



Federal spending tug-of-war threatens production at America's only tank factory

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LIMA, Ohio -- Paul Matson passes a guard shack and barbed wire-topped fence on his way home from the only factory in the United States that still makes battle tanks.

An early variant M1 Abrams tank sits at the plant's entrance, facing northeast toward nearby Lima, Ohio. More than 32 years after the first of these 65-ton beasts lumbered off the line here, the military hasn't found a better heavy-combat vehicle.

"We need the tank. Our issue is that we have enough tanks," said Kiya Batmanglij, the Army's assistant deputy for force development.

For the past two years, the Pentagon requested no money for M1A2 SEP tanks, the newest variant. Yet, members of Congress put hundreds of millions of dollars into spending bills both years to buy more. This year's spending bill isn't finalized.

The battle over the Abrams offers a glimpse of challenges ahead as Congress tries to cut federal spending and deficits that both parties warn could strangle the American economy.

Lawmakers' parochial interests, powerful special interest groups, the future of vital pockets of the heavy industrial base that depend on tax dollars, and the pressure of squeezing what's necessary into what's available are colliding in Lima, about 219 miles west of Pittsburgh.

The Budget Control Act, part of the deal that increased the debt ceiling so the government could continue paying bills last year, requires \$487 billion in defense spending cuts.

"The fiscal realities of today are not what they were three, four, five years ago," said Col. Frank Muth, who oversees Army equipping programs, including the Abrams.

The Army bought 1,589 M1A2 tanks, the last of which will be produced in June 2014. It has 791 older M1A1 tanks for the National Guard. More than 200 of the older tanks sit in storage locations in Texas and Alabama, waiting to be delivered. They've never been driven. The average tank in service today is two to three years old, said Steven Thorson, the Army's systems coordinator for the Abrams.

Lawmakers led by Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, inserted \$255 million into last year's budget to buy 42 tanks. This year, Brown and allies including Sen. Bob Casey Jr., D-Scranton, want to add \$181 million, enough for about 30 tanks. The House put \$181 million in its version of the National Defense Authorization Act, passed on May 18. The Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday added \$91 million to purchase equipment that could be used to upgrade 33 tanks.

"You have a 30-year hemorrhaging of manufacturing jobs," Casey said. "We have a skilled workforce that's making a product that we can make competitively. To give that away, I think you've got to have a very compelling argument."

Army officials say foreign orders -- Saudi Arabia and Egypt use the tank -- and the plant's production of the Stryker armored vehicle and Israeli Namer tanks would keep Lima operating until 2016-17, when the next Abrams upgrade is scheduled.

But foreign orders can be fickle. The State Department must approve them, and it's impossible to say whether the United States will want to sell the tank to, for example, the Egyptian military next year.

An elite crew

As production falls, workers get laid off. General Dynamics, the defense contractor that operates the government-owned factory, estimates it could cost \$1.5 billion to retrain workers and recertify suppliers if the Abrams line idles.

"Even if you could convince me (the Army's plan is the cheapest), isn't it worth a little something to still have an industrial base?" said Rep. Roscoe Bartlett, R-Md., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee's Air and Land Forces Subcommittee. "It's not like these guys are going to go find a job in some commercial thing somewhere and we can have them back when we need them. They're just going to be gone."

Abrams welders invented procedures for welding materials, including titanium and stainless steel, and created a certification process to ensure welders were up to the job.

"None existed because of the thickness of the material we're using," said Keith Deters, the Lima plant manager. "You don't get Abrams 101 in college. You come out and you get years of experience. It's the most sophisticated ground combat vehicle in the world."

Even experienced welders, once hired, take two months to earn the certifications required on the Abrams line, Deters said.

"You have to be able to read your metal, know where it's going to go, what it's going to do," said Matson, 60. "Everybody builds those ... like it's their own kid riding in it."

Sometimes it is. One worker's son survived an attack by Iraqi insurgents inside the tank his father built, said Matson, a welder at the plant for half his life. Veterans make up 40 percent of the plant's workforce, said Russ Clewley, president of United Auto Workers Local 2075, representing 600 workers at the plant.

Politics in play

More than 40 Pennsylvania companies supply parts for the Abrams, according to Casey's office.

"We have a system that is, by design, parochial. People from Pennsylvania are elected to represent local interests. So in a sense, their efforts to procure money for their district is totally valid. They're not representatives of the American people; they're representatives of a slice of Pennsylvania. But you're not ever allowed to say that," said Benjamin Friedman, a researcher in defense and homeland security studies at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington.

"So there's this bizarre double-talk at all times that there's no difference -- ever -- between the interests of one region of the country and the whole country, which is crazy. Of course there are," he said.

Defense contractors take advantage of this parochialism, Bartlett said.

"The F-35 (fighter aircraft) is now built in 48 states, so there are 96 senators and I don't know how many hundreds of representatives who support the F-35. ... You have people with a huge vested interest -- the military, the industrial complex, and the Congress that wants to keep jobs in their district. What do you expect them to say? 'We need a big military -- even bigger than we've got,' " Bartlett said.

Bartlett said he has "no idea" whether the country spends too much or too little on defense because "we still have not clearly defined what we want our military to do."

The people elected to decide these questions -- the Republican-controlled House and Democratic-controlled Senate -- "don't communicate," Bartlett said.

"They may as well be a thousand miles away," Bartlett said of the senators located a short walk from his Capitol Hill office.

A \$181 million slice

General Dynamics spent more than \$3.1 million to lobby Congress in the first three months of 2012, congressional records show. Since the 112th Congress began last year, the company donated \$1.1 million, fifth-most among defense contractors, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a Washington nonprofit that tracks money in politics.

Casey received \$8,500 from General Dynamics; Bartlett, \$8,000. House Armed Services Committee Chairman Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., received the most, at \$36,000, according to the center.

"I don't think there's any link between the work that I'm doing and the folks that might choose to support me," Casey said.

Bartlett said General Dynamics' lobbying had no effect on his support for the Abrams. "We were kind of proactive in that," he said.

All of this is for 0.03 percent of the total amount being debated -- a \$181 million slice of a \$525 billion budget request. For a family making \$50,000 a year, it's the equivalent of arguing over \$17.

Unless that family is Paul Matson's.