One Day Before Ouster, Phelan Touted Need for New Budget, New Business Practices, New Battleship

Then-Secretary of the Navy John Phelan delivers a keynote address just hours before unexpectedly departing the job. *Photo credit: Laura Hatcher.*

Editor's note: This story appeared April 21 in Seapower's Show Daily at Sea-Air-Space. On April 22, Pentagon Spokesman Sean Parnell announced on X that John Phelan was leaving the administration; other media reports said he had been ousted. Undersecretary of the Navy Hung Cao is now acting secretary of the Navy. This article is about his keynote speech at Sea-Air-Space.

On the day the Pentagon released a $1.5 trillion fiscal 2027

defense budget, Navy Secretary John Phelan addressed Sea-Air-Space and said the Department of the Navy needs a budget, not a series of continuing resolutions from Congress.

Phelan also defended the controversial planned Trump-class battleship, saying it brings a needed capability and would anchor the new “high-low” Golden Fleet concept outlined the day before by Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Daryl Caudle, speaking from the same stage.

Phelan also echoed Caudle in saying doing business with the Navy must change, which is why the service recently announced a new portfolio acquisition executive (PAE) structure, appointing five senior leaders to act as single accountable officials for key domains to accelerate capability delivery and keep a lid on costs.

Phelan said he will soon testify on the budget on Capitol Hill and will tell lawmakers a continuing resolution – a budget carrying forward current levels of spending – “would have extremely negative consequences for the DoN. It’s like running a business and not being able to charge what your competitors do,” he said. “Continuing resolutions impose constrained short-term funding conditions that force legacy program tradeoffs and impact our ability to innovate and therefore our readiness over time.”

The Golden Fleet initiative “is about delivering the fleet of the future through three mutually reinforcing pillars. One, to maintain and enhance maritime dominance. Two, revitalize the maritime industrial base and three, change how the Department of the Navy does business,” Phelan said.

The initiative includes the proposed Trump-class battleship, or BBG(X), certain to be a target of some in Congress.

“I know the question many of you and the pundits are asking, why battleships, and why now? The answer is straightforward and grounded in the realities of high-end conflict in shaping

the next large surface combatant," he said.

Phelan said he has discussed the issue with top admirals and commanders and said they don't want to have to choose between air defense, anti-ship warfare, anti-submarine warfare or long-range strikes.

"Battleship strike groups will offer commanders more options than what exists in today's fleet," he said. The ships would be "built to fight and stay in the fight by sustaining fires, maintaining pressure and outlasting any adversary … these are not capabilities you can fully distribute across smaller systems alone."

Phelan said he has heard the critiques of the proposed battleship, that it would be too vulnerable, too expensive, too big. "We've heard that before about carriers and about submarines and yet when it matters most, those are the platforms that combatant commanders call for."

However, he said the battleship would be just a "small part" of the Golden Fleet and would operate as part of a distributed network that would include smaller ships, crewed and uncrewed.

"This is not about replacing the fleet … the strategic reality is that manned platforms combined with unmanned systems, acting interchangeably, is the most powerful winning combination."

Reviews from Carriers to Barracks

In a roundtable interview with reporters after the keynote speech, Phelan said the Navy is studying all aspects of how it does business, from planning the battleship to building barracks for Sailors more efficiently.

Phelan said the Navy is reviewing CVN 82 and 83, the next Ford-class carriers "to review the costs, the designs, the systems, to make sure that they make sense and they have all

the systems and requirements that we want going forward," a study he said should wrap up next month.

"I think one of the things we have to do a better job of in the Navy is kind of what I call total cost of ownership. So, what does it really cost to sustain and maintain these things? … To be honest, we're reviewing every program, so the carrier's just one of them.

"We're doing the same thing in maintenance. We're doing the same thing on infrastructure. We're doing the same thing on milcon [military construction]. I'm still trying to understand why barracks cost, you know, on average more than $1,500 a foot, right? That's insane."

The budget proposal aims to improve the military industrial base to, among other things, improve submarine production rates. Phelan said that will be a challenge bigger than improving the production rate of surface ships.

"The submarines [are] a challenge because it's one of the most complicated things I have seen, having been in there and looking at it, and I've been to a lot of places, including SpaceX, etc. This thing's an underwater space station in effect, if you really look at it, particularly the Columbia."

