

COMMENTARY

Editorials, Opinions and Letters

Luke Forward: Why Arizonans Must Rally to Support Luke AFB

At a time in national politics when there seems to be more division than consensus, Arizonans can be assured that their elected officials do agree on one major issue, and that is the future of Luke Air Force Base (AFB). We have collectively taken the long view in thinking about Luke. Recently, the bipartisan Arizona Congressional delegation sent a letter to the Air Force reminding them of what they already know: Luke Air Force Base is invaluable to America's arsenal of freedom.

Currently, Luke is home to the United States Air Force's largest active duty fighter wing, in which young Airmen fly sortie after sortie, day after day, training to be America's best fighter pilots. Since the 1940's Luke has produced more than 55,000 graduates from fighter training programs for the United States and its allies and

is truly "The Home of the Fighter Pilot." This is a legacy that Arizonans can be proud of but it is not something we should take for granted.

The Air Force and industry have been working hard to replace the F-16 with a more versatile, state of the art, next generation fighter. This new fighter is the F-35 Lightning, or Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). Since Luke is the home of the F-16 training mission, it makes sense that Luke should become the home of the F-35 training mission when it replaces the F-16; but there are other bases across the country that have similarly been working hard to modernize and support their own bases.

The Air Force is in the middle of an evaluation process to determine which bases will receive the next batch of F-35s. Understandably, many states are vying to be chosen by the Air

GUEST COMMENTARY



Trent Franks
U.S. Representative
Congressional Dist. 2

Force as the next host of this honorable mission. But the Air Force must remain objective, transparent and not persuaded by personal biases. After all, training the world's bravest, finest Airmen is a national security matter of the highest order and the location of these critical training missions is crucial to their success.

The Air Force just completed the first phase in the decision making process. They looked at over 200 bases across our nation and graded them on multiple factors such as the weather around the base, the amount of

flying space these jets would have, the range space below where they could practice dropping munitions, parking space for the jets, as well as the base facilities that ensure a great quality of life our Airmen deserve.

Thankfully, and rightfully so, Luke made the "short list" in the first phase of the Air Force's analysis, and is now one of three final bases being considered for the training mission of the F-35. Luke's robust and modern infrastructure, along with 330 days of sunshine each year, provides the Department of Defense with a site that is extremely well-suited to fifth generation fighter tactics and training.

Arizonans' elected officials have been cooperating with the cities surrounding Luke to ensure that Luke receives the funding it needs for modernization. The local officials, especially, have worked tirelessly to

mitigate economic development around the base so that Luke has ample room for its air-to-air and air-to-ground training missions.

While we are all thrilled with Luke's initial selection as a candidate base, we must remain vigilant in our efforts to make Luke the ideal base for the Joint Strike Fighter mission.

There is still work to be done, and not just by politicians. The next phase of the decision-making process is called the Environmental Impact Study (EIS). The Air Force must evaluate each base on how the new mission will affect the surrounding area.

During this process, the Air Force will host public hearings where citizens of Arizona can come and publicly voice their support or concerns regarding the F-35 program.

If Arizonans do not appear at these hearings

and voice their support, it could seriously impact Luke's results during the EIS process.

I encourage each and every individual to participate in standing in support of Luke. The hearings will take place over the next several months and specific dates will be released soon. (Please refer to www.lukeforward.com for the latest updates.)

We are so close to completing this important mission and what we do today could impact the future of Luke Air Force Base, the state of Arizona, and the future of freedom as we know it, long after each of us are gone.

We are blessed to be part of something great. Together we must seize this honor-- and opportunity-- to make history, and ensure we hand to our children a state and a nation that are economically robust, militarily strong, vigilant, and free.