Editorial

Targeting the F-35

It doesn’t work. It costs too much. Existing aircraft can do the job better.

2015 is shaping up to be the year in which the F-35 strike fighter takes its long-anticipated place of honor as the No. 1 target of those who love to find fault with almost every major modern military aircraft program.

It’s behind schedule and over budget. It has no real mission. It’s too fragile and complex.

If you think you’ve heard these arguments before, you have. They were leveled, in essentially the same forms, against most of the Air Force’s top modernization priorities of the past 40 years.

To hear the defense “reformers” and their allies tell it, the E-3 AWACS flying command post had no mission and existed solely to keep money flowing to defense contractors.

The F-15 Eagle was too complex to be successful in combat, and smaller, cheaper fighters were better.

The C-17 transport was an over-priced ugly duckling hobbled by technical problems.

The B-2 bomber was too expensive and featured stealth coatings that would melt in the rain.

The V-22 Osprey was designed with aerodynamic failures that made it a death trap.

The F-22 Raptor was a gold-plated boondoggle designed to fight an enemy that no longer exists.

We could go on, but you get the point: These aircraft all experienced growing pains, some significantly. All have also gone on to become vitally important and successful machines in the most effective air force in the world.

Development and flight testing exist for good reasons, namely to find and correct the problems early on.

Test and development work is treated as a final grade by military critics, but this is akin to judging the success of a baseball team by how it does during spring training—when the roster hasn’t been finalized and the games don’t actually count.

Now it’s the F-35’s turn in the crosshairs.

Yes, the F-35 is a failure before it has even entered service.

The Pentagon has made many mistakes with the F-35 program. It tried to create a jack-of-all trades family of aircraft for three services, set off on an unrealistic development program, and now has all of its future fighter eggs in this one basket. It absolutely must get the F-35 right. But similarly difficult programs have recovered and typically worked spectacularly well—and with costs brought back under control.

The F-35 still has a long way to go, but it should not be judged based upon its “spring training” performance. Remember that the next time you hear it doesn’t work.

By Adam J. Hebert, Editor in Chief