Phelan said he has walked a lot of shipyards and "I see a lot of machinery from the 1960s and I see 1980s practices. For example, when a welder runs out of materials, they're not right next to 'em. They're sometimes in another building a mile away. Bathrooms are not in the same building. These are things that slow down time on the deck plate."

Phelan also said the Navy is looking at having some of its ships built by foreign partners, an idea President Trump has raised as a possibility.

"We are going to study that and take a hard look at it," he said. It might make sense for foreign shipyards to build

support ships, or to build modules for combatant ships. The United States will be looking at ships that are rapidly producible and could “hit the fleet fast, so that would tend to lead you more to the Koreas, Japans of the world,” he said. “I guess I would say everything’s on the table. We just need to look at it, understand it, understand the implications be

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OMB’s Vought: Industry Must Share Blame for Shipbuilding Woes

OMB Director Russell Vought discusses shipbuilding investment in the closing keynote of Sea-Air-Space. *Photo credit: Laura Hatcher*

The shipbuilding industry must share the blame for delays in

shipbuilding and the Trump administration is willing to look beyond the traditional industry if it can't produce products on time and within budget, OMB Director Russell Vought said at the closing keynote of Sea-Air-Space 2026.

Vought – who also served in his role in the first Trump administration – said, "during the first term, I came to believe that we had a demand signal problem. My view was that we, the government, we the customer, had failed to deliver a consistent demand signal to industry over successive appropriation cycles, and it was because of this inconsistency that production rates could not be more ambitious. I no longer believe that, because if you look back over the last administration, Congress provided sustained resources for shipbuilding but productivity went down, not up."

Vought said the problem has been a long time coming and has two major sources.

"First was the now legendary 'last supper' meeting in which Bill Clinton's secretary and deputy secretary of defense convened the CEOs of America's largest defense companies and told them essentially to merge or die," Vought said. "This decision, based on an end-of-history mindset, represents a strategic mistake of staggering proportions that it resulted in 105 large defense firm being reduced down to essentially seven major primes, with a resultant loss in capacity and competition."

The second major influence that exerted what Vought called a major negative impact on the operations of large defense firms in the 1990s was the transition from "founder engineers" in the C suite, "men who understood the founding culture of their organizations," with executives who were "heavily influenced by the philosophies coming out of consulting firms that placed an absolute priority upon ownership, interest in stock prices and dividends to the detriment of both the customer, which is to say the government, and the workforce."

The latter reason is why President Trump signed an order prohibiting companies from paying dividends or conducting stock buybacks “until such time as they are able to provide a superior product on time and on budget.”

The administration is also willing to look overseas and to non-traditional shipbuilding yards for ships, Vought said, citing an agreement with Finland for 11 new icebreakers that would include four built in Finland and the rest built in U.S. shipyards after they modernize their facilities.

“This overall effort will not only produce ships for our Coast Guard but also result in American shipyards with more heavy industrial capacity into the future. These icebreakers will help to put the heavy back into America’s heavy industry, but they will also result in shipyards that can compete for other programs to include surface combatants into the future,” Vought said.

The new defense budget includes sizable investments for buying new ships — 18 battle force ships and 16 support ships for the Navy, more for the Coast Guard and Army and other agencies — but Vought warned traditional shipbuilders to step up or they may be procured elsewhere.

“Most of these ships can be built to commercial standards in a number of our nation’s shipyards that are not already tasked and behind schedule with Navy contracts,” Vought said. “Some of these ships need to be bought in large numbers and could attract direct foreign investment that will meet the president’s goal of both adding capacity and competition to the U.S. shipbuilding sector.

“To be clear, we need more ships and we need them right now. We hope this year’s budget on top of the 82 ships we already received in [fiscal] ‘26 in the one Big Beautiful Bill convey that sense of urgency on the part of President Trump and his administration. If we cannot get the ships we need from

traditional sources at cost and on time, we will get them from other shipyards.”

Defense Industry Needs Steady Budgets, Congressional Speakers Say

Speakers at the congressional breakfast on the last day of Sea-Air-Space. *Photo credit: Laura Hatcher*

Speaking at the annual congressional breakfast at Sea-Air-Space, members of Congress with defense oversight agreed that sustained funding to meet increased demand signal is the best way forward.

In recent years, Congress has resorted to continuing

resolutions for government-wide funding instead of passing separate funding bills, which freezes spending at current levels and amounts to a cut in real dollars.

