

Changing Course: Making the Case (Old and New) for American Seapower



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In order to build the 355-ship Navy the United States needs, we will have to tell a new, and more compelling, story.

There is a moment in the 2001 comedy *Zoolander* when the villain Mugatu, portrayed by a white-haired Will Ferrell, screams as his plan disintegrates: “I feel like I’m taking crazy pills!” One year into my first term in Congress, this captures the mood of defense hawks in general and advocates of seapower in particular. On the one hand, this country has a president who campaigned on expanding the Navy and who signed a National Defense Authorization Act making it U.S. policy to build a 355-ship Navy “as soon as practicable.” Multiple independent reviews commissioned by Congress and the Navy leadership have reaffirmed the strategic necessity of getting to 355 in due haste.²

But the promised military rebuild has yet to materialize, notwithstanding the Trump administration’s premature claims of “making historic investments in the United States military.”³ Indeed, Trump’s initial budget request called for a modest 3 percent increase over the wholly inadequate plan of his predecessor.⁴ The Pentagon still does not have a 30-year shipbuilding plan that charts a specific course to 355. And given funding challenges and the defense industry’s limited surge capacity, some question whether industry could rapidly deliver the ships.⁵ Meanwhile,

Congress remains mired in the defense cuts of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and uncertainties over continuing resolutions and long-term spending.

The gap between promises and appropriations continues even though the Budget Control Act experiment has clearly failed to force politicians to reach agreement on limiting long-term mandatory spending and has — as Defense Secretary Jim Mattis testified before the House Armed Services Committee in June 2017 — done more to harm the U.S. military’s combat readiness than any enemy in the field.⁶ Disturbing trends such as the one-third increase in deaths from aviation mishaps in the Marine Corps over the past six years⁷ and the fatal collisions of the *USS Fitzgerald* and *USS John S. McCain* illustrate what increased risks associated with degraded readiness can mean for our men and women in uniform.⁸

In other words, despite the stated desire of the president, the Navy, and Congress to get to 355 ships, and mounting evidence of the damage done by the recent defense drawdown, the United States is struggling to change course. Even if Congress manages to pass a two-year deal to lift the caps imposed by the Budget Control Act and raise defense spending, the increase is still likely to fall

1 “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018,” U.S. Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2810/text>. Mark Cancian, “Trump Proffers Pentagon Specifics: \$60B More to Boost Troops, Ships,” *Breaking Defense*, Sept. 8, 2016, <https://breakingdefense.com/2016/09/trump-proffers-pentagon-specifics-60b-more-to-boost-troops-ships/>.

2 Sam LaGrone and Megan Eckstein, “Navy Wants to Grow Fleet to 355 Ships; 47 Hull Increase Adds Destroyers, Attack Subs,” *USNI News*, Dec. 19, 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/12/16/navy-wants-grow-fleet-355-ships-47-hull-increase-previous-goal>. Adm. John Richardson, “The Future Navy,” May 17, 2017, <https://news.usni.org/2017/05/17/document-chief-of-naval-operations-white-paper-the-future-navy>. See also the congressional-directed outside reviews: Bryan Clark, et al., *Restoring American Seapower: A New Fleet Architecture for the United States Navy* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), http://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/CSBA6292-Fleet_Architecture_Study_REPRINT_web.pdf.

Mitre Corporation, *Navy Future Fleet Platform Architecture Study* (McLean: Mitre Corporation, July 1, 2016), https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/1a3e3a4e-6c97-42fb-bec5-a482cf4d4d85/mintre-navy-future-fleet-platform-architecture-study.pdf.

3 The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

4 Travis J. Tritten, “Mac Thornberry: Trump Defense Budget Follows ‘Obama Approach,’” *Washington Examiner*, May 22, 2017, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/mac-thornberry-trump-defense-budget-follows-obama-approach/article/2623812>.

5 Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Trump’s 355-Ship Fleet Will Take Til 2050s,” *Breaking Defense*, Oct. 26, 2017, <https://breakingdefense.com/2017/10/trumps-355-ship-fleet-will-take-til-2050s/>. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the fastest 355 ships can be achieved is by 2032. See Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “355-Ship Navy Take At least 18 Years: CBO,” *Breaking Defense*, April 25, 2017, <https://breakingdefense.com/2017/04/355-ship-navy-takes-at-least-18-years-cbo/>. Navy Secretary Richard Spencer testified to the House Armed Services Committee in January 2018 that the Navy would submit a 30-year shipbuilding plan along with the Fiscal 2019 budget. But as of this writing, more than one year into the Trump administration, there is still no specific vision from the administration of how it proposes to grow the fleet to 355 ships. Megan Eckstein, “Navy FY 2019 Budget Request Will Include a 30-Year Shipbuilding Plan,” *U.S. Naval Institute*, Jan. 18, 2018, <https://news.usni.org/2018/01/18/navy-fy-2019-budget-request-will-include-30-year-shipbuilding-plan>.

6 “Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis House Armed Services Committee Written Statement for the Record,” *House of Representatives*, June 12, 2017, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20170612/106090/HHRG-115-AS00-Bio-MattisJ-20170612.pdf>.

7 Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Marine Aviation Deaths Are Six Times Navy’s,” *Breaking Defense*, Sept. 25, 2017, <https://breakingdefense.com/2017/09/marine-aviation-deaths-are-six-times-navys/>.

8 Mackenzie Eaglen, “America’s New Deadliest War Is Hiding in Plain Sight,” *Real Clear Defense*, Sept. 7, 2017, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/09/07/americas_new_deadliest_war_is_hiding_in_plain_sight_112244.html.

short of what the Pentagon needs to fulfill global requirements,⁹ or the increase will rely excessively on Overseas Contingency Operations funding.¹⁰ Even in the best-case scenario, the Pentagon would get a short-term infusion of cash and then muddle along until the Budget Control Act's defense caps expire in 2021.

