



Mixed Messages On LCS Program

By Michael Fabey



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U.S. Navy officials say they remain committed to deploying the first Littoral Combat Ship (LCS-1), the USS Freedom, to Singapore as a warship. But at the same time, service officials and other government supporters of the vessel say it should really be viewed as an R&D prototype shedding light on what design changes will be needed for the rest of the class.

Those types of mixed messages, defense analysts say, are hampering the Navy's efforts to make the continued case for buying and deploying the 55 LCS ships it wants — a total program estimated at \$37.4 billion.

Especially confusing for some is the suggestion that the ship is a testing prototype — a luxury that Navy officials have for decades maintained that they cannot afford for any major warship.

"Given the revolutionary nature of the ship, there are bound to be tweaks that need to be made on the prototype," U.S. Rep. Reid Ribble (R-Wis.) says in a recent open letter to Rep. Jackie Speier (D-Calif.), attacking her for requesting an investigation of the construction and Navy oversight of the Freedom program.

Speier says she wants the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to investigate ship deficiencies raised in articles and a photo published this month by Aviation Week, as well as recent reports from the Project on Government Oversight (POGO).

Aviation Week reported on May 9 that the Freedom is plagued by extensive corrosion and manufacturing issues more recent and serious than anything the Pentagon or LCS-1 prime contractor Lockheed Martin has publicly acknowledged thus far.

“I’m troubled that the Navy would accept so many deficiencies in a program that seems to be riddled with serious problems,” Speier said after Aviation Week shared with her staff other photographs and more material gathered from a guided, unauthorized ship tour taken several weeks ago in the San Diego Graving Dry Dock.

Ribble says the ship, or “the ‘beta’ version, to put it in Silicon Valley terms, is meant to serve as the platform to test and resolve issues and finely tune the project for future development.” And Navy Undersecretary Robert Work echoed those thoughts during a spirited debate about LCS at a May 21 Navy surface combatants forum sponsored by the Cato Institute.

“These are R&D platforms,” Work said of the first two LCS ships. “Of course there are problems. We built them to ID the problems.”

But while the ship was built using R&D funds, that is different than building an R&D ship. The DDG-1000 Zumwalt destroyer also was built using R&D funds, but Navy officials make it clear that that ship is meant to be deployed straight away.

And – despite the R&D references – Works says LCS is fit for combat. “People who don’t think this is a warship are nuts,” he said during the Cato forum, adding the ship would be “ready on day one.”

But Eric Labs, senior Congressional Budget Office analyst for Naval Weapons and Force, notes that Adm. Jonathan Greenert, chief of naval operations (CNO), recently said he would not send an LCS into certain high-threat areas at the start of a conflict.

“Bob says, ‘The LCS is ready to go into combat on day one,’” Labs says. “On the other hand, the CNO says it’s not going into a combat environment.”

Work countered that Greenert was speaking specifically about using an LCS-1 variant in certain Pacific scenarios. The undersecretary says the Navy may decide to use the LCS-2 version for the Pacific and LCS-1s for other areas to face small swarming-boat threats. LCS-2, the USS Independence, is based on a different seaframe than LCS-1 and built by a team led by Austal and General Dynamics.

The two versions, Work says, should really be viewed as two separate ship classes because they have some basic different strengths and weaknesses.

Still, Labs maintains, “The Navy has [a] real messaging problem. There is a serious disconnect.”

The current cost estimate for the Freedom's ship frame, outfitting, post-delivery and related costs goes as high as \$670.4 million — or about half the cost of a destroyer and its combat system, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) notes. A fleet of 30 to 60 LCSs, CRS said in 2005, might cost \$7.5 billion to \$15 billion. But now the Pentagon estimates the total acquisition cost for 55 LCS sea frames alone to be about \$37.4 billion.