This occasionally results in supplemental spending bills, such as the “Big Beautiful Bill” that passed last year and added money for shipbuilding and other defense needs.

However, “reconciliation is not the way to do it,” said Rep. Donald Norcross (D-New Jersey). Defense spending is currently “going the right way,” he said, but “top line yes, reconciliation no.”

Rep. Ronny Jackson (R-Texas), agreed that reconciliation funding leads to difficult math, as subsequent budgets are based on previous spending, so a budget cut often follows a reconciliation boom.

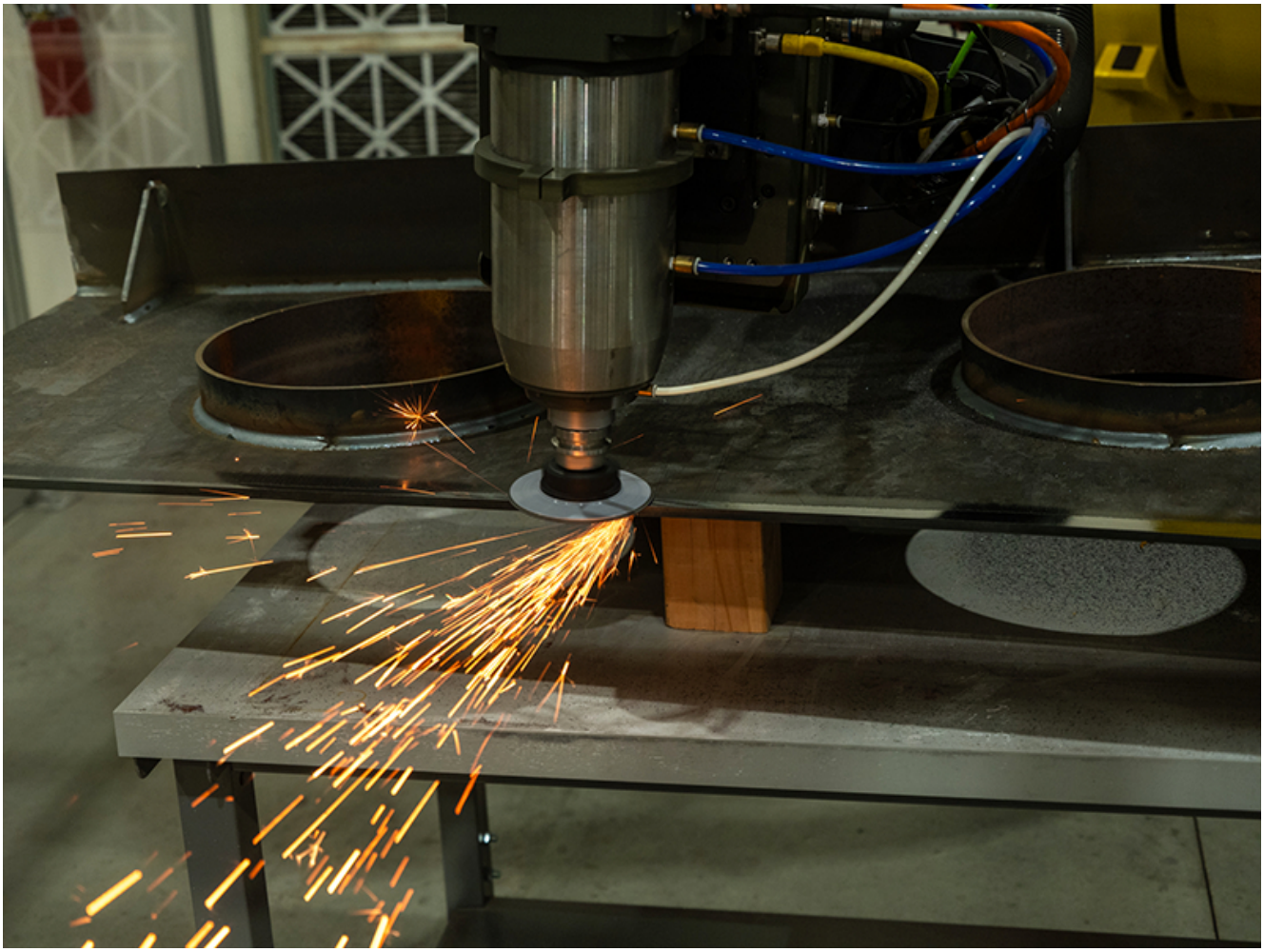
“We have to take reconciliation numbers and budget numbers and add them together, or we will be going in the wrong direction,” Jackson said.

