

Air Force Tanker
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By Senator Brownback
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As the Air Force prepares to select a new aerial refueling platform, the key word is competition. Competition for the contract, competition in Congress and competition in the post-9/11 world. Good competition to design, build and fund the new tanker should help us not only compete with but defeat our adversaries in the war on terrorism.

It is difficult to imagine a government contract that is as big, as sought after, and as vital as the one the Air Force will soon award to build the new tanker. For all of the difficulties that have surrounded tanker replacement in the past, the vigorous competition now in its final stages reflects the thorough and transparent nature of this procurement process.

Precisely because of the open nature of this competition, I can state confidently that Boeing, with its 75 years of experience building tankers, has put forward a superior proposal. Not insignificantly, the Boeing plan keeps production in the United States and hundreds of jobs in Kansas rather than making the program dependent on a foreign supplier.

The bottom line is what is best for our men and women in uniform, and that is where the Boeing plan shines: the KC-767 would put more booms in the sky, allow access to more airfields and provide greater operational flexibility than the rival platform. The KC-767 also offers greater fuel efficiency, lower operating costs and a smaller carbon footprint, putting the Boeing platform in a class by itself.

The end of the competition for the tanker contract will mark the beginning of the fight in Congress to fund the purchase of new tankers. There are always more projects to fund than money available to fund them, and some members of the House and Senate will want to vote against appropriating the tens of billions needed to begin building new tankers.

Those of us who have focused on tankers for many years, however, appreciate the dangers of continuing to fly a tanker fleet that is now more than a half-century old. Planes deteriorate, maintenance costs rise and crew safety becomes questionable. I also would remind my colleagues of an obvious but overlooked fact: none of our nation's formidable military assets count unless they can get to where they are needed. We need tankers to fuel the fighters we expect to dominate the skies, to extend the range of our bombers and to expedite the transport of soldiers and equipment to the battlefield.

In short, tanker replacement is a critical priority. In fact, we should consider accelerating the replacement schedule and put more of our resources into buying new planes instead of paying for additional maintenance on the old ones. If we wait longer to start the program, costs will rise, operational risks will increase and national security will suffer.

Replacing the KC-135 will ultimately give our men and women in uniform the upper hand in the most important competition of all: the war on terrorism. While we may not be able to predict where the next fight against the terrorists will occur, a reliable tanker fleet ensures that they can never escape the long reach of our Armed Forces. These “flying gas stations” permit our forces to deploy quickly, facilitate the flow of supplies and equipment and allow ordinance to be delivered whenever and wherever it is necessary.

In a matter of weeks, I hope to hear that the Boeing/Spirit AeroSystems Team has won the Air Force’s tanker competition on the merits of its KC-767 proposal. I believe that the crucial need for aerial refueling will allow allies of the tanker program to win full funding in Congress in the coming months. And I am convinced that these victories, over the long term, will provide our men and women in uniform with a capability to help ensure that no one can compete with them on the battlefield.

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