



F-35 fighters plagued with delays, cost overruns, federal report says

By Maxim Lott
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The development of the ballyhooed F-35 fighter jet faces new delays and is over budget, a new report from the Government Accountability Office has found.

The F-35s are “fifth-generation” fighter jets, and are designed to be the U.S. military’s new primary fighter aircraft. The Department of Defense plans to buy 2,457 of the planes between now and 2037, at a total cost of more than a trillion dollars including development and maintenance costs. While the first F-35s are scheduled to be fully operational by July 2015, the GAO report warns that they may not be.

“Persistent software problems have slowed progress... capabilities expected by the Marine Corps in July 2015 will not likely be delivered on time, and could be delayed as much as 13 months,” the report reads.

But a spokesman for Lockheed Martin, which is making the planes, told FoxNews.com that they will meet the schedule.

“Lockheed Martin remains confident we will complete flight testing of the software required for Marine Corps Initial Operational Capability this year,” spokesman Michael Rein said.

Initially, the planes were also expected to be operational by 2012. The program has also seen cost overruns. In inflation-adjusted dollars, the cost of F-35 development has risen from an estimated \$306 billion in 2001 to an estimated \$390 billion now.

And while the cost increased, the military also reduced the requirements for the planes, accepting longer takeoff distances and a reduced combat radius (the furthest point that the plane can effectively go to and patrol.)

Given that, some security experts said the latest software-based delays did not surprise them.

“These are nothing new. This aircraft has been in trouble both with cost and performance since the start,” Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies told FoxNews.com.

Cordesman noted that the cost overruns come at the expense of other military priorities.

“To get the money the Air Force has had to cut active forces. This aircraft is so expensive that it basically dominates the entire procurement budget,” he said.

Part of the blame may lie with trying to pack every feature possible into one airplane.

“People keep adding new features and requirements, and trying to make one aircraft do the job of three and trying to simultaneously solve every problem in attack aviation at once,” Cordesman said.

But other experts said the significance of the GAO report has been overblown and that the F-35 will be an excellent aircraft.

“Software is not like a physical piece that needs repair – software is never finished, it’s constantly upgraded,” Robbin Laird, who has served as a consultant to the Marine Corps and Air Force and started the website Second Line of Defense, told FoxNews.com

Long-term cost and effectiveness is more important than cost-overruns in the development phase, he added.

“The GAO is missing the whole point. This is a 30-year program, and the long term cost of this aircraft and sustainability is going to be just fine. And our major allies have bought into it. Why would they buy it if they thought it was a dog?”

The GAO report also contained some positive news.

“Critical learning has taken place and manufacturing efficiency has improved acquisition cost and schedule estimates have remained relatively stable,” it said.

Regardless of the wisdom of the F-35 project, Cordesman said that it is the only option at this point.

“I think all of us are skeptical [if it was worth it] but the problem is that the Air Force doesn’t have other options at this point,” Cordesman said.

Cordesman and other experts said that a lesson for next time is that having multiple parts of the military – in this case the Air Force, Navy and the Marine Corps – all working on the same plane may not be a good idea.

“It’s a lesson in the dangers of joint-ness. This aircraft tends to do too many different things for too many different people,” Ben Friedman, research fellow in defense at the CATO Institute, told FoxNews.com.

He added that the problems with the plane are “emblematic” of the need to cut military spending.

“It goes to show that there’s a lot of misallocation of resources and waste in the military,” Friedman said.

But Cordesman argues that anyone who thinks the cost overruns are a reason for cutting military spending are misguided.

“Really?” he asked rhetorically. “Which of our 3 most important friends right now -- Russia, Iran or North Korea – are the best reason for cutting military spending?”