



## Paul Ryan's Pants on Fire claim on Air Force pilots forced to scrounge for airplane parts in museums

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Lauding Republican legislation that would increase defense spending, U.S. House Speaker Paul Ryan attacked former President Barack Obama and Democrats in Congress, charging they had put the military in a "readiness crisis."

And he made a claim -- about the Air Force and museums, of all things -- that we want to check.

"Under President Obama, Democrats insisted that an increase in defense spending be tied to an equal increase in non-defense spending," the Wisconsin Republican said at a news conference on May 2, 2017. "You want to help the troops? You want to help the military? I need just as much money for domestic discretionary spending.

"That was the Obama rule that we lived under for eight years. They insisted on this even as our military plunged further and further into a readiness crisis. Well, we got to a point that our Air Force pilots were going to museums to find spare parts over the last eight years."

So, this is a sweeping claim: Air Force pilots, crippled by inadequate funding, being forced to scavenge for parts in museums to keep their own planes flying.

Typically we don't use many quotes in our fact checks. But in this case, they seem to tell the story about Ryan's claim:

- "That's a grotesque distortion," said Richard Aboulafia, vice president of analysis for the Teal Group Corp., which does research on the aerospace and defense industry.
- "It's grossly misleading," said Benjamin Friedman, a Cato Institute defense and homeland security studies research fellow.
- "While I admire Ryan, and agree that there are some problems in military readiness, this kind of hyperbole needs to be called out," said Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution.

### Ryan's evidence

Ryan's staff noted to us that PolitiFact Texas in July 2016 checked a similar but much more involved claim made by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump.

Our colleagues found that Air Force maintenance workers pull parts from warehoused planes at the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Ariz. -- a practice that goes back decades because it saves money and keeps the Air Force from waiting longer for new parts to be made.

But that fact check didn't get to whether the Air Force takes what seems like a more desperate step of sending parts hunters to museums.

The only example Ryan's office cited was a May 2016 [Fox News article](#) in which an Air Force captain said spare parts needed for a B-1 bomber at a base in South Dakota were taken from seven "museum aircraft" from around the country. The museums weren't identified and no other details were provided.

So, Ryan's evidence is pretty thin: An isolated example to back a broad claim.

### **Expert views**

Conversely, more than a half dozen experts confirmed to us that it has been common for decades to [retrieve parts](#) in military airplane "boneyards." Indeed, that is one of the main purposes for collecting and preserving older planes at such sites.

Davis-Monthan, according to [AirplaneBoneyards.com](#), is the [largest](#) aircraft boneyard in the world. Known officially as the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group, the boneyard has more than [4,400 aircraft](#) from the Air Force, other military branches and other federal agencies, according to the base. Besides storing aircraft that can be tapped for parts, the base also [restores planes](#) to put them back into operation.

The boneyard also [offers tours](#). But that hardly makes it a museum.

As for Ryan's slap at the Obama administration's military spending, PolitiFact National found in December 2015 that the spending [did drop](#) during Obama's tenure.

But O'Hanlon, [Todd Harrison](#) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, [Laicie Heeley](#) at the Stimson Center and other defense experts agreed that lack of funds has not been a problem in terms of the Air Force finding spare parts.

### **Our rating**

Saying the military was plunged into a readiness crisis under Obama, Ryan claimed: "We got to a point that our Air Force pilots were going to museums to find spare parts over the last eight years."

It is a broad claim, but his office cited only one news article that quoted an Air Force captain as saying parts for seven planes were obtained from "museum aircraft."

Meanwhile, defense experts told us that Ryan's claim was highly misleading, in that any such museum scrounging, if it has ever occurred, is isolated. Indeed, the Air Force operates a base whose main functions include storing thousands of planes to be available for spare parts.

The experts also agreed that even as defense spending dropped under Obama, the Air Force had sufficient funding to prevent the need for pilots to hunt for airplane parts in museums.

We rate Ryan's claim Pants on Fire.

