

Guest commentary: Oakland and American sea power

By Ray Mabus

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Today I am visiting Oakland to name the Navy's newest Littoral Combat Ship, USS Oakland (LCS 24). A ship's naming is the first milestone in bringing it to life, and here continues the long tradition and strong connection between the people of Oakland and our Navy. It is also an opportunity to highlight our commitment to increasing our Navy fleet size.

The Navy and Marine Corps team offers the best value to advance our global security and our economic interests in the face of fiscal challenges and an increasing array of threats and demands.

Uniquely, the Navy and Marine Corps provide presence around the world, around the clock. Maintaining that presence means we get there faster, stay there longer, bring everything we need with us, and get the job done without needing anyone else's permission. Born a maritime nation, America has always known success depends on an exceptional Navy and Marine Corps.

Article 1 of our Constitution authorizes Congress to "raise" an Army when needed, but to "provide and maintain a Navy." From the first six frigates to our growing fleet of today, sailors and Marines have proved the Founding Fathers' wisdom. American leaders across the political spectrum have understood the vital significance of sea power.

More than 80 percent of the world's population lives within 60 miles of the sea; 90 percent of global trade goes by sea; and 95 percent of all voice and data transfer goes under the ocean. About 38 million American jobs are directly linked to seaborne international trade. For seven decades, the presence of our Navy and Marine Corps has been the primary protector of maintaining open sea lanes and freedom of commerce.

Maintaining our naval presence requires a properly sized fleet. On Sept. 11, 2001, the fleet stood at 316 ships. By 2008, it had declined to 278 ships. In the five years before I became secretary, the Navy contracted for only 27 ships, not enough to stop the slide in the size of the fleet. In my first six years, we contracted for 70 ships, halting and reversing the decline. By the end of the decade, we will once again top 300 ships. Building those ships also provides thousands of high-skilled, good-paying jobs, not just in Navy shipbuilding yards, but for subcontractors in nearly every single state in our nation.

Despite budgetary uncertainties, I have committed to preserve shipbuilding to the maximum extent possible because cutting ships is the most damaging and least reversible course of action to our security and our economy. This commitment is the reason for my visit here. Oakland is home to the busiest port in Northern California, and the fifth busiest container port in the United States. The goods brought in on those container ships stock the shelves of your stores with "just in time" deliveries from around the globe. And they are there because the U.S. Navy and Marine

Corps are present across the world's oceans, keeping the sea lanes open and ensuring maritime security.

More importantly, we cannot have a strong Navy and Marine Corps without the American people, and I greatly appreciate these opportunities to come see firsthand the result of our partnership with a community.

USS Oakland will soon sail the world's oceans in defense of our country, and its journey is starting right here.

One of USS Oakland's greatest strengths will be the highly trained, always strong, always faithful United States sailors and Marines. Around the world, far from their homes and families, they are deployed in defense of America. We truly are America's "Away Team."

Today the partnership between our men and women in uniform and the people of Oakland is playing a vital role in maintaining American sea power and presence around the world.

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