Put differently, the U.S. is having its Mugatu moment. Policymakers across Washington must be ingesting crazy pills. We are failing in our fundamental constitutional duty to provide for the common defense and maintain the U.S. Navy.¹¹ Those of us who advocate for a 355-ship Navy have been banging our heads against the wall for more than a year with no end in sight. During posture hearings and the budget cycle, we hear about the threats facing our nation. These hearings do not change much, except that they grow progressively bleaker. It is time to recognize that our arguments are not resonating and to try a different approach.

This is my attempt to do just that. As great-power competition returns, both old and new cases for seapower must be made. First, the United States must rediscover and reinforce the geopolitical (i.e., geographic) case for why seapower matters and why it is uniquely important for this country. Second, in support of this effort, the Navy cannot remain silent for the sake of "strategic ambiguity." Rather, it must develop a new story about what the future fleet will do and how it will differ from today's fleet, and tell that story loudly and directly to the American people, thereby imposing pressure on Congress and the White House to act.

Great-Power Challenges and Self-Inflicted Wounds

As the Trump administration's *National Security*

Strategy outlines, the United States is in the midst of long-term strategic competitions with great-power adversaries. Not tomorrow, not in five years, but today. Departing from past policies "based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners," the new strategy warns that "China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence."¹²

As a book often cited by National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster argues: "the United States is in the midst of a robust competition with its rivals, spread in three key regions of Eurasia. Russia, Iran, and China are eager to revise the order established over the past six decades on the basis of Western political and economic principles and supported by American power."¹³ If these competitors and adversaries perceive weakness or opportunity, they will seek to exploit openings, perhaps even through armed conflict. The Marine Corps commandant, Gen. Robert B. Neller, recently went so far as to say, "I hope I'm wrong, but there's a war coming."¹⁴

Consider trends in the military balance between the United States and China. The official Chinese military budget expanded on average by about 10 percent in real terms from 2006 through 2015.¹⁵ Over the same period, U.S. defense spending averaged negative real growth of about 0.1 percent.¹⁶ So while U.S. defense spending was about seven times greater than China's in 2006, by 2015 it was only about three times greater, and this was in the face of more global commitments, less purchasing

9 Mackenzie Eaglen, "How to Repair and Rebuild America's Military," *National Interest*, Oct. 24, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-repair-rebuild-americas-military-22889>.

10 Mackenzie Eaglen, "Budget Deal: It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas (...2013)," *Breaking Defense*, Dec. 19, 2017, <https://breakingdefense.com/2017/12/budget-deal-its-beginning-to-look-a-lot-like-christmas-2013/>.

11 Mackubin Owens, "Navy Clause," in *Heritage Guide to the Constitution*, accessed January 16, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/constitution/articles/1/essays/53/navy-clause>.

12 *National Security Strategy*, 2017, 2–3.

13 Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 188. On McMaster's use of the book see Uri Friedman, "The World According to H.R. McMaster," *Atlantic*, Jan. 9, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/hr-mcmaster-trump-north-korea/549341/>.

14 Bradford Betz, "'There's a War Coming,' Marine Corps General Warns US Troops," *Fox News*, Dec. 23, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2017/12/23/theres-war-coming-marine-corps-general-warns-us-troops.html>.

15 Terri Moon Cronk, "DoD Report: China's Military Investments Continue," *DoD News, Defense Media Activity*, May 13, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/759522/dod-report-chinas-military-investments-continue/>.

16 Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2018* (August 2017), 140–41, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2018/FY18_Green_Book.pdf [hereafter: OUSD(C) Budget Estimates FY18].

power parity, and less military concentration near potential hotspots.¹⁷ The People's Liberation Army-Navy has more than 300 ships — the largest fleet in Asia.¹⁸ In 2016 alone, China commissioned 18 ships, including a guided missile destroyer, three guided missile frigates, and six corvettes.¹⁹ These 18 ships have a displacement of 150,000 tons, or about half that of Britain's Royal Navy.²⁰ Growth in the Chinese fleet is not just a numbers game: Beijing is retiring older ships to make room for modern ones as its maritime strategy transitions from “near sea” defense to “far seas” power projection.²¹

Meanwhile, as China's navy grows in capacity and capability, the U.S. fleet is struggling. In the aftermath of last year's collisions, a series of internal and external reviews have sought to examine their root causes. Even if a line cannot be traced directly from inadequate and unpredictable Navy budgets to these tragedies, the incidents cannot be understood apart from their operational contexts. Adm. Philip Davidson's Comprehensive Review found that “risks that were taken in the Western Pacific accumulated over time, and did so insidiously.”²²

The Navy secretary's separate review methodically tracked how, in recent decades, the Navy contracted, budgets shrank, and responsibilities grew. Secretary Richard Spencer testified in January 2018 to the House Armed Services Committee, on which I sit, that: “The Strategic Review team concluded that Navy leaders gradually accepted greater risk to accomplish

assigned missions. Standards designed for safe and effective operations were relaxed to meet operational and fiscal demands, which led to continuous accumulation of risk.”²³

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the “Base Force” proposed a 25 percent reduction in personnel from the 1989 baseline while shifting the Navy's primary focus from peer-on-peer conflict to contingencies with mid-tier regional powers.²⁴ The result was a planned fleet of more than 451 ships.²⁵ Only a few years later, the 1993 *Bottom-Up Review* reaffirmed a shift away from peer-on-peer conflict and called for a reduced fleet size of 346 ships to focus on power projection, presence, and crisis response.²⁶ While Congress authorized about 17 ships per year throughout the 1980s, it authorized only five per year on average from 1993 to 2000.²⁷ This reduction in shipbuilding stressed a smaller fleet at the same time the fleet's missions were growing.²⁸ The Navy conducted 49 named operations in the 1980s and 85 in the 1990s, a 73 percent operational increase amid a

While U.S. defense spending was about seven times greater than China's in 2006, by 2015 it was only about three times greater.

