

We must maintain our power on the seas

U~T San Diego

By Ray Mabus

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In a few weeks we will be celebrating the 238th birthday of the U.S. Navy, and a month after that of the Marine Corps.

The value of our naval forces to the United States is as apparent today as it was at the founding of our nation. Our Constitution explicitly directs Congress to “provide and maintain a Navy.” The word “maintain” is included for good reason. At that time, the Navy and Marine Corps were a tangible and permanent signal of our independence and of our presence on the world’s stage.

Throughout our history, the Navy and Marine Corps team has been called on to act in both war and peace, and today continues to play a large and vital role on that stage — from the mountains of Afghanistan to our forces in the Eastern Mediterranean, off the coast of Syria. The framers of the Constitution understood that the Navy had to provide constant and persistent presence — it had to be “maintained.” Presence is what the Navy and Marine Corps are all about.

As we chart the course for our next 238 years, as secretary of the Navy I am focused on four key factors that make our global presence possible. They are our priorities as we look ahead: people, platforms, power, and partnerships. In our 21st century world, they matter.

I’d like to concentrate on the importance of our platforms. On Monday I met with members of the San Diego Chamber of Commerce. San Diego plays a critical role in how we provide the right platforms to our sailors and marines. The number of ships, submarines, and aircraft in our fleet is what gives us the capacity to provide our global presence. We have the most advanced platforms in the world, but quantity also has a quality all its own.

In the four years before I took office in 2009 the Navy put just 19 ships under contract, continuing the downward trend in the size of our fleet. Since I took office 60 ships have been put under contract and by 2019 our current plan will return the fleet to 300 ships. In San Diego you build many of those ships, and maintain and upgrade much of what we have in the fleet. One of the strengths of our system is the teamwork of our uniformed sailors, our Navy civilians, and industry partners — teamwork that is on display at the NASSCO shipyard and throughout the San Diego ship repair industry, every day. The work on the San Diego waterfront proves that acquisition excellence isn’t just an empty phrase used in Washington; it is how we are building the fleet.

Shipbuilding is a demanding trade that requires skilled craftsmen, innovative thinking, and dedicated management. In the past year our ships homeported in San Diego accounted for \$4 billion in total economic impact to the community. Everyone benefits from the hard work of those building and repairing our ships in San Diego. It makes the fleet stronger, our nation safer and Southern California’s economy more vibrant.

I am concerned about what current budget issues in Washington will do to this work. Sequester, continuing resolutions and a government shutdown may cause us to lose a lot of the progress we

have made. I have done everything I can to safeguard shipbuilding. But, if sequestration continues, I can't do it forever. Everything under multiyear contracts or block buys, like many of our aircraft, also are at risk.

New construction is only part of what keeps our fleet operating at its current size. Maintenance and repair is what keeps the ships we already have ready for sea. Because of sequestration the fleet could get smaller and that smaller fleet not as maintained and ready when a crisis confronts us.

As Secretary Hagel has said, letting the inflexible, across-the-board cuts of sequestration persist would be a huge strategic miscalculation. In order to keep our deploying units at the proper readiness and our fleet at the right size we have already borrowed against our future. It won't be long until that bill comes due.

None of this means we can't reduce defense spending. We are coming out of two long wars and the American people have the right to expect us to spend less. Sequester and continuing resolutions have put us on course to mindless, nonstrategic, unprioritized cuts that will potentially degrade our military capabilities. A far better path would be to reduce spending in a smart and thoughtful way, protecting our capabilities by ensuring flexibility and setting priorities. We must examine every expenditure and put dollars in support of our defense strategy.

The ships you build and repair in San Diego give our naval forces the technological edge. Another edge comes from our highly trained, dedicated, always courageous, faithful United States sailors and marines. Around the world, far from their homes, far from their families, they are deployed in defense of America. They truly are America's "Away Team." We must do everything we can to support them with a rational budget process, and with the platforms they need. The partnership between our men and women in uniform and the people of San Diego plays a vital role in maintaining American sea power today, and we must keep it so in the future.

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