

Hugh Hewitt Interview of the Honorable Richard V. Spencer  
Secretary of the Navy  
MSNBC  
Friday, October 27, 2017

HH: And you just heard the President. That was one of his critical promises, a 350 ship Navy. What happened to that promise?

RS: That promise is still there, and as Secretary of the Navy, I'm working on that goal. Mr. Dee, unfortunately, being an acting placeholder, I don't know whether he was speaking for his own accord, but this is one more reason we need to get our politically-appointed people in the Pentagon and working for us. I need to get my team there who are aligned with our vision.

HH: Can we get it done in ten years? Is 350 ships possible within 10 years?

RS: It's pretty aggressive, Hugh, I have to admit, for ten years. But I'll tell you what we have to do. We have to lay the cornerstones. These are large capital asset investments that we're making that take five, seven years to build – the submarines, the aircraft carriers, the DDGs, the LCSes. They all have different timelines, but they're long, extended timelines. We need to lay the foundation now. We have some challenges with the Budget Control Act, and we have to wrestle with that. We're going to have to deal with that. But what we are doing right now is we're focusing on two primary things – building new, increasing capabilities, and a subset of that, looking at what we might have available to us that we might be able to replay one more time.

HH: Now you know, the cheerleader, I want to come back to that, replay one more time, the cheerleader of the Navy has always been the SECNAV. Franklin Roosevelt, Jim Webb, John Lehman, these are all storied people who step out and say, and they say 350 every single day. Is that your job? Is that what you think your job is?

RS: My job, that is one of my jobs. But this is a critical part of increasing our capacity and capability, which we need to do. The Navy is our forward deployed force, and it does two things. One, it has presence, which keeps peace and keeps orderly actions around the world. It keeps the sea lanes open, which as you know, it's our primary arteries for commerce. Two, it delivers the kinetic punch when we need to deliver it.

HH: Have you talked to the President about, there's not even a plan, yet, I mean, a written down plan that says this many frigates, this many cruisers, this many destroyers, this number of carriers coming up. That's not even written down, yet. Has he bugged you about this?

RS: It's underway as we speak. And one of the things we've been doing is actually doing a deep dive to find out what the makeup will be. During my confirmation, you heard me talk about 355 and do I know

the makeup. I actually don't know the makeup immediately, because technology is going to be our friend here. I can't tell you in 10 years what exactly it would look like. I will tell you that we'll probably get great yield out of the unmanned area, and we're just scratching the surface there as an example.

HH: Now the unmanned area makes me worried, because I'm a big booster of the Navy. And I'm afraid they'll put out a couple of drones somewhere and call it a ship on a barge. That's not what you're talking about, right?

RS: No, no, not at all. We're talking about various platforms whether undersea, on sea or in the air. But they're very complex pieces of equipment. But the learning curve that we're noticing on this is very, very steep.

HH: A couple of months ago, President Macron of France cut the French military budget dramatically. The top soldier in France quit in protest. Can you see something like that happening, because the sequestration has truly devastated the Pentagon, not just the Navy, but every branch. And we have readiness crises now.

RS: This is true, Hugh, and I think one of the things that I'd love for America, the taxpayers to pay attention to is the devastation that the Budget Control Act wreaked on the Pentagon. As an example, in the Navy alone, we estimate that the continuing resolutions, the fact that we can't get a budget, but the whole process of Budget Control Act and cap sequestration has cost us between \$4 and 5 billion dollars due to the starting and stopping of acquisition programs, the inability to start new programs. It has really punched us in the gut. We need to get over that. Here is where the hope is, and I don't think you'll see anyone walking out the door. As I did my office calls on the Hill and are now working with the Hill, everyone on the committees is leaning in on how they can help, how they can let the Navy, and get the Navy to 355, how we can get readiness back, very little resistance in how they can help. They all are leaning forward.

HH: It cost us \$5 billion. It may have cost us 17 lives. Was readiness responsible for the Fitzgerald and the McCain collisions? Do you fault the Budget Control Act for the deaths of those Sailors?

RS: Two answers there. One, we're waiting for the studies to come out, the reviews to come out, Hugh, and those will be coming out shortly. The second answer is fundamentally, yes, I do. The Navy is an organization that is biased to action. No is not a word that's easily reached for in the lexicon. We will do when tasked, but we've been overtaken. We've been stretched very, very thin, 16 years of war, and now you have restricted resources. It was a compounding effect. We were exhausting our enabler accounts. We're exhausting parts. Deployments were stretched. Maintenance availabilities were missed due to deployments. It was just a compounding effect. We are now getting our hands around that. It took us 16 years to get in this hole. We're not going to get out of it overnight. But we're going to do it as quickly as possible.

HH: When you say there's a plan being put together now, when will we see it? And when will the public be able to say here's a marker, we're going to hold the Navy Secretary, Secretary of Defense Mattis and the President to this timeline, that ship, that shipyard?

