

Opinion: Maintaining American Seapower

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By Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus

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USS George H.W. Bush (CVN-77) transits the Gulf of Aden in 2014. US Navy Photo

Facing an increasing array of threats and demands even as our budgetary situation grows more challenging, it is clear that the Navy and Marine Corps team offers the best value to advance both our global security and economic interests.

Uniquely, the Navy and Marine Corps provide presence around the world, around the clock. We are the nation's first line of defense, ready for any challenge on the horizon. Presence means we respond faster; remain on station longer; carry everything we need with us; and do whatever missions our nation's leaders assign us without needing anyone else's permission.

America was born a maritime nation, and we have always known that its success depends on an exceptional Navy and Marine Corps. Article I of the U.S. Constitution authorizes Congress to "raise" armies when needed, but directs it to "provide and maintain a navy." From the first six frigates to our growing Fleet of today, from Tripoli to Afghanistan, sailors and Marines have proved the Founders' wisdom. American leaders across the political spectrum have understood the vital significance of sea power.

Nearly half the world's population lives within 60 miles of the sea; 90 percent of global trade goes by sea; and 95 percent of all voice and data transfer occurs via cable under the ocean. The shelves of our stores are stocked with products from all over the globe. Some 38 million American jobs are directly linked to seaborne international trade. For seven decades, the Navy and Marine Corps have been the primary protectors of maintaining open sea lanes and freedom of commerce, giving rise to an international trade system that has created unprecedented economic growth and helped deter major conflict.

To provide the presence needed to maintain that system, and to meet the demands of a national defense strategy that clearly is focused on the maritime domain—with its emphasis on a rebalance to the Pacific—we need to maintain our investment in maritime assets.

The presence that the Navy and Marine Corps uniquely deliver, and our influence around the world together are built on four foundations: people, platforms, power and partnerships. Those are the keys to the capability, capacity, and success of our naval services. They remain my top priorities.

Tomorrow I'll be on Capitol Hill to talk with the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense about the Navy and Marine Corps posture, readiness, and budget for next year. Overall the president's Fiscal Year 2016 budget balances current readiness necessary to execute assigned missions while sustaining a highly capable Fleet, all within a tough fiscal climate. That climate

demands the most rigorous examination of every dollar we spend, and aggressive efforts to cut unnecessary costs.

For the past few years the Department of the Navy has attempted to minimize the impact of an uncertain budgetary environment that has been marked by numerous continuing resolutions, the imposition of sequester-level funding, and the threat of the return of sequestration. That environment has made it more difficult—but even more critical—to set priorities and make hard choices.

We remain committed to providing our sailors, Marines, and our civilians with the training and support they need to maintain our naval presence—and we include in that their dedicated families and our wounded veterans. We've launched a comprehensive approach to assure the world's healthiest, most resilient and best-educated force, and we are exploring innovative means to improve recruitment and retention.

But our personnel, as good as they are, cannot do their jobs without platforms. Providing presence—being where we are needed, when we are needed—requires ships, submarines, aircraft, and attendant equipment. Quantity has a quality all its own. That means we must have a properly sized and balanced fleet.

On Sept. 11, 2001, the Navy's battle force stood at 316 ships. By 2008, our Fleet had declined to 278 ships. America's focus on two ground wars only partly explains the decline. In the five years before I assumed this position, the Navy contracted for just 27 ships, not enough to stop the slide in the size of the Fleet. In my first five years in office we contracted for 70 ships, halting and reversing that decline. By the end of the decade, our Fleet will once again top 300 ships.

Without the right fleet, the Navy and Marine Corps will not be able to meet the demand placed on them by their need to respond to world events. In the face of budgetary uncertainty, cutting ships is the most damaging and least reversible course of action, which is why I am committed to preserving shipbuilding.

Fueling the ships, aircraft, and vehicles of our Navy and Marine Corps is a vital operational concern and enables our global presence. That's why the Navy has a history of innovation, especially in energy. We led the shift from sail to steam and steam to oil, and the U.S. Navy pioneered nuclear-power propulsion.

Over the past six years the fuels market has seen incredible price volatility. New domestic sources are reducing our reliance on foreign oil, but cannot stop the wild price fluctuations. At the same time, the competition for power and energy and the use of fuel as an economic weapon remains a critical international security issue. Our national security interests, and the ability of the Navy and Marine Corps to meet their missions, must be enhanced by increasing their energy diversity and efficiency.

Maintaining presence and advancing global security must also be augmented through partnerships. Cooperation helps make us more effective, diffuses tensions, and reduces misunderstandings. While we commonly lead efforts around the world, we work closely with allies and partners to increase interoperability and establish relationships that help keep the peace.

Whenever America has called, the Navy and Marine Corps have always been there. In order to ensure that we continue to provide the naval force that our nation's leaders and the American people expect, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, the Chief of Naval Operations, and I will work together with Congress to "maintain" our great Navy and Marine Corps. Because in the words of President Theodore Roosevelt "A good navy is not a provocation to war. It is the surest guaranty of peace."

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