And while government speakers have Sea-Air-Space have made some requests of industry to build systems they need and have plans to maintain them, Rep. Joe Courtney (D-Connecticut) said government owes industry something as well: contracts to indicate demand signal.

“Four years ago we authorized the block VI contract for Virginia [the Virginia-class submarine],” he said. “We still do not have a contract as we’re sitting here this morning.”

Nothing sends a more powerful signal to the shipyards and the supply chain than a contract, he said. “I know it’s being worked on right now, but I can’t say it enough, we’ve got to get this thing wrapped up … if we’re serious about doing this, let’s get it signed, and for Columbia [class subs] too.”

HII Moves Further into Physical AI for Shipbuilding



A GrayMatter Robotics technology performs autonomous grinding to an HII foundation project that used internal research and development funds.

By Brett Davis

Shipbuilding giant HII (Booth 923) has added another artificial intelligence partner to its shipbuilding program, taking another step toward adding “physical AI” to the process of constructing Navy ships.

In early April, the company announced it signed a memorandum of understanding with Carson, California-

based GrayMatter Robotics to explore integrating GMR's physical AI into shipbuilding operations, including for surface preparation, coating and inspection.

The companies will identify and potentially pursue future opportunities in four areas that include autonomous shipbuilding capability development; integration of GMR technologies with other shipbuilding technology initiatives; workforce training to extend automation; and acceleration and scaling of unmanned system production.

"Our shipbuilding throughput was up 14% in 2025 and we are looking for an additional 15% increase in 2026," said Eric Chewning, HII's executive vice president of maritime systems and corporate strategy. "By working with new partners like GMR we can further augment our workforce and speed up U.S. Navy shipbuilding production."

This follows on to a similar announcement from February, when HII signed an MOU with Ohio-based Path Robotics to incorporate physical AI for welding.

HII said much of the work that would be pursued by these companies currently is "hands-on and highly skilled," but AI-driven technologies "offer promising opportunities to support these critical processes by reducing repetitive work and improving consistency to help accelerate delivery timelines and meet the U.S. Navy's growing demand."

Chewning said the introduction of physical AI is just one step of a series of actions HII is taking to improve shipbuilding, from increasing its supplier base to hiring and retaining new workers to making capital investments.

"And finally, what brings us here today, we are investing in new industry 4.0 technologies like digital engineering, additive manufacturing, enterprise AI and physical AI to drive overall shipyard efficiency," he told reporters in a call about the announcement. "By working with new physical AI

partners like GrayMatter Robotics and integrating them into our high-yield production robotics initiative, or HYPR, we can further augment the AI workforce and speed up the shipbuilding process by bringing automation into more areas of production."

So far, shipyard automation remains limited to repeatable activities, where one robot might do a single task 100,000 times, but "there's a broader set of industrial use cases where we need a single robot to do a hundred thousand tasks just once," Chewning said. "And that's where physical AI is a game changer and our partnership with GrayMatter Robotics is so important."

Ariyan Kabir, GrayMatter Robotics' CEO and cofounder, said his company's technology will help HII do the work it needs at a time when there aren't enough skilled workers to do it.

"These are physically brutal tasks," he told reporters on the press call. "These require incredible precision and we don't have enough people, skilled people anymore in the U.S. to do these jobs, who are capable of doing these jobs. And that is the problem we solve at GrayMatter Robotics. We build physical AI systems that learn how to perform these skilled manufacturing tasks autonomously — no pre-programmed robots — robots that understand complex material physics and environmental physics, the physics of force friction, contact tool wearing out, temperature and humidity affecting the material behavior, so on and so forth."

HII will discuss its physical AI efforts at 1:30 p.m. today at its booth, along with the CEOs of its new physical AI partners.

STEM Expo Enchants Students with Science, Games and Fun

Kids raise their hands to answer a question during a Mad Science presentation

The annual STEM Expo kicked off Sea-Air-Space 2026 by giving students of all ages a look at the various technologies that underpin the maritime world of the sea services.

Attendees got examples of chemical reactions from Mad Science presentations, learned some of the principles of aerodynamics, saw how many marbles an aluminum foil boat could hold, and more, including getting a close-up look at welding to build ships.

