



The Washington Post

Pentagon Chief Calls for Cuts; Congress Opens Fire

Advertisement » Your Ad Here

By Dana Milbank
Tuesday, April 7, 2009; A02

The F-22 Raptor fighter can cruise at speeds greater than Mach 1.5 without afterburners. It is virtually invisible to enemies, carries two 1,000-pound missiles and can turn on a dime.

But there is one foe the F-22 was not designed to defeat: Defense Secretary Bob Gates.

"We will end production of the F-22 fighter," Gates announced matter-of-factly in the hushed Pentagon briefing room yesterday, dispatching Lockheed Martin's \$140-million-a-pop aircraft without even a hint of regret. "For me," he added, "it was not a close call."

The soft-spoken Kansan delivered the news not from a lectern but from his preferred position, in a leather armchair set up behind a table, giving the impression he was on the set of Jim Lehrer's "NewsHour." But the understated delivery obscured the boldness of what Gates was attempting: Calmly and methodically, he posed a direct challenge to the military-industrial complex.

Boeing's Future Combat Systems fighting vehicles -- kaboom!

Lockheed's multiple-kill vehicle: killed.

Northrop Grumman and General Dynamics' DDG 1000 Zumwalt-class destroyer with Raytheon electronics? Gates sunk their battleship.

The Lockheed VH-71 presidential helicopter and Boeing's C-17 cargo plane? SecDef shot them down, too.

It was the opening shot in what is certain to be a long war. In many ways, Gates, in taking on the defense contractors and their many friends in Congress, has invited a fight with an opponent more potent than any he has faced in Iraq and Afghanistan as President Obama's -- and before that President George W. Bush's -- defense secretary.

Obama has already surprised Washington with his ambitious efforts to pump hundreds of billions of dollars into the economy, overhaul health and energy policy, and take command of the auto industry. But when it comes to changing the way this town does business, Obama and Gates have attempted a whole new level of difficulty in challenging the combined might of Boeing, Lockheed, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon and General Dynamics.

The contractors held fire yesterday -- Lockheed and Raytheon said they were "assessing" while Boeing announced it was "studying" -- and defense stocks rose, either because investors were

expecting worse, or more likely, because they suspect Gates's proposal will never get through Congress. To that end, lawmakers' guns were already blazing yesterday, despite Easter recess. Just 24 minutes after Gates finished his announcement, a bipartisan group of senators including Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.) and Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.) fired off a letter to Obama saying Gates's proposed cuts in missile defense "could undermine our emerging missile defense capabilities to protect the United States against a growing threat."

Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, served notice that "the buck stops with Congress," while Jack Murtha (D-Pa.), undergoing knee surgery, managed to issue a statement saying he would weigh Gates's ideas "in the context of current and future threats."

Of course, lawmakers' view of what Rep. Norm Dicks (D-Wash.) dubbed "bloody Monday" depended on whose Osprey was being gored. A joint statement by two Kansas Republicans -- Sen. Pat Roberts and Rep. Todd Tiahrt -- protesting the "extremely concerning" cancellation of an airborne laser prototype may have had something to do with that Boeing plant in Wichita.

Gates, blunt and at times ruthless, seems ready for the guerrilla insurgency the contractors and lawmakers will mount. Walking into the briefing room with black folder, black tie and black suit, he skipped even a "good afternoon" before plunging into his announcement; at his side, providing military cover for his plan, was a no-nonsense Marine general known as "Hoss."

"In the coming weeks, we will hear a great deal about threats and risks and danger to our country and to our men and women in uniform, associated with different budget choices," Gates warned. But, he added: "It is one thing to speak generally about the need for budget discipline in acquisition and contract reform. It is quite another to make tough choices about specific systems and defense priorities based solely on the national interest and then stick to those decisions over time."

Nursing a sniffle and occasional cough, he spent a full hour detailing the terrible things he would do to lawmakers' beloved programs. It was the sort of thing a Democratic administration almost certainly wouldn't have attempted without a holdover from the Bush Pentagon to give the effort credibility -- and even now it's a long shot.

"I expect the e-mails are already coming out from Congress complaining about the cuts to programs that various lawmakers support," the Associated Press's Anne Gearan said. "Do you feel like you're walking into a buzz saw?"

"My hope," Gates replied, is "that the members of Congress will rise above parochial interests and consider what is in the best interest of the nation as a whole."

There's a first time for everything, Mr. Secretary.

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Add a comment (max 5000 characters)

Submit

or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2009 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[Blanco Law Office](#)

Experienced criminal defense lawyer Call today to let us help you
Blancolawoffice1.com

[Security Fence System](#)

Anti-cut, anti-climb, modular high security fence system by Payne
www.GuardianFenceSystem.com

[Artery Clearing Secret](#)

Hugh Downs reports on breakthrough from Nobel Prize Winning Doctor
www.bottomlinesecrets.com