

DC Congresswoman Pushes DC Statehood at Keel-Laying for Navy Submarine



U.S. Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-District of Columbia), approves the welding of her initials onto a metal plate during a ceremony at the General Dynamics Electric Boat Facility at Quonset Point, Rhode Island, June 4. The congresswoman is the sponsor of the future U.S. Navy ballistic missile submarine District of Columbia. *U.S. NAVY / GENERAL DYNAMICS ELECTRIC BOAT*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The keel-laying of the U.S. Navy's next-generation ballistic-missile submarine (SSBN) was celebrated June 4 in Quonset Point, Rhode Island, by the submarine's designers and builders and the Navy that will operate it.

At the ceremonies for the future USS District of Columbia (SSBN 826), one of the ship's two sponsors, Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-District of Columbia, also used the event as an occasion to advocate for the cause of her life: statehood for the District of Columbia.

The day before the ceremonies, Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro announced that the first ship of the Columbia class would be named USS District of Columbia, instead of Columbia.

"The decision to name SSBN 826 is to alleviate any name conflicts with the already-commissioned USS Columbia (SSN 771). §10 U.S.C. 8662(a) states that not more than one vessel of the Navy may have the same name," the secretary's public affairs officer said in a June 3 release. "The Columbia program was named in 2016 with the lead ship projected to enter service in 2027, consequently overlapping with the existing USS Columbia (SSN 771). SSBN 826 will be named after the nation's capital while SSN 771 is named after cities in South Carolina, Missouri, and Illinois named Columbia, following the naval tradition of SSNs being named after U.S. cities."

General Dynamics Electric Boat President Kevin Graney presided at the keel-laying ceremonies. Also speaking were Jennifer Boykin, president of Newport News Shipbuilding, a Huntington Ingalls company that builds sections of the Columbia-class submarines; Rep. Joe Courtney (D-Connecticut), in whose district the Columbia SSBNs will be assembled; Reps. David Cicilline and Jim Langevin and Sens. Sheldon Whitehouse and Jack Reed, all Democrats from Rhode Island, site of Electric Boats' Quonset Point fabrication facility; Adm. Daryl Caudle, commander, U.S. Fleet Forces Command; Del Toro; and Norton.

Graney said the new SSBN was going to be "the most capable and quiet submarine ever built."

He noted Electric Boat invested almost \$2 billion in

facilities and hired thousands of workers to build the Columbia class, and that as the program progressed the company would “need to hire and train many thousands more.”

Graney called the Columbia class SSBN was “arguably be the greatest engineering achievement of the most advanced military in the world.”

Boykin noted that “our Sailors’ lives depend on the quality of our product, and it is this responsibility that guides everything that we do.”

She noted Newport News Shipbuilding has been allied with Electric Boat in the Virginia-class attack submarine program that began nearly 25 years ago.

“As every ballistic-missile submarine has since the keel laying of USS George Washington (SSBN 598) here at Electric Boat in November 1958 – the District of Columbia, and all those in its class will continue to serve as the most survivable leg of the nuclear triad – standing constant watch far beneath the waves, as we have done for over 63 years, a stalwart deterrent against those who would seek to do the unspeakable,” Caudle said.

Del Toro noted the Washington Navy Yard in the district is the Navy’s oldest shore facility.

“While it’s common to refer to D.C. as our nation’s capital, I also like to think of it as our naval capital,” Del Toro said, in reference to notable Sailors and Marines who were born and raised in the district. “That’s why I want to make it clear that this boat honors the people and the spirit of the District of Columbia.”

Norton – the boat’s sponsor along with the district’s mayor, Muriel Bowser – wrote her initials on a steel plate. The initials were then welded onto the plate by Electric Boat welder Maria Betance-Pizarro. The plate will be fixed to the

structure of the submarine.

"I can't say how pleased I am today as we celebrate the USS District of Columbia-class submarine, commissioned in recognition of my hometown and the jurisdiction I represent in the Congress, the District of Columbia," Norton said.

Norton, who has been a staunch advocate for statehood for the district during her long career, used the occasion to plug her top political goal.

Norton said the submarine's name is "fitting that it recognizes the jurisdiction that will become the 51st state of the United States of America. ... As we celebrate this keel-laying today, we also underline the Congress must no longer exclude the residents of our nation's capital from the democratic presence, forcing residents to watch from the sidelines as Congress votes on laws that affect the nation or votes even on laws on the duly elected government. Democracy demands more, D.C. residents demand much more. They deserve statehood."