

# The Bumpy, Risky Road Attempting to Modernize Outdated Aircraft

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How would you like to fly in combat in an airplane that was more than 80 years old? That's what we'll be asking our pilots to do in a few years because the Air Force can't seem to retire its aging fleet of military airlift aircraft, including planes that are already a half-century old. Not only has the Secretary of the Air Force been unable to retire several models of the C-130 Hercules, the giant C-5A Galaxy cargo aircraft or the KC-135 aerial tanker, but now he has to figure out how to keep these aircraft operational beyond their 75<sup>th</sup> birthdays.

The worst part is we're putting the lives of our pilots at risk every day as these planes become less safe to fly. Some are so rickety, they're prohibited from carrying anything but the crew. Many can't go overseas. They're of no use in Iraq or Afghanistan. And, with a smaller fleet of airlift aircraft, when you factor in the impact and cost of maintaining older planes, we're not really saving any money.

Commercial air carriers don't maintain aircraft this old. Even in a tight, highly competitive marketplace where minimizing cost and maximizing performance are vital to profitability, keeping an aging fleet in the air past its useful life isn't even a consideration. Why in the world should we hold the Air Force and its aircraft to a lower standard?

The Air Force has invested in several programs to upgrade these aircraft, but cost overruns have become enormous. The upgrades on the C-130 cargo aircraft, which first entered service in 1956, were intended to lower the operating cost of the fleet by improving efficiencies. But the program has become so expensive — costs are up 160 percent according to Department of Defense estimates — the military was required to report the huge overruns to Congress.

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Tight federal budgets demand more efficiency in providing dependable and economic delivery of people and supplies to the battlefield. Currently, only one new aircraft meets this standard: the C-17 Globemaster III cargo plane. The C-17 is economical as long as the assembly line is operating. However, no more C-17s have been authorized, and with no orders guaranteed for next year, the line will be closing in months.

The Secretary of the Air Force must be allowed to manage and retire the airlift and refueling fleet as operational requirements dictate. Doing so will ensure that we are using taxpayer dollars responsibly and not putting our future global airlift capability at risk.

President Harry Truman used this capability in the Berlin Airlift of 1947-1948. President Dwight Eisenhower did the same thing in Hungary in 1956-57, and so did President Bill Clinton in Kosovo in 1999. Today, U.S. airlift is used in virtually every military scenario, whether it is providing combat or humanitarian support. In today's world, we must maintain a modern fleet capable of responding to any military mission on the planet; a fleet that maximizes the reach and capability of our U.S. military at the most efficient cost to the American taxpayer.

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