



'Treason 'Allegations Bust Open National Jones Act Debate

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The revelation earlier this month that an advisory panel to the U.S. Maritime Administration recommended charging Jones Act critics with treason — a felony punishable by death — sparked a wave of media attention last week that is still rippling through the U.S. maritime industry.

Notable is the comprehensive and thoughtful article by Capt. John Konrad, “Shots Fired in Jones Act Debate,” in *gCaptain*, a prominent maritime publication not known for crusading against the Jones Act.

Konrad seemed to lament that neither current Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg nor his predecessor Elaine Chao “have done much to address the threat from [the] Cato [Institute],” which was one of the targets of the treason allegation.

However, he said, based on a “source inside the Maritime Administration” that’s probably because they think “Cato’s efforts have not been very effective.”

He said a “Jones Act lobbyist” told him: “We haven’t worried too much about Cato because they have spent a lot of time focusing on the shipment of goods to Puerto Rico and Hawaii. Frankly, the majority of American voters don’t care about our distant islands.”

Konrad, however, seemed to think the Jones Act actually is vulnerable to significant change.

“What Americans do care about very much,” he said, “is the escalating price of energy, the price of food, traffic congestion, highway deaths from large trucks, and ... decarbonization. All problems that — according to MARAD’s own Marine Highway initiative documents — could be solved by moving cargo via ships and barges which can move a significantly larger amount of cargo at roughly 1/10th the amount of energy and carbon emissions compared to trucks” — the implication being that the Jones Act has hindered this transition.

Thus, “in recent months,” Konrad said, “gCaptain has become aware of several new efforts to reform the Jones Act, and increasingly these groups are focusing on swing states and voters in the heartland and politically powerful places that could benefit most from increased short-sea shipping. Places like New York, Texas, Florida, California and Virginia, as well as the states connected to inland waterways.

“Most of these groups are still in the exploratory phase,” he said, “but the reframing of concerns from distant islands like Puerto Rico to the heart of America, could, if left unchecked (and in concert with the U.S. Navy’s increased frustration over the lack of DOT support for shipyard expansion and sealift), be a stake in the heart of Senator Wesley Jones.”

Konrad noted the success of a week-old YouTube video posted by “the wildly popular geopolitical strategist” and author Peter Zeihan that calls for Jones Act reform. It has been viewed more than 130,000 times and generated more than 1,300 comments.

Konrad added: “Before exposing Zeihan to the fury of gCaptain’s American readers, it’s important to note that he suggests reforming the Jones Act, not replacing it, a view that some of the act’s most ardent supporters ... agree with.”

In the view of the Grassroot Institute of Hawaii, the most politically feasible reform probably would be elimination of the law’s U.S.-build requirement.

This would allow American carriers to buy less expensive foreign-built ships, expand their fleets, add more maritime jobs, increase competition, bring down consumer prices, make more ships available to the military in times of crisis and better serve America’s economic needs in general.