

Pentagon Defends B-2 Performance but

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The Pentagon yesterday strongly defended the performance of the B-2 stealth bomber, disputing a General Accounting Office draft report that said tests have yet to demonstrate the radar-eluding and low-flying characteristics that were promised to set the controversial aircraft apart from other planes.

News of the GAO study has galvanized opponents of the costly bomber at a time when Congress is divided over whether to double the order for 20. The Pentagon yesterday reaffirmed its opposition to buying more than 20, but made clear that its decision to cap the program had more to do with strategic and budgetary considerations than doubts about the plane's ability to perform as advertised.

A statement by Paul Kaminski, the Pentagon's acquisition chief, said the test program is only about 50 percent complete, and none of

the tests so far indicate the B-2 will fail to meet its key operational requirements.

But the GAO draft report, copies of which have been circulating since last week, asserted that the B-2 has not proven as invisible to radar as it is supposed to be.

Additionally, a special guidance system designed to enable the plane to fly close to the ground and further elude detection is having trouble distinguishing rain from other obstacles. And, the report said, some of the frequency bands of the plane's electronic defenses are easily overloaded.

"After 14 years of development and evolving mission requirements, including six years of flight testing, the Air Force has yet to demonstrate that the B-2 design will meet some of its most important mission requirements," said the study, first reported last Friday in the trade publication "Inside the Air Force." "For the most part, aircraft have been delivered late and with significant deviations and waivers."

So far, the study noted, the plane has

achieved only 12 percent of its required test objectives for stealth and only 7 percent of its objectives for survivability.

Begun in 1981 and intended originally to deliver nuclear weapons deep inside the Soviet Union, the plane's mission has changed since the Cold War's end. The B-2 now is touted by proponents as a revolutionary conventional bomber whose planned radar-evading capability and large weapons load will be useful against a range of potential enemies.

Over the years, the number of B-2s that the Pentagon planned to order has shrunk from 132 to 20. Defense hawks in the House, with support from representatives in whose districts the plane would be built, won floor approval last month of \$553 million to prepare for additional production. But the Senate Armed Services Committee denied the funds earlier this month and House members are expected to reconsider the matter when the 1996 appropriations bill comes up for a vote next week.

Continues to Oppose Ordering More

Studies last spring by both the Pentagon and the Institute for Defense Analysis concluded there was little need for additional B-2s and said future funds would be better spent on modernizing the Air Force's jet fighter and transport fleets. Another Pentagon study completed earlier this month concluded that the nation's ability to produce B-2 bombers would not be lost if the program is terminated at 20.

But B-2 proponents have marshaled support from seven former defense secretaries who say 20 bombers would not satisfy U.S. strategic needs. And Northrop Grumman Corp., the plane's prime contractor, has engaged in a very aggressive campaign, running newspaper and television ads extolling the B-2, organizing subcontractors to lobby congressional representatives, hiring retired senior Air Force officers to promote the plane, offering rides in the bomber to Hill members and proposing to provide 20 more B-2s at a "flyaway cost" of about \$570 million per plane.

The GAO report said difficulties with the

B-2 have called into question whether the cost of the 20 bombers on order will stay below the total \$44.6 billion price cap mandated by Congress in 1994, or about \$2.2 billion per plane.

Northrop has delivered 13 planes, with some production delays of up to five months, and the GAO said the latest planes to come off the production line continue to show many of the same deviations as earlier B-2s.

Pentagon and Northrop officials responded yesterday that B-2s are being produced in three batches, with the initial batch intended to lack some of the capabilities of later batches as development and testing continues.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For excerpts from the GAO study of the B-2 bomber, see *Digital Ink*, The Washington Post's on-line news and information service. For more information on *Digital Ink*, call 1-800-510-5104, ext. 9000.