

Tough to figure how much Romney's fleet would cost

By Kate Brannen – October 10th, 2012

After months of pledging to grow the Navy, Mitt Romney and his advisers are finally getting specific about the warships they'd build if he's elected — which should make it easy to figure out the price tag for taxpayers, right?

Wrong.

With four weeks to go before the election, the campaign might have become a little more forthcoming with its plans, but details are still scarce enough that a potential cost for Romney's naval ambitions is elusive.

"I criticized the campaign for a while for talking about shipbuilding without providing any details," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "I'm grateful they've given us some more details. It's a step in the right direction, but there is still a lot of detail to fill in."

The Romney campaign said in a white paper last year that it would boost the annual shipbuilding rate from nine to 15, with the overall goal of building a 350-ship Navy over the next decade. Today's fleet includes 285 ships.

Then in a speech this week at the Virginia Military Institute, Romney said that one of the six new ships to be built each year would be a Virginia-class attack submarine. The Navy currently plans to buy two of these submarines per year, but Romney would like to increase that rate to three.

Buying three submarines versus two every year would slightly lower the unit cost per ship, said Ron O'Rourke, a naval analyst at the Congressional Research Service.

"If the reduction was something like 5 percent, then the additional amount of procurement funding that would be needed in the Virginia-class program to move from a two-ship buy to a three-ship buy in 2016 might be roughly \$2.4 billion to \$2.5 billion," he said.

Defense Department plans show that buying two submarines in 2016 would cost \$5.8 billion. Bumping that up to three ships would total between \$8.2 billion and \$8.3 billion, according to O'Rourke.

But the submarines are part of an existing program that performs well, the costs of which are well known. The costs of the Romney camp's other proposals are more difficult to estimate.

One example is a new "ballistic missile defense ship" that Romney would support, according to an interview his adviser John Lehman gave to Defense News.

Lehman, who served as secretary of the Navy under President Ronald Reagan, said the new ship's design would either be based on the San Antonio-class amphibious transport or the Navy's unfinished Zumwalt-class destroyer.

This choice would dramatically affect the cost.

A San Antonio-class ship costs roughly \$2 billion per copy. If it were equipped with an advanced new radar, the price tag would go up by at least hundreds of millions more — plus the additional non-recurring costs to modify the existing hull design and research the equipment and weapons it might carry. The Zumwalt is about a \$3 billion ship whose cost also would likely climb when outfitted with a new radar.

Lehman did not say how many new missile defense ships Romney would buy, making it impossible to know how much a total program would cost. But both the San Antonio and Zumwalt classes are in current production — on the Gulf Coast and in Maine, respectively — so builders Huntington-Ingalls and General Dynamics might be able to defray some of the cost of subsequent copies. The more ships a yard builds, the better it tends to get at predicting and reducing the price per hull.

Another Romney campaign proposal, however, would be to build an altogether new ship — what Lehman called "a new battle-group deployable frigate" to replace the Navy's aging Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigates.

The Navy's force structure studies "have not identified any need for a single-mission ship such as the frigate." President Barack Obama has attacked Romney's support for "trillions" of dollars' worth of weapons he says "the joint chiefs don't even want."

Still, Lehman said the Navy needs a new escort that can run with its carrier strike groups, one he said could cost between \$600 million and \$700 million — but again, he did not say how many would be needed.

The Navy has about 30 Perry-class frigates in its fleet today. If Romney replaced all of those with Lehman's, it would cost as much as \$21 billion.

Preble, of the Cato Institute, said he's been calling for the Navy to buy a new frigate in lieu of its controversial littoral combat ship, which is smaller and faster than a frigate but which the Navy has struggled to deliver as it once planned.

"I don't have a problem with buying a new frigate, but ditch the LCS," he said.

Lehman, however, made clear that Romney would keep LCS and buy the new frigate on top of that. Congressional reports have estimated that buying 55 LCSs will cost more than \$37 billion over the life of the program and operating them will cost more than \$87 billion.

Romney's other plans for the Navy are even more difficult to price out.

Lehman said a Romney administration would not buy a new aircraft carrier but would create an 11th carrier air wing for each of the existing 11 carriers.

A carrier air wing includes several squadrons with various types of fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft. Lehman said the mix of aircraft in those air wings would be looked at carefully.

Without knowing the mix of aircraft — the number of Lockheed Martin-built F-35C Lightning IIs or Boeing-built F/A-18E and F Super Hornets — it's impossible to know how much a new air wing would cost.

Preble said an extra air wing for every carrier would be wasteful because not all aircraft carriers are deployed at the same time, so some of these wings would always be sitting idle.

Plus all these initiatives would require more sailors to crew and maintain the new ships and aircraft, and people are the single most expensive part of the services' budgets. Lehman did not give specifics about how many more sailors would be needed for all of the extra ships, and because he did not detail the numbers of new ships Romney would buy, there's no way to calculate it based on the current fleet.

Defense insiders acknowledge that Romney's campaign promises are more like general statements of intent than specific policy proposals, and his Navy program is no different. Preble said that because shipbuilding has an immediate, tangible economic impact — creating jobs in states such as Virginia, Maine and Mississippi — it is a useful campaign promise.

To take an alternate example, building aircraft doesn't have quite the same economic impact, he said.

This could explain why the Romney camp has talked more about its plans for the Navy than any other military service.

What's still left to be explained is how Romney would pump billions of dollars into shipbuilding and other defense programs while at the same time reducing the federal deficit.