

# Defense News

## *Fleet Size Becomes an Election-Year Football*

By, **SAM FELLMAN**

March 5, 2012 Monday

Republicans in Congress are telling the U.S. Navy: You need more ships.

President Obama's budget drops the five-year shipbuilding plan by 11 warships and calls for retiring nine ships early, plans that come in tandem with the administration's new defense strategy, which relies heavily on naval forces for its focus on the Pacific region.

GOP lawmakers, backed by some analysts, say that doesn't add up. And they plan to make it an election-year issue.

"Obama's Asia strategy gives the Navy [a] key role, but fewer ships," Rep. Randy Forbes, R-Va., told Navy Secretary Ray Mabus at a Feb. 16 House Armed Services Committee hearing. "And I would think we'd be pounding on the desk, saying 'We need more ships.'"

"I have made it the priority of this administration to build the fleet," Mabus responded, noting that the fleet's size "declined dramatically" during the Bush administration and that there are 36 ships under contract at affordable prices.

Forbes' concerns were recently echoed by members of the House Appropriations defense subcommittee, which funds the Navy's budget. At a March 1 hearing, Chairman C.W. Bill Young, R-Fla., called the Navy's position an "apparent contradiction."

Mitt Romney, the front-runner in the Republican presidential nomination contest, has called for ramping up shipbuilding to 15 ships a year; the fiscal 2013 budget calls for building 10 ships. One top priority Romney would tackle in his first 100 days in the White House is to "restore America's naval credibility," according to his defense strategy.

But the Romney campaign hasn't specified what ships he wants more of or why, defense experts point out. And they and former fleet leaders counter that the Navy doesn't have a credibility gap at sea.

The number of ships being built

in any given year is "not really the measure of the capability of

the Navy," said retired Vice Adm. Lou Crenshaw, who was an

architect of the Navy's 313-ship goal. "We are still the most capable maritime force on the planet,

bar none."

'Apples to Pineapples'

The crux of the argument for fewer ships is that today's Navy is more potent than ever, thanks to technology. If one Arleigh Burke-class destroyer can do the work of, say, three Leahy-class cruisers from the 1970s, then why build three of the newer ships?

Crenshaw, who retired in 2006 and is now an executive with the consulting firm Grant Thornton, flew A-6 Intruders in Desert Storm and used the jets as part of an example: Back then, six Intruders would carry 22 bombs to a target. Now, that work can be done by one Hornet carrying four precision-guided bombs, known as Joint Direct Attack Munitions, he said.

"I don't want to buy any more A-6s and have to drop 22 bombs. I like the fact that one Hornet carrying four JDAMs can do just as much damage as four sections of Intruders back then," Crenshaw said.

"We have spent a lot of money for technology; we ought to reap the benefits," he continued. "And if that means that we invested a lot of money in the latest flight of Arleigh Burke-class destroyers to give them this expanded capability that they need, well, I don't want to buy more of those than I need just so I can satisfy some number."

Navy Undersecretary Bob Work, meanwhile, pointed to the amount of sea that can be patrolled by unmanned Broad Area Maritime Surveillance aircraft.

"How many ships would it take to provide the same maritime domain awareness as those BAMS?" he said in January. "It's a lot bigger than a [Reagan-era] 600-ship Navy, I guarantee you that."

Yet to the other side, numbers count. In a January presidential debate, Romney noted, "Our Navy is smaller than it's been since 1917," echoing what others, including Navy leaders, have noted.

One defense expert said that statement, while true, is disingenuous.

"The striking power of a single ship has been so dramatically increased by the virtue of technology, by virtue of precision munitions, [and] by virtue of computer technology," said Christopher **Preble**, a defense analyst with the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington. "When I hear people make comparisons between the fleet of 2012 and the fleet of 1914, I laugh out loud. It's absolutely absurd. I mean, those ships were powered by steam, they were manpower-intensive. You were loading guns with bags of gunpowder.

"You're comparing apples to pineapples," he added.

'Numbers Take Over'

Looking for ammo against President Obama's budget request, GOP congressmen have begun comparing the drop in Navy shipbuilding to the Chinese Navy's buildup.

But due to advances in technology that may not be immediately apparent, such as software, the Congressional Research Service said in a Feb. 8 report, "the idea of comparing the war-fighting capabilities of navies principally on the basis of easily observed factors such as ship numbers and tonnages has become increasingly less valid, and today is highly problematic."

Advocates for a larger Navy are focusing on the difference between the president's new defense strategy, which enhances the importance of naval forces and the Pacific Ocean, and his budget, which doesn't increase the size of the Navy even though the service has shrunk markedly over the past decade.

"They want more Navy deployed," said retired Vice Adm. Peter Daly, referring to policy-makers. "And we are not increasing the size of the Navy. That's another disconnect from the strategy."

Daly, former deputy commander of Fleet Forces Command who is now chief executive officer of the U.S. Naval Institute, said the new strategy depends on the Navy saying "No" to more of the requests of combatant commanders, outside of the Pacific and Central commands: a do-less-with-less strategy.

"But we have a bad track record of actually carrying that out," he added.

The size of the fleet should be based on how many regions the nation needs the Navy to cover and the extent of that presence, Daly said, which he referred to as a "critical mass."

In 1995, the Navy had 128 surface combatants, according to Navy figures compiled by the Congressional Research Service. Daly estimated that there would only be 95 of them by 2015, after the cutbacks.

"I think there's a point where numbers take over," Daly said. "There's a point where, even if you have a more capable force, the numbers don't allow you to cover [it.]"

Daly summed up his views by quoting a Soviet phrase: "Quantity has a quality all its own."