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U.S. Coast Guard at Risk: Modernization Plans Sinking Under Budget Constraints

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Given the backbreaking demands currently placed on American forces around the world, the U.S. military's significant humanitarian response efforts in Haiti have been extraordinary. This response has been led by the frequently forgotten fifth member of the U.S. Armed Forces: the U.S. Coast Guard. Yet despite its vital contribution to homeland defense and international security, the Coast Guard's future ability to respond to maritime crises is at risk, and the pending President's budget request will hasten the fleet's decline. The fiscal year (FY) 2011 President's budget request would send this service—which is at a turning point—in the wrong direction and allow it to hollow out more quickly.

Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Thad Allen is preparing to accept reduced readiness levels in order to modernize the service's assets, yet this either/or approach is unacceptable. Instead, Congress must remedy the operational gap exposed by the President's budget request and address the funding modernization shortfalls facing the Coast Guard this year, particularly those for icebreakers, cutters, medium response boats, and patrol aircraft. Congress must also consider the President's budget-driven personnel cuts and seek to free up funds elsewhere in order to avoid dramatic endstrength reductions.

Coast Guard's Rapid Response Capability Threatened. It is unfathomable that in the ninth year of a global war, with forces deployed on multiple fronts, the world's best coast guard is budgeted

to lose nearly 1,000 personnel, five cutters, and several helicopters and aircraft. While the platforms slated for retirement are indeed old, the problem is that there is no plan to replace the already modest fleet on a one-for-one basis. Inadequate resources will increase the operational risk to Coast Guardsmen and delay the time and ability of the service to respond to the nation's needs. If enacted, the President's 2011 budget request would reduce the Coast Guard's blue water fleet by a full one-third at a time the nation is asking these men and women to do more with less.

When viewed through the lens of the post-Cold War drawdown of the 1990s, the Coast Guard appeared to be operating in a position of strength—until now. Out of necessity, the Coast Guard had grown to its largest size since World War II and had become the lead operational agency in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The days of being an orphan agency, as the Coast Guard was throughout its tenure in the highway-centric Department of Transportation, were supposed to be over.

The trend of a prominent Coast Guard as a leader within DHS is reversing in this Administration. One

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of the glaring omissions from the Quadrennial Homeland Security Review—a long-term strategy document—was the Coast Guard, which received little mention.

Even with the Coast Guard's substantial growth due to its increased demands in a post-9/11 era, this critical service was still taking on water. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the Coast Guard's response to the devastating January earthquake in Haiti. Like after Hurricane Katrina, Coast Guard cutters and aircraft were the first ones on scene, arriving at dawn the day after the disaster. The Coast Guard's agility reaped huge dividends in the eyes of desperate Haitians and U.S. taxpayers who wanted their tax dollars to help their Caribbean neighbors. However, the rest of the story tells otherwise.

In his final State of the Coast Guard Address as Commandant, Admiral Allen reported, "Of the 12 major cutters assigned to Haiti relief operations, 10, or 83 percent, suffered severe emission affecting casualties. Two were forced to return to port for emergency repairs, and one proceeded to an emergency dry dock." The decrepit state of the Coast Guard fleet caused the service to divert air power from rescue operations to deliver spare parts.

The mismatched demands of the nation and the President's budget cuts for the Coast Guard are unacceptable. One can only imagine the outcome—and outrage—if 83 percent of the fleet assigned to the Battle of Midway had to return to Pearl Harbor for emergency repairs. The Coast Guard should not be held to lower standards.

Robustly Funding Coast Guard Modernization Now and in the Future. If the Coast Guard's budget were to be rubber stamped on Capitol Hill, the undercapitalized and overworked service would face an even more stark and troubled future. Instead of accepting the cuts proposed in this year's budget, Congress should do the following to ensure that the Coast Guard modernizes its fleet without sacrificing people or readiness:

- *Accelerate the Coast Guard's recapitalization of its aging fleet of cutters and aircraft.* When asked in a February 16 Pentagon bloggers roundtable if there were any non-financial obstacles to accelerating the Coast Guard's

recapitalization plan, Admiral Allen stated, "I don't think the technology challenges are as great an obstacle as trying to phase them and fit them into what's going to be a fixed funding level over a period of years." The Coast Guard should not be forced to sacrifice people and modern equipment while taking on additional missions. Congress should find other money from within DHS to fund modernization.

- *Establish a Maritime Security Fleet Fund within the defense authorization and appropriations bills to bolster Coast Guard modernization.* Congress should create a new fund within the annual defense bills, one that does not draw from the Navy's scarce shipbuilding account. This account would be modeled after the much-needed National Defense Sealift Fund and help protect modernization priorities at the expense of rising operations or personnel costs.
- *Halt the Coast Guard's planned endstrength cuts.* U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security Chairman Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV) was right when he called the President's budget cuts of Coast Guardsmen "pennywise and pound foolish." The nation's maritime security warrants a Coast Guard endstrength that will double in active and reserve growth over the next decade. The Coast Guard is already the nation's smallest military service and cannot endure additional cuts—especially those driven by scarce resources rather than reduced commitments.
- *Require the Coast Guard to develop a 30-year shipbuilding plan similar to the Navy's annual report to Congress.* Congress should require the Coast Guard to submit biannual, comprehensive, long-term shipbuilding plans to ensure the service is meeting its strategic goals. For instance, Congress should encourage the Coast Guard to build a plan to close the icebreaker gap in the Arctic. Admiral Allen rightly noted, "We need a national policy discussion and then an affirmative decision on the future of the Ice-breaking program. These are very, very valuable ships to us, and with the increasing open water, diminished ice in the Arctic in the summer, we

still need ice-strengthened vessels up there, and icebreakers are extremely important to us.”

Reject the President’s Budget Cuts for the Coast Guard. In 2000, the Interagency Task Force on Roles and Missions concluded that “If the Coast Guard did not exist, it would be in the best interests of the country to invent it, quickly.” Fast forward to 2010, where the best support the White House can provide for this vital service is to cut its budget, keep its recapitalization project in neutral, and dismiss nearly 1,000 Coast Guardsmen.

Congress must reverse this ominous course by appropriating the resources the Coast Guard needs to carry out its missions on behalf of the American people.

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