17 Moon Cronk, “China's Military Investments Continue.” See also OUSD(C) Budget Estimates FY18, 140-41, and “Military expenditure by country,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2017, 11, <https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/Milex-constant-2015-USD.pdf>.

18 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016* (Washington: Department of Defense, April 26, 2016), 25, https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016_China_Military_Power_Report.pdf.

19 Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities — Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, Dec. 13, 2017), 3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>.

20 O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization*.

21 Rear Adm. Michael McDevitt (Ret.), *Becoming a Great “Maritime Power”: A Chinese Dream* (Arlington: Center for Naval Analysis, June 2016), v, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/IRM-2016-U-013646.pdf. David A. Shlapak, et al., *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), 89, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG888.pdf. Ministry of National Defense, *2017 Quadrennial Defense Review* (Taipei City: Republic of China, March 2017), 22, <http://www.ustaiwandefense.com/tdnswp/wp-content/uploads/2000/01/2017-Taiwan-Quadrennial-Defense-Review-QDR.pdf>.

22 Adm. P.S. Davidson, *Comprehensive Review of Recent Surface Force Incidents* (Norfolk: U.S. Fleet Forces Command, 2017), 9, <https://news.usni.org/2017/11/02/document-navy-comprehensive-review-surface-forces>.

23 Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer, statement to U.S. House Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness and Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces, Jan. 18, 2018, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS03/20180118/106784/HHRG-115-AS03-Wstate-SpencerR-20180118.pdf>.

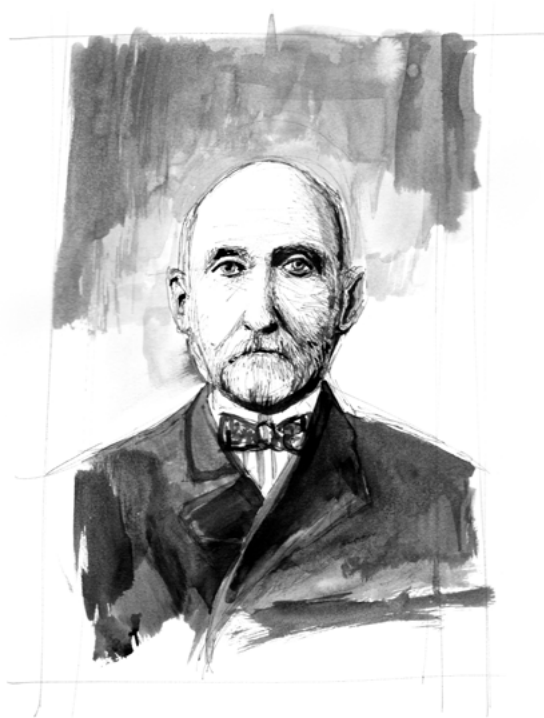
24 Hon. Michael Bayer, Adm. Gary Roughead (Ret.), et al., *Strategic Readiness Review 2017* (Washington: Department of the Navy, Dec. 3, 2017), 10, <http://s3.amazonaws.com/CHINFO/SRR+Final+12112017.pdf>.

25 *Strategic Readiness Review*, 10.

26 *Strategic Readiness Review*, 11.

27 *Strategic Readiness Review*, 12.

28 *Strategic Readiness Review*, 12.



25 percent funding cut.²⁹ This naturally produced maintenance backlogs, manning shortfalls, reduced part availability, and diminished training.³⁰

Then, as the United States scrambled to respond to the 9/11 attacks, the Navy continued its shift away from peer conflict while operating a shrinking fleet at full tilt. In 2001, the U.S. Navy was 316 ships strong. Although defense budgets grew, driven by war-related spending, the Navy continued scaling down and, by 2009, had only 285 ships.³¹ The 2010 Balisle Report found that the wear and tear of a decade of war had taxed this declining fleet to its breaking point, requiring the Navy to retire many ships after 20 or 25 years — well short of their expected 35-year lifespan.³² In July 2011, then-Vice Chief of Naval Operations Jonathan Greenert

warned, “I can’t tell you for sure...if we are at an inflection point or a tipping point, but I don’t see how we can sustain this pace of operations indefinitely and meet the readiness standards.”³³ One month later, Congress passed the Budget Control Act and took close to a trillion dollars out of the bipartisan budget path identified by then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates just seven months prior.³⁴ Since then, the Navy alone has accumulated more than \$100 billion in shortfalls between enacted budgets and the Gates plan, generating a readiness crisis throughout the fleet.³⁵

Compounding the problem, the Defense Department has operated under continuing resolutions for 33 of the past 42 years.³⁶ Over the past decade alone, it has operated under continuing resolutions an average of 106 days per year — almost 30 percent of that time.³⁷ In practical terms, this means almost a third of each year has been lost or renegotiated for more than 100,000 contracts across the Department of the Navy.³⁸ Because contractors factor this uncertainty into their pricing, the cost to taxpayers has gone up. The Navy estimates that inefficiencies associated with continuing resolutions have cost the service \$4 billion over the past decade.³⁹ As Navy Secretary Spencer put it, due to inefficiencies from continuing resolutions, the Navy essentially “put \$4 billion in a trash can, poured lighter fluid on it, and burned it.”⁴⁰

This is where we defense hawks usually stop. We paint a scary picture of the world, remind everyone of the original sin of the post-Cold War peace dividend, and inveigh against the Budget Control Act while throwing around numbers. At that point, we essentially tell the public that if only the corpse of Ronald Reagan could be reanimated, none of this would be happening. This argument is not working. As the Budget Control Act enters its seventh year,

29 *Strategic Readiness Review*, 11-12.

