

Air Force Weighs Scrapping A-10 Replacement

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The U.S. Air Force is looking closely at the future of close-in warfare, but the service's top general says that future may not include a direct replacement for the A-10 Warthog.

The Air Force has for years contemplated building a follow-on, dedicated close-air support (CAS) platform to replace the Warthog when it reaches the end of its service life, but that effort now appears to have stalled. When asked whether the service is taking steps to develop a single-role "A-X," Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein said "not yet."

So does that mean a single-mission CAS platform will eventually go away? "Maybe," Goldfein says.

"I don't disagree that a single-role platform sets an incredibly high bar for the rest of the force," he said during a wide-ranging interview with *Aviation Week* July 16. "But remember, [combatant commanders] have got the entire spectrum of conflict that I've got to support, from the highest end, the lowest end and everything in between, and I've got a certain amount of money that I've got to use to build the best Air Force that money can buy."

Goldfein spoke with *Aviation Week* on an Air Force C-40 during the flight back from his visit to the Royal International Air Tattoo, the world's largest military air show, at Royal Air Force Fairford, England.

As the air component commander in Afghanistan, Goldfein saw firsthand how the Air Force now relies on a family of systems, not just the A-10, for the close-air support (CAS) mission. The Warthog was not always his first choice to protect soldiers in battle: in the mountainous terrain of the east, an MQ-9 Reaper was the best choice to quickly navigate the peaks and valleys; in the volatile west, where operations could quickly take a turn for the worse, the multirole F-15E would give maximum agility; for the north, a B-1B bomber—with its endurance and large payload—worked best.

"If we can start having a conversation about that family of systems, and not which one weapon system is the most important, we're going to actually have a 21st-century close-air-support discussion," Goldfein said. "There's very few mission sets that we have where I'm throwing a single bullet at it."

The Air Force is planning to fly the Warthog until the mid-2020s, although it needs additional funding in order to keep all nine A-10 squadrons in the skies past 2021. But the question of whether the Air Force will build a direct A-10 replacement hangs on adequate funding and stable budgets, Goldfein stressed.

Sequestration and budget uncertainty—including year after year of continuing resolutions—wreak havoc on the military's ability to plan, he said.

"It's impossible to predict where I would go with that kind of a strategic trade relative to the amount of topline I have and where it fits," he said. "Nothing comes for free."

Before making a decision, Goldfein will consult the CAS community about what the future of the mission looks like, because it may not look like the past. Experts argue that the A-10 performs well in an environment of total air dominance, like Iraq and Afghanistan, but as advanced anti-air weapons and surface-to-air missiles proliferate, it becomes more and more dangerous to fly a bulky, unstealthy Warthog into battle.

"Before we have any conversation about replacements ... we want to make sure that anything we talk about is moving us forward into new ways of doing business," Goldfein said.