

politico-military situation they are operating in. This is surely one situation where we need to let our commanders command. ♦

## Lies, damned lies and comparative costings

Congressional Research Service (CRS), Government Accounting Office (GAO), commercial and think-tank reports in the US continue to indicate serious financial and technical risks with the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program. Even the Pentagon's JSF Program Office concedes an array of substantial challenges.

Various estimates of the Average Unit Procurement Cost (AUPC) from reputable US sources continue to indicate figures substantially above what the Department of Defence and the RAAF continue to maintain that Australia's JSFs will cost (\$US45-50m). The most recent AUPC being banded about in the US (based on December 2005 figures) is \$US94.8 million per aircraft system.

The current parliamentary joint committee inquiry into Australia's future air defence needs is at least generating some genuine debate about the various options. This is welcome because the low level of public debate thus far has been caused, in part, by the reluctance of senior Defence officials and air force officers to debate their critics.

As the costs of the developmental F-35 continue to rise in the real world, and close on the more stable costs of the already in-squadron-service F-22 Raptor (around \$US125m), the option of meeting our future air combat needs with a traditional mix of the two complementary platforms looks increasingly attractive.

The senior leadership of the RAAF remain adamantly opposed to a two-aircraft option of any type arguing that a one-platform fleet offers considerable through-life savings in maintenance and training. This is no doubt quite true, to a point, but maintaining separate fighter and strike fleets since the RAAF was founded in 1921 does not appear to have been an intolerable burden thus far.

There are four major arguments commonly mounted against buying the F-22. First is the claim that the US will probably not sell them to us. Second, that the F-22 is too expensive. Third, even if we could afford them and the US would sell us some, we could not buy enough to constitute an effective capability in terms of numbers of aircraft, given our continental-sized responsibilities. Finally, it is said that the F-35 will be technologically far in advance of the F-22 by the time it enters squadron service.

None of these arguments is convincing enough in itself that further debate on the option of buying less JSFs and at least some Raptors instead is not worth having. If the costs of the two aircraft continue to converge at the rate predicted one key argument will fall by the wayside fairly quickly, especially if there is another substantial hiccup in the JSF program.

Whether the US might really agree to sell the F-22 to Australia (and other trusted allies) remains unknown, largely because of the pessimistic and self-defeating argument that it is not worth asking the question. The time to seriously ask may

be fast approaching and at least we would then know one way or the other. The answer is increasingly likely to be yes

The remaining two objections have been largely ignored to date and are perhaps the hardest to debate in insecure open forums. That does not mean, however, that such debates are not worth having. More strength to the Defence Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade in its all-party deliberations in the national interest. ♦

## Bi-partisan acknowledgement

The Australia Defence Association has always strived to undertake its public interest guardian activities in an independent and non-partisan manner. Predictably, at various times, some members from both sides of politics have accused the ADA of favouring the other side. On the whole, however, the Association's hard-earned politically-neutral stance is well accepted by those parliamentarians and others with a good knowledge of defence and wider national security matters.

Recently, *Hansard* recorded another example when the editorial on the AWB scandal in the Autumn 2006 *Defender* attracted the following exchange during House of Representatives Question Time on Monday 27 March 2006:

Mr McClelland (3.01pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Has the Prime Minister seen comments by respected defence analyst Neil James, who wrote in the latest edition of *Defender*, the journal of the Australia Defence Association:

'The deeper moral question is what kind of person would have no apparent ethical qualms, or commonsense reservations, about contravening the very UN sanctions that fellow Australians were enforcing under difficult, and at times even dangerous, conditions...'

'... Never again must any Australian Government risk the well-being and safety of the men and women of the defence force in such a manner'

I ask the Prime Minister: why has the government failed its legal and moral responsibility to ensure that the dangerous work of our armed forces in enforcing UN sanctions against Iraq was not undermined?

Mr Howard—Mr Speaker, may I say through you, in response to the member for Barton, that I have read those remarks made by Mr James. Mr James is a person I respect a lot. He is a person whose public comments, I think it can fairly be said, do not reflect a bias one way or the other as far as Australian politics are concerned. I think his proposition of lack of moral fibre in relation to people who deliberately set out to breach the sanctions imposed by the United Nations, or connived in that, is perfectly correct, and I support it. I do not agree for a moment that the government has been guilty of that conduct—absolutely not.

Editorials in *Defender* naturally reflect the considered view of the Association, and are a collective effort by the journal's editorial board with additional input from, and the approval of, the ADA Board of Directors. Wider Association input to informed public debate is similarly measured. Although the remarks by the Opposition Spokesman on Defence and the Prime-Minister only mentioned our official spokesman, they are undoubtedly another acknowledgment that the ADA's actively non-partisan stance continues to be respected by both sides of politics. ♦