30 *Strategic Readiness Review*, 12.

31 Ronald O'Rourke, "Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, Dec. 22, 2017, 130, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL32665.pdf>.

32 *Strategic Readiness Review*, 14.

33 U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, "Total Force Readiness: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Readiness," July 26, 2011, 7, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg68163/pdf/CHRG-112hhrg68163.pdf>.

34 The Fiscal 2012 Gates budget, in the words of the *Strategic Readiness Review*, was "the last time the Navy had sufficient resources to operate at its present levels without having to markedly decrease funding for ships, weapons and aircraft procurement, equipment modernization, shore infrastructure, and the maintenance backlog." *Strategic Readiness Review*, 55.

35 *Strategic Readiness Review*, 55.

36 *Strategic Readiness Review*, 58.

37 O'Rourke, *Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans*, 44.

38 O'Rourke, *Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans*, 44.

39 O'Rourke, *Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans*, 44.

40 Katherine Blakeley, "It's Time for a Grand Budget Bargain to Save the Pentagon," *War on the Rocks*, Dec. 21, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/time-grand-budget-bargain-save-pentagon/>

the proof is in the pudding. Our warnings, speeches, and reviews have fallen flat.

I suspect this is partly because many who campaign on (or vote for) a strong national defense secretly harbor doubts about how much money the Pentagon really needs. After all, the Pentagon wastes a lot of money and the United States is 17 years into the longest and most costly wars in its history with no end in sight. Yes, there are obvious rejoinders to these concerns: One of the biggest sources of waste is stop-start budgetary dysfunction that creates uncertainty and precludes planning. But more significant is that reflexive criticism of past mistakes has made defense hawks lazy. Put another way, it is easy but ineffective to point to fleet failures and scream for more defense dollars. It is much harder to make a positive and strategic case for seapower. As Seth Cropsey writes in his new book, *Seabindness: How Political Neglect Is Choking American Seapower and What to Do*, “American seapower needs more than funding. It needs articulate, strategic-minded leadership that can connect national seapower goals with persuasive arguments to achieve them.”⁴¹

It’s the Geography, Stupid

Making this kind of strategically minded case for seapower begins with an old case: geography. North America remains functionally a continent-size island, one “abundant in natural resources and lacking the competitive political environment of Europe and Asia.”⁴² There is no conceivable challenger to American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. This means that despite the real dangers of domestic terrorism or cyber warfare, any existential threat to the U.S. homeland will come from across the seas.⁴³

Rear Adm. Alfred Thayer Mahan illustrated this point in his seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*. Mahan argued that the “geographical position” and “physical conformation” of nations comes with strengths

and vulnerabilities. Compared with a nation that has continental boundaries, there is a natural advantage for a nation that is “so situated that it is neither forced to defend itself by land nor induced to seek extension of its territory by way of the land.” In peacetime, this is a blessing for the United States because “[i]ts contour is such as to present few points specially weak from their saliency, and all important parts of the frontiers can be readily attained — cheaply by water, rapidly by rail. The weakest frontier, the Pacific, is far removed from the most dangerous of possible enemies. The internal resources are boundless as compared with present needs.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, during wartime American coastlines are vulnerable targets, particularly on the Pacific side, where harbors and port cities (in Mahan’s time) were widely dispersed and lacked adequate fortifications. Mahan feared that if adversaries were able to operate from Pacific island bases they could strike the U.S. coast at will while disrupting U.S. trade routes to Asia.⁴⁵

The inevitable conclusion, even for a country as geographically blessed as the United States, is to eschew isolationism and the temptations of hemispheric defense.⁴⁶ As Michael Green shows in his review of Mahan’s work, in the Pacific this started with controlling Hawaii and thereby giving the U.S. Navy

flexible internal lines to shift its fleets from one flank to the other for decisive engagements against enemy fleets. In contrast, control of Hawaii by a hostile power would provide a secure coaling station from which to mount attacks on American trade routes to Asia, the vulnerable West Coast, and the canal route to the Gulf Coast and East Coast. As naval officers had begun to appreciate in the Gilded Age, the combination of geography and technology (steam power and steel) meant that forward presence in the Pacific was necessary not only for access to China but now also for defense of the homeland.⁴⁷

41 Seth Cropsey, *Seabindness: How Political Neglect Is Choking American Seapower and What to Do* (New York: Encounter Books, 2017), 270. John Lehman highlights this same point in his memoirs. To build Reagan’s 600-ship Navy it was necessary to make a strategy-first argument from which requirements and fleet size naturally flowed. John F. Lehman, *Command of the Seas* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 121, 115-60.

42 Grygiel and Mitchell, *Unquiet Frontier*, 18.

43 See Lehman, *Command of the Seas*, 119. “The free world is an oceanic coalition. It follows, therefore, that the free world coalition must have unquestioned superiority on the seas if overall strategic parity is to exist — parity at the nuclear level, and inferiority in the size of land force balanced by superiority at sea. We must be sure we can use the oceans in peace and in war if we are to survive.”

44 Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), 30, 43.

