increase personnel in the Space Force
- Consolidate all DOD space agencies into the Space Force to assure unity of military and space intelligence operations, reducing duplication and waste.

- Establish a national nuclear deterrence fund separate from the Air Force and the Navy service accounts to ensure necessary funding is not offset from conventional forces.
- Fully fund the Sentinel program to begin replacing the Air Force's obsolescing Minuteman-III ICBMs and their launch facilities by 2030
- Initiate development of the Next Generation Air Refueling System (NGAS) with initial production target in the 2030s.

"The Air Force requires significantly more resources to expand both its capacity and its capabilities"—2024 Commission on the National Defense Strategy

Bottom Lines

- Today's U.S. military personnel are the finest in the world. But without the proper tools, training and capacity, their talents cannot be realized.
- The Department of the Air Force is too small, too old, and not ready to execute the national defense strategy
- On its current vector—without a significant increase in funding the situation will only get worse.
- The cost of the effort to begin recovering the Air Force's decline and adequately fund the Space Force will require an increase of at least $45 billion annually.
- Without fixing the United States risks losing its next war.

The only thing more expensive than a first-rate Department of the Air Force is a second-rate Department of the Air Force.

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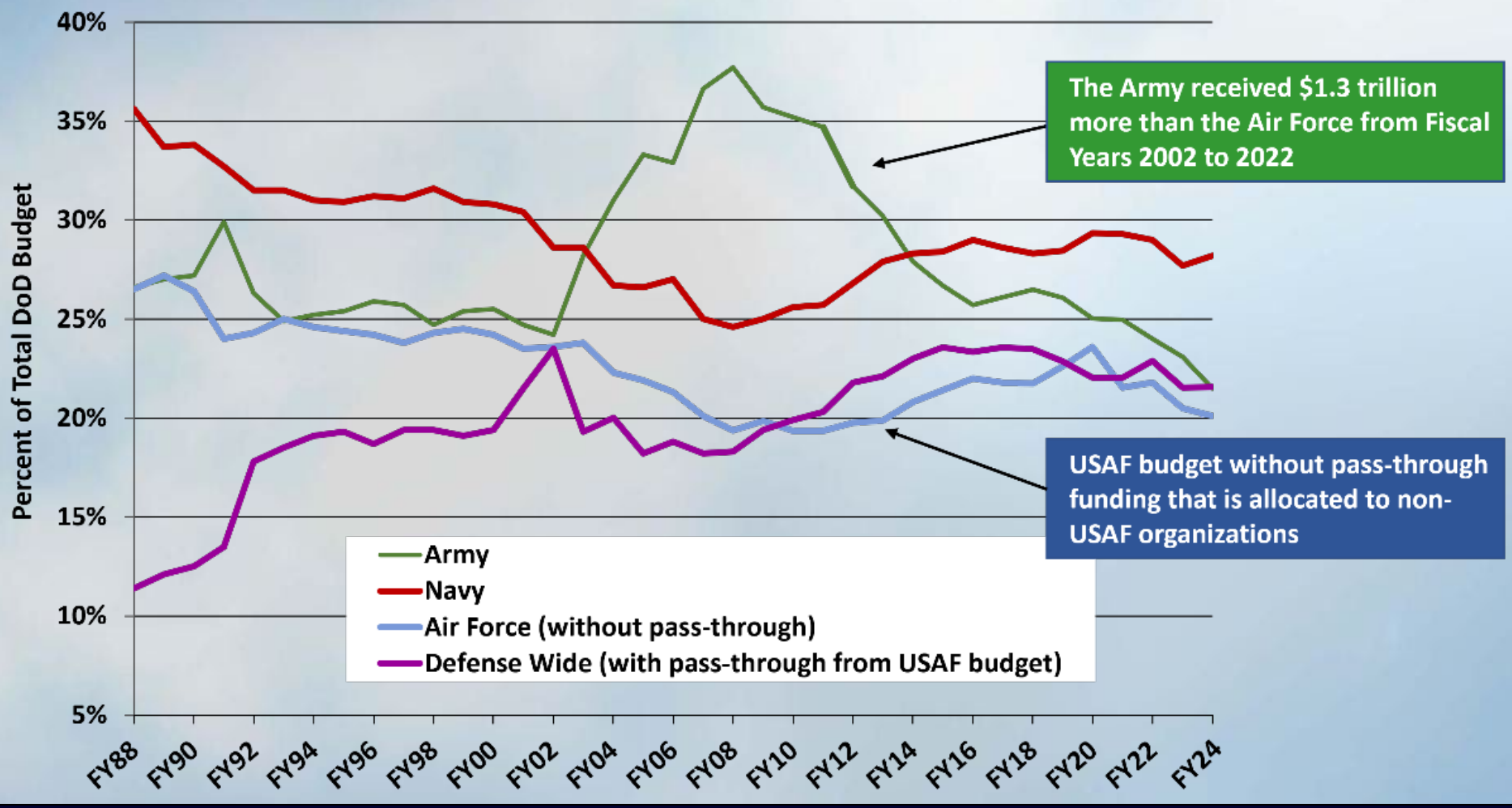
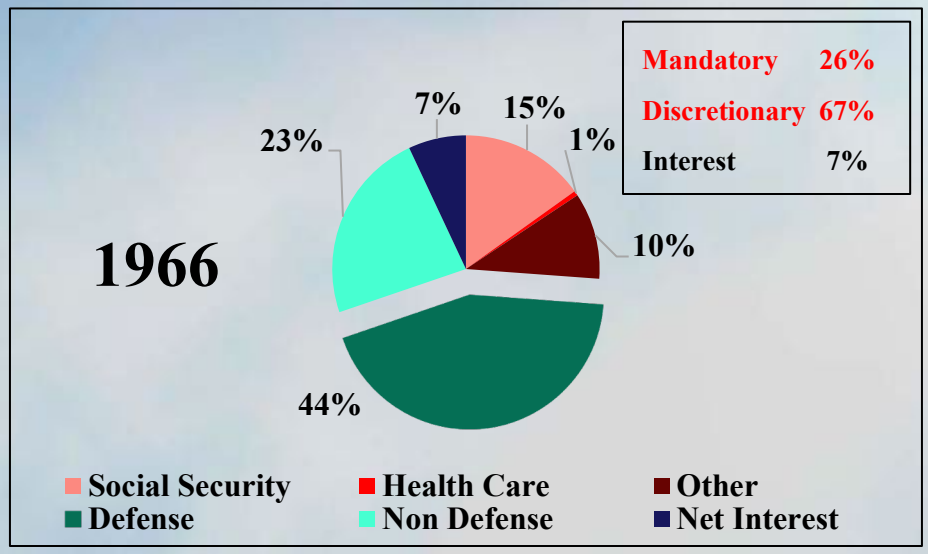
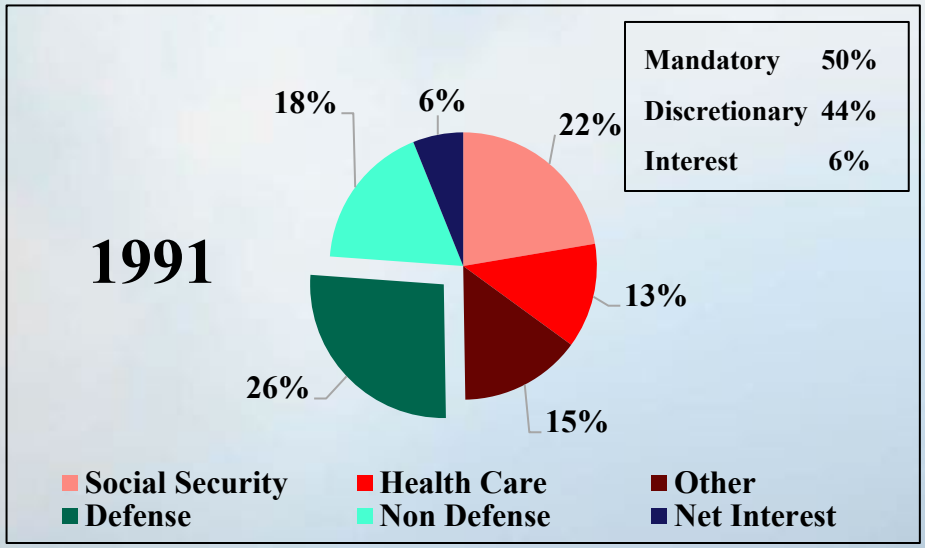
Comparing Service Budget Shares

