Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 13, 2013

The Honorable Chuck Hagel
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

General Martin E. Dempsey
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
Department of Defense
9999 Joint Chiefs of Staff Pentagon
Washington, DC 20318

Dear Secretary Hagel and Chairman Dempsey:

We write to express our deep concern regarding the Air Force's plan to divest the A-10 Thunderbolt II. The A-10 provides close air support (CAS) capability unmatched by any other aircraft in the Air Force's inventory. The A-10 plays an essential role in helping our ground forces and special operators accomplish their missions and return home safely. We oppose any effort that would divest the A-10, creating a CAS capability gap that would reduce Air Force combat power and unnecessarily endanger our service members in future conflicts.

We appreciate that the Air Force confronts significant budget pressure and uncertainty that require difficult decisions. However, as you and your staffs assess the Air Force's budget recommendations for fiscal year (FY) 2015, we urge you to scrutinize the Air Force's proposals, as well as the assumptions underlying those proposals. The budget the Department of Defense (DoD) submits to Congress early next year must be based on realistic assumptions that place a priority on operational capability, combat readiness, and the safety of our service members in harm's way.

DoD must make every effort to protect programs that function as core components of our nation's combat power and military readiness. It would be unconscionable to further cut an asset like the A-10 for budget reasons—increasing the risks our service members confront in ground combat—when equivalent savings could be achieved elsewhere in the Air Force budget without reducing operational capabilities. It would be difficult for DoD to justify the divestment of the A-10 while the Air Force continues to expend millions of dollars on conferences, air shows, and bloated headquarters staffs—while also struggling to meet statutory audit deadlines.

The A-10 certainly qualifies as a core component of our nation's combat power and military readiness. The A-10 represents the Air Force's best CAS aircraft—one whose unmatched survivability, maneuverability, and lethal armaments are surpassed only by the deeply-ingrained CAS culture of its pilots. As the report for the FY 2014 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) approved by the Senate Armed Services Committee states, "The A-10 has served as the Air Force's primary close air support asset, having been designed for that specific mission with characteristics that permit it to operate and maneuver at low altitude and slow speeds. The aircraft is also heavily armored to ensure the highest survivability for the pilot and vital aircraft systems." In short, many soldiers and Marines are alive today because of the unique capabilities of the A-10, as well as the focused CAS training and dedicated CAS culture of A-10 pilots.

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No other fixed-wing CAS assets are as proficient as the A-10 in conducting visual support operations below 800 to 3,000 foot ceilings with limited visibility. We ask you to consult closely with the geographic combatant commanders and report back to us so that all parties fully appreciate that divestment of the A-10 would significantly undercut the ability of combatant commanders to conduct inclement weather CAS support when exact target coordinates for GPS-guided bombs are not available, or when friendly forces are in close proximity to the enemy. We see this loss of capability as an unacceptable risk, and do not believe that combatant commanders would willingly accept this reduction in CAS capability and increased risk to the service members under their command.

Despite clear evidence that the A-10 provides essential and unmatched CAS capabilities, for reasons we believe are short-sighted and primarily budget-driven, the Air Force has cut or is cutting three squadrons of A-10s at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana; Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany; and Fort Smith, Arkansas. Moreover, based on reports related to the Air Force's FY 2015 proposals for the A-10 and an apparent Air Force document entitled "CAF Force Generation Model" (dated 19 Jul 2013), we are deeply concerned that the Air Force's ill-advised effort to divest the A-10 may be accelerating. Yet, such an Air Force divestment of the A-10 would run counter to a long-standing congressional belief that the A-10's past combat performance, low operating costs, and unique CAS capabilities warrant the allocation of finite resources to ensure the A-10 remains part of the fleet for years to come. That is why Congress blocked the Air Force's effort to cut A-10 force structure even deeper in FY 2013.

That is also why Congress has supported the investment of significant resources to modernize the A-10 fleet—including state-of-the-art cockpit displays, digital data links, advanced targeting pod integration, full laser and GPS-guided munitions integration, and best-of-class integrated threat countermeasures. These modernization efforts will help ensure that the A-10 can continue to provide cutting-edge, one-of-a-kind close air support for years to come. An Air Force acceleration of its plan to divest the A-10 would represent an irresponsible waste of the modernization tax dollars that we have invested in the A-10 and a disregard for congressional intent.

An Air Force plan to divest A-10s may be based on two questionable—and potentially dangerous—assumptions. The first assumption is that the United States will not be fighting wars like Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom in the future. While we hope the U.S. can avoid such conflicts in the future, should they emerge unexpectedly, we have an obligation to ensure that our service members have the best resources at their disposal. The United States has had a poor track record predicting conflicts. When the U.S. military enters a conflict without sufficient training, resources, and capabilities, the cost is measured in the lives of our brave service members. We have a responsibility to not make those mistakes again.

The second assumption related to A-10 divestment appears to be that other aircraft currently in the Air Force inventory can replace the CAS capabilities of the A-10. The F-15, F-16, B-1, and B-52 are incredibly effective aircraft that are important components of the Air Force inventory, yet none of these aircraft can fully replace the capabilities and focus of the A-10 in many CAS situations. Technological advancements in weapons and sensors will not make a "multi-role" aircraft designed for other missions—and with a pilot who only spends a portion of their time training for CAS missions—comparable to the A-10, an aircraft and crew with a

singular focus on CAS missions. Experience in Iraq and Afghanistan clearly demonstrate the A-10's well-documented capability to operate effectively in combat below 800 foot ceilings/2 miles visibility and still provide effective CAS within 50 meters to save the lives of our troops when engaged in close combat with the enemy. In fact, the ability of the A-10 to operate in these conditions close to the point of engagement often results in faster re-attack times and lower civilian casualties.

For these reasons, in terms of maintaining the health of the A-10 fleet with pilot training, sufficient flight hours, utilization of active component squadrons, software upgrades, and modernization funding, it is essential that the Air Force not take any additional steps toward divestment. It is also important that the Air Force reverse any actions taken in recent months that could make an A-10 divestment a foregone conclusion before Congress can exercise its constitutional oversight role.

We look forward to reviewing DoD's close air support study that was mandated by the FY 2014 NDAA report approved by the Senate Armed Services Committee. Most importantly, we ask you and your staffs to closely scrutinize the Air Force's FY 2015 proposals as they relate to the A-10.

There is no question DoD must make difficult budget decisions. However, as we work together to best protect our nation and address our fiscal challenges, the last cuts we should make are ones that would deprive our troops of the capabilities they need to accomplish their missions and return home safely.

Thank you for your distinguished service to our nation.

Sincerely,

Kelly A. Ayotte
United States Senate

Ron Barber
Member of Congress

Mark Pryor
United States Senate

Jack Kingston
Member of Congress

Saxby Chambliss
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