STEM Expo sponsor HII featured a variety of exhibits at its booth, including the marble-carrying boats and welding systems. John Walker, 043 facilities manager at Newport News Shipbuilding, helped students work with an introductory welding program.

“This introduces these kids to things that they’re probably not exposed to on a daily basis,” he said. “Even at the schools, they probably don’t talk a lot about welding, or fitting up steel, or even shipbuilding. So, STEM is very important to expose these kids to this type of technology and the things we do at the shipyard.”

The Navy League created the STEM Expo to give students interested in science, technology, engineering and math an opportunity to enjoy interactive workshops and hands-on demonstrations while accessing real-world career information.

Students are captivated by dry ice during a Mad Science demonstration at STEM Expo.

HII’s Buzz Donnelly, vice president of customer affairs and a former Navy carrier pilot and ship commander, said he has “spent a lot of time reaping the benefits of forums like this.” He said the STEM event is a great lead-off event for local visitors and for Sea-Air-Space attendees from all over the world to share with their families.

“It’s extremely important to what we need as a defense industry, because these are the future engineers, the future tradesmen and laborers, that our heavy labor-centric force structure depends on. Regardless of how much we modernize with technology, automation, robots and cobots, we still rely on the people,” Donnelly said.

An attendee gets up close and personal with a pair of virtual-reality goggles at STEM Expo

“Having these young folks here today to see how exciting all the different aspects are, from the shipbuilding to the missiles and aerospace industry, [and] medicines here, is just a real motivating opportunity for them to get them excited about all the things that we do in this industry, to get

excited about school, and I know for certain we're going to have some of them that come in and benefit our nation and this industrial base in the future."

Exhibitors at the event, which was also sponsored by Smart Learning Solutions, included universities, defense-related government agencies, science organizations and others.

HII Works to Boost Capacity as New Ship Designs Loom

An artist's conception of a new Navy battleship, as released by the U.S. Navy in December. *Image credit: U.S. Navy*

ARLINGTON, VA – Shipbuilder HII is concentrating on improving its shipbuilding capacity and efficiency to meet the demands of the military and the Trump Administration, efforts that now are expected to include building a new class of battleships.

Chris Kastner, president and CEO of HII, sat down with reporters in the company's Arlington, Virginia office ahead of next week's Surface Navy Association meeting and said the company is in tune with the administration and is focused on increasing its capacity and bolstering its workforce to speed ship production.

"It's a good and challenging time to be in shipbuilding," Kastner said.

Some of those challenges have arisen very recently. Just before Christmas, Trump announced a new class of battleship as part of the "Golden Fleet" concept to revitalize American shipbuilding, which would mark the first battleship construction since World War II.

This week, Trump said he wants defense spending to climb to $1.5 trillion, a 50% increase over the current budget, including spending from last year's budget reconciliation bill. He also said defense companies should focus on performance instead of conducting stock buybacks or paying large salaries to executives.

Kastner said while much is yet unknown about the battleship – "we learned of the battleship announcement when you did" – he expects more information in the next month or two and said it won't interfere with plans for a Navy package buy of two aircraft carriers as "it's clear the Navy wants both, they're both part of the Golden Fleet."

The Navy has so far projected the battleship will be up to 800 feet long, have a crew of up to 850 and consist of 20 to 25 ships, each equipped with vertical launch missile cells, two Mk45 five-inch guns, one 32-megajoule railguns, Spy-6 radars and more.

Kastner said the speed of design and construction depends on whether it's a clean-sheet system or one based on a parent ship, such as Arleigh Burke-class DDG-51 destroyers or the

follow-on DDG(X) concept.

“If it’s fundamentally based on a derivative of a DDG expanded and they can use the DDG(X) concept studies as a baseline, you can accelerate things,” he said. “It’s all going to be based on the requirements, and how many of those requirements are consistent with a previous ship’s requirements, and whether you can use similar design parameters.”

Navy shipbuilding plans also include a yet-undefined new type of aircraft carrier as well as a new frigate based on HII’s Legend-class national security cutter, which Secretary of the Navy John Phelan described as “a proven, American-built ship that has been protecting U.S. interest at home and abroad … our goal is clear — launch the first hull in the water in 2028.”

Kastner said the carrier design is likely a “potential redesign of the Ford class” and said the goal date of 2028 for the new frigate is achievable because it’s based on the existing design. The Navy’s previous frigate program, based on an Italian ship design, was truncated to just two vessels after the program experienced schedule delays, cost overruns and design changes.

