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Shipbuilding remains a shortchanged priority

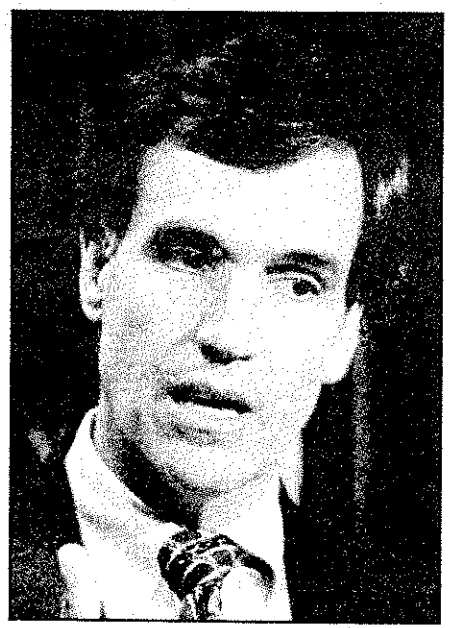
By Rep. Tom Allen

America's global leadership and economic prosperity have always been linked to the strength of our Navy. The U.S. fleet ensures global access wherever and whenever combat operations are needed. Naval ships transport troops and equipment, protect maritime trade, and create an overseas presence that deters aggression. As President Theodore Roosevelt said a century ago, "A good navy is not a provocation of war. It is the surest guaranty of peace."

Today's "good navy" comes close to the 310-ship fleet size endorsed in the most recent Quadrennial Defense Review, down from a Cold War high of almost 600 ships. As these ships age and are retired, the key issue becomes replacement.

Alarmingly, at the current pace of construction, by the time today's new ships retire, we will hit a low of some 240 ships. With this kind of precipitous decline, the Navy cannot meet its combat and presence missions, nor will the U.S. shipbuilding industrial base remain competitive and secure.

The shortfall began in the Clinton administration. Since 1993, we've bought only four to seven new ships each year, well short of the "steady-state replacement rate" of almost nine new ships a year. At least in that era of tight budgets, one could explain that shipbuilding was absorbing its share of the pain.



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Rep. Tom Allen (D-Maine)

With President Bush's dramatic expansion in military spending (an additional $85 billion in two years), one would expect shipbuilding to get its share of the increases. The opposite has been true. While overall defense spending has risen 27 percent in two years, new ship construction is down by 46 percent. The Bush administration asked for only five new Navy ships in FY2003, and an average of less than seven per year through FY 2007 — far below the 11-per-year rate needed to make up for the low construction rate of the past decade.

As a presidential candidate, Bush promised, "Help is on the way." In office, his budgets have been anything but helpful for shipbuilding. In the four years we can compare (FY 2002-2005), the Bush budget will buy eight fewer ships than the last Clinton budget.

A year ago, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld testified that "the right [shipbuilding] number is nine ..." and admitted that an additional $3 billion a year was needed to attain a steady procurement rate. At the same time, however, he defended the budget request for a $3 billion increase for ballistic missile defense.

In my opinion, this is not coincidence. The Bush administration has made clear that its number one priority is escalating missile defense. In the last two years, missile defense funding has grown by 47 percent, while new ship funding has dropped by 46 percent. I believe these are misdirected priorities that will undermine America's overall security in the long run.

There is no question that a strong naval fleet promotes U.S. interests and leadership. And we need theater (short-range) missile defenses to protect our troops. But the Bush administration is intent on diverting money to space-based lasers, space-based kinetic interceptors and possibly nuclear-tipped missile interceptors. These technologically dubious programs drain resources from tried-and-true weapons systems and threaten to provoke future arms races.

There is also some gamesmanship going on. The Pentagon knows that Congress is likely to restore some shipbuilding funds, so they intentionally shortchange it in the president's budget. Congress may come to the rescue again this year, but the administration's annual low requests don't help.

America goes to war by ship

When America goes to war, we go by ship. Operation Enduring Freedom is but the latest example of a mission made possible by Navy vessels transporting or launching aircraft, missiles and troops. Our ships still patrol the Persian Gulf, the Western Pacific and the Mediterranean, but the deployment to the North Arabian Sea has demonstrated that our fleet is stretched perilously thin. Our global reach, security and leadership demand a shipbuilding rate appropriate for the mission.

Rep. Allen, a Democrat from Maine, is a member of the Armed Services Committee.