U.S. Defense Secretary Underscores F-35 Importance During Lockheed Martin Visit

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United States Secretary of Defense Robert Gates visited Lockheed Martin's final assembly operation for the F-35 Lightning II stealth fighter today, conveying optimism for the program's future and emphasizing the F-35's importance to global security.

(Photo: http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20090831/DA68451)

"We cannot afford as a nation not to have this airplane," Gates said at a news conference following a tour of the factory where the F-35 is assembled. "I was very impressed by what I saw this morning - by the investments that have been made in the production line, the robotics and automation. I'm heartened by what I've seen . . . but especially by the commitment of the people involved in putting this airplane together."

Gates walked along portions of the mile-long factory floor, where he stopped to converse with F-35 workers, and saw all three variants of the aircraft in various stages of assembly.

Robert J. Stevens, chairman, president and CEO of Lockheed Martin Corp., said it was a "great honor" to host Secretary Gates.

"The purpose of the Secretary's visit was to make very clear to us his expectations and our need to perform to our plans. That means producing a superior technological product and making sure that we maintain our schedule, enable the government to start training pilots in 2011, and fully equipping the Marine Corps for initial operational capability in 2012. It also means we'll support our allied governments' interests in the program while maintaining affordability," Stevens said. "So, there's a full array of things that we have to do, but we have great confidence in the team that we've put together here."

The visit was Gates' first to Lockheed Martin's Fort Worth plant, which also has served as the final assembly point for the B-24 Liberator, B-36 Peacemaker, B-58 Hustler, F-111 Aardvark and F-16 Fighting Falcon.

The Lockheed Martin F-35 is a 5th generation fighter, uniquely characterized by a combination of advanced stealth with supersonic speed and high agility, sensor fusion, network-enabled capabilities and advanced sustainment. The three F-35 variants are derived from a common design, are being developed together and will use the same sustainment infrastructure worldwide, bringing economies of commonality and scale.

The United States and eight international partners are planning to buy more than 3,000 F-35 aircraft.

Headquartered in Bethesda, Md., Lockheed Martin is a global security company that employs about 140,000 people worldwide and is principally engaged in the research, design, development, manufacture, integration and sustainment of advanced technology systems, products and services. The corporation reported 2008 sales of $42.7 billion.

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