F-16 transfer debate highlights flaws in Senate’s decision-making

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Many people, including airmen, wish the Senate were run as efficiently as the Air Force.

When the service wanted to transfer a squadron of F-16C/D Block 30 Fighting Falcons from Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska, within the state to Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, stepped in and halted the move.

After weeks of hemming and hawing, Begich on June 26 announced he’d receive a letter from Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz putting the F-16 transfer on hold. Neither Begich nor the letter spells it out, but the transfer is now dead.

Under Senate rules, one senator can block action by the entire deliberative body. Begich held up the nomination of an Air Force general — Lt. Gen. Herbert “Hawk” Carlisle — for promotion and a key service job while implying that he might additionally stop the choice of Gen. Mark Welsh — an eminently qualified nominee — to become the service’s next chief of staff.

Had he chosen to do so, under Senate rules Begich could have held up officer nominations without even identifying himself. One senator is all it takes to do that.

When the framers of the Constitution required the advice and consent of the Senate for certain appointments by the executive branch, they never intended to give one lawmaker so much power. But the framers permitted the Senate to write its own rules. Senators did — poorly — and those rules enable one individual to gum up the legislative process.

The F-16 affair is a metaphor for a larger problem that has paralyzed the Senate as a functioning body. Members now use a filibuster rule for a purpose never intended, so that when a vote is on the Senate floor, a majority consists of 60 votes rather than 51 out of 100. Both parties, when in power, have done this in recent years, effectively making it impossible for either to ever control the Senate.

F-16 debate is filled with language about environmental and housing impact studies. Those studies are part of the story, but it’s hard to believe anyone cares what conclusions they reach. Begich clearly wants to keep the F-16s at Eielson no matter what.

In capitulating to a senator who was more concerned about his state than his nation, Schwartz has set a dangerous precedent that will haunt his successor. Welsh is expected to take the job Aug. 1, amid a summer of discontent in an election year when real policy decisions in Washington are being set aside in favor of partisanship politics.

If Begich can halt an F-16 transfer, what’s to prevent any lone-wolf senator, acting on his own, from halting any action the Pentagon decides to take, no matter how much study, effort or common sense went into the proposed action?

The Senate needs to get its house in order. If it wants a role model for an organization that usually performs superbly — although not this time — it should study the Air Force.

Page 103 on AFI 36-2905 shows the table for admin actions dealing with PT. An admin demotion can be done on the fourth fail. Promotions can be withheld and deferred. It is still at the commander’s discretion.

— Jamethon

THE NCO EXPERIENCE

I remember back in 1992 attending a staff sergeant’s retirement ceremony, and nobody had anything negative to whisper about, if this man made his BS