

The \$2 Trillion USAF F-35 Disaster

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From a chapter in Dr. Johnson's upcoming book: *The Necrotic Empire: Essays on the American Military and the End of the World* (Hromada Books, 2017-2026)

The F-35 was supposed to be the next generation American stealth fighter. Like the Navy, it has been an unmitigated disaster, with a large number of accidents and crashes around the world, coming in massively over-budget and distrusted by most other air-forces. The onboard computer systems, the oxygen system, wires too close to hydraulic lines, coolant, engine issues and nearly everything else has caused crashes. The one thing that seems to work is the ejection system. The problem is that at least \$2 trillion has been invested. Worse, this was supposed to be the American “air superiority” fighter that would “instill fear” in Russia and China. The only people afraid of this fighter are its pilots, and after 25 years, few are used in any combat situation.

2024 admitted the \$2 trillion figure for this project, meaning it was and is much higher. The F-35 had reached full-rate production in March 2024. At this point, the GAO said:

DOD is pursuing a \$16.5 billion modernization effort that will provide the F-35 with new capabilities through both hardware and software upgrades. These include radar enhancements, weapons and technology to avoid aircraft collisions. Some of these capabilities depend on technology updates that were planned for delivery last July. But they are delayed because of software stability issues.

The plane has to stay in the sky first. At the time, there were over 600 F-35s being used across the world, and international orders are at roughly 2000. That might be put on hold:

Projected costs for sustaining the F-35s have continued to rise from \$1.1 trillion in 2018 to \$1.58 trillion five years later (a 44 percent increase). This increase is in part due to the extension of the service life of the aircraft from 2077 in 2018 to 2088 in 2023. The increase came despite the Pentagon reducing some costs, making plans to fly the F-35 less, and making an

effort at “spending more now to cut costs later.” The F-35 is meant to give the US military defense an advantage as well as be the future of these efforts, that's why it is so important for the F-35 to be both affordable and available to the military when needed.

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It is a disaster and a humiliation. For the USAF to claim its service life will be until 2088 is purely subjective and can be considered as nothing more than propaganda. *Responsible Statecraft* wrote on the huge cost of the F-35 in August 2024, stating the fighter is “officially the most expensive weapons program in history.” The contract for the F-35 was awarded to Lockheed Martin a month after the 9/11 attacks, taking advantage of national confusion and sense of vulnerability to force such a project through.

The public and private investors in the fighter “committed the United States to spend hundreds of billions of dollars for a program that has proven to be an unmitigated disaster. They created a massive financial obligation that future generations of taxpayers must bear, without the much-touted program having produced any of the actual security benefits it was supposed to bring to the U.S. armed forces.” This is an intense indictment.

In April 2024, the F-35 Program Office issued a “clarification” about that cost estimate, which by that point had been reported as reaching \$2.1 trillion or more, meaning it was around \$3 trillion in reality. Air and Space Forces cited a press release from the Joint Program Office claiming that “the \$2.1 trillion F-35 program estimate, which came to light last spring, is an all-inclusive figure covering 94 years of procurement of an eventual 2,456 aircraft, development, upgrades and modifications, spare parts, operating costs, personnel, the depot enterprise and even fuel, among other expenses.” These words are meant to deceive. This is what a fighter costs. There is nothing special about these variables being included.

This is a press release, not a source of information. It was titled “Providing the Facts Behind the \$2T Number.” It added hilariously that about half of the historical \$2.1 trillion figure was due to “inflation” and it's not their fault:

The long-term nature of the program, spanning nearly a century, results in significant inflationary effects. This unprecedented scale, along with the simultaneous management of development, production and sustainment, underlines the scope of the F-35 program and its associated costs.

This is the rhetorical equivalent of throwing sand in the face of a debating opponent. That same revelation also noted that while President Trump praised the F-35 program, Elon Musk, at DOGE was more realistic, seeing it as “obsolete.” He wanted the whole thing scrapped. Put differently, the government finally admitted the jet will never live up to Lockheed's promises that were used to sell the \$2 trillion mess to nearly 20 countries around the world.¹ This is an obvious statement, since the manufacturer will always exaggerate how “indispensable” their product is.