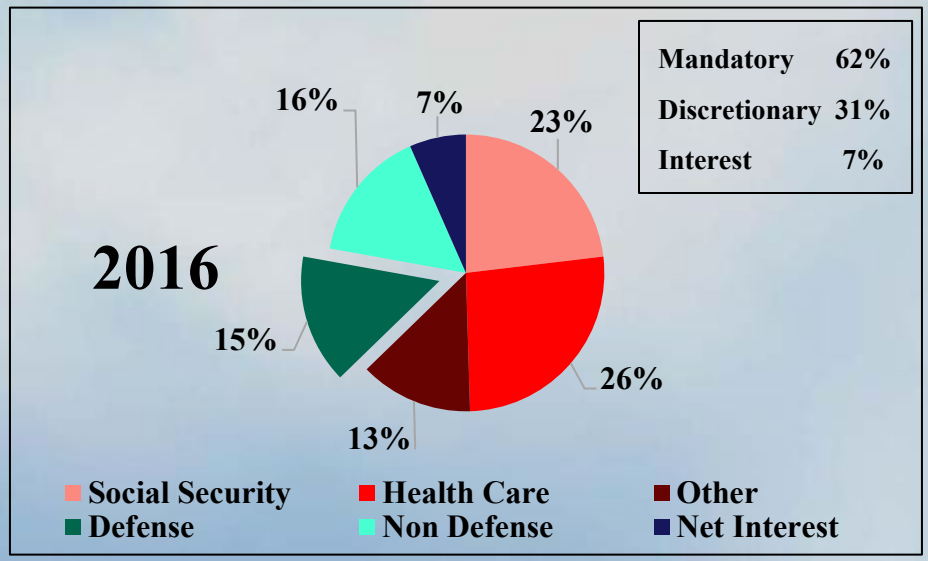


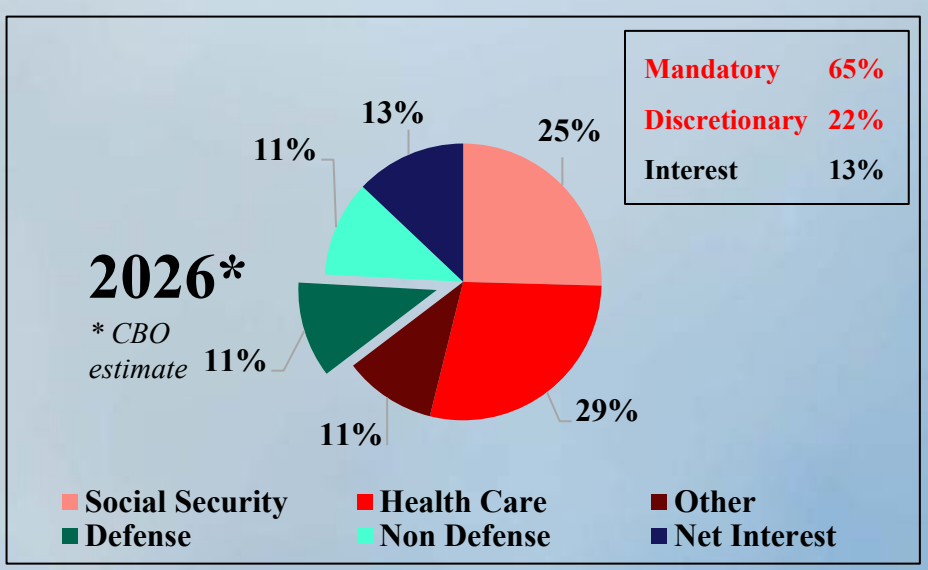
AF Has Been Chronically Underfunded Relative to the Army and Navy For Over 30 Years but masked by passthrough

