House Committee Again Confronts Navy Leaders Over Truman's Retirement, Troubled Ship Programs, Long-Term Planning

The U.S. Navy's shipbuilding plans and programs came under attack in the House Armed Services Committee on April 10, with concerns about the accelerated development of a new large surface combatant and unmanned vessels, early retirement of the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman and constant changes in long-term plans.

House Armed Services Chairman Rep. Adam Smith (D-Washington) cited numerous failed or troubled ship programs while questioning new proposals, a retired Navy officer doubted the Navy had "a long-term vision" for its fleet and other committee members voiced concerns about meeting combatant commanders' needs with a reduced carrier force.

Questions and concerns also came up about delays in building two amphibious warships, the badly aged strategic sealift fleet, the cybersecurity of the supply chain and the operational impact on the Marine Corps from the hurricane damage to two North Carolina installations.

Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer and Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John M. Richardson said that, with the need to balance requirements and limited resources, they prioritized modernization to meet rising peer competitors and were working more with industry to match desired requirements with what is achievable and affordable.

The plan to retire USS Truman at midlife was a "hard choice"

made to allow investments in future technologies, they said. Those investments would suffer if Congress insisted on refueling Truman for another 25 years of service, which committee members indicated they would.

Challenged by Rep. Elaine Luria (D-Virginia), a retired commander, that the frequent changes in the 30-year shipbuilding plan indicated a lack of vision, Richardson said, "yes, we have a long-term vision," but the changes are "reflective of how much the security landscape has changed." Spencer said the revised shipbuilding program "doesn't bother me one bit" because it was necessary to adapt to changed conditions.

Smith, in his prepared opening statement, cited a long list of troubled Navy programs, including the planned new cruiser CG(X), which was canceled, the DDG-1000, which was cut from 21 to three ships, and the littoral combat ships (LCS), which were bought in blocks without firm requirements and have yet to be deployed with a full capability.

"I'm concerned that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past," Smith said, listing Richardson's "arbitrary" goal of starting construction on the new surface combatant by 2023 and the plan to buy 20 large unmanned vessels "without any requirements review, understanding of the concept of operations or how to employ weapons on unmanned vessels, including the application of the law of armed conflict." Smith's concerns about the unmanned vessels was echoed by Rep. Joe Courtney (D-Connecticut), chairman of the Seapower subcommittee, who asked, "Are we getting ahead of our skis?"

Spencer told Courtney: "One of things you have charged us with is to go quicker, go smarter. … We think what we have is the smart way" to put the unmanned ships into the fleet, try them, break them and learn. Richardson said the Navy leaders do have a concept for the 20 unmanned ships. But, he said, "we have to learn how to use those to go forward," which is why the ships

are in research and development.

Spencer said the Navy is determined to work closer with industry to match capabilities with what can be produced and to adopt commercial best practices. On cybersecurity, he said the Navy is good at protecting its information but is demanding that its industrial suppliers do a better job of protecting data.

Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert B. Neller said that despite the heavy damage inflicted by Hurricane Florence on Camp Lejeune and Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point last year, the II Marine Expeditionary Force is operational but working in badly degraded conditions. He thanked Congress for reprograming $400 million to start repairs but warned that, without supplemental appropriations for the remaining $3 billion, readiness would suffer.