

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
Week of Valor Veterans Job Fair Luncheon
Jacksonville, FL
Tuesday, 28 February 2012

I want to thank you for being such a great military city, for being so good to our Sailors, our Marines, their families. Jacksonville is the most requested duty station we have in the Navy. And it has one of the biggest military retirement communities anywhere in the country.

And so your pride in being a military-friendly city is borne out by those two facts. That absolutely reflects the work being done by so many people, by your congressional delegation – Senator Nelson, Senator Rubio, Congressman Crenshaw, the city council here, the business community, the people of Jacksonville - and the great work done by your incredible mayor, Mayor Brown.

Thank you all for treating me so well, but thank you also for treating our Sailors and their families so well.

And to the Jaguars, the last time I was in this stadium, I tossed the coin when the Jaguars played the Texans, and the Jaguars were down by 10 late in the game and came back to win it on a sort of a miracle pass. So I'm just saying, if you ever really need a win I've been practicing with my thumb, and I'm ready to go. Keep that in mind, but hold it for a really important one - important game.

You know, this year is going to mark some significant anniversaries for Mayport and for the first coast. First, the European maritime explorers came here, these inner waterways from France in 1562. They were pretty quickly followed by the English, the Spanish. And for 450 years through today, the strategic importance of this region is incredibly clear.

Two important Navy anniversaries happen this year; the 70th anniversary of our commissioning Mayport as a naval port and the 60th anniversary of the first deep draft ship into the bay and use the Navy's deep-water basin. And we'll meet one more milestone this year when we finish the \$46 million dredging that will make the port of Mayport accessible to every single ship we've got in the Navy.

This is my first visit to a naval base or a naval city since the release last month of our new defense strategy and the budget to support that. And the reason I'm here today is to underscore the importance of the first coast, Mayport and Jacksonville have and are to our national defense.

The new defense strategy requires a strong Navy-Marine Corps team. And with Mayport continuing to play an absolutely key role, the Navy and Marine Corps will keep being the most formidable expeditionary fighting force the world has ever known.

Now, it's not news that America faces some pretty tough fiscal challenges. We've had to make some hard choices. But we've also worked pretty diligently on this budget to strike a balance between fiscal responsibility and keeping faith with those who have served us so well, the Sailors, Marines and their families. They are and will remain our first priority.

The fiscal constraints, challenges imposed by the congressionally mandated Budget Control Act weren't the only things that made us take another look at our national strategy. So at a time when we're transitioning out of two land wars that have gone on for a decade, a dynamic security environment with very complex threats around the world, given those two things, a review of our national strategy was essential.

And I want to stress one thing. The budget that the president put in two weeks ago is a strategy-driven budget... [inaudible] We did the strategy, and then we put the budget against it to make sure we could meet the strategy. The strategy came first and will always come first.

It was developed under the active leadership of the president and the full participation of the secretary of defense, all the service secretaries and all the joint chiefs. It understandably calls for a renewed focus on the Western Pacific and on the Middle East. But it requires us to maintain our partnerships, our connections in the rest of the world.

We will maintain America's global presence using innovative, low-cost, light-footprint engagements and with a Navy and Marine Corps team that is built for absolutely anything it could face on the land, in the air, on and under the world's oceans or in the vast cyber seas. And it's going to be operated forward to protect American interests, to respond to crises, to deter and prevent war and, if necessary, to fight and win those wars.

The bottom line is that this new strategy places increased responsibilities and demands on our global world-class Navy and Marine Corps. And what this budget does is it meets those demands.

The Navy and Marine Corps can do everything from high-end, conventional warfare to irregular warfare, from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to partnership engagements. We do it all with the same people. We do it all with the same platforms. We do it all without taking up a single inch of anybody's soil. And we do it all thanks to the Sailors and Marines who sail with us.

