

X-37B robotic space plane aims for Thursday launch

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(AP) -- The military is poised to launch an unmanned winged spacecraft resembling a miniature space shuttle Thursday and it probably won't be a one-time shot.

Gary Payton, [Air Force](#) deputy under secretary for space programs, said Tuesday the Air Force has contracted for a second space plane depending on the success of the prototype's maiden flight.

"Currently, we're looking at a 2011 launch for that second tail number. That assumes everything goes properly as predicted on this first flight," Payton told reporters.

After a decade of development, the X-37B Orbital [Test Vehicle](#) is slated to launch from Florida and spend up to nine months in orbit. It will re-enter Earth on autopilot and land like an airplane at the Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif.

The spacecraft will conduct classified experiments while in orbit. Payton said the Air Force's main interest is to test the craft's automated flight control system and learn about the cost of turning it around for launch again.

Built by Boeing's Phantom Works division, the X-37 program was originally headed by [NASA](#). It was later turned over to the Pentagon's research and development arm and then to a secretive Air Force unit.

Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on the project, but the current total has not been released.

"After a tumultuous history of sponsorship, it's great to see the X37 finally get to the [launch pad](#) and get into space," Payton said.

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