

# United States Senate

August 28, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth  
Secretary of Defense  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

Thanks to President Trump and your leadership, our military has reached historic milestones in just eight months, including cementing lethality instead of social ideology and establishing credible deterrence as witnessed during Operation Midnight Hammer. Surely, we share mutual national security objectives driven by reestablishing peace through strength. One glaring obstacle, however, remains: the readiness of our fighter fleet across the Total Force. In particular, the reserve components of our Air Force are at risk of losing experienced fighter pilots and maintainers.

The A-10 unit at the 442<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Wing, based in Whiteman Air Force Base (“Whiteman AFB”), is an invaluable asset to our Total Force with decades of combat experience. The 442<sup>nd</sup> is one of the most highly decorated, most-combat-deployed Fighter Wings in the Reserve Component. The span of experience embedded in their pilots and maintainers is unprecedented as a Reserve Unit, especially one that operates more cost-efficiently than their active-duty unit counterparts. As an Air Force Reserve Command wing, it has performed critical missions in support of counter terrorism operations in the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility and has been integrated into the Tier 1 Special Operations world more than any other Air Force aviation unit.

Currently, the Air Force’s fiscal year 2026 budget calls for the full retirement of all A-10 fighter aircraft. I support the need for modernization, but I reject the premise that we must sacrifice the most experienced personnel, like those at the 442<sup>nd</sup>, to invest in new capabilities when Congress has been clear that it is willing to be a reliable partner in those investments. The Biden Administration’s disastrous “Divest to Invest” strategy put the 442<sup>nd</sup>, along with numerous other units, in existential jeopardy by failing to provide an investment strategy, while accelerating divestment. For over five years, the personnel in the unit have been waiting to hear of a replacement and are now starting to pursue commercial careers. However, if a commitment is announced before they return from their current and tenth combat deployment, we can reverse this course and preserve the 442<sup>nd</sup>.

To that end, I would like to propose potential stopgap courses of action (COA) that can be executed before the A-10 is fully divested and aimed at maintaining the 442<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Wing. One

such proposal includes the temporary transfer of F-15E Strike Eagles to Whiteman AFB from the Active Component, as the Air Force re-distributes F-15Es previously stationed in the United Kingdom as that base receives new F-35s. Another COA transfers available F-16 C/D Block 42 training aircraft. These options will ensure a swift transition and capitalize on the experience of the 442<sup>nd</sup>, leading to the fastest path to readiness. Both options also leverage existing investments made in the F-15EX program and from foreign military sales of the F-16 Block 70/72 for our Air Force, should foreign customers pivot to other platforms.

As a proponent of an America First foreign policy, the 442<sup>nd</sup> has provided the Department of Defense options across various areas of responsibility rooted in Midwest patriotism and a ready-to-fight tonight ethos. This fighter unit stands ready to fill operational gaps in support of President Trump's strategic objectives. The 442<sup>nd</sup> is again deployed and conducting operations in CENTCOM, demonstrating that maintaining critical legacy capabilities while investing in modernization remains relevant in both asymmetrical and high-end threat environments. Losing the 442<sup>nd</sup> would further reduce the Combatant Commanders' ability to field already limited combat-deployable Wings, eliminate a battle-ready unit, weaken a shrinking reserve, and discard irreplaceable pilot expertise.

I firmly believe in the sustainability and long-term value of the 442<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Wing, which contributes to advancing the administration's strategic objectives. As you consider these ideas or any other internal proposals regarding the 442<sup>nd</sup>, I welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter with you further at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



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Eric Schmitt  
United States Senator