

WebMemo



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Reject Coast Guard's Maritime Security and Counterterrorism Mission Budget Cuts

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The U.S. Coast Guard's advanced interdiction and counterterrorism capabilities are being scaled back at a time when they should be expanded. President Obama's fiscal year (FY) 2011 budget request for the Coast Guard proposes killing five of the 12 Maritime Safety and Security Teams (MSSTs) in addition to nine aircraft and five cutters. Worse yet, a recently leaked memo from the nominee to become the next commandant of the Coast Guard explores further reducing critical capabilities—such as the Maritime Security Response Team (MSRT). The Coast Guard's maritime security and counterterrorism missions are taking on water and are at risk if President Obama's FY 2011 budget request is enacted without congressional intervention.

Therefore, Congress should hold oversight hearings and require a study to determine both Coast Guard law enforcement specialist requirements and an associate national training structure. This could then be used to build a comprehensive plan for maritime response that includes standards for local, state, and federal maritime law enforcement. Congress should also demand that the current commandant submit an unfunded priorities list to Members documenting the shortfalls in capabilities due to arbitrary budget topline. Finally, Congress should reject the maritime team cuts and examine whether the MSSTs—to be fully effective—need to be expanded to 17 with additional helicopters and more specialized training.

Building Multi-Mission Capacity in the U.S. Coast Guard. This year, the Coast Guard is the only

branch of the nation's five armed forces to have its 2011 budget slashed. Continuing the theme of doing more with less, the Coast Guard is slated to lose five out of its 12 MSSTs in Kings Bay, Georgia; San Francisco, California; New Orleans, Louisiana; New York, New York; and, Anchorage, Alaska. Established in the aftermath of 9/11, the MSSTs were created to:

- Enhance the Coast Guard's presence and response capabilities;
- Maintain increased vigilance throughout the National Maritime Transportation System;
- Employ unique law enforcement teams to conduct advance interdiction high-risk boardings, neutralize potential threats, and perform a broad range of domestic and foreign port security and harbor defense missions; and
- Detect and intercept criminal or catastrophic risks well beyond U.S. shores.

The budget request to decommission the five MSSTs is shortsighted and based purely upon budgetary—rather than strategic—requirements. Today's Coast Guard remains stretched thin after going decades without recapitalizing its equipment, hav-

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ing served as a sacrificial billpayer when in the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Moreover, the Coast Guard's current endstrength already constitutes a substantial reduction from the level it achieved at the end of World War II, with some 1,677 vessels (including 600 cutters) and 171,192 personnel. Such a reduction is curious to say the least, given that the service is a force multiplier, providing both a law enforcement force and a defense force at a relative bargain.

2011 Budget Cuts Cannot Be a Down Payment on Future Reductions. Internal budget memos provide no relief for important Coast Guard wartime missions. In November 2009, Coast Guard Atlantic Area Commander Vice Admiral Robert J. Papp, Jr.—President Obama's choice to become the 24th Coast Guard commandant—prepared an internal FY 2012–2016 planning guidance memo that identified areas in which the Coast Guard could incur additional risk such as decommissioning the Coast Guard's only MSRT. Admiral Papp's fiscally constrained rationale was highlighted by his notation that “other federal agencies have more mature and robust MSRT-like capabilities.”

Congress should immediately dismiss this possible cut; the U.S. Coast Guard is the only federal agency with dual Title 10 and Title 14 law enforcement and regulatory authorities. These unique authorities, diverse capabilities, and potential to accept multiple sources of funding allow the Coast Guard to operate alone on the seam between national security and law enforcement threats.

Absent in the discussion about the Coast Guard's maritime security and counterterrorism missions is the fact that these forces provide combatant commanders with invaluable theater security cooperation opportunities. Eliminating this unique capability, as well as the “face” of America for many of the world's navies, sends the wrong message to U.S. allies. It also sends a contradictory message, considering the Pentagon's stated goal of building partnership capacity around the world as evidenced in the recent Quadrennial Defense Review.

Margin of Risk Is Too High. Congress should carefully and publicly examine whether dismantling the Coast Guard's maritime security and coun-

terterrorism missions may be achieved within an acceptable level of risk. Members should examine whether the Coast Guard currently has enough personnel and modern platforms to meet the service's existing missions. If the response to Haiti was any guide, the Coast Guard does indeed have difficulty meeting wartime demands.

Therefore, it is inevitable that a tradeoff would have to occur in the event that not enough coast guardsmen and equipment are available during unforeseen circumstances. The question then becomes: How can the nation not afford to maintain a minimum of 12 MSSTs and one MSRT?

Congress should reject the President's FY 2011 budget request and instead force the Department of Homeland Security to bolster—rather than dismantle—the Coast Guard's maritime security mission. Congress should hold current and future Coast Guard leaders' feet to the fire in order to ensure the maritime security mission is fully and honestly resourced.

As part of this year's homeland security funding bill, Congress should require the Coast Guard to outline its regionalization strategy for the MSSTs and document the specific helicopter and enhanced training requirements. The Coast Guard should also describe how it plans to continue meeting the Department of Defense's Northern Command requirement for short-notice maritime response. While waiting on additional analysis, Congress should maintain the current MSST structure for at least another fiscal year.

Additionally, Congress should hold hearings to examine whether current funding for Coast Guard training is adequate, specifically for law enforcement, shooting, close quarters combat, and vertical insertion. Congress should work across committees to ask Federal Law Enforcement Training Academy and Coast Guard officials to collaboratively build a comprehensive plan for maritime response and training that includes standards and training requirements for local, state, and federal maritime law enforcement forces (similar to the current process for land forces).

Finally, Congress should enact into law once again a provision authorizing the commandant of the Coast Guard to submit an unfunded priority list

similar to those submitted annually by military service chiefs. This requirement would preempt Office of Management and Budget officials from dismantling important wartime Coast Guard missions for the sole purpose of saving money. It would also allow Congress to force Coast Guard leaders to identify gaps and vulnerabilities within the maritime operations forces.

This will help Congress to provide oversight and ensure that the Coast Guard resists balancing its own constrained budget on the back of equally important military and maritime missions. Overall, preserving the Coast Guard's maritime security mission will likely require Congress to continue to increase the Coast Guard's budget as it has loyally done so many times over the last several years.

A Commonsense Necessity. Congress should reject President Obama's request to decommission the five MSSTs and halt any future plans to dismantle the Coast Guard's counterterrorism capabilities. Congress should declare the request to decommission the Coast Guard's five MSSTs as "dead on arrival" and request alternative proposals from service leadership in other non-wartime mission

areas. Financing a robust and modern Coast Guard is a commonsense necessity for a maritime power like the U.S.

A predictable Coast Guard budget for the next 10–20 years is critical to reversing the decline in the Coast Guard's ability to perform its maritime security missions. Failure to do so will only embolden U.S. adversaries that are far too experienced in carrying out acts of maritime terrorism. The cuts to the Coast Guard's budget in FY 2011 is another reminder that the topline is too low for the services to simultaneously field trained and ready forces, support ongoing operations, and modernize. Congress should provide additional resources above the President's budget request in order to meet the Coast Guard's immediate modernization needs.

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