I have high confidence we can get that in the water in 2028,” he said. “When I say in the water, that means launched by 2028.” As for performing to meet White House and Department of Defense standards, Kastner said, “the theme is invest more, invest more for capacity and capability and technology, and if you do that and execute, you have opportunity for growth.”

Navy’s MQ-4C Triton Maritime UAV Picks up the Tempo

Northrop Grumman’s Brad Champion briefs reporters in front of B21, the latest MQ-4C Triton the company delivered to the U.S. Navy. *Photo credit: Brett Davis*

NAVAL AIR STATION PATUXENT RIVER, Maryland – The MQ-4C Triton maritime uncrewed aircraft, built for the Navy by Northrop Grumman, has been picking up its operational tempo in recent months, even as international customers consider adding the high-flying drones to their fleets.

The U.S. Navy has ordered 24 of the high-altitude, long-endurance aircraft and Northrop Grumman recently delivered the 20th of the batch, tail No. B-21. That vehicle was in a hangar at Naval Air Station Patuxent River on June 13, when the company invited reporters to see it and get an update on the aircraft program.

Australia, a partner on the program, has ordered four and has received three of them so far.

Captain Josh Guerre, program manager for the Persistent Maritime Unmanned Aircraft Systems Office, said the Triton system has been racking up milestones since August of 2023 when its capability stood up in 7th fleet and it achieved initial operating capability. Since then, the Triton was stood up in 6th Fleet in April 2024 and 5th Fleet in October 2024, which Guerre called a "stair-step" progress.

"For us, getting to IOC was like the start of the base climb to Mount Everest, because then we had to stand up capability in two other theaters and then maintain that pace of operation in all three of those theaters in continuity," Guerre said. "The good news is, we've done that."

Over the last six months, "we've been able to execute 45 flights per month across all three operational orbits, 15 per orbit for six straight months," Guerre said. The aircraft are operated remotely by crews in Jacksonville, Florida, well beyond the line of sight.

Triton is, as Guerre said, "a truck" that carries GEOINT (geographic intelligence) and SIGINT (signals intelligence) payloads, which the program is continually refining to meet the needs of combatant commanders.

Brad Champion, Northrop Grumman's MQ-4C enterprise director, said although the Triton is a variant of the Global Hawk airframe, it's very different and its sensor packages are hardened to meet the rigors of maritime environments and to transit through icy weather.

It is, he said, "the most advanced UAV that has ever been deployed by the U.S. Navy."

An MQ-4C Triton peeks out of a hangar at Naval Air Station Patuxent River. *Photo credit: Brett Davis*

As the company nears the end of the current U.S. Navy buy, other countries are considering adding Triton to their fleets, including Norway, which is expected to down-select between the Triton and a competitor platform later this year.

NATO, which is already flying the Global Hawk as part of its Alliance Ground Surveillance program, wants to beef up its program as well with a maritime variant.

The Triton is expected to interface closely with the Navy's Boeing-built P-8 Poseidon crewed aircraft, as together they help pick up the workload of the aging P-3 Orion maritime surveillance aircraft.

The multi-intelligence version of the Triton "was selected as one of a family of systems to replace the EP-3," Champion said. "The EP-3 has sunset and Triton is picking up a portion of that mission from a SIGINT perspective."

Any country that flies P-8s should consider the Triton, Champion said, as they operate in a similar fashion and can share similar information. And, because the Triton can pick up the SIGINT portion of the work and leave the P-8s to conduct anti-submarine warfare, “we actually preserve the life of your P-8.”

New Systems Pending, but Coast Guard ‘Stretched Thin,’ Lunday Says

Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem and Admiral Kevin Lunday, acting Commandant of the Coast Guard, shown here discussing response efforts in Washington D.C., January 30, after a helicopter and passenger jet collided. *Photo credit:*

U.S Coast Guard | Petty Officer 1st Class Brandon Giles
Much-needed new ships are on the way for the U.S. Coast Guard, acting Commandant Admiral Kevin Lunday told members of a House Armed Services Committee panel on May 14 as Congress prepares to receive defense budget requests from the new administration.

Lunday noted the service quickly moved resources to the Southern U.S. border in the wake of the presidential election.