45 Michael J. Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 80-81.

46 Grygiel and Mitchell, *Unquiet Frontier*, 17-20.

47 Green, *More Than Providence*, 80-81.

Green contends that “Mahan was one of the first strategic thinkers to identify America’s realpolitik interest in preventing the rise of *any* rival hegemonic power from within continental Asia.”⁴⁸ Adm. James Stavridis argues that the strategic concept underlying Mahan’s work is

the ability of a nation to use sea power to ultimately contain powerful nations that have concentrated their use of forces ashore, ignoring the sea out of lack of interest, or an inability to see the force of the sea power argument, or simply because they lack the geography, character, and political will to exploit the oceans.⁴⁹

Owing in part to Mahan’s influence, America’s core geostrategic goal has stayed remarkably consistent since World War II: The United States has forward-deployed forces to deter potential aggressors from attempting hegemony in Europe or Northeast Asia. As the 20th-century American strategist Nicholas Spykman wrote, “our constant concern in peace time must be to see that no nation or alliance of nations is allowed to emerge as a dominating power in either of the two regions of the Old World from which our security could be threatened.”⁵⁰ To this end, America has defended forward, manning a series of ramparts along the Eurasian littoral from Western Europe, through the Middle East, to East Asia. America’s core strategic positioning along the Eurasian littoral follows Spykman’s logic of the “Rimland.” Spykman took the maritime strategic worldview of Mahan and paired it with Mackinder to develop his analysis of the centrality of the Rimland, which he viewed as the crucial “zone of conflict between sea power and land power.”⁵¹ The Rimland encompasses what are now viewed as critical strategic locations: Western Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia.⁵² Spykman summarized his views by saying

“Who controls the Rimland, rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.”⁵³

Spykman’s writings on the centrality of the Rimland to world politics are often paired with those of Halford Mackinder, a British strategist prominent around the turn of the 20th century. Mackinder also conceived of grand strategy through geographic terms, but he favored land

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power. He described how the Eurasian “Heartland” of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia — part of a broader “World Island” containing more than half of the planet’s natural resources — was the “pivot” around which global power turned. Thus Mackinder’s alternative formulation: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.”⁵⁴

The Cold War, in a sense, was the ultimate showdown between Spykman and Mackinder. The United States and the free-world coalition enjoyed a considerable advantage along the Eurasian Rimland. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, tightly controlled the Eurasian Heartland. Cold War strategists conceived of Europe as a peninsula, surrounded by the Baltic and North Seas on one flank and the Mediterranean on the other. This quintessential Rimland strategy meant that the United States and its NATO allies

48 Green, *More Than Providence*, 81.

49 Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, 432-33.

50 Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944), 34.

51 Spykman, *Geography of the Peace*, 41.

52 “The importance of these states is not measured in their physical size, power, or wealth but in the real estate that they occupy. Roughly speaking, they compose a narrow belt that runs from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea in Europe, through the Levant and Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean and up through littoral Asia to the Sea of Japan. What happens to these states in coming years will have a disproportionate impact on the shape of the twenty-first century.” Grygiel and Mitchell, *Unquiet Frontier*, 163.

53 Spykman, *Geography of the Peace*, 43. Bryan McGrath recently argued in these pages that “no other aspect of military power is as closely connected with prosperity [as seapower]. This symbiotic relationship between seapower and prosperity was bluntly stated centuries ago by Sir Walter Raleigh: ‘[W]hosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself.’ American seapower apostle Alfred Thayer Mahan packaged this view more diplomatically for statesmen in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, though no less emphatically.” Bryan McGrath, “The National Security Strategy’s Implications for Seapower,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 1, (2017), <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-make-trumps-national-security-strategy/-essay8>.

54 Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (National Defense University Press, 1996), 106.

counted on a decisive advantage in the maritime domain. While the NATO allies could afford rough parity — and even conventional inferiority — with the Soviets on land, as long as NATO maintained maritime superiority it could threaten the Soviets on their vulnerable flanks.⁵⁵ Since the United States was physically separated from its allies, as well as the most likely theater of battle, supplies and reinforcements would have to travel over the high seas.⁵⁶ Mere naval parity, therefore, would not mean stalemate but slaughter for allied forces in Europe.⁵⁷ Seapower was not a sideshow to the battle on the central front because only a decisive advantage at sea could guarantee the safe and timely arrival of American military might to defend Europe.

Throughout the Cold War, command of the seas provided administrations of both parties options to reassure allies, deter aggression, and take action without resorting to kinetic force. When mainland Chinese Communist forces began shelling Chinese Nationalist forces on Quemoy in 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower was able to reject the Joint Chiefs of Staff's recommendation to use tactical nuclear weapons against China and, instead, sent the Seventh Fleet to evacuate 15,000 of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces and 20,000 civilians from the Tachens island chain while securing a congressional authorization to use force in defense of Formosa (Taiwan).⁵⁸ When U.S. reconnaissance confirmed that the Soviets were deploying medium-range nuclear missiles to Cuba in 1962, President John F. Kennedy chose a naval "quarantine" and bought time to negotiate, rejecting the preference of his national security

adviser and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs for airstrikes.⁵⁹ And when an Arab coalition attacked Israel in 1973, President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger not only put the United States on global military alert but also surged a third carrier task force to reinforce the Sixth Fleet in its dangerous confrontation with the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron, thereby deterring Leonid Brezhnev from more aggressive action.⁶⁰

Back to the Future

Some might suggest that this geopolitical case for seapower is obsolete. As President Obama quipped when debating Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney in 2012: "The 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back because the Cold War's been over for 20 years."⁶¹ Implicit in Obama's retort was a sense that the complexities of the present day and advances in technology obviate the lessons of geography and make Cold War instruments of national power less relevant.⁶² Yet even in the Internet age, 90 percent of global trade travels by sea, and American goods and services trade with Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation member economies totaled almost \$3 trillion in 2016.⁶³ Furthermore, 40 percent of the world's population lives within 62 miles of a coast,⁶⁴ the Pacific Ocean alone is bigger than all of the combined land on Earth,⁶⁵ and almost all of the world's transoceanic data traffic is dependent on fiber-optic cables at the bottom of the ocean.⁶⁶

As Robert Kaplan argues, while technology may have neutralized America's geographic position to some extent, this diffusion of technology creates

55 Cropsey, *Seablandness*, 72.

56 Lehman, *Command of the Seas*, 119.

57 Lehman, *Command of the Seas*, 119.

58 The authorization also explicitly included the Pescadores islands but left the fate of Quemoy and Matsu ambiguous. Jean Edward Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace* (New York: Random House, 2012), 655-59.

