

## **Uncertainty on F-22 Numbers**

Despite the apparent finality of the Quadrennial Defense Review's findings that 183 is the optimum number of F-22s for the future, there is some room for optimism that the number will increase, though perhaps not as high as the Air Force's stated requirement for 381.

Item one: A high-level review expected to recommend cutting the F-22 buy even further appears to be going in the other direction.

A study of tactical air requirements by the consulting firm of Whitney, Bradley, & Brown, Inc., set in motion last fall by Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England (see "Washington Watch: England Launches New Fighter Review," October 2005, p. 12), will recommend between 220 and 260 F-22s be bought, according to Pentagon officials. That's a surprise because the last WBB study England asked for recommended a cut in the combined Navy-Marine Corps combat aircraft fleet, and England proceeded to reduce the fleet by 400 aircraft. England's instructions that the firm seek "optimization" of the military's overall air combat capability in the current study was understood to be marching orders to find savings through more cuts.

The report isn't due to England until August, leaving plenty of time for anti-Raptor factions in the Pentagon to weigh in, but the very fact that such figures leaked out is considered a positive sign for the Air Force.

Item two: USAF's Chief of Staff says the Pentagon leadership has been given "assurances" that 183 is the rock-bottom number of F-22s, and more may be needed for industrial-base reasons.

Gen. T. Michael Moseley told defense reporters in April that "we do have assurances from [the Office of the Secretary of Defense] that 183 is the QDR number," which he said is "the baseline."

However, he also noted that the QDR determined that the Air Force must have a warm production base for "fifth generation fighters," those aircraft which exploit a combination of stealth, speed, and sensor fusion. If the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is delayed, Moseley said, it would mean the F-22 production line could be extended, and this move "bridges us to the F-35."

Asked about the WBB study, Moseley declined to say that the Air Force is hopeful it will get more of the Raptors.

"I think what I want to say is, let's just let the study play out," he said. In the meantime, the Air Force is concentrating on getting the program stabilized, from a vendor and subcontractor perspective. Getting that accomplished, along with approval for a three-year multiyear buy, he said, will likely get the F-22's unit cost down. If that happens, "I think we can set the plateau so that if we have to extend this, relative to Joint Strike Fighter, we're set right to do it."