"…to provide for the common defense, Promote the general welfare…" Is that still true?









Reconstructing the Air Force America Needs

https://www.mitchellaerospacepower.org/app/uploads/2025/02/Air_and_Space_Vectors_Policy_Paper_59-WEB.pdf

1. **Fully fund the Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) penetrating combat aircraft (PCA).**

Cost estimate: Resume $3-4 billion per year in the budget as originally planned to keep this program on track.

2. **Increase F-35A acquisition to 74 per year as quickly as possible.**

Cost estimate: $3.7 billion for an additional 32 F-35A per year.

3. **Increase F-15EX acquisition to 24 per year and grow the planned inventory to 225.**

Cost estimate: $3 billion for an additional 24 F-15EX per year.

4. **Increase B-21 acquisition to 20 per year by 2030.**

Cost estimate: $5.2 billion for ten more B-21s per year and a $4–5 billion one-time cost to stand up a second B-21 production line.

Reconstructing the Air Force America Needs

5. **Fully fund the Sentinel program to begin replacing Minuteman-III ICBMs by 2030 as planned.**

Cost estimate: An additional $5–8 billion over the FY 2026–2030 future years defense program (FYDP).

6. **Establish a National Nuclear Deterrence Fund.**

Cost estimate: Reduction of $5–8 billion out of DAF budget over FY 2026–2030.

7. **Increase the Air Force's combat fighter pilot flight hours to 200 per yr.**

Cost estimate: An additional 4.95 billion to bring flying hours up to/sustain 200 hours per fighter pilot per year.

8. **Fully fund the Air Force's Weapon System Sustainment (WSS) account to support 200 flying hours for fighter pilots each year.**

Cost estimate: An additional $11.15 billion annually to sustain 100 percent of the new flying hour support requirements.

Reconstructing the Air Force America Needs

9. Increase funding to rebuild critical munitions inventories.

Cost estimate: $1 billion, ramping to $2 billion per year as industry increases its munitions production capacity and new weapons enter production.

10. Add funding to the U.S. Air Force for air base air and missile defense.

Cost estimate: An additional $1 billion annually.

11. Fund at least 26 E-7s as the Next-Generation AEW&C Capability.

Cost estimate: An additional $5.12 billion annually between 2028–2032.

12. Initiate development of the Next Generation Air Refueling System (NGAS) with a target of beginning initial production in the mid-2030s.

Cost estimate: An estimated $300 million in RDT&E per year beginning early in the next FYDP would provide seed money to develop NGAS without impacting these other critical modernization programs.

Setting Up the Space Force for Success

1. Field Advanced Space Control and Counterspace Systems.

Cost estimate: Ramp from $1.5 billion in 2026 to $5 billion in 2030.

2. Expand Space Domain Awareness and Battle Management Capabilities.

Cost estimate: Ramp from $0.75 billion in 2026 to $3 billion in 2030.

3. Enhance Space Access and Launch Capabilities.

Cost estimate: Ramp from $1 billion in 2026 to $3 billion in 2030.

4. Expand Space Force Military Personnel End Strength.

Cost estimate: An additional $1 billion annually between 2026–2030 for increased military personnel costs.

5. Develop Cislunar Space Operations Capabilities.

Cost estimate: An additional $0.25 billion per year between 2026–2030.