59 Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008), 72-5. See also "The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962," State Department Office of the Historian, accessed January 16, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>.

60 John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 311; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 575-91.

61 Glenn Kessler, "Flashback: Obama's Debate Zinger on Romney's '1980s' Foreign Policy (Video)," *Washington Post*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2014/03/20/flashback-obamas-debate-zinger-on-romneys-1980s-foreign-policy/>.

62 On the "temptation of technology," see Grygiel and Mitchell, *Unquiet Frontier*, 20-5.

63 Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, "U.S.-APEC Bilateral Trade and Investment," accessed Jan. 24, 2018, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/japan-korea-apec/apec/us-apec-trade-facts#>

64 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Percentage of Total Population Living in Coastal Areas," accessed Jan. 16, 2018, http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/natlinfo/indicators/methodology_sheets/oceans_seas_coasts/pop_coastal_areas.pdf.

65 Adm. James Stavridis, *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 15.

66 Nicole Starosielski, "In Our Wi-Fi World, the Internet Still Depends on Undersea Cables," *The Conversation*, Nov. 3, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/in-our-wi-fi-world-the-internet-still-depends-on-undersea-cables-49936>. See also Magnus Nordenman, "Russian Subs Are Sniffing Around Transatlantic Cables. Here's What to Do About It," *Defense One*, Jan. 17, 2018, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/01/russian-subs-are-sniffing-around-transatlantic-cables-heres-what-do-about-it/145241/>.

even greater vulnerabilities than those identified by Mahan. Technological advances have

only deepened American involvement and influence around the globe. We remain an immense continent but in an increasingly smaller and interconnected world, so that we are, more and more, vulnerable to everything from global financial disruptions to violent ideological movements...it is simply impossible for us to escape from the geopolitical intimacy of the twenty-first-century world. What all of this amounts to is something stark: America is *fated to lead*. That is the judgment of geography as it has played out over the past two and a half centuries.⁶⁷

In such an environment the U.S. Navy plays a unique role sustaining maritime order, providing the world with the “primary geopolitical good” of securing the global commons. As Kaplan puts it: “While our land forces are for unpredictable contingencies, our sea and air forces secure the global commons. The navy is our *away team*: its operations tempo around the world is the same, whether in peacetime or wartime.”⁶⁸

Thus, Mahan’s logic is still relevant and the geographical case for seapower endures. As it did during the Cold War, the United States depends on command of the seas to facilitate its transoceanic alliances. Furthermore, the theories of Spykman and Mackinder are again playing out on the world stage. The United States and its allies lead a Rimland coalition against autocratic aggressors. Today, however, our most difficult challenger is not a Heartland power but a Rimland state. The sea-facing geography of Chinese power compounds the challenge to our transoceanic alliance and makes command of the seas more difficult than when we faced the Soviets.

While maritime superiority was the implicit foundation of U.S. defense strategy during the Cold War, on the operational level the U.S. Navy focused on power projection and hitting the vulnerable Soviet flanks. Today, while power projection would be critical in a war against China, the growing capability of China’s navy means the United States would have to establish sea control in the Indo-Asia-Pacific before the hammer of American power

projection could be brought to bear. This shifting operational focus — from power projection to sea control — makes a balanced and powerful naval force structure more important than ever. If the Navy is not able to establish sea control where and when it is needed, U.S. power projection forces would face difficulties even entering the fight. After all, U.S. allies and forward-deployed assets are still oceans away from reinforcement.

In a future conflict, forces based in the continental United States would not be able to swiftly arrive in theater without decisive maritime superiority. And time will not be on our side: Global pressure to end the conflict before it escalates further would be intense — even if doing so meant locking in Chinese gains.⁶⁹ The longer it takes for decisive American forces to fight their way across the Pacific, the more likely it is that a conflict could be settled on unfavorable terms. As Spykman warned more than 70 years ago, advances in technology and communication mean that the oceans buffering the United States

are not barriers but highways. [A] balance of power in the transatlantic and transpacific zones is an absolute prerequisite for the independence of the New World and the preservation of the power position of the United States. There is no safe defensive position on this side of the oceans. Hemispheric defense is no defense at all.⁷⁰

Spyskman’s fundamental insight — that if unified under a single hegemon or an unfriendly alliance of great powers, the Eurasian landmass would effectively encircle North America — becomes more relevant each day as China continues its naval modernization and island construction campaign, as Russia continues its aggression against the United States and our allies, and as rogue actors such as Iran and North Korea threaten regional security. And his fundamental challenge — that America must have unquestioned command of the seas to vigorously defend interests and allies in the Eurasian Rimland — becomes more difficult each day the rebuilding of the U.S. naval fleet is delayed. Mere parity in the maritime domain is a recipe for wartime defeat. Maritime dominance — a navy capable of decisive fleet action near the enemy’s home waters that can win quickly — is

67 Robert D. Kaplan, *Earning the Rockies: How Geography Shapes America's Role in the World* (New York: Random House, 2017), 138.

