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SHOT DOWN: Politicians, union vow to block Pentagon's plan to cut F-22 Raptor program

By Howard French

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Connecticut's political leaders bristled with defiance Monday at Defense Secretary Robert Gates' announcement that the Pentagon plans to end production of the F-22 Raptor jet fighter powered by Pratt & Whitney engines - a move that could cost as many as 3,000 jobs in the state.

Some of the most pointed responses came from Rep. John B. Larson, D-1st District, and Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, D-Conn. Lieberman, who is a senior member of the Senate Committee on Armed Services, said he will strongly oppose dropping the F-22 program.

Lieberman said he intends to schedule committee hearings "through the year" to assess Gates' cutback proposals, "and modify them in the National Defense Authorization Act."

Joining a wave of protests from Connecticut's elected officials, Lieberman said the Pentagon needs the F-22

program to continue at least until production begins on the even newer F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, also powered by Pratt engines.

"If we stop the F-22 program now, our industrial base will suffer a major blow before the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter reaches full-rate production," Lieberman said. "This would result in the loss of thousands of jobs in Connecticut - the skilled workers we will need to support the F-35 in just a few years," he said.

Added state Sen. Gary LeBeau, D-East Hartford, "I'd prefer to see Secretary Gates and Congress work on some sort of a bridge manufacturing program that would phase out the F-22 fighter jet program as they phase in the new generation of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters."

Lieberman also said he'll oppose Gates' plan to drop production of the C-17 Globemaster military transport, which also is powered exclusively by Pratt-built engines.

"Every combat commander I have spoken with tells me that we need more of these aircraft, and I will work to make sure they stay in production," he said.

In the House of Representatives, Larson also said he will use his position as chairman of the House Democratic Caucus to resist the F-22's demise.

Larson said he has gathered 200 signatures from members of Congress who oppose the dropping of the F-22 program, an illustration of the broad base of support among the 44 states that will face production worker layoffs if the Gates proposal goes forward.

"The drastic cutback of the F-22 program would mean serious economic consequences and negatively impact national security for the entire nation," Larson said. "I will work with my colleagues to protect this program that is absolutely vital to Connecticut's workforce," he said.

"The F-22 is the only fifth generation air dominance fighter plane in use today," Larson said. "Ending this program will seriously limit our Air Force and leave us vulnerable in military conflicts that could arise."

He added, "The curtailment of the F-22 program could mean a loss of nearly 100,000 jobs across 44 states. Our nation cannot afford that kind of blow right now, not when we are experiencing such severe crises in other parts of our manufacturing sector like the auto industry. We must smooth the transition to the high-tech manufacturing economy that will mean prosperity for this nation for generations to come, not deal our manufacturing industry another fatal blow."

Larson said, "We have been through this before," recalling similar efforts under the Bush administration in 2007 and 2008 to end the F-22 program.

"We have won this fight before and we will win it again and keep these jobs in Connecticut," he said.

Also raising an alarm over the F-22's cancellation Monday was the Machinists union that represents thousands of workers facing layoffs should the Pentagon's plan to end production succeed.

"Defense Secretary Gates does not get it - you cannot dismantle the skill base needed to produce this aircraft, and then ramp up a year or two later for the next program," James Parent, the union's District 26 assistant directing business representative, said. "Once those skills are gone, it will be tough if not impossible to reassemble them. If the nation needs the F-35, it needs to continue the F-22."

Parent said that the Machinists union in Connecticut is urging members and their families "to contact the White House on this urgent issue to the future of our state."

"The union will be working with the Connecticut congressional delegation to ensure that the White House understands the importance of these programs to our state's future," he said.

A few bright spots for Connecticut workers in Gates' proposal Monday was his plan to drop the proposed new presidential helicopter fleet, holding out some hope that Sikorsky might take part in any rebid of the project in the future. After 50 years of supplying the White House helicopter fleet, Sikorsky in 2005 lost the contract to a team composed of Lockheed Martin and Britain's AgustaWestland.

Also a possible positive note was Gates' announcement that a proposed new Air Force refueling tanker also may be rebid eventually. Pratt was left out of the equation in 2008 when its partner, Chicago-based Boeing Co., lost a competition to build a new tanker to the military arm of Europe's Airbus Industrie. That project subsequently was set aside under the Bush administration, and Gates said Monday the tanker project will remain in limbo until it can be rebid.

U.S. Rep. Joseph D. Courtney, D-2nd District, also said Gates' proposed defense budget supports the replacement of older submarines with newer Virginia-class submarines built by Electric Boat in Groton. That portion of the proposal "is a vote of confidence in the men and women of Electric Boat," Courtney said.

But like Lieberman and Larson, Courtney said the decision to cut F-22 production is being done "too deeply and too quickly."

