Opinion

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An F-35B Lightning II performs a vertical landing aboard Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort. (Flickr/U.S. Marine Corps/Cpl. Jonah Lovy)



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A few weeks ago the CBS drama "Madam Secretary," about a fictional U.S. secretary of state, a woman, Elizabeth McCord, presented a military, diplomatic and commercial crisis about a fictional fighter plane, the so-called F-40. The manufacturer had a cost overrun and was demanding that the U.S. buy 20 more planes. The Pentagon was proposing the planes be given to Taiwan. The total cost would run, as best I remember, about $40 billion.

And to further complicate things, Madam Secretary's husband, a retired fighter pilot, had flown the plane and called it a "brick," sluggish, but with lots of bells and whistles like stealth radar.

The show caught my attention because for years I've been tracking the F-35 fighter plane. According to POGO, the Project on Government Oversight, the F-35 was to be fully functional and in the air by 2008 at a cost of $40 or $50 million per plane. But to save money, the competing manufacturers, Lockheed and Boeing, didn't build a prototype. And flaws have plagued the plane.

Cost-overrun fails to capture the magnitude of the cost increase, currently estimated at $150 million per plane – that is if we actually build 2,500 of them. Currently, congressional appropriations committees recommend producing 93 planes in FY19; Lockheed has delivered more than 355 planes, as of mid-January.

The POGO article cited above says the planes are not combat-ready, based on a report by Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James who certified in 2016 that the planes would be combat-ready by 2018. Besides that, a plane crashed in October; the Pentagon grounded them while investigating the cause.

There's a lot of criticism of the F-35. And "Madam Secretary" attempted to catch and explain the criticisms. Indeed, I would say the show took sides, with the secretary of state declaring the plane to be a boondoggle. In the end, spoiler alert, Madam Secretary loses to a cabal of the president, defense secretary and chief of staff, men who cannot imagine actually rejecting a weapons system. It's pretty shocking television, naming one of the Pentagon's dirty secrets.

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