"In January of this year, under the leadership of Secretary [Kristi] Noem, I directed our operational commanders to immediately increase Coast Guard presence along the U.S. border and maritime approaches, starting with the southern border where the president has declared a national emergency," Lunday told members of the committee's Subcommittee on Homeland Security. "We surged forces, tripling the number of forward-deployed air and surface assets in that area."

The service also moved to continue operations to control the northern border, including on the Great Lakes, to maritime approaches around Alaska, Hawaii and U.S. territories in the Pacific.

"Tasked with defending the nation's maritime borders, countering threats like illegal migration and drug trafficking, safeguarding our ports and waterways, responding to maritime disasters, and saving lives, the service is now stretched thin, with significant workforce shortages and aging, underfunded assets and infrastructure nearing collapse," he said. "The Coast Guard's current organizational structure and reactive posture are no longer adequate to meet current and emerging challenges."

Acquisitions

Last month, Lunday debuted a plan called Force Design 2028, aimed at addressing those issues. It will focus on four major areas: People, organization, acquisition and contracting and

technology, including an effort to “Develop a high velocity acquisition and contracting system to rapidly deliver the assets the service needs to fulfill its commitment to the American people.”

Some much-needed assets are already in the works, Lunday told members of the panel, with new production milestones achieved.

The service’s top ship acquisition priority is the polar security cutter and Lunday said the first PSC received approval on April 30 for full production by Bollinger Shipyards. Functional design maturity has topped 95 percent, so “they already are construction 10 of the pre-fabrication assembly units, which are the bottom center sections of that new icebreaker,” he said.

Likewise, the service is moving ahead to replace its aging construction tenders and river tenders, which maintain aids to navigation, and some of which have been in service since the 1940s. The DHS has approved the construction of the first eight of the new water commerce cutter being built by Birdon America, with their homeports to be decided later.

New systems are needed in the air as well, Lunday said.

The recent termination of the C-27J missionization program and stalled growth in our HC-130J program place our readiness to conduct various missions in jeopardy, including long range surveillance, disaster response, and border security operations,” he said. “For our rotary wing fleet, it is imperative that we continue and accelerate transition of air stations from the short-range MH-65E to the medium-range MH-60 to ensure sustainability and increase our capability to serve our national priorities.”

Navy League Fly In Focuses Federal Attention on Sea Services

Navy League National President Christopher Townsend, right, speaks with Rep. Rob Wittman of Virginia during the Fly In. *Photo credit: James Peterson*

Members of the Navy League of the United States fanned out across congressional buildings on May 7 as part of the second consecutive “Anchors Aweigh Fly In” to help educate lawmakers and their staff about the needs of the men and women of the sea services.

Luke Lorenz, the senior director of legislative affairs at the Navy League, said nearly 60 members from around the country participated in the Fly In, a significant step up from the 40 who took part last year, when the annual effort was restarted in the wake of COVID.

They came from all over the country, as far away as California, representing the Navy League's different regions, he said.

The Navy Leaguers briefed lawmakers and their staff on a variety of issues, including the importance of passing regular appropriations bills instead of relying on continuing resolutions that freeze federal spending at last year's levels. For many agencies, including the Department of Defense, that amounts to a cut as it doesn't account for inflation.

Bolstered by a new report from the Congressional Budget Office, the Navy Leaguers advocated for at least a $40 billion annual Navy shipbuilding and conversion budget to get to a 355-ship manned fleet, as well as $10 billion annually to build an uncrewed fleet.

They also advocated for a $20 billion Coast Guard budget (up from less than $13.5 billion in fiscal 2024) and touted workforce development pipeline programs such as the Sea Cadets and Young Marines.

Last but not least, the group sought co-sponsors for the SHIPS for America Act, which would revitalize the U.S. shipbuilding and commercial maritime industries. Creating such an act was a chief goal of the Fly In last year; now that it has been introduced, the Navy Leaguers called for support and passage.

Nearly 60 Navy League members took part in the 2025 Fly In. *Photo credit: James Peterson*

“Today was a great day. It’s always a privilege to spend time with my fellow Navy Leaguers who fly down here on their own dime, taking time off from work and their busy lives, to advocate for our sea services, the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and U.S.-flag Merchant Marine,” said board member Sara Fuentes.

