

Phelan to Focus on Navy Recruiting, Shipbuilding



Sen. Roger Wicker, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, met with Secretary of the Navy nominee John Phelan in January. *Photo credit: Sen. Wicker's office.*

WASHINGTON – Businessman John Phelan, nominated by President Trump to be secretary of the Navy, appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Feb. 27 and said he wants to focus on Navy recruitment and training, get shipbuilding back on track and set up an “accountable warfighting culture” is approved.

Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Mississippi), chairman of the committee, said Phelan had a “distinguished career in the private sector” although he has no Navy experience, and said “his background showcases his ability to manage complex business deals to drive efficiency and to deliver results. Our Navy will need someone with all three of those skills and more to get our Navy back on the right track.”

“I understand why some question why a businessman who did not wear the uniform should lead the Navy,” Phelan said, pledging to “step outside the status quo and take decisive action with a results-oriented approach.”

Wicker's first question to Phelan was what he would do to

improve Navy recruiting. The service met its goals last year, he said, but “only by lowering standards. Last year, nearly 20% of Navy recruits were considered category IV – they tested below the 30th percentile on the military aptitude test.”

Phelan said some recruiting numbers have gone up, “which is a reflection of the president’s victory and return to the warfighting ethos,” and said he would take advantage of the upcoming 250th anniversary of the Navy to highlight the benefits of life in the service.

He also said the Navy should “do better from a digital perspective outreach” to young people, and take a page from the Marine Corps, which has worked with the same advertising company for three decades to build its brand.

Wicker said if Congress “threw a zillion dollars at the Navy” it still couldn’t build enough ships because the industrial base doesn’t have enough workers.

Phelan said he would visit the shipyards and spread best practices, including borrowing some from international shipyards, and also “telegraph demand” for shipbuilding to incentivize the private sector to invest in shipbuilding.

Echoing Wicker’s comment that some shipyard salaries are so low a welder could get the same salary working at a convenience store, Phelan said, “you can’t have those kinds of wage differentials for those kinds of jobs.”

Sen. Jack Reed (D-Rhode Island) asked about Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth’s recent announcement that the Pentagon should be ready to cut 8% from the defense budget in each of the next five years in addition to laying off thousands of defense workers. Reed said such “disruptions” could jeopardize any gains the shipbuilders might make in recruiting workers.

Phelan said he is “not privy” to the details of the cuts, but

“I do think the shipbuilding force is critical. If confirmed, will set with the secretary of defense and president and very quickly talk about that.”

Later, he said he understood the potential cuts to be “a planning tool – where would we cut if we need to cut?” that would move resources from nonlethal to more lethal activities.

“Do I view the construction of submarines and ships as lethal? The answer is yes, because we need to have these ships and we need to get them out there quickly,” he said.