

## Response to information from Senator Bernie Sanders' Office on the F-35s nuclear capability and role

There are no sources given for any of the statements coming from Sen Sanders. Some information appears to have been provided by Ethan Rosenkranz, a policy analyst on the U.S. Senate Budget Committee with no technical background in the F-35 or other aircraft.

1. According to this analyst, "there are no plans to deploy nuclear weapons in Burlington.

### *RESPONSE to plans to deploy:*

It is highly unlikely that a Congressional budget staffer would be privy to Department of Defense nuclear targeting strategy and planning. In any case, *current* plans are not germane since new plans could emerge at any time in the future without Vermont being informed.

### *RESPONSE to nuclear weapons in Burlington:*

It appears the staffer is referring to the storage of the B61-12, the nuclear gravity bomb being designed specifically for the F-35. From a targeting perspective, the location of the bombs is not the issue. The location of the nuclear weapon delivery system, that is, the nuclear bomber, is the issue. The F-35/B61-12 nuclear bomb is designed to be stored in forward deployment theaters like NATO or Korea, and then married up with F-35s when they deploy — as we have always done with earlier versions of the B-61 family of nuclear weapons. America's nuclear enemies target the bombers' home bases and forward deployed bases, just as our nuclear targeteers do.

2. "The F-35 is a short-range fighter designed primarily to perform ground attack and air-superiority missions."

### *RESPONSE:*

This is a correct statement, but irrelevant. The F-35 will be forward-deployed from their home bases in the U.S. in order to conduct conventional or nuclear strikes. Armaments will also be pre-staged at forward deployed locations.

- *SOURCE: The Secretary of Defense, James Mattis in his 2018 Nuclear Posture Review.*

3. "It is not a bomber."

### *RESPONSE:*

This is a false statement. Aircraft that can drop bombs are bombers. The F-35 is designed to carry and deploy the B61-12 guided nuclear gravity bomb, as well as conventional munitions including conventional bombs.

- *SOURCE: The Secretary of Defense, James Mattis in his 2018 Nuclear Posture Review*
- *SOURCE: F-35A Operational Environmental Impact Statement, 2013*

4. "In 2014, Congress cut funding to make the F-35 nuclear capable, pushing the earlier date to 2024. Even then, only certain "blocks" of the planes will be upgraded."

### *RESPONSE to deployment timeframe:*

In 2017, during a Pentagon interview, Air Force Brig Gen Scott Pleus, Director of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program Integration Office, said the F-35 is set to be fitted with the B61-12 Mod gravity bomb sometime between 2020 and 2022; but if the weapon is needed sooner, the schedule could be quickened.

- *SOURCE: "F-35 Could Carry B61 Nuclear Warhead Sooner Than Planned" Oriana Pawlyk, 10 Jan 2017, Defensetech, military.com*

*RESPONSE to "blocks":*

A. In March 2016, Lt Gen Chris Bogdan, Executive Officer of the F-35 Joint Program Office, testified before Congress that nuclear certification planning efforts—part of the F-35 Block 4 modernization program—had been initiated to equip the aircraft with the nuclear bomb.

B. In July 2018, in response to the question "Will the F-35A in Burlington, VT receive Block 4 upgrades?" The Air Force stated "Yes, all F-35A Block 3F aircraft (the variant that the VT Air National Guard will receive) will eventually receive block 4 upgrades, however the timing of these upgrades is still being determined."

- SOURCE: "F-35 Could Carry B61 Nuclear Warhead Sooner Than Planned" Oriana Pawlyk, 10 Jan 2017, *Defensetech*, military.com
- SOURCE: Q and A from SAF-FM (Secretary of the Air Force-Financial Management and Comptroller Office), July 2018

5. "Even if the F-35 becomes nuclear capable, it does not mean all F-35s will carry nuclear weapons. The F-16, F-15 and F-18 are all nuclear capable. Very, very few have ever carried a nuclear weapon."

*RESPONSE to comparing F-35 to other fighter aircraft:*

None of the mentioned aircraft (F-16, F-15 or F-18) had stealth capabilities or were integrated into the U.S. nuclear target strategy or were part of the U.S. nuclear triad. The Air Force has never selectively nuclear-wired certain models of its previous first line fighters. All F-100s, F-105s, F-4s and F-16s were nuclear wired.

- SOURCE: *The Secretary of Defense, James Mattis in his 2018 Nuclear Posture Review*

6. "The mission of the 158th Fighter Wing has not changed. Only the plane is changing. The F-16s currently based here do not carry nuclear weapons, and there is no reason to believe the F-35 would either. There is simply no operational rationale to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on a short-range FIGHTER based on the border of Canada."

*RESPONSE to mission change:*

The 158th mission has changed throughout the years. Further, the Pentagon can change the mission tomorrow. In the 1960's the 158th F-89Ds were upgraded to the F89Js which had nuclear capability; and at that time, the 158th acquired a nuclear mission and flew with nuclear weapons. In 1974, the 158th mission was changed to an electronic jamming mission, and then to a ground attack mission with the F-4s in 1980. Mission changes happened routinely in the past, and there is no reason to think that the 158th mission won't be changed again, especially with new administrations, with new nuclear buildups, and with increased world tensions.

