

Matt Yglesias

Today at 10:44 am

Nobody Wants to Lose an Aircraft Carrier for Their State



Benjamin Friedman says [people shouldn't pay attention](#) to big-think strategy documents like the QDR:

Policy types love strategy documents because they are mostly technocratic idealists. They want government polices to be made by rational processes that reveal national interests, which are then laid out in plans like the QDR. **They want policy to be like science. But democratic government is the push and pull of competing ideologies and interests.**

Maybe so. When I hear things like that, though, I'm reminded of Keynes' idea that "It is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil."

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.

I think there's some truth to both of these points of view. And with a lot of QDR-talk in the air, I think it is worth refocusing a bit on some of the seamier, less idea-based drivers of policy. Consider this excellent [Government Executive report on the QDR](#):

The report also recommends that one carrier should be based in Mayport Naval Station in Florida — a homeport preference that will renew a heated political battle between the Florida and Virginia delegations in Congress. **All carriers assigned to the East Coast are now stationed in Norfolk, Va. after the 2007 decommissioning of the USS John F. Kennedy, which called Mayport home.**

"The reason for moving one of the nuclear carriers from Norfolk to Mayport is so they're not all lined up in one place like sitting ducks," Sen. **Bill Nelson, D-Fla., said in a statement after CongressDaily posted the QDR Friday night.** "Beyond that, this is huge for the North Florida economy."

Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., issued a statement Saturday emphasizing that the QDR is a planning tool that does not have the force of law. **“I continue to believe that removing an aircraft carrier from Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia, would not be justified on either a strategic or fiscal level,” he said.**

The Florida congressional delegation wants a carrier sent to Florida. The Virginia delegation doesn't want to lose a carrier. And if the US Navy were to reduce the size of its carrier fleet, some particular location would need to lose a carrier. And that would prompt political opposition. You won't read anything in the QDR about how “it would be politically inconvenient to permanently reduce the size of the carrier fleet because it would cost jobs in someone's district” but that's very much among the reasons for maintaining a large carrier fleet.

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Filed under: [Defense Budget](#), [National Security](#),

25 Responses to “Nobody Wants to Lose an Aircraft Carrier for Their State”

1. *LaFollette Progressive* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 10:54 am](#)

“it would be politically inconvenient to permanently reduce the size of the carrier fleet because it would cost jobs in someone's district” but that's very much among the reasons for maintaining a large carrier fleet.

You'd be hard-pressed to come up with any other reasons. We could eliminate three or four carrier groups and still win a hypothetical naval war against the entire rest of planet earth.

Though, interestingly, it turns out that an aircraft carrier is uniquely well equipped to respond to a humanitarian crisis in a low-lying coastal region. I'd suggest that we convert two or three carriers to primarily focus on being floating disaster-response units, but I'm sure that a dirty hippie idea like that would render a Democrat completely unelectable in Virginia or Florida.

2. *NYC_Charles* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 11:06 am](#)

LaFollette – what if we move that dirty hippie carrier to Florida? Seems like having the mobile humanitarian carrier in Florida, where it could much more easily access the Caribbean or the Gulf Coast, would be far better than having it in Virginia.

3. *oboe* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 11:06 am](#)

Couldn't we just gift these congressional districts each with a \$800bn USD roller coaster? The initial outlay of cash would be the same, but I'd imagine there'd be significant savings in maintenance costs.

That, and the roller-coasters would probably keep America safer.

4. *LaFollette Progressive* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 11:19 am](#)

“LaFollette – what if we move that dirty hippie carrier to Florida?”

Realistically, if I were in the Senate, I’d vote to put it in Baltimore. Because I’d be representing Maryland.

But of course, as Matt points out, that’s the root of the problem.

5. *Why oh why* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 11:26 am](#)

The Navy should be prepared to lose [a few aircraft carriers](#) anyway. They seem about as useful as Zeppelins against countries with a semi-functioning military (of course, the Navy hasn’t fought any country like that in a while and shouldn’t in the future).

6. *ChooChoo!* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 11:27 am](#)

Easily solved: a USS Obambi to be stationed in Fl .
As the president pointed out to the Republicans, 5 billion\$\$\$ is nothing.

7. *Spike* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 11:39 am](#)

Realistically, if I were in the Senate, I’d vote to put it in Baltimore. Because I’d be representing Maryland.

Baltimore has the Hospital Ship Comfort (now in Haiti) for just this reason. Also, because Baltimore has lots of medical institutions.

Why not give Florida a new hospital ship instead of a new air craft carrier?

8. *Mr. E* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 11:52 am](#)

Government can’t create or support jobs – so jobs can’t be the issue why they want the carrier in their district. QED

9. *Greg* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 12:05 pm](#)

These ships have been obsolescent since the ’50s, and outright obsolete since the early ’70s.

In a shooting war against the Sovs, they would have lasted five minutes.

Against the Chinese, I’d give them collectively a quarter of an hour, because we don’t keep all of them in the Pacific, and PLAN doesn’t have anything like the range of the Red Banner fleets.

And even against Iran, at least one of those guys is going to be a scuba divers’ paradise within an hour.

10. *Greg* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 12:06 pm](#)

We'd be better off with the roller coaster idea, or just having money fights like the Simpsons.

11. *mds* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 12:07 pm](#)

“I continue to believe that removing an aircraft carrier from Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia, would not be justified on either a strategic or fiscal level,” [Webb] said.

