

U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Robert J. Papp
Address to Navy League Sea Air Space Exposition
April 12, 2011

“Internationally Engaged: Ensuring Freedom of the Seas” is a fitting theme for our current maritime challenges. But, I also find some irony in that many of our current 21st century challenges were also 18th and 19th century challenges. Think about it. Piracy. We thought we left pirates behind in the age of sail. No more than a few years ago we thought the only remaining pirates were led by Johnny Depp as “Captain Jack Sparrow.” Who would have thought in 2011 we would still be battling pirates?

Smuggling. In colonial days, this was a national past time, and point of pride among colonists trying to avoid British crown taxation. Today, it involves illicit narcotics that result in addiction, crime – and even destabilization of our neighbors like Mexico.

The Arctic. In the 18th and 19th centuries, explorers travelled to the Arctic seeking its precious resources – seal skins and whales. Today is no different – it’s just that these resources are oil and natural gas – and shorter trade routes – which are a really big deal for China and Russia.

When our young Nation first confronted these challenges in the 18th century, the first Secretary of the Treasury...and, the father of the United States Coast Guard, Alexander Hamilton called for the construction of 10 small armed cutters to serve as “useful sentinels of the law.” Our small armed service collected revenue, when our Nation had none.

For the first few years of our republic, before the construction of 6 Naval frigates, we battled pirates and French Privateers, and interdicted smugglers. And later, in the 1870’s, when the “District of Alaska” was under the control of the U.S. Treasury Department, we patrolled the Bering Sea and the Arctic.

Then, as now, our mission was to **protect U.S. sovereign interests**, rescue mariners in distress, and enforce U.S. laws and treaties. We were quite literally the law of Alaska – as we conducted “court cruises” with a federal judges and Public Health Service doctors embarked, settling disputes, dispensing justice, and humanitarian care.

Today, our ability to simultaneously serve as an armed service, law enforcement agency, and regulator has allowed us to assist our partners in the Department of Defense – and in particular the Navy – in unique ways.

Our ability to take law enforcement action provides an end-game in drug enforcement and anti-piracy operations. And, our white-hulled cutters are often welcomed by nations who we have challenging relationships with – this ability has sometimes been referred to as “**soft-power**” -- and we’ve used it over the years both to deliver humanitarian aid, and assist in prying open the doors of diplomacy.

We are operating with our sister services in many places you *would not think to find the Coast Guard*: Our patrol boat squadron in Bahrain operates in the Arabian Gulf off the coasts of Iraq and Kuwait – major cutters and law enforcement detachments are operating off the coast of Africa and with the Joint Anti-Piracy task force - we have an International Port Inspection team that has visited some 150 countries to ensure their ports have implemented anti-terrorism measures, and a few Coast Guardsmen are even performing niche specialty assignments in Afghanistan.

Yet we are also combating smuggling in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific, patrolling our littorals to deter threats to our homeland, conserving our fisheries, and ensuring the smooth flow of commerce throughout our maritime transportation system...in short, YOU will still find us *everywhere* you'd expect us to be – performing our challenging maritime missions!

The Arctic. I want to spend a few minutes this evening on the increasingly “wet” Arctic...folks, there's a whole new ocean opening up that we have responsibilities for...the Arctic reportedly contains 20% of the world's undiscovered natural gas and vast oil resources – which is becoming increasingly accessible.

The lore of untapped energy resources has spurred other Arctic Nations to increase their Arctic presence, expand their capabilities – and to make Extended Continental Shelf Claims – which are essentially areas over which they have the sole right to extract oil, gas and minerals from the ocean floor.

The increasing world demand for petroleum is being driven by advanced emerging market economies like India and China – As you know, oil exploration is already taking place in the Arctic – these operations will continue to expand – and we need to ensure we are prepared to meet both our sovereign and statutory responsibilities—including U. S. Arctic environmental response.

But what concerns me is that while our Navy can go under the ice with submarines – and, when the Arctic weather permits—which is not all that often, we can fly over the ice, our Nation has very limited Arctic surface capabilities. But surface capabilities are what we need to conduct missions like search and rescue, environmental response – and to provide a consistent and visible sovereign presence.

However, we – which is to say our combine naval forces – currently have only 1 operational ice breaker. This was not always the case. There was a time in the late 1950s when possessing an Arctic surface capability was a national imperative. The Cold war was the driver for this surge in Arctic activity. The Coast Guard and Navy worked jointly to support the Distant Early Warning Line – or DEW line – which was a string of 50 radar sites and weather stations running 3,000 miles from Point Barrow in Alaska across the Northern Arctic Circle to North Eastern Canada's Baffin Island.

It was no accident that in 1957 Coast Guard Cutters STORIS, BRAMBLE and SPAR were the first American vessels to circumnavigate the North American continent via the Northwest Passage – their mission was to find and mark a usable Northwest Passage in the event ships supporting the DEW line became trapped north of Point Barrow, so they could use this passage to escape to the Atlantic.

This always reminds me of one of my favorite sea stories....

When Coast Guard Cutters SPAR, STORIS and BRAMBLE received their orders to transit the North West Passage, they met up in Seattle, to report in to Navy Task Force 5. Task Force 5 was commanded by Rear Adm. Henry S. Persons, USN, and was responsible for the supply of the DEW line stations on the Pacific side of Bellot Strait. The Coast Guard element was designated as Task Unit 5.1.5, and operated under the command of Capt. Harold Wood, the skipper of the STORIS.