“It’s really inspiring to see how they’re able to move the ball forward in terms of our sea service priorities. Last year we were here asking Congress to consider a SHIPS for America Act and today we are here asking for that SHIPS for America Act to have cosponsors. So, it’s amazing to see the progress we’ve already been able to make within one year thanks to the passion, dedication and service of Navy League members.”

After the busy day, members reported to National President Chris “Towny” Townsend they heard support for the SHIPS Act and the sea services during their meetings, and members were pleased the message was non-partisan.

Townsend said the event was “bittersweet” for him, as the Fly In is his last as national president, but said, “As always, it’s great to see our members engage, to execute on of our most important mission pillars, which is to advocate on behalf of our sea services, our sea service members and their families. And I saw that in full display today.”

Resonating Messages

Hampton Dowling, of the Mid-Atlantic Council in Northern Virginia, said although he is a life member, the Fly In was his first event with the Navy League – and it won’t be the last.

He said the staffers he spoke with felt the SHIPS for America Act was something that needs to happen and were impressed that the Navy League is one of the driving forces behind it.

“To have such a definitive statement by staffers on a rather uncommon subject matter – and the bill is about as complex as an octopus – I was really impressed. I was very optimistic,” he said.

Retired Navy Commander Jim Semerad met with a variety of lawmakers and staffers, from Republican Rep. Pete Sessions of Texas to Michigan Democrat Rashida Tlaib, and said the message resonated well on both sides of the aisle.

Semerad said Sessions even “commandeered” him to address Sessions’ staff and educate them about the Navy League and its issues, and Tlaib was “very excited that I showed up” and came out of her office to speak with him.

“People wanted to do the right thing when it comes to the Navy’s and the sea services’ budget,” he said, including for keeping commercial shipping lanes open.

“This was a very positive experience,” Semerad said. “I would encourage everybody from the Navy League: Put on your

comfortable shoes, wear tennis shoes if necessary, and come to Washington, D.C. and have the experience of passing on the Navy's message. You'll feel good about it and the legislators feel good about it, too."

Sea-Air-Space: Looking Ahead to a Modern Marine Corps

Major General Jason Woodworth makes a point during the panel on modernizing the Marine Corps. *Photo credit: Dan Goodrich*

Six years into its modernization initiative, the Marine Corps has a head start on some of its sister services. But there's still more to be done, said panelists during the April 8 session "Modernizing the Marine Corps: Building an Agile, Lethal and Resilient Force."

“It’s exciting and we need to go faster,” summed up Lieutenant General Eric Austin, deputy commandant for combat development and integration and commanding general of the Marine Corps Combat Development Command.

Austin emphasized the Marine campaign of learning and its influence on force design. “How we responsibly modernize the Marine Corps is how we execute force design,” he said.

Lieutenant General Benjamin Watson, commanding general, Training and Education Command, said the Corps has traditionally relied on brick-and-mortar training solutions, “but that’s not the world we’re in these days.”

He cited initiatives like Project Triumph’s emphasis on leveraging technology to be more efficient and effective, and Project Tripoli’s emphasis on a live, virtual and constructive training environment.

“We’re increasingly fielding more complicated and sophisticated systems that are tougher and more costly to train on. I think if you look at what we’re seeing in contemporary conflict, it’s not much of a stretch to say we will never fight again with what’s traditionally known as air superiority,” Watson said, citing the need for unmanned systems integration, data and artificial intelligence.

“It’s exciting, and we need to go faster,” said Lieutenant General Eric Austin. *Photo credit: Dan Goodrich*

“One of our mantras is the idea that any Marine using a precision weapon can kill someone who needs killing at 500 meters. But now that’s up to 15, 20 kilometers and beyond” through the use of technology like first-person view drones, he said.

Major General Jason Woodworth, commander, Marine Corps Installations Command, and assistant deputy commandant, Installations and Logistics, discussed the importance of Barracks 2030, noting that modernizing aging structures is one of the commandant’s top priorities.

“It’s where warrior and family readiness starts. If Marines are good at home, they’re better at work,” he said.

Brigadier General Robert Brodie, director, Expeditionary Warfare OPNAV N95, said he’s seeing good collaboration between the Marine Corps and industry on modernization initiatives. He said in terms of shipbuilding, the most successful companies

have great relationships with other industry partners as well.

Brodie and the other panelists said to further facilitate Marine-industry partnerships, members of the Corps need to do a better job of defining exactly what they’re looking for from industry – including opportunities for industry to help them understand a problem, define the problem and shape solutions.