By DAN CHAPMAN of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution who published this story on 4th April

The fate of the F-22 Raptor fighter jet, assembled in Cobb County by 2,000 workers, should be revealed Monday when Defense Secretary Robert Gates unveils "a fundamental shift" in U.S. military priorities.

The Pentagon is alerting key members of Congress this weekend about plans to shrink spending on expensive weapons systems, including the technologically superior F-22. Gates, no big fan of the stealth fighter, will lay out 2010 budget priorities at the Monday afternoon Pentagon press conference.

"These are not changes to the margins," Defense Department spokesman Geoff Morrell told reporters Friday. "This is a fundamental shift."

Morrell offered no details. But Gates has recently made clear that high-tech weapons better suited for Cold War battles aren't top budgetary priorities while low-tech conflicts continue in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Pentagon has contracted to buy 183 F-22s from the Lockheed Martin Corp. More than 140 have been built. Each plane costs a minimum of $150 million but adding in research and development expeses over 20 years can more than double the price. Current orders would keep the Marietta assembly line open until late 2011.

Rob Fuller, a Lockheed Martin spokesman for the F-22 program, said Saturday it was "premature" to speculate on what Gates will recommend.

But the recession, which has slashed five million payroll jobs, could prove the F-22's savior. Roughly 25,000 workers in Georgia, California and Texas supply parts and assemble the jet fighter. President Barack Obama might be loath to endanger any more jobs.

"A lot of people find that argument persuasive," said defense analyst John Pike. "And, as a practical matter, there's only a finite number of things the Executive branch can change in a budget without Congress putting it back in."

U.S. Sens. Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson and Rep. Phil Gingrey, all Republicans from Georgia, couldn't be reached for comment Saturday.

"We're cautiously optimistic that Monday will be a favorable day for the F-22," said Chris Jackson, the spokesman for Gingrey whose district includes the Marietta aircraft plant.