

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus  
Secretary of the Navy  
USS Montana (SSN 794) Naming Ceremony  
Billings, Montana  
Wednesday, September 2, 2015

Mr. Mayor, thank you so much. And thank y'all so much for joining us here today, particularly our veterans and our active-duty military, who are here today. To Senator Tester and Governor Bullock – I want to say just a couple words about these two folks.

And this is not political. It's not partisan. It's just from somebody who has spent most of his life in and around government. Jon Tester brings some just common sense to Washington that is all-too-often in short supply in that – in that city. And you'll notice that Senator Tester and I look pretty happy today, because we're out of there – (laughter) – for at least a little while. But I want to thank him for all the support he has shown for the Navy and Marine Corps and all our armed forces and our veterans.

And, Governor, as a former governor, I was reading what you're trying to do. And I don't want to make any accusations here now, but I think you sort of copied some stuff from my campaign of 28 years ago about better education and better jobs. And if you want to know why we've got to do a better job at education in this country, think about this: Only 25 percent – 25 percent – of Americans 18- to 24-years old qualify for the U.S. military. Three out of four do not. And the only reasons are not enough education, because we've got some pretty high standards for that, health issues or a criminal record. And so we need to do a lot better than that. Thank you, Governor, for working on it.

And thank you all for your continuing support of our Sailors and our Marines who – and our veterans who call the Treasure State home. Now, you know, it's a little unusual, I think, for a Secretary of the Navy to come to a state that's not real close to the ocean. (Laughter.) And when people think of Montana, they think of the beautiful views and big sky, towering mountains, amazing wildlife. Sailors and Marines probably aren't right on the top of what you think about, because you don't normally see Sailors and Marines walking around on the streets of Billings because where we are is forward deployed; underneath, on, or above the world's oceans – far from the Rocky Mountains.

Our Navy and Marine Corps provide one thing uniquely to this country, and that's presence. Around the clock, around the world, we ensure stability, we deter aggression, and we provide our nation's leaders with options in times of crisis. We're America's away team because we don't get any home games. When we're doing our job, we're usually a long, long way from home. And we do it equally in times of peacetime and in times of war. We're in the right place not just at the right time, but all the time. We get there faster, we can stay on station longer, we bring everything we need with us, and we don't have to ask anybody's permission to get the job done because those ships are sovereign U.S. territory.

And our ability to provide that presence, that unique contribution to America, is built on four things: People, our Sailors and Marines; power, how we power the energy that we use on ships and aircraft; platforms, the numbers of those ships and aircraft; and partnerships, our strong relationships not only overseas with our international partners, but particularly our partnership with the American people.

Now, I have one of the coolest jobs in the world. I get to name every Navy ship. But it's also a really large responsibility. You get a lot more suggestions than you have opportunities to name. And since the founding of our Navy, I and my predecessors – dating all the way back to 1798 – have honored that partnership with the American people by naming ships after cities and states and people as a reflection of our values and as an expression of gratitude for those who support the Navy and Marines.

Now, this special relationship with the people of Montana began 100 years ago – over 100 years ago, when the USS Montana, a cruiser commissioned in 1908, transported Sailors and soldiers and Marines and equipment to and from Europe during World War I. But right after World War I she was decommissioned. And later, my predecessors have twice tried to name ships the Montana. Once, the keel from the battleship Montana was laid in 1918, but the ship was never built because of an international treaty. And in 1941 our second attempt to construct a battleship Montana ended when funds were reappropriated for other types of ships. In fact, Montana was the only state in the union that didn't have a battleship named after it through World War II.

So a battleship evidently is not the answer for Montana. And that's OK, because we don't build battleships anymore, and the technology is a little bit out of date. Today, the world's most innovative, best ships are our fast-attack submarines and our littoral combat ships. Our new subs have masts that are equipped with high-resolution cameras, infrared sensors, laser range finders, the propulsion system they've got is nearly silent. And the open architecture allows us to keep up with technology. And we've got a submariner veteran right here.

And so we need a lot of these. We command the undersea. Last summer the Navy signed the biggest contract in our history, almost \$18 billion, to buy 10 Virginia-class attack submarines. They cost about \$2 billion each. So by buying 10, by allowing these shipyards to make the investments, by allowing them to buy the stuff you need to build a submarine in economic quantities, we were able to get 10 for the price of nine. It's like having one of those punch cards – (laughter) – buy nine submarines, get your 10<sup>th</sup> one free.

Now, the other ship – the littoral combat ship, big ship, fast, shallow draft, modular, has two variants built by different yards, one in Wisconsin, one in Alabama. First four were contracted for in the mid – about 2005 and 2008. And they cost an average of \$548 million a hull. We've got 19 more now authorized under contract, appropriated under this thing called a block buy. We've got the average cost down to \$337 million a ship, thanks to just competition between those two shipyards and improvements that they both made.

And the production of these subs, these LCSs, is an example of how we've halted and reversed the slide in the size of our fleet. On 9/11/2001, we had 316 ships in the U.S. Navy. By 2008, after one of the great military build-ups in our history, we were down to 278 ships. In the five years before I became Secretary, the Navy put 27 ships under contract. That wasn't enough to stop our fleet from getting smaller, and it wasn't enough to keep our shipyards in business. My first five years, we have put 70 ships under contract. And we've done it with a smaller top line. We continue to grow our fleet and we're ahead of schedule and we're under budget.

The ships that we're naming today are going to be in our fleet for decades, defending America, representing our interests around the world. And because of the efforts of our shipbuilders and because of the efforts of Congress, because of the efforts of the American people, we're going to get to a fleet of more than 300 ships, again, before the end of this decade. And we haven't done it at the expense of airplanes. We bought 45 percent more aircraft in the first five years than we had before.

Now, before I get to the reason that we're here, I want to talk about one more Navy tradition, and that's a tradition of being a sponsor. Every ship has a sponsor. And that sponsor imbues that ship with her personality, with her drive, her energy, and with the personality of the city or the state that the ship is named for. That ship's sponsor stays with that ship – in communication with it for the lifetime of that ship. Every time a new captain comes on board, one of the first things that captain does is call the sponsor. And the sponsor of the Billings, we're very lucky and the ship is very lucky, to have Sharla Tester, who's here today, who's agreed to sponsor the next USS Billings.

So, as I've talked about, we've tried to name two ships, the way I see it we're two in the hole with Montana. So we need to name two to get even. So today, I officially am honored to announce our newest nuclear-powered fast attack submarine, SSN 794 will be USS Montana. And our newest littoral combat ship, LCS 15, the USS Billings.

So in keeping with Navy tradition, may God bless all those who sail in Montana and Billings. From the Navy, Semper Fortis, Always Courageous. From the Marines, Semper Fidelis, Always Faithful. Thank you.