

Weapons of Mass Destruction Wanted? Protecting Neighbors From Air Force F-35 Attack

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With Vermont's highest elected officials still deep in Defense Dept. denial over the disaster that is the Air Force's F-35 strike fighter, a local city council threatens to bring some military sanity to Vermont (but nowhere else) by exercising its landlord right to reject as a tenant a weapon of mass destruction that will wreak havoc on the local neighborhood.

This initiative comes from four members of Vermont's Progressive Party on the Burlington City Council, who plan to introduce a resolution on October 7 effectively barring the F-35 from being based in the middle of Vermont's most populated area. In contrast, Vermont's official "leadership," almost all Democrats, still thinks basing nuclear-capable warplanes in a Vermont community is a dandy idea.

Whatever they say - which is next to nothing - Vermont's governor, two Senators, lone Congressmen, Burlington mayor, and most of the legislature remain effectively committed to a fool's errand on behalf of the military-industrial complex, one that will do nothing good for the vast majority of their constituents and will do real harm to many of them. These representatives consistently refuse to meet with their constituents for serious discussion of health, safety, cost, and other issues. This is what the breakdown of American representative democracy looks like up close.

John McCain calls F-35 fighter-bomber "worse than a disgrace"

In Washington, at a Senate Armed Services Committee meeting on September 19, Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona was telling Pentagon officials that continuing cost overruns have made the F-35 the first trillion-dollar weapons program and "have made it worse than a disgrace.... it's still one of the great, national scandals that we have ever had, as far as the expenditure of taxpayers' dollars are concerned."

Not only is the F-35 roughly ten years behind schedule and 100% over budget, it's still years from being operational. At Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, where F-35's are being tested, its current safety limitations are severe: "the squadrons at Eglin are prohibited from flying at night, prohibited from flying at supersonic speed, prohibited from flying in bad weather (including within 25 miles of lightning), prohibited from dropping live ordnance, and prohibited from firing their guns," according to a September 16 article in Vanity Fair.

The story also notes that one of the chronic problems is F-35 software. The plane requires some 18.6 million lines of code to function at its operational specifications. Currently, according to the Pentagon's chief weapons tester, if the F-35 went into combat with its current software package, it would need protection in the air from the F-16s and other planes it is supposed to replace.

Vermont leaders lead by silent evasion of dangers to Vermonters

None of Vermont's elected leaders – not Sen. Patrick Leahy or Rep. Peter Welch, not independent Sen. Bernie Sanders, not Democratic Gov. Peter Shumlin or Democratic Burlington Mayor Miro Weinberger – none of them has anything serious to say about the F-35's multiple shortcomings. Nor do any Republicans. And they all have even less to say about the health, social, and environmental punishment the plane will deliver to thousands of mostly low income Vermonters.

But when people's elected representatives get captured by hostile interests, sometimes people react with something like direct democracy. And sometimes that democratic coalescing gathers enough momentum to make a difference at least for a moment. For example, broad national opposition to waging a one-sided war on Syria seems to have kept that from happening, at least for awhile.

Popular Vermont resistance to the F-35 basing has been building since the Air Force first announced its plans more than three years ago. The city councils in South Burlington and Winooski, the cities closest to the proposed base at the Burlington International Airport, have both voted to oppose the F-35 (although South Burlington later reversed its vote after a corrupt election).

Will Burlington take responsibility for damaging others?

Even though Burlington owns the airport located in South Burlington, the Burlington city council has been a hotbed of inaction on the F-35 so far, passing only a resolution to seek more information. In early September, the four Progressive city councilors announced their plan to put the council on the record by offering a resolution to block the F-35 basing at the city-owned airport.

The city council has 14 members. In addition to the four progressives, there are two independents, one Republican, and seven Democrats, making the outcome on the resolution uncertain, given the Democratic pressure in the state to support the American war machine. Approaching the vote, it appears that there are four votes in favor of the resolution, four opposed, and the rest probably worried that voting either way could be a big mistake.

