

Sea-Air-Space: CMS Breakfast Panel Discusses How to Make Future Shipbuilding Shipshape



Navy, Coast Guard and industry officials discuss the rebuilding of the United States' shipbuilding industry.

Photo Credit: Dan Goodrich

During his March 4 joint address to Congress, President Donald Trump vowed to establish a new office of shipbuilding within the White House and "resurrect" America's shipbuilding industry.

Implementing that vision poses both opportunities and challenges, said military and shipbuilding leaders during the April 8 Sea-Air-Space Center for Maritime Strategy Breakfast session, "Navigating Tomorrow: Forging a New Era in Innovation and Shipbuilding."

U.S. Navy Admiral Daryl Caudle, commander of U.S. Fleet Forces Command, said one issue is there is a set of strategic assumptions regarding shipbuilding that most people take for

granted, and those assumptions “limit intellectual honesty and our perspective about the size, scale and scope of our challenges.”

Caudle said the largest assumption has to do with combat shipbuilding capacity. He said it’s commonly thought the attack on Pearl Harbor awoke a sleeping shipbuilding giant, but “the only reason we were able to achieve that level of production was because of the groundwork of two years earlier.”

Caudle said there’s a tendency to focus on the decay of U.S. shipbuilding capacity since World War II, but before the war, the U.S. contributed a relatively small amount of global shipbuilding.

“I bring these up to show we have faced the odds before,” he said, adding he’s quite confident solutions are available as long as people are open and honest about the problems, the scale of those problems, and are proactive in solving them without having to undergo a crisis like Pearl Harbor and 9/11.

“Shipbuilding has taken on a prominence and importance we haven’t seen in a century. Coast Guard shipbuilding continues to move, but not move fast enough,” said U.S. Coast Guard Acting Commandant Admiral Kevin Lunday.

He said America is demanding more of its Coast Guard, “but we are less ready than in any time in our history since World War II.”



Admiral Daryl Caudle, left, Admiral Kevin Lunday and Rick Hunt share thoughts during the panel.

Photo credit: Dan Goodrich

Lunday said Coast Guard fleet cutters and boats are at “significant decline,” and there’s a shift to almost complete corrective maintenance of the fleet. “No ship gets underway today without stripping another for parts,” he said. “The pace of modernization has not kept pace with the rate of change.”

However, there are positives on the horizon, Lunday said, citing the U.S. Coast Guard Force Design 2028’s transformative capabilities, along with significant government support. “I’ve not seen this level of support from [the Navy] secretary and the Office of Budget and Management certainly in my career, and maybe in our history,” he said.

Shipbuilding Perspective

A trio of shipbuilders closed out the panel presentations. Retired U.S. Navy Vice Admiral Rick Hunt, president of Fincantieri Marinette Marine, addressed shipbuilding from the

perspective of the end user, including Sailors on a ship and operational commanders.

“I think the focus has to be on platforms that deliver top-level requirements, like combat systems, range, speed, durability and endurance,” he said. But there are challenges to achieving that. “Top of my list is readiness,” he said.

For instance, Hunt said maintenance is a key issue for surface warfare, and condition-based maintenance can be revolutionary. Cyber resilience is also important. “I think that’s where the next war starts and maybe the next war ends,” he said.

Hunt said he believes there needs to be continual engagement between the military and industry when it comes to shipbuilding.

“The primes, the subs and the suppliers – we need to bring all those guys in,” he said. “We can’t have a serial, time-consuming, somewhat bureaucratic process to identify things we need to change and understand the impacts of change. Remember, Sailors are the ultimate customers.”

Kari Wilkinson, executive vice president of HII and president of Newport News Shipbuilding, said she believes “now is the time to challenge what we think about the business. We do things in shipbuilding as we have since the beginning of time.”

But there is now the opportunity to use tools like algorithms and AI and integrate across portfolios, she said.

Mark Rayha, president of General Dynamics Electric Boat, said he’s heartened by the different attitude toward shipbuilding espoused by the current administration. “We talk a lot about the time we’re in – we need to do more; we need to deliver more,” he said.