

The Coast Guard and American Maritime: A Vital Post-9/11 Partnership



A Coast Guard rescue team from Sandy Hook, New Jersey, races to the scene of the World Trade Center terrorist attack. A subsequent call for “all available boats” led to the largest maritime evacuation in history. *U.S. COAST GUARD / PA2 Tom Sperduto*

Twenty years ago this week, al Qaeda carried out attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and perhaps would have succeeded in attacking a third target but for the bravery of the airline passengers who forced their plane down in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

These attacks would ultimately claim thousands of lives and dramatically alter America’s domestic security posture and the geopolitical landscape for years to come. But in the tense, chaotic hours that followed the unimaginable horror of commercial airliners striking the Twin Towers, amid the uncertainty of whether more was on the way, the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. maritime industry were focused on a single shared mission in New York: Get people to safety.

When the local Coast Guard commander put out the call for “all available boats” to make their way to lower Manhattan to help rescue people stranded due to the closure of bridges and tunnels, the response was widespread and immediate. An armada of tugboats, ferries and other vessels quickly arrived on the scene and, in a collective undertaking of tremendous skill and grit, safely evacuated 500,000 people. It was the largest maritime evacuation in history, even exceeding the heroic achievement at Dunkirk in 1940.

This kind of proactive collaboration to keep people safe has

long defined the relationship between the Coast Guard and the U.S. maritime industry. And in the years since 9/11, they have continued their close partnership to keep our waterways and our nation secure – a partnership made possible by a mix of sound policy, focused coordination and shared commitment. The continued strength, agility and effectiveness of the partnership in the face of existing and emerging threats will depend on several key factors.

The Jones Act

First, the Jones Act, the law requiring that vessels moving cargo between two U.S. points be American built, owned and crewed, plays a foundational role in our maritime security and must remain sacrosanct. By keeping our domestic maritime industry in American hands, the law ensures a reliable pipeline of experienced American mariners for the long-term – the kind that works seamlessly with the Coast Guard and risks their own lives to evacuate half a million people from New York, without hesitation. It also greatly reduces the potential for malign actors who might seek to use our waterways to carry out attacks, decreasing the operational burden on the Coast Guard and allowing the service to channel its limited resources where they are needed most.

The Jones Act is also instrumental to the durability of what the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments [calls](#) the Defense Maritime Industrial Base – the vast network of public and private sector maritime entities that collectively serve as a major component of our national security. The U.S. must be able to rely on American shipyards to build boats the Coast Guard needs to patrol and defend our territorial waters and that America's maritime industry needs to move the cargo that drives our economy and supports military readiness.

Cyber Risk Management

Second, cyber risk management must remain an urgent priority.

The Coast Guard's latest [alert](#) discussing recent cyberattacks on South African ports and leaked Iranian documents describing research on how a cyberattack can be used to target the Maritime Transportation System (MTS) is a stark reminder that our adversaries don't have to be in our waters to attack our waterways. And as ever, with greater technology innovation comes greater cyber risk to the MTS as these threats continue to evolve.

The Coast Guard recently issued its [2021 Cyber Strategic Outlook](#), detailing its approach to this complex, high-stakes threat landscape. Notably, among the report's major Lines of Effort is to "Protect the Marine Transportation System," elements of which emphasize continued coordination with the maritime industry to manage cyber risks and "improve the ability for owners and operators to prepare for, mitigate, and respond to threats to maritime critical infrastructure." Recognizing the importance of its own role in safeguarding the MTS, the tugboat, towboat and barge industry has taken proactive steps to improve that ability, including by developing [Best Practices for the Towing Industry](#), a cyber risk management guide for use by marine towing companies of all sizes and sectors. This is important progress, but more surely remains to be done.

Finally, whether in response to threats of physical attacks, or attacks carried out in cyberspace, for the partnership to continue achieving results that keep the American people safe, the policies and practices guiding it into the future must be crafted with an eye toward facilitating the tracking and exchange of threat information in real time; ensuring that security regulations are informed by practical operational realities and risk management principles; and maintaining effective security for our waterways without impeding the waterborne commerce that is itself fundamental to our national security.

That worst of days 20 years ago summoned what is best in our

Coast Guard and our mariners, whose actions helped prevent further loss of life. And while we hope and pray not to hear another call for “all available boats,” we owe it to our nation to make sure this vital partnership is ready if we do.

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