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## A Fighter Jet's Fate Poses a Quandary for Obama

By [CHRISTOPHER DREW](#)

Two of President-elect [Barack Obama](#)'s stated goals — cutting wasteful spending and saving or creating millions of jobs — are on a collision course in a looming decision over whether to keep building the F-22 fighter jet.

[Air Force](#) officials have told Congress that they are hoping to win a \$9 billion commitment to produce at least 60 F-22s over a three-year period, which would expand the fleet to 243.

But the F-22, a stealthy, supersonic fighter that was designed during the cold war and has never been used in combat, has many critics, and they include [Robert M. Gates](#), who will remain Defense secretary in the [Obama administration](#). Mr. Gates has questioned the relevancy of the F-22, and said the military should focus its resources more on fighting insurgencies like those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, supporters of the F-22 program — which has cost more than \$65 billion so far — argue that Mr. Obama should extend its production, at least temporarily, to preserve thousands of jobs related to building the jets, which cost \$143 million each.

“To continue F-22 production would be to continue all the fundamental problems we’ve been having over the last 30 years, where each new weapons system costs so much that we end up with a dwindling inventory of planes, ships and tanks,” said Winslow T. Wheeler, an analyst at the Center for Defense Information, a nonprofit group in Washington.

“It’s the first test of whether President Obama is going to go along with business as usual or instead will bring much needed change to the Pentagon,” he added.

Defense experts say his decision, expected early next year, could provide the first sign of whether the economic crisis would force the military to make much harder choices about what kind of wars it should be prepared to fight.

So far, Mr. Obama has been vague about his defense plans, saying only that he does not intend to cut the recent record spending levels while the nation is at war and that he will review major weapons programs with Pentagon and Congressional leaders.

But nearly everyone expects defense spending to tighten over time, and that the military will no longer have enough money to prepare for every contingency.

As a result, Mr. Obama’s transition team is already being lobbied by military services seeking to preserve prized programs, from the Army’s plans for advanced combat gear to the ground-based missile defense

system.

The F-22 program, which the Bush administration wanted to end, may survive only if something else is cut from the Pentagon budget. That means the Obama administration's decision will set the tone for how tough-minded it will be in balancing competing pressures.

Without further spending for the F-22, companies that supply critical components for it would begin shutting down soon.

The chairmen and ranking Republicans on both the House and Senate defense appropriations subcommittees recently wrote to Mr. Gates to voice their support for the F-22, cautioning that "the last thing our nation needs is to terminate jobs in this time of such economic uncertainty."

Like many big weapons systems, the plane, which relies on 1,000 parts suppliers in 44 states, has strong support in Congress, which recently provided up to \$140 million in bridge financing for some of the suppliers.

"I think we're going to keep the F-22 going, that's my gut instinct," said Norman Dicks, a Democrat from Washington who also sits on the House subcommittee that approves money for defense programs.

"But it's going to be a very tight budget environment," he said. "We've still got the \$12 billion to \$15 billion a month that we're spending on the war, we've got to replenish the troops and the equipment that has been used up, and we've still got this whole need to modernize the Air Force, the Army and the [Navy](#). And a lot of people are going to look at the consequences of ending these programs on a further deterioration in the economy."

The plane had far more support in the 1980s, when the Air Force envisioned buying up to 750 of the planes to dominate dogfights with Soviet jets.

The F-22 can perform tactical operations at higher altitudes than other fighters, and it can cruise at supersonic speeds without using telltale afterburners. With its stealthy skin that scatters radar detection signals, it can also sneak in and destroy enemy surface-to-air missile defenses, clearing the way for bombers and other planes to follow.

Because of complications with some of the technologies, the plane ran into major delays and cost overruns that are typical of many defense projects, and more than 20 years passed before it was ready for military use in 2005.

By then, the Pentagon's focus had shifted to the wars against Islamic insurgents, and many critics, including Mr. Bush's first Defense secretary, [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#), and then Mr. Gates, began slashing spending for the F-22, leading to unusually bitter confrontations with Air Force officials.

Mr. Gates, in particular, has questioned what he called "a tendency toward what might be called next-war-itis — the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict" rather than the tanks and armored troop transports needed now.

Mr. Gates has pressed instead for more spending on heavily armored, mine-resistant troop transports and unmanned planes that can conduct surveillance and carry out missile strikes on terrorists.

The Air Force said in a statement that it would be “premature” to talk publicly about its goals for the F-22 since Mr. Obama’s team “has not had the opportunity to establish a position.”

But some Air Force officials say they are still required under the national military strategy to prepare for larger wars as well, no matter how remote the chances.

“Next-war-itis is a parallel to something called ostrich-itis, and that means you can’t bury your head in the sand and assume that the way things are now are the way they’ll be across the board in the future,” said one senior military officer, who spoke on condition that he not be named because he was not authorized to discuss the matter.

He added that Russia and China are also selling surface-to-air missile defense systems to smaller nations, and planes like the F-22 are needed “to dissuade and deter other countries so we never have to fight.”

Air Force officials also have told Congress that they need more F-22s to create cost-efficient squadrons in important locations and to provide pilot training. Another concern, they say, is that many of the F-15 Eagles, which have been the lead fighter jets for 25 to 30 years, are wearing out from overuse and age, while another new model, the Joint Strike Fighter, or F-35, is still several years away from full-scale production.

Two of Mr. Gates’s top advisers, Gordon England, the deputy secretary of Defense, and John J. Young Jr., the Pentagon’s under secretary for acquisition, want to cut off spending for the F-22 to free up money for the Joint Strike Fighter.

Though it cannot match the speed or evasiveness of the F-22, the joint fighter also has advanced stealth features. It is meant to be less expensive and built in far greater numbers for use by the Navy, the Marine Corps and major allies as well as the Air Force.

In the last several weeks, Mr. Young has seemed to step up his campaign against the plane, telling reporters that the F-22 needs \$8 billion in upgrades, is expensive to maintain and has not lived up to all its performance promises.

And a House Armed Services subcommittee has held a hearing to chastise Mr. Young for refusing to spend more than \$50 million of the \$140 million in bridge money that Congress had set aside for F-22 suppliers, thus increasing the pressure on the Obama administration to decide quickly whether to keep the program alive.

Under a previous deal, the main contractor, Lockheed Martin, will be working through 2011 to assemble the planes that the government has already ordered. But some of the delicate components take two to three years to produce, company officials say.

So critical suppliers would start shutting down their lines if money was not provided soon for additional orders. And several thousand of the 25,000 people whose jobs depend on the plane could be laid off over the

next year if their companies could not find replacement business.

Both Mr. England and Mr. Young will be departing with the Bush administration.

Mr. Obama's transition team wants to complete its own assessment of the military threats and weapons programs before making any recommendations.

"What Obama has said repeatedly is that he wants to hear from senior military people on the options," said F. Whitten Peters, a former Air Force secretary who advised Mr. Obama on defense issues during the campaign but is not on his transition team. "And at some point, rational minds can say, 'This is what we ought to do.'"

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