68 Kaplan, *Earning the Rockies*, 131.

69 Jan Van Tol, et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), xii, <http://csbaonline.org/research/publications/airsea-battle-concept/publication>.

70 Spykman, *Geography of the Peace*, 457.

essential not just for winning future wars but also for preventing them in the first place.

Speak Loudly in Order to Carry a Big Stick

Even if defense hawks in Congress start making such a strategic case for seapower, we will need the help of the Navy and the president. This is true in part because the Navy has much higher approval ratings and trust among the public than Congress does, and because none of us can match the president's megaphone.⁷¹ In some respects, the right notes are being sounded. There is talk of expanding the fleet and of restoring readiness.⁷² The new *National Defense Strategy* discusses "emerging from a period of strategic atrophy" and re-orienting the military around the primary concern of "[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism."⁷³ Yet the tragedies of the past year, and our collective response, suggest that something is still wrong.⁷⁴

I am reminded of Andrew Gordon's masterful book *The Rules of the Game*, about the decline of the Royal Navy before the Battle of Jutland.⁷⁵ As technology advanced in the century between the Battle of Trafalgar and World War I, the Royal Navy seemed to be adapting. It converted from sail to steam and constructed a fleet that captured public imagination. New classes such as dreadnoughts and battlecruisers stood ready to defend the empire should the German High Seas Fleet sally forth.

Yet out of public view, something was wrong. Officers of the Royal Navy had failed to appreciate the ways in which their doctrines of war at sea needed to change because of technological innovations. They

failed to appreciate the ways that their adversary's capabilities had caught up to their own. And, most dangerous of all, some viewed their tradition as part of their armor, succumbing to the illusion that generations of British mastery of the seas guaranteed future British mastery of the seas. As Gordon put it, "They thought they were good, but in ways that mattered, they were not. They thought they were ready for war, but they were not."⁷⁶ The Royal Navy paid for this with about 6,000 British lives at Jutland. It lost eight destroyers, three cruisers, and three battlecruisers that just hours before had been the pride of the fleet.⁷⁷ One of those battlecruisers, *HMS Invincible*, sank after just 90 seconds of fire from German ships.⁷⁸

To avoid a similar fate, and to complement the geopolitical case for seapower in general, the U.S. Navy needs to tell a new story about what it will do with 355 ships and how this future fleet will differ from today's. Strategy is, after all, a type of script, or a "story told in the future tense."⁷⁹ It is not enough to talk vaguely about overall numbers and new technologies. The usual talking points and generic warnings of risk have left the Navy seven years into the Budget Control Act and more than three decades removed from the last major naval recapitalization. What's needed is a specific and compelling sense of how the Navy would operate in the Eurasian Rimland, how its warfighting doctrines would change, how its culture is likely to evolve, and how it can ensure that technology would not become a crutch.⁸⁰

Without proper funding, no amount of introspection will heal the Navy. But the Navy needs to do more than craft a new case for seapower in the 21st century; it also needs to tell that story directly to the American people. I worry that the Navy is

71 Domenico Montanaro, "Here's Just How Little Confidence Americans Have in Political Institutions," *National Public Radio*, Jan. 17, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/17/578422668/heres-just-how-little-confidence-americans-have-in-political-institutions>.

72 "Prepared Remarks of the Honorable Thomas Modly, Undersecretary of the Navy: Formal Swearing in Ceremony," *U.S. Navy*, Jan. 5, 2018, <http://navylive.dodlive.mil/2018/01/11/swearing-in-of-thomas-modly-under-secretary-of-the-navy/>.

73 *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: Department of Defense, January 2018), 1, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

74 *The Strategic Readiness Review* did identify, as one of its four broad recommendations, the need for the Navy to become a true learning organization. "Navy history is replete with reports and investigations that contain like findings regarding past collisions, groundings, and other operational incidents. The repeated recommendations and calls for changes belie the belief that the Navy always learns from its mistakes. Navy leadership at all levels must foster a culture of learning and create the structures and processes that fully embrace this commitment." *Strategic Readiness Review*, 5.

75 Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996).

76 Gordon, *Rules of the Game*, 594.

77 United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, "Battle of Jutland Centenary," accessed Jan. 23, 2018, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/features/jutland-100>.

78 Adm. Sir Philip Jones, "First Sea Lord's Remarks Ahead of the Centenary of the Battle of Jutland," *United Kingdom Ministry of Defence*, May 19, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/first-sea-lords-remarks-ahead-of-the-centenary-of-the-battle-of-jutland>.

79 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), xiv, 607-29.

80 In fact, it is possible that due to enemy disruptions in communications, electronics, and connectivity, parts of the wars of tomorrow may be fought with less technology than the wars of the recent past. For a non-naval analysis of overreliance on revolutions in military affairs, see the transcript "Harbingers of Future War: Implications for the Army With Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 4, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/harbingers-future-war-implications-army-lieutenant-general-hr-mcmaster>.

headed in the wrong direction in this regard. I read with great concern public reporting of a memo from last March that focused on a “less is more” approach to strategic communications.⁸¹ This would be a catastrophic mistake. While it might have been true once that “loose lips sink ships,” nonexistent strategic communications today can sink entire navies.⁸² If the bias is toward silence to prevent adversaries from finding out about unique capabilities or potential weaknesses, then there will

The Navy again needs to tell its story in a new way that inspires popular action. The Navy has advocates and allies across the country, from Congress to newspaper editorial pages to Legion and VFW halls. This coalition needs to be mobilized to create a groundswell of public support and political pressure. Members of Congress need to hear from their constituents about key Navy priorities the same way we hear about domestic issues such as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program or health-care reform. More people need to be part of the conversation about the future U.S. fleet and how it will keep this country safe and prosperous.

