

GE And UTC In Media Face-Off Over Joint Strike Fighter Engine Funding

By JANICE PODSADA

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Two of Connecticut's top guns, General Electric and United Technologies Corp., waged a war of words Wednesday in print and over the air.

The annual fight over funding for an alternate engine program for the Joint Strike Fighter, an advanced fighter jet, turned into a public spectacle as the normally staid blue-chip companies bashed each other's role in the development of the Joint Strike Fighter. It's the military's most expensive weapons program at \$323 billion.

UTC's Pratt & Whitney unit is the primary engine provider for the Joint Strike Fighter, also known as the F-35 Lightning II.

But with the aid of congressional funding, rival GE is developing its own engine to power the F-35 even though the Department of Defense has said it can't afford two engine models. UTC has been trying to scuttle GE's alternate engine program for years.

GE characterizes its efforts as healthy competition that has spurred technological innovation and driven down costs. Pratt & Whitney, on the other hand, describes its rival's "competition" as unnecessary, unwanted and wasteful of taxpayers' dollars.

Now, in a congressional showdown today or Friday, the U.S. House of Representatives is expected to take a full floor vote, led by Rep. John B. Larson, D-1st District, that could eliminate funding for GE's alternate engine. Larson has described the extra engine program as misguided and a "prime example of wasteful spending." Last week, the House Armed Services Committee voted to include \$485 million for further development of GE's alternate engine.

"Sometimes when time is of the essence you don't have a lot of choice but to go directly to a mass audience in the hopes that your friends see your message and help you in your cause," said Michael London, owner of Michael J. London and Associates, a Trumbull public relations firm. "When both of these ads [which ran a few pages apart in The Courant] are viewed in combination, it's a significant reminder of the financial and political power of these two companies."

Erin Dick, a Pratt & Whitney spokeswoman, said, "It just so happens that both of our 'competition' ads ran [Wednesday]. We had no intelligence that their competition ad was going to run."

The companies' ads, which challenged each other's definition of competition, urged readers to contact their congressional representatives and register their support.

GE said it ran its ad locally because of the number of jobs and suppliers it has in Connecticut, and acknowledged that it's a heated debate "with a lot of stuff flying all over the place," said Rick Kennedy, a GE spokesman. "We want to alert people to what's happening."