As a stoic and pipe-smoking Capt. Wood and his Coast Guard contingent entered Adm. Persons' office; Persons quipped that it was “good to have the Hooligan Navy here at the meeting.” Wood answered, “**We don't mind you calling us 'hooligans', but it's the 'navy' part that we find objectionable.**”

But back to the story: in 1957, at the height of DEW line operations, the Coast Guard and the Navy had a combined total of 8 heavy polar icebreakers. Today, we only have two heavy polar ice breakers –POLAR STAR and POLAR SEA – both are over 30 years old – and neither one is currently operational. POLAR SEA, while preparing for a U.S. Arctic sovereignty mission, suffered a catastrophic engine casualty in June 2010, and has been out of operation since. And, POLAR STAR is currently in the shipyard undergoing reactivation after being in caretaker status for almost 5 years – she will not be ready for operations until 2013.

Our current plan is to transfer POLAR SEA's crew to POLAR STAR and then take POLAR SEA out of operation. So that leaves Cutter HEALY – (which is a medium polar icebreaker) – as our sole operational Arctic icebreaker. HEALY is a great ship – but she's mainly laid out for conducting scientific operations, and her missions – in the main – are determined by the needs of the National Science Foundation.

While Science is certainly important, it is sovereignty that should be our first and foremost concern in the Arctic. Russia and other nations (who are party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) have made application under the treaty's provisions to expand their continental shelves. If approved, this will expand the area over which they enjoy exclusive exploration rights – these claims could potentially provide them with significant additional minerals, natural gas and oil reserves.

Not coincidentally, other Arctic nations also have large ice breaker fleets, and they are continuing to expand their Arctic presence. Russia has approximately 20; Finland and Sweden 7 each; – Canada has 6; – And China – which is not an Arctic nation – already has a large ice breaker, the Xue Long (or Snow Dragon), and is in the process of building the world’s most powerful non-nuclear icebreaker! -- a title previously held by POLAR SEA and POLAR STAR.

China has been operating up in the Arctic the past two summers –conducting operations just outside the U.S. – EEZ on the Chukchi Plateau in an area that’s reputed to be one of the richest Arctic oil and natural gas fields. The United States would be able to make an extended continental shelf claim over the precise area where China has been operating – potentially giving us exclusive mineral, gas and oil rights – but for the fact that we have not yet ratified the law of sea treaty.

Now before you think that this is just a Coast Guard push for new ice breakers, I need to tell you that we are working on a comprehensive concept of operations that will look at all aspects of Coast Guard mission responsibilities and United States interests. So, while our respective services have been conducting limited exercises in the Arctic, we need to have a serious national conversation on what type of capability we wish to have—particularly surface capability.

This will be a real challenge. Because, if you ask someone in the Midwest, whether they think the U.S. is 1) an Arctic nation – and 2) whether, all things considered we should make the required investment in resources to protect our sovereign interests – they might have a different opinion than, say, our citizens from Alaska!

But someday, natural gas and oil extracted from the U.S. Arctic will have a direct bearing on the cost of gas in the Midwest... just like the Trans Alaska Pipeline helped reduce fuel costs in the Midwest for the last three decades. Give it time. It won’t be long before all Americans take notice of the importance of the Arctic to the U.S. economy.

Maintaining sovereignty over sovereign territory is the foremost responsibility of a nation-state. Sovereignty is often expensive...but its benefits are priceless. “Use it or Lose it”...is how Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has styled their Arctic strategy...and perhaps, we need to start approaching ours with a similar attitude.

As we address the challenges of the Arctic, piracy, smuggling, and shipbuilding in the context of constrained budgets and instability around the world, we find ourselves facing uncertain and stormy seas. In my career as a sailor, I have found that no matter how severe the storm, you continue to work, struggle, and fight...and you rely on your shipmates...because ultimately the weather must improve, and conditions will change. In sailors, I believe this instills a sense of optimism and faith.

I have also learned that you not only rely upon your shipmates who sail with you – you also rely upon many other shipmates who provide support from afar.

That's why, over time, the term "Shipmate" has become revered, and applied as my short hand for members of the Coast Guard Family...our active duty, Reservists, civilians and Auxiliarists.

"Shipmates" also include the extended family...our partners in the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense...most notably our Shipmates in the Navy and Marine Corps...but also institutions like the Navy League of the United States. Over the course of my career, I've experienced your good works...both great and small.

I've seen you support Sailor of the quarter programs and adopt Coast Guard small units, and I've taken part in grand events like ship commissioning and Sea, Air, Space. Quite frankly, you had me at Sailor of the Quarter, because anyone who takes care of my Coast Guardsmen is a Shipmate to me.

I have always found inspiration in quotes from President Kennedy, because I have believed his actions were based in his experiences as a sailor. But it was not until recently that I found proof of my belief in a letter he wrote supporting Operation Sail...

QUOTE: From my first race on Nantucket Sound many years ago to my most recent outing as a weekend sailor, sailing has given me some of the most pleasant and exciting moments of my life. It has also taught me something of courage, resourcefulness and strength required of men who sail the seas in ships. Thus, I am looking forward eagerly to Operation Sail. The sight of so many ships gathered from the distant corners of the world should remind us that strong, disciplined and venturesome men still can find their way safely across uncertain and stormy seas. SIGNED John F. Kennedy]

So, as we collectively venture out across those uncertain and stormy seas, we count ourselves fortunate to have Shipmates like the Navy League. We assumed – whether instinctively or presumptuously – that Benevolence...Zeal...and Service to others...were terms that exclusively applied to those of us in the sea-service...But you in the Navy League, through your great works, have made them yours, and by doing so, you have improved the lives of our sailors, enhanced the capability of our fleets, and made us all ... *stronger to save!*

And for that, on behalf of all sailors, marines and Coast Guardsmen – I sincerely thank you.

Semper Paratus!