I'm reasonably certain that Senator Webb isn't stupid. I'm also pretty sure that given his CV, he's not simply ignorant about such matters, either. Which leaves us with the conclusion that he's a liar. (Not a difficult conclusion to reach with a Congressman, I'll admit, especially if he's got a media reputation as a straight talker.)

12. *Max424* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 12:22 pm](#)

Ben “Lord Admiral” Nelson, SUPER naval/genius ... “The reason for moving one of the nuclear carriers from Norfolk to Mayport is so they're not all lined up in one place like sitting ducks...,”

Look! You can see the Jap planes, up there, up amongst the clouds, the high level Nakajimas, the “Betty Bombers.” the Rising Sun painted on their... Look! Just above the horizon, the B5Ns, with the devastating Type 95 torpedoes hanging from their racks, wave skipping toward our helpless ships. It's a perfectly coordinated high-low attack! Aerial waves of Japanese planes are hellbent on sinking every..single..carrier we foolishly lined-up in Carrier Row!

Japanese Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, the brilliant mastermind of the attack, and the intrepid leader of the first wave, issues the final orders: TORA...TORA...TORA....

13. *Susan* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 12:56 pm](#)

In a shooting war against the Sovs, they would have lasted five minutes

Which of course is why the Soviets started building aircraft carriers, doofus.

14. *pseudonymous in nc* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 12:57 pm](#)

Nthing Why oh why at #5 and Greg at #9.

Brecher's a polemicist, but the basic point stands: not just the ballistic missiles, but the [Chinese diesel-powered submarines](#) make carriers sitting ducks. Their purpose is not to naval warfare, but soft power: global dick-swinging, a bit of humanitarian work and domestic procurement boondoggles.

15. *Greg* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 1:04 pm](#)

Which of course is why the Soviets started building aircraft carriers, doofus.

Do you have any idea how ridiculous your statement is?

The Sovs barely built one. We built in the double digits, and *continue to build them*.

Whereas on submarines, their best were and are as good or better than ours, particularly from the

perspective of cost, since Diesel-Electric boats are far cheaper, and arguably quieter.

And pseudo, he sure is. And carriers are **absolutely** for global dick swinging.

Which, Susan, should answer your queries as to why they built one.

16. *Rpx* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 1:24 pm](#)

You won't read anything in the QDR about how "it would be politically inconvenient to permanently reduce the size of the carrier fleet because it would cost jobs in someone's district" but that's very much among the reasons for maintaining a large carrier fleet.

How does this differ from any other government program? The impact of all federal programs are judged at least partially by Congress on which set of constituencies benefit from the program. The proposed rail link between Tampa and Orlando wasn't chosen solely based on the idea that we need a rail link between those two cities. Funding for jobs is important to any congressman voting on defense, infrastructure, housing subsidies, whatever.

17. *Kropotkin* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 1:41 pm](#)

Let's be realistic here, Carriers are basically floating air force bases and have been used that way since the 1950s.

I think the Navy realizes what the posters above had wrote:

Battles between fleets at sea, especially carrier vs. carrier is about as relevant as the battle-worthiness of a Man of War in modern times. But the Navy likes to pretend that this possibility remains since that means they can have just one more justification for having 11 active carriers.

For the U.S. it's all about power projection against small countries and don't have a Navy. A carrier air wing sitting off of your shore when you don't have the means to combat a Carrier Group is pretty persuasive. Nobody's going to try and take on the PLAN or what's left of the Russian Navy with a Carrier group.

That's the pragmatics of it. If it's moral to be an imperialist power a whole other can of worms

18. *mds* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 1:42 pm](#)

How does this differ from any other government program?

Other government programs sometimes actually get their funding reduced.

19. *cmholm* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 2:09 pm](#)

“The reason for moving one of the nuclear carriers from Norfolk to Mayport is so they're not all lined up in one place like sitting ducks...,”

Which is why most of the fleet is usually deployed at sea, rather than a sitting duck in port. In any case, if we get to the point where someone zaps warships in a major Navy installation, the response won't be

dependent on whether that extra carrier was in Norfolk or Mayport.

20. *Mike K* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 2:12 pm](#)

Greg

Ever been at sea on a carrier? You'd change your mind. Iran doesn't have a prayer in Allah to sink a carrier. Read about the Forrestal fire, then decide how soft they are.

21. *cmholm* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 2:37 pm](#)

Mike K is right, carriers are tough nuts to crack. The reason why carriers were considered vulnerable against the Soviets is because their Navy was organized around big cruise missiles tasked with nuking carrier task forces... which is why the USN bought F-14s with 90nm air-to-air missiles.

For the Forrestal fire, go to the ['pedia](#). 'Fire' understated the situation.

22. *Greg* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 2:44 pm](#)

Kropotkin-

Bingo.

It's great for bombing people without carriers. That's about it.

23. *joe from Lowell* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 3:16 pm](#)

I second mds's comment. Jim Webb used to be Secretary of the Navy. The dishonesty of his statement is shocking.

He clearly knows better, and is clearly lying.

24. *joe from Lowell* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 3:17 pm](#)

It's great for bombing people without carriers. That's about it.

"People without carriers," aka, "every other military in the world."

That's about it? Uh, ok.

25. *Why oh why* Says:

[February 1st, 2010 at 3:25 pm](#)

"*People without carriers,*"

Or people with many (small) ships and missiles.

aka, "every other [semi-decent] military in the world."

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