Civilian, Uniformed Navy Leaders Again Face Questions About Truman's Retirement, Ford Carriers, Diversion of Funds for Border Wall

Senate Armed Services Committee members expressed concerns about the Navy's planned early retirement of the aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman and the impact of use of military funds and troops to secure the southwest border and questioned the operational status of the new Gerald R. Ford carrier.

During an April 9 hearing with the Navy Department's top civilian and uniformed leaders, the senators also questioned the delay in building two new amphibious warships and suggested moving that procurement ahead by authorizing incremental funding for the first of the Amphibious Transport Dock (LPD) Flight IIs and the next America-class Amphibious Assault (LHA) ship.

In his opening statement, Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer announced that the three U.S. service members killed by a suicide car bombing April 8 in Afghanistan were Marines. He provided no details.

SASC Chairman Sen. James M. Inhofe (R-Oklahoma) said there was no other Navy weapon system that matches "the reach and lethality of the carrier and its air wing" and said he was "highly skeptical" of Pentagon claims that early retirement of the Truman will result in savings.

That view was echoed by other committee members.

Questioned about the Truman decision, Chief of Naval

Operations Adm. John M. Richardson estimated savings of $16 billion to $17 billion if officials follow through on plans to skip the normal midlife nuclear refueling and overhaul of the carrier and retire it with 25 years of expected service life remaining.

Richardson said the Navy is completing a new future fleet study and could reverse the Truman decision if needed.

Inhofe responded: “You may need to do that.”

The Navy has heard similar views from other influential members of Congress.

Inhofe and others also questioned progress on the Ford, the first ship in a new class of nuclear-powered carriers, which is in the shipyard three years after it was expected to be operational and billions of dollars over budget.

Spencer said all 11 of the advanced weapons elevators would be installed and the other mechanical and structural problems with the Ford would be resolved when the carrier is expected to leave the shipyard in October.

Questioned later by Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Arkansas), Spencer insisted that “the Ford will work” and noted that it will be able to produce 30% more aircraft sorties a day than the Nimitz-class carriers and do it with fewer Sailors.

“We have a much more capable, much more lethal asset,” which was “the primary factor” in moving to the new carriers, Spencer said.

Asked if Congress provided additional money to cover refueling Truman, Spencer said he “would not turn it down.”

Questioned later by Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Mississippi) on whether the Navy could purchase the LPD Flight II and the LHA-9 a year earlier than the planned 2021 and 2024 starts if Congress authorized incremental funding, Spencer said they

could.

Incremental funding normally is used for the most expensive ships, including carriers.

Asked about the response to growing Russian activities in the Arctic, Richardson said the Navy is conducting more exercises there, including a planned Marine amphibious landing in September to seize an airfield on the Aleutian island of Adak to allow Navy aircraft, including P-8A patrol planes, to operate.

Several senators expressed concern about the impact of the Trump administration's plans to divert military construction funds to building the wall at the U.S.-Mexico border and the expense of sending active-duty troops there.

Spencer said he has not been given a list of Navy construction projects that would be affected by the diversion of $3.6 billion in MilCon funds but would provide his best advice on any such proposal.

Questioned about his leaked memos to Spencer about the threat to Marine readiness from several programs, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert B. Neller said the border deployment was only one of the eight factors he cited and represented only 2% of the funding shortfalls. He said he knew of no exercise that was canceled because Marines were sent to the border, although the size of one was reduced, and only one unit may have suffered reduced readiness from the border deployment, while other units gained readiness from duties there.