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<http://contraryperspective.com/2014/02/18/the-f-35-fighter-program-america-going-down-in-flames/>

## The F-35 Fighter Program: America Going Down in Flames

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This past weekend, CBS 60 Minutes did a segment on the F-35 fighter program. The basic facts are these: the program is seven years behind schedule and \$163 billion over budget. Yes, you read that right: Not \$163 million, but \$163 **billion**. The lead contractor, Lockheed Martin, is essentially unapologetic about the delays and cost overruns. Why should they be? The general in charge of the F-35 acquisition program said we're going to buy thousands of the plane over the next two decades. Talk about rewarding failure!

If we continue like drunken sailors to throw money at the F-35, it'll be an effective fighter jet. But the biggest issue is that we don't need it. Predator and Reaper drones are just the beginning of a new generation of pilotless aircraft that promise to be more effective. Why? Because we need not risk pilots getting shot down. Also, when you combine long loiter time over targets with super-sensitive sensors, drones reduce collateral damage while increasing the odds of "one shot, one kill."

Proponents of the F-35 like to brag about its (costly) stealthy features, its (costly) cameras and sensors (especially the computer- and sensor-integrated helmet worn by each pilot, which creates a virtual reality and visual scape for that pilot), and its survivability vis-a-vis Russian and Chinese fighters (which are largely still on the drawing boards in those countries). But the truth is that an updated generation of F-15s, F-16s, F-18s, and F-22s are more than capable of defending America and projecting power. (The Vietnam War proved that, in aerial combat, pilot training and skill matter more than technology. That's why the U.S. military established realistic training at "Top Gun" schools.)

The F-35, given the amount of money thrown at it, doubtless has some improvements over planes such as the F-15 and F-18. But at a price tag of at least \$400 billion to purchase the F-35, and \$1.45 trillion over the life of the program to operate and maintain them, it has simply become far too prohibitive for the United States to afford, especially in a climate of fiscal austerity.

Based on its track record, it's probably safe to say that the F-35 will soon be a decade behind schedule and \$200 billion over budget, even as it's increasingly rendered irrelevant by improvements in drone technologies. So why are we buying it? Simply because the program is too big to fail. The Air Force, Navy, and Marines are all counting on it.

Meanwhile, Lockheed Martin has distributed its subcontractors across the USA, making it exceedingly difficult for Congress to cut the program without hurting jobs in virtually every Congressional district. Indeed, in an awesome display of chutzpah, you can go to the Lockheed Martin website to see how much your state is involved in building the F-35. Clicking on the "economic impact map," I see that for the State of Pennsylvania, for example, the F-35 creates 759 jobs and an economic impact of nearly \$51 million.

For the DoD, the F-35 may have ridden off the rails, but for Lockheed Martin the F-35 will continue to soar into the stratosphere as a major money-maker for decades to come. In the battle between DoD program managers and Lockheed Martin, the winner and "top gun" is as obvious as it is depressing. Score another victory for Lockheed Martin! But please avert your eyes as America itself goes down in flames.

**Update:** Another critical perspective from “War Is Boring” on the F-35 program that also takes “60 Minutes” to task for relying only on government sources for their (weak) critique. Here’s an excerpt:

“But where was the long list of design and quality-control issues with the aircraft, 12 years after development began? What about discussing the many alternatives to this under-performing machine, such as F-22s and drones plus rebuilt F-15s, F-16s and F/A-18s? Why not point out how many experts in the defense journalism and analysis worlds see the JSF program as detracting from America’s security rather than enhancing it?”

Those are very good questions.