This will not be easy. I am new to elected office, and I still hear daily from my constituents about what is on their minds. Although they would rather talk about Aaron Rodgers than Nicholas Spykman, I believe they would be open to a strategic case for seapower — and higher defense budgets — if that case were made

It is not enough to talk vaguely about overall numbers and new technologies.

never be a public constituency for acquiring those capabilities or mitigating those weaknesses. (And U.S. adversaries already have a decent idea of what our Navy is up to.)⁸³

The Navy has done public diplomacy well in the past. During the height of the Cold War, the Navy's nuclear missile submarine program adopted the slogan “41 for Freedom,” and each of the 41 ballistic missile submarines commissioned from 1959 to 1967 was named after a historical figure who had contributed to our nation. The Navy invested in videos, posters, and media relations to publicize the missions and importance of the ships throughout their service lives. These ships captured popular imagination in a visceral way. Proud veterans groups still celebrate the 41 for Freedom.⁸⁴

powerfully. Recent Chicago Council polling on “What Americans Think About America First” found some interesting attitudes among core Trump voters, who are often perceived as being outside the post-World War II consensus.⁸⁵ While core Trump supporters profess skepticism that the U.S. benefits from its alliance system, they are more supportive than other subgroups about increasing the U.S. military footprint abroad in defense of those alliances.⁸⁶ For example, 21 percent of core Trump supporters favor increasing America's military presence in the Asia-Pacific compared with 13 percent of all respondents. This is not a segment espousing only isolationism, and the reaction seems more proactive than a reflexive Jacksonian response to foreign aggression.⁸⁷ To the extent that Trump supporters want a larger

81 Barbara Starr, “Admiral Warns Staff Against Talking Too Freely,” *CNN*, March 8, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/08/politics/admiral-warns-navy-of-speaking-freely/index.html>. See also Christopher P. Cavas, “Does the US Navy Have a Strategy Beyond Hope?” *Defense News*, Jan. 4, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/surface-navy-association/2018/01/04/does-the-us-navy-have-a-strategy-beyond-hope/>.

82 Also, there is no single individual in charge of unified communications across the Navy and Marine Corps. See Bryan McGrath, “Reforming the Navy Secretariat: Bureaucratic Requirements to Achieve a Vision of American Seapower,” *Information Dissemination*, Jan. 26, 2016, <http://www.informationdissemination.net/2016/01/reforming-navy-secretariat-bureaucratic.html>.

83 On the other hand, it's also possible that the Navy is too open in discussion of some programs and initiatives. As Bryan McGrath put it, “There is no doubt in my mind that the Navy is ‘oversharing’. There is also no doubt in my mind that it is ‘undersharing’. There is furthermore, no doubt in my mind that the Navy is ‘inefficiently-sharing’. The plain truth is that the Navy is incapable of figuring this out because it is not organized to address it.” Bryan McGrath, “On the Navy and Oversharing,” *Information Dissemination*, April 6, 2017, <http://www.informationdissemination.net/2017/04/on-navy-and-oversharing.html>.

84 Erica Buell, “41 for Freedom,” Submarine Force Library and Museum Association, Aug. 11, 2017, <http://ussnautilus.org/blog/41-for-freedom/>. See also “41 for Freedom: Polaris Submarines 2088,” YouTube video published Oct. 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PAmEFrzQdk&t=931s>.

85 Dina Smeltz, et al., “What Americans Think About America First,” *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, 2017, https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/ccgasurvey2017_what_americans_think_about_america_first.pdf.

86 Smeltz, “What Americans Think About America First,” 12, 33.

87 Walter Russell Mead, “The Jacksonian Revolt,” *Hudson Institute*, Jan. 20, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/research/13258-the-jacksonian-revolt>.

military presence in that region, it is for extended deterrence. This suggests a broader awareness of America's responsibility to maintain stability on foreign shores in order to protect our continental island.

Yet even if this instinctive awareness exists, only strategic-minded leadership can translate it into 355 ships. Advocates for American seapower have effectively skipped that step. We have long assumed that our audience shares our understanding of why an unquestioned Navy is critical. Rather than trying to scare the public into accepting certain fleet numbers (and implicitly taking others' word for it), we need to focus more on explaining why getting to 355 ships is so important and what strategic and operational risks our nation runs if it fails to do so.

After all, budgets are tight, our country's debt is out of control, and 355 might seem like an arbitrary number. Yet as this analysis shows, there is nothing arbitrary about the Navy's requirement for more ships, nor optional about America's role in the world and on the seas. History offers a sobering lesson: When hostile nations have threatened U.S. interests and allies, they often did so by projecting power across the seas. Today, it might be easy to think, "Well of course Hitler lost. Of course the U.S. defeated Japan. Of course the Berlin Wall fell." But the totalitarians of the 20th century were not destined to lose. Freedom's triumph was not preordained. It took men and women of good faith and courage to win the peace. And it took a lot of strong ships manned by brave sailors and Marines.

We who have inherited that legacy cannot fail in our duty. Every day sailors around the world are carrying out their missions, deterring conflict

and enforcing the rules the United States created to our benefit. And too often, that service is taken for granted. Americans fly flags and thank veterans for their service, but it takes tragedy to remind us of the cost of liberty. Getting to a 355-ship Navy is about giving U.S. warfighters the best tools they can possibly have to accomplish the mission and come home safe. To this end, the strategic case must be made for seapower, both old and new; building a fleet strong enough to secure the peace; and passing the torch of maritime superiority to the next generation. 🇺🇸

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