

Round 4 in the Fight for Boeing's C-17 Production Line and Its 5,000 Long Beach Jobs

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Where do President Obama and Secretary of Defense , Robert M. Gates, really stand on the C-17? The answer is far from clear. While the administration has drawn a line on the F-22 fifth generation air superiority fighter, they are essentially silent on the C-17 heavy airlifter.

When Gates unveiled his 2010 Defense budget recommendations back in April, he grouped the F-22 and the C-17 together as major acquisition programs to be terminated. Now, more than 3 months later and just as action in congress is heating up on next year's defense budget, the talk from the Administration is all about the F-22 and hardly a word on the C-17.

The Administration has been outspoken about the need to terminate the F-22 program. They have even gone so far as to threaten a veto. On Wednesday, 7/15/09, regarding the Senate defense spending bill, the Administration issued a Statement of Administration Policy (SAP), which read in part "F-22 Procurement: The Administration strongly objects to the provisions in the bill authorizing \$1.75 billion for seven F-22s in FY 2010. The collective judgment of the Service Chiefs and Secretaries of the military departments determined that a final program of record of 187 F-22s is sufficient to meet operational requirements. As the President wrote in his letter to the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee on July 13, if the final bill presented to him contains this provision, the President will veto it."

Pretty strong words, one would think. The SAP made reference to several other aspects of the legislation to which the administration objected, but only the F-22 drew the unequivocal veto promise. The next day, Gates made a major speech at the Economic Club of Chicago where he essentially repeated his message that military procurement must change.

Gates opened with "The issue that brings me here today is central to the security of all Americans: the future of the United States military, how it should be organized, equipped and funded in the years ahead to win the wars we are in while being prepared for threats on or beyond the horizon."

gates wrapped up his speech with: "We stand at a crossroads. We simply cannot risk continuing down -- going down the same path, where our spending and program priorities are increasingly divorced from the very real threats of today and the growing ones of tomorrow. These threats demand that all of our nation's leaders rise above the politics and parochialism that have too often plagued considerations of our national -- the national defense, from industry to interest groups, from the Pentagon to Foggy Bottom, from one end of Pennsylvania Avenue to the other."

While the main thrust of the speech was general, he singled out the F-22 for special mention. In fact, the F-22 comprised over 1/3 of the entire speech and was the only individual program to receive any substantial mention. It seems that the F-22 has become the administration's poster child for terminating major military programs.

In concluding a major section of the speech which explained why he wants to cancel the F-22, Gates said "And with regard to something like the F-22, regardless of whether the number of aircraft at issue is 12 or 200, if we can't bring ourselves to make this tough but straightforward decision -- reflecting the judgment of two very different presidents, two secretaries of defense, two chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the current Air Force secretary and chief of staff -- where do we draw the line? And if not now, when?"

If we can't get this right, what on earth can we get right? It is time to draw the line on doing defense business as usual. The president has drawn that line, and that line is with regard to a veto. And it is real."

But, that veto seems only to apply to the F-22, not the C-17. So, what does this mean for the C-17 and the 5,000 Long Beach jobs which depend on it? With all the administration's tough talk on the F-22, they been virtually speechless on the C-17. In fact, the C-17 was not even mentioned--not one word--in either Gates' Chicago speech or the administration's budget veto SAP.

This could mean that the administration plans to make its stand on the F-22 and let the appropriations slide by for the C-17. The administration is building their strongest case for making some hard cuts in traditional defense programs and the F-22 might be the easiest chopping block program to lead this charge. Both planes seem to be very well regarded, but the C-17's role appears a bit closer to the needs of today than that of the F-22. The F-22 was built to be an air superiority fighter against a threat from the Soviet Union which never materialized and the F-22 is not much good for anything else. While it might be the best air to air combat fighter in the world, it is not as effective at providing air to ground attacks and there is no other plane which is challenging it for air to air combat superiority. Plus, it's not like we don't have any of them--the administration has already provided for 187 of the fancy planes.

Not only that, but the even newer, less expensive, and much more versatile F-35 is on the way. The argument for canceling the C-17 appears to be much less clear. While the F-22 has not seen combat in either Iraq or Afghanistan, the C-17 has been a workhorse of those conflicts. As noted before in these pages, our need for the missions which the C-17 ably fulfills is so great that we have to resort to renting Russian planes to meet the need. Further, unlike the F-35 which will soon be coming into the force to augment the F-22, there is no such relief plane on the drawing boards for the C-17.

Of the 4 Senate and House committees which must approve the defense budget, the House Armed Services Committee and the House Appropriations subcommittee on defense have both voted to include funds for C-17s which are unwanted by the Obama Administration. Three of the four committees have approved funds for the F-22. It is a bit hard to imagine that President Obama would really veto the defense budget, but they certainly have drawn the proverbial line in the sand. As the bills move through congress, a showdown looms. Your Editors will be watching.