

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
Naming Celebration for USS Omaha
Omaha, Nebraska
Monday, 25 June 2012

Congressman, thank you. Mr. Mayor, Admiral, thank you all so much for being here today on this historic waterfront. And I am incredibly happy to announce officially that, as the congressman said, one of our newest, most advanced naval platforms, a littoral combat ship, will be named USS Omaha.

Now, I selected “Omaha” to honor the people of this great city, who have supported and contributed to our military in so many different ways. Men and women from this city serve in every branch and all around the world.

You heard that Omaha is a great part of naval history. This will be the fourth ship named Omaha, but it’s been 17 years since there’s been an Omaha in the fleet, and I’m very happy to set that right today, to put Omaha back in the fleet.

As the congressman said, construction will start next year, and she will arrive in the fleet around 2016.

Let me tell you a little bit about the littoral combat ship. It’s going to be one of the crucial parts of our future fleet. She is very fast. She’s modular. She has a very shallow draft. She’s able to operate in much shallower waters close to land, and she is able to operate as part of the blue-water navy.

The first LCS, littoral combat ship, the USS Freedom, was commissioned in 2008, and we sent her in 2009, two years ahead of schedule, to the Caribbean on her first deployment. In a little over three weeks, she seized more than 3 tons of cocaine. Drug runners in their fast boats were used to seeing Navy ships on the horizon and just assuming that they could outrun them. They were wrong.

The modular capacity of an LCS is also important because as technology changes, we can change without having to build a new ship. You pull it into the pier, you take off one weapons system, you put another one on. Right now we have modules for anti-submarine, anti-mine and anti-surface, but more are coming. This is one of our most versatile ships, and we’re already exploring a lot more potential uses.

USS Omaha will be constructed in Mobile, Alabama, by Austal. Austal has been a great partner and has played an important role in turning the LCS into a great success story for American industry and for the Navy.

But I have to tell you it didn’t start out that way. When I took this office three years ago, we had two variants of the LCS class, one built in Mobile, like Omaha will be, and one built in

Marinette, Wisconsin. We had one of each kind in the water in 2009, and we had one of each being built. And one of the first things that happened when I became secretary is we bid out three more. The bids came in, and they were just unacceptably high. We couldn't afford them. Congressman, you know that in this budget environment or in any budget environment, we ought to make sure that what we buy is affordable to the taxpayers and that we ought to get the best deal that we can.

My father was one of the cheapest people that God ever saw fit to put on this earth. And I am his son. In fact, my first elected office – and I'm digressing here – was as state auditor. And when I was campaigning for that, I met a man, and he said, are you Raymond Mabus' son? And I said, yes sir, I am. And he said, well, I'm going to vote for you, because if you're half as cheap with the state's money as your dad is with his, we'll be OK.

So even though the Navy wanted both versions, and even though we had a use for both versions, because they bring different strengths to the fleet, I made the decision to withdraw the bids and to make the two companies compete against each other. And the winner was going to get 10 ships over five years, and we were going to pick the winner based mainly on price. Then we were going to get a technical package from the winner and bid it out so a second shipyard would come in and keep the competition going, and they would get nine ships. All of the next year as the bids were negotiated and the bids came in, those prices went down 40 percent for the ships. So we went back, and thanks to Congress, we were able to buy both versions, 10 ships each over five years, firm fixed-price contracts. We got 20 ships instead of 19, and we saved \$2.9 billion in that program. And the 10th ship of each class cost significantly less than the first ship. So as each ship is built, there's a learning curve, and we're getting ships cheaper and cheaper.

This is a model program for the rest of our shipbuilding programs. Again, when I came in in 2009, too many of our programs were – and this is a technical term – a mess. We were paying way too much; they were coming in way too late. But over the last three years, I'm really proud to report that we've stabilized our shipbuilding program and we've stabilized our fleet.

On 9/11, 2001 we had 316 ships in the Navy and 377,000 Sailors. Eight years later, when I took office, the fleet had fallen to 283 ships, and we had lost almost 49,000 Sailors.

We've reversed that trend, and we will grow our fleet - even in this constrained revenue environment -we will grow our fleet to 300 ships by the end of this decade. Since December of 2010, we have placed 40 ships under contract, and that compares to three the year before I took office. We've done this by making sure that we have competition. We've done it by things like firm fixed-price contracts. By building these advanced platforms and by rebuilding our fleet, we're keeping the Navy strong around the world, and we're helping to keep the United States safe. And we're supporting American workers by keeping these high-skilled jobs right here.

The Navy is absolutely unique among services because we build these platforms to last decades. There are Sailors who will sail on the USS Omaha who have not yet been born. And very often the Sailors on ships like Omaha will be the only Americans that foreigners will ever come in contact with. And in fact, most Americans have too few opportunities to see and to

know what the Navy and Marine Corps do, because when we are doing our job, we are America's away team. We are a long, long way from home. And one way to remedy that is to forge real close ties between cities like Omaha and the ships that bear their name. That's why what we're doing today is so important. And I want to urge you to establish those close ties and keep those close ties with this ship. I don't know if we can bring her up the river to be commissioned, but I do know how important it is for the namesake cities to stay in close touch with the Sailors who are on that ship. Because as important as these incredibly technologically advanced platforms are – and they are – the most important thing we have are the Sailors and Marines who crew these ships.

I was in the Navy 40 years ago. Admiral, you and I served when there were a lot of very patriotic, very skilled, very talented people. But I have to tell you, we couldn't touch the force we've got today. We have the best, the most lethal, the most skilled, the most talented, the best-trained and most patriotic force that we have ever had in the history of the United States.

And this ship, the USS Omaha, aims to honor not only the current force, but also, as the mayor and the congressman said, the veterans, the veterans of Omaha, the veterans of Nebraska, the veterans who are here today, and veterans like Omaha native Ensign John Parle, who at a very young age was in charge of part of an amphibious force about to invade Sicily in World War II. Off the coast at night, he discovered a smoke pot that accidentally ignited in a boat filled with high explosives. He was aware that any explosions would reveal the ship's presence to the enemy, so he immediately went after the smoke pot, grabbed it and threw it overboard. His heroic self-sacrifice saved the security of the invasion, but the damage he suffered from the smoke and flames claimed his life three days later. For those actions, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. That's the kind of character, that's the kind of citizen, that's the kind of veteran that lives in this city and will live in the USS Omaha.

So thank you all so much for being here today and being part of the early life of this ship and of the history of the United States Navy. Thank you for being here for the celebration of this great city.

And I want to digress again a minute and say how wonderful the hospitality has been. We got to go to the College World Series last night, and there was a wounded warrior, a captain from the Army who lost both legs stepping on an IED in Afghanistan. And when he was introduced, the whole stadium stood for several minutes and applauded. That's the kind of patriotism and that's the kind of hospitality that Omaha has shown to us and to all the military.

So thank you for being so hospitable. Thank you for being so patriotic. And your legacy will soon be forged in steel and sent to sea in support of the defense of the United States.

So in the words of the Navy motto, *semper paratus* – forever courageous.

Thank you.