

The New Bomber's Stealthy Constituency

Massive Pentagon contracts enjoy large and powerful constituencies on Capitol Hill, with lawmakers whose districts and states stand to benefit economically from these programs frequently creating a unified front with one goal in mind: to keep the funds flowing.

The hard-fought contracts for the F-35 strike fighter and the KC-46 aerial refueling tanker, for instance, spurred armies of lawmakers whose unwavering support for these programs crosses party lines and transcends ideologies.

Parochialism often trumps partisanship, particularly when thousands of highly skilled and well-paid jobs are at stake. That public, political support is often key to keeping programs off the chopping block, especially as the Pentagon grapples with its priorities in a more frugal spending environment.

For lawmakers who could potentially stand to benefit from the Air Force's next Long-Range Strike Bomber—a program cloaked in secrecy—the situation is quite different. The bomber, a top Air Force procurement priority and the only manned combat aircraft currently in development, comes with a price tag that could top \$100 billion, making it one of the most expensive programs in the Pentagon's weapons portfolio.

When the Air Force announced its decision to pass over defense giants Lockheed Martin and Boeing and instead award Northrop Grumman the coveted and highly lucrative contract to develop and build the military's next fleet of stealth bombers, there was comparatively little reaction on Capitol Hill.

Those lawmakers who commented on the contract award, such as Rep. Joe Courtney of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee's sea power and projection forces panel, focused on the importance of the bomber to the nation's security. Noticeably absent were the usual boasts about local job creation and economic investment.

"As testimony before our subcommittee has shown definitively, our nation's ability to project power and strike from far distances is a cornerstone of our warfighting capabilities—both now and well into the future," Courtney said in a statement. "In the coming months, Congress must do all it can on a bipartisan basis to support this program, while also providing



the necessary oversight to ensure successful execution."

Courtney's home state could stand to benefit from the bomber, particularly if Northrop Grumman's bomber features a Pratt & Whitney engine, but in a rare twist in an industry that strategically selects subcontractors to maximize political advantage, neither Northrop Grumman nor the Air Force are disclosing who is actually working on the program.

"We won't go into any details relative to specific components or subcontractors due to classification and enhanced security," Lt. Gen. Arnold W. Bunch Jr., the military deputy in the Air Force's acquisition office, told reporters Oct. 27.

A fair amount of the work will likely be done in southern California, particularly at the company's Palmdale plant, but other areas that stand to gain an economic boost from the bomber contract remain a question mark.

Lawmakers and congressional staff with the necessary clearances will know where the jobs are, but they won't be able to share the information with their colleagues or the general public.

That, says Todd Harrison of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, could be an issue for the bomber, ultimately handicapping outreach and lobbying efforts against other high-priced programs with a known supplier base.

After all, the bomber will be competing for cash against programs like the F-35, whose supporters eagerly point out that the fighter employs people in nearly every state.

"It makes it harder to defend the program on the Hill if you can't point to constituencies that would be affected," Harrison says.

For now, at least, congressional support for the bomber runs high, with lawmakers in both parties stressing that it remains a strategic priority for the nation. However, that doesn't make it invulnerable to cuts. Lawmakers announced \$5 billion in reductions to the national policy bill on Nov. 3, bringing the defense authorization in line with a two-year budget deal already signed by President Obama. The cuts included a \$230 million reduction to the LRS-B program, due to schedule changes.

Of the four congressional defense committees, only the Senate Appropriations Committee granted the Pentagon its \$1.25 billion request for the program.

Defense officials have repeatedly made it clear that they unequivocally support the bomber, a strategic asset and crucial leg of the military's nuclear triad.

"Building this bomber is a strategic investment in the next 50 years," Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter said Oct. 27. "It demonstrates our commitment to our allies, and our determination to potential adversaries, making it crystal clear that the United States will continue to retain the ability to project power throughout the globe long into the future." ★

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