

Lawmakers Vote To Continue Production Of F-22 Jets

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional supporters of an advanced jet fighter won battles Thursday to build more of the aircraft. But with the Obama administration threatening to veto the move, they're a long way from winning the war.

The Senate Armed Services Committee announced it had added \$1.75 billion for seven more F-22 jets to the proposed 2010 defense budget. Earlier, the House voted to include a \$369 million downpayment for 12 additional fighters to its version of the defense budget bill.

The extra money would extend production of the F-22 beyond the 187 aircraft that Defense Secretary Robert Gates says are needed. Buying any more of the jets, which cost about \$140 million each, undermines the ability to increase the size of U.S. ground forces and purchase gear for fighting unconventional wars against terror groups and insurgents, Gates has argued.

On Wednesday, the White House said President Barack Obama's senior advisers would recommend he reject the 2010 defense budget bill if it includes money for more F-22s. That's the first time the new administration has used the veto threat since taking office in January.

Administration allies in the Senate say they're optimistic the money will be stripped out before a final bill reaches President Barack Obama's desk. They pointed to the slim margin of the victory and said it's not likely to last.

The full Senate must still vote on the committee's recommendation. That budget bill must then be reconciled with the House version, a process that won't be completed until later this year.

Michigan Sen. Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said the committee approved the \$1.75 billion boost by a narrow 13-11 vote. Levin, along with Arizona Sen. John McCain, the committee's top Republican, voted against the addition.

"I think we should have terminated the F-22, and I voted that way," Levin said. "I don't think anyone is looking for a battle here with the White House."

Last week, the House Armed Services Committee voted 31 to 30 to include the F-22 downpayment. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, wanted to eliminate the money during the debate over the budget bill by the full House of Representatives.

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But procedural rules prevented Frank from offering his amendment, and the House approved the overall defense budget bill by a vote of 389-22.

Supporters of the aircraft say capping production of the F-22 at 187 aircraft is too risky in an unstable world where Iran, North Korea and China all loom as potential adversaries that can't be ignored.

They point to an assessment from a senior Air Force officer, Gen. John Corley, who said in early June that buying only 187 F-22s "puts execution of our current national military strategy at high risk." Corley, who runs Air Combat Command at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, says 381 of the aircraft are required.

The multibillion F-22 program also means jobs, a compelling argument during tough economic times. The aircraft is built by the Lockheed Martin Corp. The primary manufacturing plant is in Georgia, but key parts of the plane are also made in Texas and California.

According to Republicans on the House Armed Services Committee, there are 95,000 jobs directly or indirectly tied to F-22 production.

"It is regrettable that the administration needs to issue a veto threat for funding intended to meet a real national security requirement that has been consistently confirmed by our uniformed military leaders," said Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., a staunch advocate of the radar-evading jets.

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