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The GAO released a report in July of 2026, detailing “ongoing challenges” the program faces. To summarize, the report is a profound admission that the F-35 will never meet its capability goals. The Pentagon has also forbidden the report to be made public, so we know only a few slogans from it. This is the first time such a report has been banned from public view. The Swiss Broadcasting Corporation said:

The combination of . . . various factors and the chronic shortage of spare parts has prevented the aircraft from carrying out most of its missions. In 2021, when the Swiss government decided to

¹ <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/f-35-failure/>

choose the F-35A as Switzerland's new fighter jet, the US promised to deliver an aircraft capable of operating 67 percent of the time. This threshold has now been lowered to 44 percent, according to the US Federal Audit Office.²

This had to be cited because some would accuse this writer of being funny, but it is also unclear what “missions” a Swiss F-35 would have in the first place. The American taxpayer has been on the hook for a generation for this – a fighter that is operational 44 percent of the time, and that is too expensive for pilots to train on, since its per hour cost and maintenance are just as absurd as the rest of this project. As of last year, the F-35 costs \$42,000 per flight hour. It burns almost 1500 gallons of JP-8 fuel per hour and each hour in the air requires about 30 hours of maintenance at a minimum. The fleet as it stands is at about 50 percent readiness, and that is highly optimistic.³ What the GAO does not mention is that the maintenance back up in the USAF is about seven years, and it also does not take into account the massive lack of pilots. Americans assume that a fighter is purchased by the USAF and delivered, thus the aircraft is ready to fly against “our” enemies. The number on paper of America's fighter fleet is symbolic. Most cannot fly. Readiness is falling, not rising.

2 <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/global-trade/pentagon-blocked-critical-f-35-fighter-jet-report/91860284>

3 <https://migflug.com/afterburner/what-an-hour-of-f-35-time-actually-costs/>

The Pentagon and the manufacturer claim that the US “needed” the F-35 since it will permit the US to “maintain a qualitative technological advantage over potential rivals.” The promises of “new combat capabilities” are vague, but imply new forms of electronic warfare, new missile systems, communications and advanced navigation systems, but no one has seen them. These capabilities were worth the ridiculous cost, or so the taxpayer was told. Now, none of it will happen.

Elijah J. Henry of The Foundation for Economic Education wrote:

Last year, Defense News identified 13 significant deficiencies in one or more F-35 models, including the possibility of a blown tire destroying the entire aircraft, inadequate vision and sensor systems, and not being to fly too high, too fast, or in certain maneuvers without either apparent or actual major problems. Other issues included logistical and security concerns. Many of these have solutions in progress, although several additional issues with the weapons systems have been identified since then.⁴

4 <https://fee.org/articles/the-f-35-project-has-been-a-disastrous-waste-of-money/>

By admitting that the program cannot deliver the products as planned, is an admission that the entire project has failed. While the trillions wasted are bad enough, there is the issue of the 20 or so countries that have ordered the F-35s, and worse, those who actually use them.⁵ The UK, Italy and Norway have invested heavily in the program with the expectation that they would receive the most combat capable aircraft in history. They bought the propaganda from Lockheed-Martin as a matter of fact rather than as a sales pitch. All have seen costs rise beyond anyone's ability to pay, and now, they discover the fighters don't really work, or even if they do, cannot do what was initially claimed.

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The USAF admits to something like 24 crashes of this fighter since 2020, but they are hardly a reliable source of information. One should assume that many more have been successfully covered up. Newspapers, when dealing with crash numbers, go to the very institutions that seek to minimize them. Still, the USAF crash claims might be a good record if the fighter was flown regularly, but it is not. Even 10 crashes would be horrifying for a jet that rarely gets off the ground. Training is done in simulators for the F-35, the Raptor and the F-22, the latter of which

5 <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/05/asia/south-korea-f-35-fighter-jet-belly-landing-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>

is almost \$70,000 an hour to fly. The money is just not there.

So, in addition to being a military disaster, the F-35 many also prove to be a foreign relations disaster as well. Those backing the fighter in the United States sold the jet to these countries with elaborate sales pitches on the combat capabilities they planned to deliver. They even said early on that it would be affordable too. The F-35 is just one in a long list of USAF failures.