The new defense strategy says that we're building the force for 2020. And we are. But the impact of two ground wars over the past decade on our fleet and on our force is unmistakable. A fleet that stood at 316 ships and 377,000 Sailors on 9/11/2001 had dropped to 283 ships and almost 49,000 fewer Sailors just eight years later when I took office as secretary.

This administration has made it a priority to rebuild our fleet, and that's what we're going to do. Despite the budget constraints that we've faced, the budget that we put in stabilizes our fleet, ensuring that we will have at least the same number of ships we do at the end of the five-year period – the five-year budget cycle from 2013 to 2017, from FYDP, the future years defense plan – as we have today.

The fleet is not going to go down. In spite of that we're decommissioning seven cruisers because of structural or modernization issues, and the fleet of 2017 will have more capable ships equipped with state-of-the-art technology and manned, as always, with highly skilled Sailors.

In the next five years after this FYDP – so from 2018 through 2022 – we have a plan to grow our fleet and to ensure that capacity continues to match commissions. And we're going to cross the threshold of 300 ships in our fleet by 2019.

Overall, we're going to fully meet the requirements of this new strategy, and we're going to maintain the crucial industrial base that we have today at the same time.

Doing this is going to require doing some of the things the mayor talked about; emphasizing some of the aggressive reforms we've already started on how to get and use energy; how we design and purchase and build new platforms; and how we increase the number and use of unmanned systems.

Rebuilding our fleet is going to mean a new chapter in the types of ships we've got stationed here in Mayport, but it also means that Mayport's importance will absolutely continue.

Last week, we said goodbye to the USS Boone and the USS Groves, two frigates that have both served and represented Mayport proudly for 30 years. We will celebrate and welcome new ships starting next year and for the next few years to include no later than 2015 a three-ship amphibious-ready group and its 2,000 Sailors and their families.

We remain absolutely committed to the importance of strategic disbursal of our fleet. Let me make this very clear. We are only deferring disbursal of our carriers along the East Coast, but we're illustrating our commitment to strategic disbursal with the decision to move the ARG [Amphibious Ready Group] including a big-deck amphibious ship to Mayport. This ARG will be here at least four years before the carrier would have been here and will provide a much bigger boost to the local economy and local industry.

Our estimate suggests that those three ships – the LHD, the LPD and the LSD – will require about \$75 million in maintenance and repair work every year. And unlike a nuclear-powered vessel, all that work gets done here in Mayport.

Jacksonville has been the home of a strong shipbuilding and repair industry for well over a century. You keep us under way. You keep us forward in the fight. You are one of us.

Great example of that is a small-businessman, Mike Whalen. Mike, are you here today? There you are.

Mike's Navy-focused small business, Specialty Marine, just down the street from the base on Mayport Road, does everything from sell watertight doors to rewinding small electric motors. Everybody knows that if you need a part on a Sunday to get under way on Monday, call Mike Whalen and you'll find him.

Mike's a great example of America and the American dream, going from shipyard worker to business owner, entrepreneur and there for the U.S. Navy the whole way. The big support-our-troops banner in the window of his shop is testimony to his dedication to our Navy family. He is the living history book of how the industry has grown here in Mayport.

Thank you, Mike Whalen.

As much as we focused on our platforms, the ships, the aircraft, the submarines, the vehicles, they don't sail, they don't fly, they don't drive, they don't dive without the most important asset we have: the highly trained Sailors and Marines.

Having these Sailors and Marines around this world and providing relief after a storm hits the shore or being the storm that hits the shore is the key to our success. I and everybody in this room remain committed to those Sailors and their families.

For 236 years, from sail to steam to nuclear, from the USS Constitution to the USS Farragut, from Tripoli to Tripoli, our Sailors and Marines have upheld the proud heritage. They protected our nation, projected our power and provided freedom of the seas for everyone.

In the coming years, this new strategy and our plans to execute that strategy will ultimately depend on their skills, their talents and their wellbeing to ensure that our naval heritage not only continues but that our Navy and Marine Corps continue to prevail.

Semper Fortis. Semper Fidelis. Thank you all very much.