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**United States Senate**  
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6050

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March 24, 2015

The Honorable Ashton Carter  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Carter:

I am writing regarding my interest in the requirements and acquisition strategy for the Unmanned Carrier-Launched Airborne Surveillance-Strike (UCLASS) program. I strongly believe that the Navy's first operational unmanned combat aircraft must be capable of performing a broad range of missions in contested environments as part of the carrier air wing, including precision strike as well as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR).

This program will have far-reaching implications for the future of naval power-projection. Given both its warfighting importance and the reality of a constrained fiscal environment, it is essential that we prioritize the right set of requirements today to prepare our Navy and the joint force for the future. While the Navy needs an unmanned combat aircraft as soon as possible, rushing to start the wrong program will only delay—and could prevent—fielding of the right system. Therefore, I strongly support the decision to assess the UCLASS program as part of the Department's ongoing ISR review, and I look forward to working with you and the Navy to ensure that this program is optimized for the demands of future operating environments.

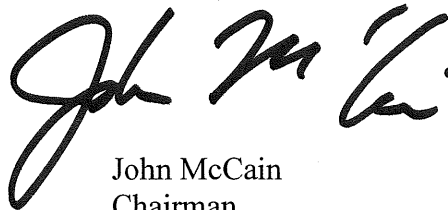
At the same time, I am concerned that the current requirements proposed for the UCLASS program place a disproportionate emphasis on unrefueled endurance to enable sustained ISR support to the carrier strike group, which would result in an aircraft design with serious deficiencies in both long-term survivability and its internal weapons payload capacity. I would encourage you to ensure that the Navy's first unmanned combat aircraft is capable of both providing persistent ISR *and* conducting strike missions from the carrier at standoff distances in contested environments. Developing a new carrier-based unmanned aircraft that is primarily an ISR platform and unable to operate effectively in medium- to high-level threat environments would be operationally and strategically misguided.

More specifically, I would encourage you to consider what attributes could enable the UCLASS program to perform strike, as well as ISR, missions—including an unrefueled endurance several times that of manned fighters; a refueled mission endurance measured in days; broadband, all-aspect radar cross-section reduction sufficient to find and engage defended targets; and the ability to carry internally a flexible mix of up to 4,000 pounds of strike payload. This would expand the strike range and lethality of the carrier strike group, thereby ensuring its role as the preeminent tool of naval power projection.

Additionally, while this review is underway and until a restructured UCLASS program yields flying prototypes, I would encourage you to maximize the use of the Unmanned Combat Air System Demonstration (UCAS-D) program in order to gain technological and other insights that could help increase the effectiveness of the UCLASS program. Our nation has made a sizable investment in this demonstration program to date, and both air vehicles have consumed only a small fraction of their approved flying hours. Under current plans, starting this April, there will be no unmanned air vehicles operating from carrier decks for several years. I think this would be a lost learning opportunity in what promises to be a critical area for sustaining the long-term operational and strategic relevance of the aircraft carrier.

I look forward to working with you and the Navy to explore near-term options for sustaining momentum behind unmanned carrier aviation and ensuring that we use our limited defense dollars on programs that will strengthen the American military's technological advantage.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John McCain". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "John" being the most prominent.

John McCain  
Chairman