

Will The U.S. Retrofit Older F-35s To Fight Or Buy New?

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NATIONAL HARBOR, Maryland—Faced with a set of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters that are too limited to fly in combat, the U.S. military is faced with the question of what to do with them—upgrade or buy new?

The F-35 Joint Program Office is on the cusp of a major increase in F-35 production of F-35s. In 2016, Lockheed Martin delivered 46 of the fighters. By the end of 2018, the company should be producing 130 per year, according to Vice Adm. Mat Winter, the head of the program. And the rate of production will increase even further.

At the same time, the program is juggling multiple configurations of the aircraft—not just because there are Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy variants, but also because production began before flight tests were finished. That issue, known as concurrency, continues to bedevil the military's ability to afford the program, as it will take a lot of work to bring some of the oldest F-35s up to the standard they will need to fight in combat.

"From a production perspective, we have literally 150 to 160 modifications that have to occur on some of our tails to get it to a Block 3 configuration," Winter said during a Sept. 18 speech at the Air Force Association's annual Air, Space and Cyber conference here. "Our mods program is almost as exciting and dwarfing our production program."

With that in mind, Winter said it is time to consider perhaps not modifying every aircraft to the Block 3F standard that would enable it carry a full complement of air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons. Testing of Block 3F could be delivered by the end of this year. "We're looking at a solution space that gives our warfighter options," he said.

For the Air Force, some of those options would be whether to use this handful of older F-35s as aggressor aircraft or in other training roles.

Air Force Chief of Staff David Goldfein said there is an ongoing discussion among the Air Force, the other Joint Chiefs and international air chiefs about whether to modify those older F-35s.

"You're going to see us continuing to do a business-case analysis of retrofit of these aircraft," he said during a Sept. 19 press conference. But he quickly added that this is not a new kind of discussion—the Air Force had the same one around the F-16, the F-15 and F-22.