

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
60th Anniversary of “Underway on Nuclear Power” Ceremony
and
Naming Ceremony for USS Hyman G. Rickover (SSN 795)
Washington Navy Yard
Washington, DC
Friday, 9 January 2015

Thanks, John. And thank you all for being here. This is wonderful.

And you know, I know what you’re thinking, “he’s going to drone on.” (Laughter.) My daughter Annie, who’s 22, told me just the other day – she said, “Dad, when you leave this shop you’re going to find out you’re not nearly as funny as you think you are.” (Laughter.) But if you feel the need to change seats, go ahead. (laughter).

Everybody’s been recognized here, but I want to say a special word to John Warner, my esteemed predecessor. And I want to point out that this is John Warner the person, not John Warner the attack submarine. (Laughter.) – To our three Congressmen, thank you (Inaudible), and I’ve got another short word to say about Joe in a little while.

But we’re here to do a couple of things. One is to celebrate the 60th anniversary of this pivotal moment in our – in our nation’s history and in American history. And secondly, we’re recognizing the people, represented by the person of Hyman Rickover, instrumental to that moment, who have had a vast impact on the United States Navy.

About six decades ago this week, Commander Eugene Wilkinson sent the famous order “Underway on nuclear power.” The sailing of Nautilus ushered in the Navy’s nuclear age and it changed the Navy forever. These forces – and the CNO talked about this – maritime forces that operated from the sea, incredibly flexible, incredibly responsive – they provide our country’s leaders with an incredible array of options in any crisis.

Since we come from the sea, we get there quicker. We can stay for a very long time. We bring everything that we need. And we don’t have to ask anyone’s permission to do so. The Navy and Marine Corps are where it matters, when it matters. And you can see that today, whether over the skies of Iraq, whether in the Black Sea, or the wide expanse of the Pacific. And that, again, we see in those areas.

But presence is what the Navy and Marine Corps uniquely bring our country. And our submarine force is at the core of the capabilities we provide this nation. Their ability to deploy for long periods, undetected, undeterred, has been vital.

Now, as John Richardson pointed out, we’re continuing the groundbreaking legacy of Nautilus, maintaining a focus on our sources of power and energy. We have always, in the Navy, been at the forefront of energy innovation – sail to coal, coal to oil, pioneering nuclear. Today we’re moving to renewable energy – biofuels, the Great Green Fleet,

high-efficiency hyper drives on our ships. We're using power more effectively and we're introducing new sources of power.

And today, just like in the days of Nautilus, there are naysayers. Then, it was "You can't – you can't do that. It's too dangerous." "Technically, it won't work." Hyman Rickover and your predecessors in this building had the good sense– (audio break) – and those naysayers were proven wrong. Claims today are, "It's too expensive." "It's not the way we've done it." Harder to be proved wrong. The Navy has always led this and every other kind of energy innovation, and we will continue to do it because we have to. We have to, to ensure our naval supremacy and our national security.

Part of what we do in this presence is we cause quantity to become a quality all its own. And I know naval officers in this room have heard these statistics so many times, but on 9/11/2001, we had 316 ships in our fleet. By 2008 – after one of the great military buildups in our history – we were down to 278 ships. In the five years before I became secretary, we put 27 ships under contract. That wasn't enough to stop the slide in the size of our fleet and it wasn't enough to protect the industrial base.

In the five years since I've been the secretary, we have put 70 ships under contract, with a smaller top line. But one of the criticisms I get, "yeah, well, you're neglecting stuff like aviation." Well, just to throw this out, we've also bought 50 percent more airplanes. So thanks to help from industry, particularly from Congress, our fleet's going to be above 300 ships by the end of this decade, able to meet any mission that this country chooses.

I get to have a lot of fun in this job. I really do. And one of the great things I get to do – it's a big responsibility; I get a lot of suggestions – (laughter) – but today, to honor Hyman Rickover, his place in naval history, Navy nuclear place in naval history, I'm announcing I'm naming the next Virginia-class attack submarine Hyman G. Rickover. (Extended applause.)

Well, now, as any good public speaker knows, I ought to quit, right? (Laughter.) This ain't going to get much better. (Laughter.) But the power, the force behind the design and the production of Nautilus, a visionary, and in many, many ways he made the Navy today what it is. Now, you've heard the stories about him. They are legion, that chair is only one of them.

And as I said, I get a lot of suggestions about naming ships. There are also naming conventions, and many traditionalists sometimes get upset when secretaries of the Navy break those naming conventions.

Well, I'm going to tell a story of the first six frigates we built. George Washington named the first five. He said they should come from things in our Constitution, so it's things like the President and the Constitution, Constellation, Congress. He left number six to be named by the first secretary of the Navy, Benjamin Stoddert. He named it the Chesapeake. (Laughter.) He defied George Washington on the name. (Laughter.) I think every secretary has broken naming conventions in extraordinary circumstances.

The Virginia-class attack submarine naming convention has already been broken once, for John Warner. That was an exceptional circumstance – (audio break).

This is the second boat we've had named the Rickover. The first one, around the time he retired, in itself was a breaking of the naming convention for the Los Angeles-class.

USS Rickover will be our newest Virginia-class attack boat, most advanced submarines in the world. Because of nuclear power, they really can be anywhere in the world. This program has become a model for shipbuilding.

We signed, last summer, the biggest contract the Navy has ever signed: 10 Virginia-class attack submarines. We've got them. And that's where the two sub, 10 sub came in. Joe Courtney made a speech that he wanted to be known as two-sub Joe, for two subs a year. And, being a politician, not to be outdone, I got up after this contract and said I want to be known as 10-sub Ray. (Laughter.) Joe Courtney was nice enough to bring me a license plate that says 10-sub Ray – (laughter) – which I have in my office, and it has very much a prized place.

You know, two of the speakers today have illustrious and distinguished submarine careers – careers in submarines, Chief of Naval Operations Jonathan Greenert and head naval reactors John Richardson, both of whom I have come to rely on incredibly much in this job. Both, because they got to interview with Hyman Rickover, provide a real continuity to – (audio break).

But I'm also very happy to announce – the other great thing I get to pick are sponsors. Darlene Greenert has been married to Jon Greenert for 33 years, endured countless moves while her husband deployed time after time, ever since she has also served as a part of the submarine force and I asked and she has agreed to be the sponsor of the Rickover. (Extended applause.)

They ought to say something. (Laughter.)

But lastly, I wanted to say something about the crews of our submarines. They are the best in the world. But until very recently, a lot of our Sailors have been denied the opportunity to serve on submarines. But Hyman Rickover was a trailblazer, took the Navy in many new directions. But he was also someone who overcame great discrimination – had to face people who said he couldn't be a good officer simply because he was Jewish. Well, he kept breaking down those barriers, and we're trying to break down some of the final remaining barriers.

We have more than a hundred women now assigned to our – (audio break) – guided-missile submarines, all officers. The first female officers are being assigned right now to our Virginia-class attack submarines, and very soon we'll give you the details of integrating enlisted on all classes of our ships. And I know that, just like the rest of the fleet, the addition of women will make these crews even better.

So thank you for being here, for the recognition of the sailing for honoring of Hyman Rickover and all those who worked to make that day and this day possible. God bless the future of the USS Rickover, all who shall sail in her the men and women of the U.S. Submarine Force. They remain, as the Navy motto says: Semper Fortis, Always courageous.) – may remain, as our Navy motto says. (Extended applause.)