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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

The U.S. Should Recommit to Supporting Coast Guard Operations

**Testimony before
Committee on Transportation and
Infrastructure
United States House of Representatives**

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My name is Dr. Steven P. Bucci. I am the Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

My responsibilities at The Heritage Foundation involve leading research and analysis for the foundation's public policy work concerning defense and homeland security issues. Prior to coming to The Heritage Foundation I served as an Army Special Forces officer for three decades and led deployments to eastern Africa, South Asia, and the Persian Gulf. I also served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense, where I facilitated cooperation between the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee and address this vital subject.

The United States Coast Guard provides critical security to America's coastal regions, waterways, and ports. With missions ranging from search and rescue to ice operations, the Coast Guard responds to numerous threats in myriad environments. As a federal law enforcement agency, the sea service also performs critical missions such as drug interdiction, marine safety, migrant interdiction, and protecting living marine resources.

Facing Growing Threats

U.S. citizens and interests face daily threats within America's territorial waters. Last year *The New York Times* recounted an incident where the sea service interdicted an illegal semisubmersible vessel smuggling cocaine from Colombia. U.S. security forces have long combated smugglers bringing drugs and other contraband into the country via the Gulf Coast; however, semisubmersible and fully submerged vessels are emerging as a preferred means of transportation for these shipments, as it improves the smugglers' chances of going undetected.

In the most recent run-in with these illegal vessels, the Coast Guard Cutter *Mohawk* utilized information from an interagency intelligence effort to locate the submersible and then pursued it with its deck-launched helicopter and fast boat. Though the smugglers were able to sink their vessel before the Coast Guard could salvage most of the cargo, this effort is considered a success both for the joint preparatory work performed in locating the smugglers and the proficiency the *Mohawk* crew showed in executing their interdiction mission.

While the Coast Guard has successfully performed many similar operations, the sea service's role in the Caribbean and elsewhere will be increasingly burdened by an aging and shrinking fleet. The *Mohawk* is the newest of the *Famous*-class medium endurance cutters, commissioned in 1991. Many in this class are reaching the end of their 30-year service lives and will likely require extensions to fill mission gaps. According to the

Government Accountability Office, the Coast Guard's high- and medium-endurance cutters have been falling below performance expectations for a number of years. The bottom line: These vessels need replacement.

Yet the Obama Administration is taking action to undermine this overhaul rather than accelerate it. The Offshore Patrol Cutter—the Coast Guard's intended replacement for both the *Famous* fleet and the *Reliance*-class Medium Endurance Cutters—is currently in limbo due to recent budget uncertainty. The National Security Cutter, the replacement for the extremely old *Hamilton*-class High Endurance Cutter, will shrink to a fleet of just six vessels under the President's fiscal year 2013 budget request, well below the original requirement of 16.

This comes as a time when the Arctic is drawing intense international interest. The Coast Guard has recognized this trend and is pursuing more presence in the region, but will its resources be able to keep up with rapidly increasing traffic?

Rear Admiral Thomas P. Ostebo, commander of the 17th District of the U.S. Coast Guard, recently testified before Congress during a field hearing about Arctic issues and the sea service's exercise "Arctic Shield 2012."

Ostebo explained the purpose of the exercise, the lessons learned, and what new assets and capabilities they brought to the region. While the exercise is considered a success, the Coast Guard requires more resources to make these capabilities a reality.

Notably at Arctic Shield, the Coast Guard stationed two helicopters in Barrow, Alaska (the northernmost point in the U.S.), to afford the sea service increased presence, situational awareness, and reach within the Arctic Circle. The USCGC *Bertholf*, the first-in-class of the National Security Cutter (NSC) fleet, also deployed to the region, marking an important milestone for a cutter class intended to provide increased range and presence farther from the coast.

Both of these firsts indicate that the Coast Guard is aware of growing interests in the Arctic for natural resources such as hydrocarbons and fisheries, expanding sea lanes, and tourism. In spite of Arctic Shield's success, the Coast Guard may have trouble keeping up with real-world increased traffic in northern U.S. waters while executing its various other missions.

The sea service has already been operating with old and overused equipment, particularly in its High Endurance Cutter fleet. The *Hamilton*-class fleet has been sailing since the 1960s and has extended well beyond its intended service life. The NSC, intended to replace this fleet, has been cut from a requirement of 16 vessels to just eight.

Sadly, the Coast Guard is having trouble meeting even that reduced requirement. The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) FY 2014 budget followed through on requesting the seventh NSC, an improvement over the previous year, but makes no

mention of the eighth. The House of Representatives rectified this by adding advanced funding for the eighth NSC.

Other fleet priorities include two other cutters replacing old, worn-out legacy fleets: the Fast Response Cutter and the Offshore Patrol Cutter. The Coast Guard intends to build a total of 58 Fast Response Cutters. This year's DHS budget request called for only two FRCs to be built rather than the four that had previously been planned. The Offshore Patrol Cutter was similarly halved, receiving in FY 2014 \$25 million in developmental funding instead of the \$50 million in FY 2013.¹ Congress should investigate further the consequences of these reductions before deciding how to fund the two critical cutter programs.

Critical to Coast Guard missions in the Arctic is America's icebreaking capability. Regrettably, the Coast Guard has fallen below its icebreaker requirements as well. The sea service's own "high latitude study" concluded that, to accomplish all its polar missions, the Coast Guard requires three heavy-duty and three medium icebreakers. Currently, the service sails one medium icebreaker and is keeping two heavy-duty icebreakers afloat (though neither is operational). Funding has been received to restore the heavy-duty *Polar Star* to working order for an additional seven to 10 years, though it is well past its planned service life.

One can look to McMurdo Station, Antarctica, to witness the effect this depleted force is having. The U.S. has had to rely on Russian icebreakers to clear the way for U.S. supplies to the station. The Coast Guard is called upon to operate in both polar regions on opposite ends of the world with just one moderately capable and one barely operational icebreaker. This is unacceptable.

A new heavy-duty icebreaker would cost nearly a billion dollars and take a decade to build. This year the Department of Homeland Security requested \$2 million in developmental funding to this end. With an overall recapitalization budget of \$743 million in FY 2014 for all of its vessels, the Coast Guard would have to direct a huge portion of its total budget just to fund the icebreaker. Rather than waste money trying to develop an increasingly unachievable vessel, the Coast Guard should instead seek to lease existing foreign commercial icebreakers to provide the primary capability—breaking ice—at least until it develops a more feasible and cost-effective plan. This in turn would require a waiver to the Jones Act, a protectionist law which restricts foreign built vessels from serving in certain capacities in U.S. waters.

Maintaining Maritime Security Through Support of the Coast Guard

If Congress does not act to correct the chronic underfunding of the Coast Guard's fleet revitalization, the sea service must continue to operate in aging craft. As they require

¹ Ronald O'Rourke, "Coast Guard Cutter Procurement: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, June 7, 2013, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R42567.pdf> (accessed June 24, 2013).

increasing maintenance with age and mileage, these vessels will continue to incur greater costs for maintenance and repair, thus steering resources away from the more capable replacements that the Coast Guard needs. One can see the downward spiral this creates.

While the Coast Guard continues to perform its missions admirably, they will find it increasingly difficult to keep up the pace with insufficient resources and equipment. Congress, in fulfilling its constitutional responsibility to provide for the common defense, should make a commitment to the Coast Guard to protect America's seas and waterways.

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