

December 8, 2008: Weekly Washington Update

As Co-Chairman of the Congressional Shipbuilding Caucus, one of my chief priorities is promoting the importance of shipbuilding and sea power within Congress. This past week, I had the opportunity to attend the American Shipbuilding Association conference to discuss the importance of shipbuilding and, in particular, the national security issues surrounding our capacity to build ships for our navy and the economic importance of the capacity to build commercial ships. Our shipyard in Newport News plays a critical role in the maintaining the ability to build ships for this nation. This event was attended by Members of Congress and industry leaders and provided an excellent forum to call for a renewal of American shipbuilding.

The impact of shipbuilding on both the security of our country and our economic vitality makes a compelling case for a renewed emphasis. Although the current US Navy fleet is comprised of 280 ships, naval leaders have stated the need for a battle force of 313 ships to maintain national security. Meanwhile, countries like China, Russia and India are rapidly expanding their naval and shipping capability. This is of concern as the ships in our navy age out of service and the number of ships we have to counter from other nations increase. Both of these situations create a quickly developing issue of national security.

Today, America's naval superiority is facing its most substantial challenge since the end of the Cold War. Russia has announced its intention to field the world's second largest navy within 20 years. To accomplish this, the Russian government recently approved a \$60 billion naval shipbuilding plan. Concurrently, China has been very open in its aspiration to become the largest builder of commercial and naval ships in the world by 2015. At China's current expansion rate, its navy will be larger than the US Navy in 2015 as well.

Clearly, these are threats that Congress must address in the near term. To begin combating them, I've worked in the House Armed Service Committee to provide advance procurement for two Virginia class submarines per year. Furthermore, I continue to support the construction of a minimum of twelve new ships per year for our navy.

In addition to projecting power and countering threats at sea, shipbuilding is also critical to the United States' economy. More than 90% of U.S. imports and exports are transported via ship. In total, the shipbuilding industry is responsible for 350,000 jobs across 47 states. With the current tough economic climate, a reinvestment in shipbuilding would be a way to create jobs, enhance trade and bolster national security.

Of course, the national shipbuilding debate has significant impact on our local economy in the Hampton Roads region. Of the six major shipyards across America, Newport News is especially important. In addition to producing nuclear submarines, Newport News Shipyard is the only builder of nuclear aircraft carriers. I have visited the shipyard several times and understand firsthand its importance to the national security and our local economy.

When the new Congress comes to Washington in January, I will continue to push for an increase in productivity at Newport News and at other shipyards around the country. While there are certainly tough decisions about spending ahead, we can no longer afford to underfund shipbuilding. I believe strongly that an increase is important to both our national and economic security.

If we can be of assistance or if you have questions or comments please feel free to contact us at 202-225-4261 or at <http://wittman.house.gov/>