- SOURCE: *Vermont National Guard* <http://vt.public.ng.mil>

There is another recent and relevant example of how easily military plans can change. In May 2018, Sen Leahy got the Secretary of the Air Force to make a public statement about the Vermont Air National Guard's flying mission which directly contradicted her previous statements in 2013 and 2016. In the 2013 Air Force Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), the Air Force stated that "if there is no F-35A operational beddown at Burlington AGS the current mission would continue." And in the 2016 Air Force testimony in Federal court documents, the Secretary of the Air Force stated that "it expected Burlington to continue to fly military aircraft if it was not selected to host the F-35A." In May 2018, the Secretary of the Air Force said that if the F-35s were not assigned in Burlington that "the Vermont Air National Guard would likely lose their flying mission..." This was the total opposite of what the Air Force has previously written in 2013 and 2016 regarding the Vermont Air National Guard's flying mission. This is yet another example of how easily and quickly the Pentagon can reverse previous decisions and plans.

- SOURCE: *Secretary of the Air Force letter to Miro Weinberger, May 22, 2018*
- SOURCE: *F-35A Operational Environmental Impact Statement, 2013 page PA-47*

- *SOURCE: Federal Case No 5:14-cv-132, Defendant's Memo in Opposition to Plaintiffs' Motion, March 7, 2016, page 59-60*

*RESPONSE to implications of basing location in Vermont.*

To allege that the nuclear mission of the 158th would be restricted to targets within range of Burlington shows ignorance of tactical nuclear fighter attack plans, which have always been assigned to overseas deployed fighters in Europe and Asia, and never to fighters flying from U.S. home bases.

The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review states that for nuclear missions the F-35 would be forward deployed. Note that F-35s based in Vermont are geographically closer to forward deployed bases in Europe than F-35s based in the midwest or west. (*No one would think of assigning US-based F-35s to fly directly to targets in Russia or China because of the excessive time to arrive and the excessive use of scarce tanker resources.*)

- *SOURCE: The Secretary of Defense, James Mattis in his 2018 Nuclear Posture Review*

7. "Military bases hosting nuclear weapons have to go through an extensive nuclear certification process."

*RESPONSE:*

Correct, but irrelevant. Where the nuclear bombs are stored has nothing to do with the F-35 being nuclear capable or having a nuclear mission, or whether the F-35 base is a nuclear target. The target is the F-35 base and the F-35 aircraft.

8. "As far as we know, none of the pilots or maintainers at the VTANG base have undergone the extensive training necessary to handle nuclear weapons control and delivery systems."

*RESPONSE:*

This statement is meaningless for multiple reasons.

It is unknown as to whom "we" refers; without a doubt "somebody" knows about pilot and maintainer training.

Handling nuclear weapons is not relevant to the issue of the F-35 nuclear capability or mission. As stated above, the nuclear weapons would be pre-staged and forward delayed to other locations. Therefore, there would be no need for the Burlington Air Guard personnel to be trained in handling nuclear weapons.

Not mentioned was any reference to F-35 pilot training with the B61-12. According to an Air Force statement on the use of ordnance during the F-35 basing process "The F-35A would train for and deploy all the types of ordnance it is capable of carrying." Additionally, Brig Gen Scott Pleus, Director of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program's Integration Office, stated that arming the F-35 with the nuclear bomb will require some extra training for pilots, but nothing out of the ordinary from their usual regimen.

- *SOURCE: "F-35A Operational Environmental Impact Statement on the use of ordnance and defensive countermeasures" August 15, 2012*
- *SOURCE: "F-35 Could Carry B61 Nuclear Warhead Sooner Than Planned" Oriana Pawlyk, 10 Jan 2017, Defensetech, military.com*

A few Q&As were also included in what Sen Sanders sent to numerous people. These appear to have been taken from a paper sent from the Air Force Media Operations office in response to a request from Senator Leahy in the summer of 2018. What is concerning is that the most important of the six original Q&As was omitted by Sen Sanders. Three of the Q&A ask about the F-35 variant that the VT Guard will be getting. All units, Burlington included, are getting the Block 3F, which is not nuclear capable. This is because there are currently NO nuclear capable variants of the F-35 ready. Block 3Fs and all new production F-35s will be upgraded to the nuclear-capable Block 4 (which is named C2D2—Continuous

Capability Development and Delivery). The only question and answer that Sen Sanders did NOT include in his information paper to legislators and others was:

“Q: Will the F-35A in Burlington, VT receive Block 4 upgrades? A: Yes, all Block 3F aircraft will eventually receive block 4 upgrades, however the timing of these upgrades is still being determined.”

- *SOURCE: Q and A from SAF-FM, July 2018*