RS: You're going to see it quickly. I can't give you an exact date, because we're still honing out some of the numbers. And one of the things we're doing, Hugh, which is really important to understand, is especially when it comes to the Navy, and I defer to Ms. Lord up at AT&L at OSD, but with the Navy, and she's in line with this, we are really approaching industry now and saying we have to work in terms of partnership. And what I mean by partnership is shared risk, shared rewards. We have to be teammates in this. It doesn't mean that we're not going to have competitive situation buying fiducially appropriately the best money can buy for our taxpayers, but we can't have a completely adversarial, the best money can buy from the absolute cheapest, drawn-out, painful contract process. We need ideas now. We need expedition now. We need to have industry on our side with us working side by side for solutions at the right price.

HH: Yesterday, Secretary of Defense Mattis was at the DMZ in Korea just as a third carrier, I believe it's the Nimitz, entered the Western Pacific for the first time in four or five decades. Are we prepared if it comes to blows? Do you think those carriers are defended? And can the F-18s that are on them penetrate North Korean airspace without getting shot down?

RS: The carrier, I am safe to say the carrier is a well-protected asset, yes, Hugh.

HH: And what about the F-18s and the North Korean airspace.

RS: They will have their match, and I think we have the superior outcome there.

HH: All right. Now talk to me about building two carriers at the same time. It's one of the new initiatives that you've come out with, which makes a lot of sense to a civilian like me. But is it hard to sell to the Congress?

RS: It's very interesting. This is going on right now, and this is a perfect example of leaning in. The four committees that would entertain any sort of action like this, and this is a bold action, but we have been working with industry to come up with a number that makes it worthwhile for us to put this proposition forward. And there's a lot of heavy lifting with this proposition. But in initial conversations with the committees, everyone is leaning in to say how can we do it versus we can't do it.

HH: And can you reclaim ships from the so-called ghost fleet?

RS: We can, and here's what we're doing on the ghost fleet, specifically the Perry Class, is one that we're looking at. One, we're not going to do a lot of them. There might be 10 Perry Class that are even in the zone to be retrofitted. But what we're looking at now in this whole buildup of what the fleet's going to look like, is we're starting to look at matching the asset off against the threat. So we have drug interdiction down in the Caribbean base and on the Pacific side of Latin America. Can we put a refitted Oliver Harry, excuse me, the Perry Class frigate down there? I think we can match threat with that...

HH: Make a lot of sense to me. Last question, you're a Marine. 182,000 Marines, that's down significantly from where it was at the height of the invasion of Iraq. Does the Marine Corps need more Marines in it?

RS: I think if they need, in speaking to the Commandant, the need might be there, but it's incremental to where we are now. We're actually up at 189,000. The question is do you go up to 190,000, 200,000? It's incrementally not a huge number. The Marine Corps is in pretty good shape. What we have to really get our hands around is debt to dwell. We have to get that so we know...

HH: Expand on that. I don't get that.

RS: I'm sorry. Deployment to dwell time.

HH: Okay.

RS: So how much time do we have home to recharge...

HH: Got it.

RS: Be with family, quality of life versus deploying yet again.

HH: And then, the spinoff of that is how about Sailors? 279 ship fleet going to 350, I'm holding you to this promise, that's a lot more Sailors.

RS: That is.

HH: Do you have a recruitment plan? Do you have a budget plan? And do we have reform of pension and pay so that we'll be able to afford it long term?

RS: And you hit a very interesting nail right on the head, Hugh. My three priorities – people, capabilities and process, people are the most important thing that we have. Otherwise, it's just a piece of aluminum in the air or metal floating on the water or under the water. They are also our most expensive asset. They're our most valuable asset and our most expensive asset, and we have to think this thing through. Yes, we have a plan, because we can't grow to 355 ships and just keep the Navy the same size it is. We're going to have to man and staff.

HH: Columbia Class, I'm sneaking one in, because I've got the time, Columbia Class to replace the Ohio Class. I asked every presidential candidate about this. Are they on time? Will they be there? Or are you going to have to extend the life of the Ohio Class boomer submarines, that is the key part of our nuclear deterrent?

RS: The nuclear triad, as you know, the submarine is the stealthiest of the whole leg of the triad. And it's, I think, one of the most important. I'm just wearing a Navy hat, but looking at the actual nuclear triad itself.

HH: Yeah.

RS: Columbia Class, I will be very, very candid and open. It's public record. It's critical we keep that on time, on schedule. The way we have all our assets rolling off, we're going to look at the ability to actually SLEP them, i.e. service life extension for every single asset and platform we have. But Columbia Class, to keep it on funded, on schedule, is critical.

HH: How often do you get updated on that, Mr. Secretary?

RS: That's twice a week.

HH: Is it really?

RS: Oh, yes.

HH: That's good to know that.

RS: Oh, we have eyes on.

HH: Thank you for coming in. I hope you'll come back. Maybe we'll do a six month checkup on that 350 ship plan?

RS: I welcome it, Hugh. Thank you very much.

HH: Thank you very much, Richard Spencer, the Secretary of the Navy.