

## Boeing ABL, Continued

The Boeing-led team remains concerned about the funding stream after the 2009 demonstration and believes alleged multimission capability "adds to the total value" of ABL, Rinn asserted.

The chemical oxygen-iodine laser achieved "first light" onboard the modified 747-400F in September, and over Nov. 24-25 was fired through the aircraft's beam-control/fire-control system for the first time.

Two firings, each of less than a second, were completed at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., to ensure the beam is controlled and boresighted.

Rinn said completion of the two milestones keeps ABL on track for the shootdown demonstration against a "foreign ballistic-missile asset" in late summer or early fall 2009. Flight-testing is planned to begin early next year. The "lethal" demonstration is seen as vital to continuing the program, which eventually calls for a fleet of the laser-armed aircraft.

For the latest ABL tests, the laser was fired through the aircraft's nose-mounted turret and into a range simulator. This collects the 1.5 meter-diameter beam and focuses it on a simulated target. A small amount is split off for diagnostic tests to determine beam quality. The rest is dumped into a calorimeter to measure power.

Rinn said longer-duration ground tests are planned during December and January. Flight-tests will then begin, first with inert fluids in the laser. Once the laser is activated, it will be fired initially into an onboard calorimeter.

Once airborne shots through the turret begin, Terrier-Lynx sounding rockets will be used to test acquisition and tracking. Instrumented missiles will be used as targets to test the laser at low and high power leading up to the shootdown, he said.

The ABL team is working with the U.S. Missile Defense Agency to define a post-shootdown program. This will be "driven by funding," Rinn acknowledged, but could include expanding the boost-phase intercept envelope with shots against different missile classes at various ranges and altitudes. It could also include a demo of the ABL's potential capabilities against other types of targets.

## OBAMA, Continued

Meanwhile, Mann said, Obama also can launch discussions of how to revise energy and health care policies "without setting specific dates for completion."

Issues that cannot wait, however, include the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama has repeatedly said he wants to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq within 16 months, although he has left himself some wiggle room. Top military leaders advocate a somewhat slower schedule, and the new president will have to resolve the matter.

Obama wants to increase the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, which might draw more public attention and controversy if the economic news were not so dominant.

For now, at least, Obama enjoys strong public support. Political insiders say his Cabinet picks are savvy and substantial. A recent AP-GfK poll found that nearly three in four Americans approve of how Obama has handled the transition. That's about the same level of support his two immediate predecessors enjoyed.

But there is no guarantee that Obama's actions will reverse the dramatic drops in employment and the stock market, or the crises in the financial and automaking sectors. With billions of taxpayer dollars pouring in, Americans may want results soon, and the new president's popularity could rapidly diminish if they don't materialize.

"I find it hard to believe that, no matter how skillful he is, he can sustain this level of hope and support," said Galston, the former Clinton aide. "To govern is to choose," he said, and every time a president chooses, some groups are disappointed

## US Sending 20,000 Troops, Continued

Asked whether Marines may be tapped to go, Gates said the decision has not been made.

The top Marine officer, Gen. James Conway, told The Associated Press this week that he believes there is a growing consensus that Marines could be used to fill part of the need in Afghanistan. If approved, he said, some could go there in early spring.

"It's clear that the Marines want to be in the fight, that's what you'd expect," said Gates, adding that it's clear that the security situation has greatly improved in Iraq's Anbar province, where the bulk of the Marines are. "I don't have a problem with Gen. Conway's desire to have a bigger part of the mission in Afghanistan for the Marine Corps."

He said he will wait for recommendations from his military leaders.

There are 31,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, including 13,500 with the NATO-led coalition and 17,500 training Afghan troops and fighting the insurgency. There are 149,000 troops in Iraq.

Gates' stop in Afghanistan was designed initially as a farewell tour to visit troops as he prepared to leave office. But that changed when he was asked to stay on by Obama, making Gates the new administration's Republican holdover in the Cabinet.

During a NATO meeting in October, Gates asked allies to consider increasing troop levels in Afghanistan next year during the elections, a move that has been made for past votes, both there and in Iraq. Gates said the increase would be temporary, and it was not clear how many forces would be needed or who would provide them.

At the same meeting, the allies also agreed on to step up their operations to combat Afghan drug lords who fuel terror networks.