A month ahead of the vote, Progressive city councilor Rachel Siegel said of the outcome: "I'm unsure, to be totally be frank. I'm going to work my tail off to try to get there. It's going to be a lot of work I believe because a lot of them [Democrats] follow the state leadership and our administration at the city level who are proponents of basing [F-35s] here for God knows why."

At the time of their announcement, the Progressives were joined by three new, Democratic state legislators: two House members and the Senate majority leader, Philip Baruth, the highest-ranking Vermont Democrat yet to oppose the F-35. The Vermont Natural Resources Council has also joined the F-35 opposition, sending a letter to the mayor and city council saying that the expanded militarization of the airport would come at the expense of community housing and growth. F-35 opponents plan to support the Progressives' resolution with a door-to-door leafleting campaign, as well as several continuing legal challenges.

Lack of accountability can be hilarious, albeit unintentionally

In what has the earmarks of a politically-timed response to the increased opposition to its warplane, the Pentagon announced September 12 that it would study another Vermont site as a potential base for an anti-missile missile system, part of the Ballistic Missile Defense System's effort to protect the country from Iran, which does not yet have any missiles that could reach the United States.

The Pentagon announced the site study for Camp Ethan Allen, a federally-owned Vermont National Guard post near Burlington, without giving any advance notice to the Vermont Congressional delegation. This combination of events inspired each member of the delegation to issue an unintentionally hilarious objection to the anti-missile missiles, since each response was just as applicable to the F-35:

Leahy issued a statement saying: "I've always felt that the multiple billions spent on missile defense are a monumental waste of money, on technologically challenged systems, and I am emphatically against putting one of these sites in Vermont." Leahy once questioned the \$400 billion and counting spent on the F-35, although he stopped short of calling that technologically challenged weapons system "technologically challenged."

Sanders supported Leahy, saying: "My first impression is that this is a very bad idea and, for a wide variety of reasons, I do not believe that it will ever happen." For reasons he has yet to explain, Sanders has not pointed out that the bad idea of the F-35 is a "bad idea."

Welch supported Leahy, saying: "This is absurd. It's the wrong location for a bad idea and dead on arrival." So implicitly, Welch thinks the Burlington Airport is the right location for a bad idea.

Shumlin supported everyone, saying: "Vermonters are well-served by our federal delegation's thoughtful involvement and deep experience in these issues, and I agree with Senator Leahy, Senator Sanders and Congressman Welch." Translation: whatever.

The missile-system-formerly-known-as-star-wars still doesn't work

As the New York Times reported in July: "A test launching of an advanced missile-defense interceptor failed to hit its target high over the Pacific Ocean, the Pentagon said on Friday, four months after the Obama administration [announced](#) that it would spend \$1 billion to increase the number of interceptors along the West Coast in response to verbal threats from [North Korea](#)."

The report went on to say that the Pentagon didn't know why the missile failed and that this particular missile system has had no successful test in five years. Prior to that, "the interceptors had a mixed record, hitting dummy targets just 50 percent of the time."

In September, the chief executive officer of Boeing Defense, Space and Security, the missile's maker, called for more testing to make the missile system reliable.

After almost two decades in development, the unreliable F-35 strike fighter is not yet far enough developed to subject it to any reasonably realistic operational tests.

As the Daily Beast summarized the Vanity Fair report:

"Vanity Fair dove deep into the troubled Joint Strike Fighter program, and what it found isn't pretty. The \$1.5 trillion plane that was supposed to be the next generation in fighter jets is

years over deadline, billions over budget, and might not be able to safely fly.

“A helmet that uses cameras to give pilots 360-degree vision, one of the centerpieces of the F-35, was supposed to be its crowning achievement, but Lockheed still hasn’t finished the software for it. Furthermore, pilots who’ve tested the F-35 have found it laggy, disorienting, and blurry.

“The plane has been grounded repeatedly for broken parts, it can’t fly near lightning, and the stealth coating burns off when it goes supersonic.”

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