

OTHER VIEW | CHICAGO TRIB.

# Air Force F-22 too risky?

Anyone flying the world's most advanced jet fighter must be willing to shoulder a high level of risk. We worry the F-22 Raptor is too risky.

For years now, service personnel have complained privately that this very expensive war-bird is unsafe. Two Air National Guard pilots made their concerns public on "60 Minutes." They had taken the highly unusual step of refusing to fly the Raptor, jeopardizing their military careers.

This much we know: The single-seat, two-engine aircraft, made by Lockheed Martin, has a mysterious flaw that can deprive its human operators of breathable air during flight.

The result is that pilots can become lightheaded and disoriented. The hypoxia-like symptoms have led to a series of close calls and, according to a lawsuit filed by a pilot's widow, at least one death.

The Air Force acknowledges the existence of a problem. A year ago, it grounded the F-22 for four months to investigate. Despite failing to find what it termed the "root cause," the Air Force cleared the planes for flight.

Michael Donley, secretary of the Air Force, told the *Chicago Tribune* editorial board last week that "mitigating measures" had been introduced to improve pilot safety. Yet it's unclear whether those measures have worked. Critics say a charcoal breathing filter hasn't performed as intended and is being withdrawn.

The Air Force has added sensors that measure the atmosphere inside the cockpits and monitor the condition of pilots during airborne maneuvers. The data are under review, and more are being gathered to pinpoint the flaw, Donley told us. A proposal to add a backup oxygen system also is under review.

Since their grounding came to an end in September, the planes have logged thousands of flight hours. Incidents of suspected hypoxia have occurred only rarely, the Air Force secretary said. "The return to flight, I think, is successful."

Others are not so sure. We applaud Maj. Jeremy Gordon and Capt. Joshua Wilson, who appeared on "60 Minutes" to alert the public about F-22 safety issues. The pilots acted under a law protecting military whistle-blowers who report their suspicions to Congress. U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger, also an Air National Guard pilot, said Gordon and Wilson had a duty to speak up when they concluded that safety was being compromised. The Illinois Republican stood by as a witness during their TV interview in an effort to shield them from possible retaliation.

The Air Force needs to address the F-22's unresolved oxygen issues by putting the safety of its pilots at the forefront.

As is, the nation's 187 operational F-22s are not used in combat. The plane is designed to defeat advanced jets that rival powers have not yet developed, let alone deployed. It is being flown on training missions, which are important for readiness and deterrence, but less urgent than combat operations.

The Air Force should scale back the tempo of its Raptor flights and allow pilots concerned about their safety to withdraw from flying the planes without penalty. The process of collecting data should continue with volunteer pilots until the F-22 can be declared airworthy without the shadow of doubt now upon it.

America has invested tens of billions of dollars developing this jet, and in most respects it performs exceptionally well. The Raptor combines stealth, speed and agility with cutting-edge technology that gives its pilots amazing awareness of targets and threats. "It is still the world's finest fighter," Donley declared in his meeting with us.

No argument here. The Air Force needs to ensure, however, that the F-22 is the safest fighter it can be as well.

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## ARTIST'S VIEW



POLITICS | SEN. TOM O'MARA

## Righting terrible wrongs

The center of attention in New York government this week is best summed up by the opening words of a special state report released at the Capitol in April, "The secret of care of the patient is in caring for the patient."

Keep these words in mind, and read on.

Thankfully it's not a common occurrence, but inevitably there are times when failings come to light that are disturbing, egregious and sometimes even worse. So when revelations like these do surface, they need to be addressed and repaired immediately.

Put into this category what's come to light over the past year, following a series of reports by the *New York Times* and subsequent internal Cuomo administration investigations, involving long simmering allegations of abuse and neglect of the mentally ill, disabled, elderly and other patients with special needs at state-run group homes, hospitals and other facilities.

Beginning last year, the Times undertook an investigation into "widespread allegations of abuse and neglect at facilities overseen by the State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities." *The Times* investigation led the governor to quickly call for an internal review and accompanying report involving six state agen-

cies including the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, and the offices of Mental Health, Children and Family Services, and Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services.

This report, "The Measure of a Society: Protection of Vulnerable Persons in Residential Facilities Against Abuse and Neglect" was made public last month (it can be found at: <http://www.governor.ny.gov/assets/documents/justice4specialneeds.pdf>). To say the least, it contains a troubling look inside the operations of state facilities whose mission, above all else, is to take care of and protect their patients.

We can commend the swiftness of the Cuomo administration's response, but we also have to condemn the lack of discipline and oversight that apparently festered in far too many places over far too many years prior to the beginning of this governor's watch.

Based upon the report's recommendations, legislation was introduced last week calling for the strongest standards and practices in the nation for protecting people with special needs and disabilities.

"This is about safeguarding the civil rights of the more than one million New Yorkers with disabilities and special needs who for too long have not had the protections and justice they

deserve," the governor said.

"The [legislation] will give New York State the strongest standards and practices in the country for protecting those who are often the most vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment. I urge the Legislature to speedily pass this bill and give people with special needs and disabilities a new level of protection and service in our state."

So this week the spotlight turns to the Legislature, and the Senate's scheduled to act first. The legislation's being called the "Protection of People with Special Needs Act." Among numerous provisions it:

- creates a new Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs to provide stricter oversight of New York's system of human services;

- ensures that allegations of abuse and neglect are promptly and fully investigated, reported and prosecuted; and

- strengthens the criminal statutes that make abuse of vulnerable or disabled persons a crime.

More than anything else, Senate action this week is going to try to put the words "care of the patient" back where they belong – as priority number one.

■ **Tom O'Mara is a Republican state senator from Big Flats.**

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OTHER VIEW | PHILA. INQUIRER

# The right decision

President Obama may have been forced to come out sooner than he wanted on gay marriage, but he deserves tremendous credit for taking a risky political stand on one of the more divisive social issues of the day.

Obama had long said his position on same-sex relationships was evolving beyond his support for civil unions. But after Vice President Biden and Education Secretary Arne Duncan broke ranks this week and said they support gay marriage, the pressure was on Obama to make up his mind.

"I've always been adamant that gay and lesbian Americans should be treated fairly and equally," Obama said Tuesday. "At a certain point I've just concluded that, for me personally, it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be able to get married."

There had been signs that Obama would eventually reverse his opposition to gay marriage, the most recent being the decision by the Justice Department not to defend the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act.

Obama said his mind was changed after reflecting on the relationships of gay friends and conversations with his wife and two daughters. It had been widely speculated that he might make such an announcement after the presidential election, but after Biden and Duncan's statements, Obama supporters such as former Gov. Ed Rendell challenged Obama to "man up" and tell the truth about his position.

Political opponents say Obama's changed view, coming six months before the November election, was calculated. But he has just as much to lose as he does to gain with the historic declaration. Polls show Americans evenly split on the issue, and many gay-rights proponents were already inclined to vote for Obama.

That's because expected Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney not only supports a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, but he also opposes civil unions. Obama's decision may galvanize gays and young people, but his new position will likely hurt him among some conservative Democrats and independents.

Obama also can't ignore that more than 30 states, most recently North Carolina, a key battleground state in presidential elections, have passed laws prohibiting same-sex marriages. If his announcement was a political calculation, it couldn't have been an easy one, and it may yet prove to be an error.

Many gay-rights activists are disappointed that the announcement came unannounced. Obama aides say the president has no plans to push for any changes in federal law, and that he believes the issue should be settled by the states. Obama should know by his study of American history that it typically takes uniform, federal action to end discrimination.