OBAMA’S TRANSITION

WEIGHING THE OPTIONS

The U.S. Air Force sees opportunity for the F-22 under a new administration

A soul-testing job confronts President-elect Barack Obama and his heavyweight defense advisers that include Sam Nunn, former Senate Armed Services Committee chairman, and Richard Danzig, former Navy secretary. Obama’s campaign rhetoric indicated a desire to wind down the war in Iraq and to act more aggressively against terrorists in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Obama also will have to decide the fate of numerous programs, including the F-22 stealth fighter and human spaceflight. And his administration will have to find a way to train, equip and fund the planned increase of 92,000 soldiers and Marines while grappling with a domestic agenda of tea, health care reform and energy policy, and a host of other matters.

Russia’s new belligerence about defense is a concern as well. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev says the country will place mobile, midrange Iskander missile batteries on the Baltic coast to counter U.S. plans to put missile defenses in Poland. As a candidate, Obama expressed doubts about the interceptor system, but the Russian challenge could force him to keep a missile about which he is not enthusiastic to avoid appearing weak. Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev faced a similar confrontation on newly elected President John F. Kennedy in 1962. In the following eight pages Aviation Week & Space Technology explores some of the key issues in defense and space the incoming president will face.

DAVID A. FULGHUM AND AMY BUTLER/WASHINGTON

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resident Bush has not vacated the White House yet, but changes are already afoot for the Pentagon’s premier stealthy fighter program, the F-22 Raptor, which suffered waning support from his administration.

The Air Force—long banned by the Bush administration from promoting more F-22s—is crafting a new requirement for total procurement of the aircraft in the range of 250-275, a cut of more than 100 aircraft from the current requirement of 187.

It is a compromise steeped in the economic reality of the recession setting in around the world, but it also would boost the number of twin-engine fighters from the 183 now expected. The new number would allow enough aircraft to field seven squadrons of 24 aircraft (two in Alaska, two in Virginia, one in Hawaii and two in New Mexico). Alternatively, it would reserve 10 squadrons of 18 aircraft, if the service wants more squadrons but fewer backup aircraft.

“THe Air Force is very close to a compromise between those two numbers,” says an official participating in some of the discussions. “They’ve had to examine the fiscal reality and accept some rational risks by taking fewer than the next supplement war spending request. However, aerospace industry officials say four aircraft are not enough to bridge the Obama transition period, and the offer is another slap at the Air Force for pushing for more F-22s.

This debate has sparked the ire of Congress. Six Republican senators—Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson (Ga.), Orrin Hatch (Utah), James Inhofe (Okla.), John Cornyn (Tex.) and John Thune (S.C.)—implored England in a Nov. 3 letter to release the advance procurement funding to “preserve the option” for President-elect Barack Obama’s administration to continue production without incurring penalties for cooling down the manufacturing line.

“Anything short of this will cause suppliers to quickly stop F-22-related work, begin shutting down the lines and laying off a national high-tech workforce of over 25,000 in the midst of a severe economic downturn,” the senators say.

On Oct. 31, four members of the House Armed Services Committee—Chairman Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), top Republican Duncan Hunter (Calif.), Neil Abercrombie (D-Hawaii) and Jim Saxton (R-N.J.)—sent a similar letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates. They note that if Obama’s Pentagon decides to shut the line down, “$40 million of the $140 million needed for advance procurement could be used for the F-35 program.

Officials at Lockheed Martin, which builds the F-22, say the funding is needed by the end of this month. A consultant advising the Obama transition team says the funding is needed to smelt the structures that are the longest lead items for the fighter’s production process.

Obama’s defense policy has not yet been articulated fully, especially regarding the balance between counterinsurgency technologies for today’s wars and capabilities for tomorrow’s. But advisers involved in the transition say the lineup of Obama’s defense experts, including several F-22-savvy members such as former Air Force Secretary F. Whitten Peters and former Pentagon acquisition chiefs Paul Kaminski and Jacques Gansler, may indicate the new administration is likely to support production of several more lots of Raptors and, equally important, fund the classified electronic attack, electronic warfare and information warfare upgrades.

“The problem is that the programs of record aren’t properly funded,” says the consultant. “For example, cost overruns are often driven by the millions of lines of code that have to be developed. Obama’s team thinks that spiral upgrades of existing programs can avoid the software-related cost overruns with new programs.”

While awaiting a close examination of the Pentagon’s programs, the attraction to avoid new costs is creating an early inclination to support continued production of the F-22s and to reject a plan to accelerate the F-35 program at the Raptor’s expense.

“It won’t give you 10 squadrons of 24 aircraft, but it’s a sustainable force,” the consultant says. “Eighteen is possible if the aircraft has a very high utility rate. The only two programmatic markers so far for the Obama administration are a slow down in the fielding of land-based missile defense and no new nuclear weapons—perhaps a reduction in the stockpile.”

Obama’s advisers are not opponents of the F-22 or of supporting a strong defense,” says a civilian official involved in the president-elect’s policy formulation. “I think we ought to consider the F-22 program in light of the automobile industry bailout. What do you get out of it in the end? If you support military aircraft production—such as the C-17, F/A-18, F-22 and F-35—that would keep 500,000 people with high-paying jobs employed and paying taxes.”

Obama’s position is expected to fall between Gates’s policy of focusing intensely “on the war we have” and the stance of former Air Force Secretary Mike Wynne and former Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. (ret.) T. Michael Moseley—whom Gates fired—of preparing for the war of 20 years from now.

“A lot of the fighting about systems is really about how much risk we’re going to take in the future,” the consultant says. “My guess is that Obama’s stance is going to be more progressive than Gates’s, but less futurist that Wynne and Moseley’s. Chances are that they will go for an F-22 force of 250.”

England has called for ending F-22 production and pushing that of the F-35.

“That strategy of accelerating the F-35 program doesn’t make sense,” the consultant says. “It’s not a coherent theory to keep the Air Force modernized. There is a study that says you have a sustainable force at around 250 F-22s, if you look at pilot retention, training and attrition.”

The Air Force says it will take more risk and settle for a fleet of 250-275 F-22s, which can carry a range of weapons including Joint Direct Attack Munitions.