

Statement of Congressman Steven Palazzo to the National Commission on the Structure of the Air Force

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for allowing me to come here today to testify on the incredibly important matter of the structure of the Air Force. As a member of the House Armed Services Committee, I believe I have a unique point of view when it comes to this matter. I've traveled to many bases, grown up in a military community, and served in the military for most of my adult life. These are experiences that I cherish and that I use every day in my role as a member of the House of Representatives.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Air Force has excess capacity. My colleagues and I have heard that for years. The Air Force undoubtedly has the most expensive inventory of any of our military services on a per-member basis. In addition, the service requires more fuel than any other service, requiring 10% of the nation's aviation fuel per year.

Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that the Air Force must look at their expenditures on a more regular basis than some of our other forces. I admire the Air Force for attempting to increase fiscal responsibility, especially in the face of an unholy trinity of shrinking budgets, sequestration, and Continuing Resolutions. All of which I continue to fight against every day in Congress.

At the same time, I believe the Air Force has made something of a habit out of moving force structure every few years without thorough consideration of the effects, fiscally, militarily and on the communities involved. These communities are home to countless airmen who are uprooted every time a move is suggested. It is easy to forget is that these planes are not just cold metal. They represent a piece of a community. The men and women who maintain and operate these planes are our brothers and sisters, our neighbors and our friends.

Starting in 2011, the Air Force proposed moving aircraft from all over our nation in hopes of once again "realigning the force." Unfortunately, I believe that the Air Force's movements of late have been recommended and approved prematurely, with inadequate research and thought given to the overall cost of the movements or the utilization of the nation's best bases and facilities. I believe, throughout the process, political considerations have played a role that at times has conflicted with the military value of the move.

My congressional district serves as a perfect example of the Air Force's lack of foresight. For over a year, my congressional colleagues and I have challenged the Air Force on these decisions. Originally, the Air Force attempted to move C-130Js from Keesler Air Force Base in South Mississippi to Dobbins Reserve Base in Atlanta, Georgia without providing any justification. To date, I have still not received an accurate cost estimate of the aircraft movements.

These aircraft movements would have involved the transfer of ten planes, and the loss of 140 members of the active associate unit, 100 Air Reserve Technicians, and 350 reserve positions. That's approximately \$12.5 million dollars in lost economic impact to my Congressional district.

When my colleagues and I pointed out that Dobbins didn't even have hangars that could even fit the stretch model C-130's - not to mention any facilities required for active duty personnel (commissary, dental, housing) - the Air Force agreed with us! If none of these factors were even considered in the initial planning, how were any of these decisions made in the first place? And why on earth, would the Air Force be moving ten C-130's to the busiest airspace in the country, the Atlanta metro area. Additionally, why would the Air Force move a unit that had previously been setting records for cargo flown, most airdrops, and best commission rate for aircraft, and from a base that has new MILCON to support the Unit, a C-130 simulator on base, not to mention interoperability with many other facilities in the area? After the Air Force realized it could not adequately justify the move of Keesler planes to Dobbins, in an effort to appease others they reversed course, suggesting that the C-130's should be moved to Pope AFB instead.

KAFB facilities to support the 403rd Wing have been upgraded over the past 10 years at a cost of approximately \$60,000,000 in the form of a fully enclosed fuel cell maintenance hangar, a fully enclosed 2-bay isochronal maintenance hangar, and a maintenance facility complex to accommodate the myriad of requirements that support the C-130J airframe.

Recently, I had the honor of cutting the ribbon on the newly constructed \$8,400,000 state of the art 41st Aerial Port facility. The 41st Aerial Port Squadron will support the 403rd tactical airlift mission (rigging loads for airdrop, drop zone support, and aircraft and cargo loading). If the tactical airlift mission is transferred, there will be no requirement for the building, and the investments would be wasted. How on earth does it make sense for the Air Force to move these planes to another base, when they have brand new, custom-built facilities to support the airframe in question?

In addition to new facilities, no consideration was given to the interoperability with other military facilities in the area. I have said for years that South Mississippi provides twice the base at half the cost because of the cooperation between our bases. These C-130s have had a long-standing agreement with Stennis Space Center for training, airdrops, and night vision operations. In addition, they have been working with the National Guard at Camp Shelby for drop zones and airdrop training. The removal of this unit not only hurts Keesler Air Force Base, it also has serious effects on the other military operations in the area that participate in this training.

Keesler Air Force Base was recently given the Commander in Chief's award for the best base in the Air Force. Our close proximity to the Gulf of Mexico gives us unlimited airspace in which to train. All of these unique capabilities are not available to the Air Force at other locations. With these training grounds, the 403rd's Flying Jennies have become one of the highest performing units in the entire Air Force. My question to the Air Force from the get-go has been, "If it ain't broke, why fix it?" Especially if there is little, if any, cost savings associated with the move.

I have worked on multiple amendments that would freeze all aircraft movements until this commission completes their work and Congress has 60 days to review the results. I believe that if Congress requested the work of this commission in the first place, there is no reason why we should continue moving aircraft until we have the results of your study.

Despite several requests, the Air Force has been unable to provide an accurate cost estimate of the freeze for a few months prior to House consideration of the 2014 NDAA. If this isn't telling, I don't know

what is. If the Air Force can't tell me how much it will cost to not move planes, they haven't done their homework prior to making decisions to move the planes in the first place. Either that or they are afraid to share the numbers.

Members of the Commission, the Air Force cannot continue to move planes, equipment, and people around every few years without looking at costs, the impact to communities, and current readiness. In a time of shrinking budgets and uncertainty, these movements appear unnecessary and, more importantly, as uncalculated expenditures. I believe the commission must strongly recommend that the Air Force stop all moves that were recommended without an estimate of short term cost savings, unless they are a matter of absolute military necessity. Furthermore, all movements that are currently planned must be frozen until the same criteria can be proven and shown in an open and transparent process.

Our nation faces unprecedented challenges in the coming decade. We can't continue business as usual.

Thank you for your consideration, your time, and your service to our great nation.