

2023 State of the Coast Guard

Admiral Linda Fagan

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Good evening and greetings! Thank you for joining me for the 2023 State of the Coast Guard.

It is an exciting time for the Coast Guard and our workforce. For nearly 233 years our Service has provided safety and security for the American people. Today we uphold that tradition and the Coast Guard's future is bright.

We've never been in greater demand around the world, and that demand is matched by greater recognition of the service's value to the Nation. There are challenges ahead but with the dedication, professionalism, and passion of everyone who serves in the Coast Guard, we are ready to meet them all.

The U.S. Coast Guard is a unique instrument of national power. We are a military service, a law enforcement agency, and a regulatory agency. Our combination of authorities and capabilities means we contribute to America's national security and economic prosperity in ways no other single federal entity can.

As an operational component within the Department of Homeland Security, the Coast Guard is committed to the Secretary's priorities, including maritime border security, crisis response leadership, and cybersecurity protection of critical infrastructure.

We collaborate with the other components to build cohesion and efficiency across the Department and build trust with the American people. The Coast Guard, as one of the six Armed Services, is a valued and integrated member of the Joint Force. Our total workforce of over 57,000 active duty, Reserve, and civilian personnel, supported by 21,000 Auxiliary volunteers, serve around the world. These sentinels are the heartbeat of the Coast Guard; they are always ready to protect, defend, and save the people we serve.

We uphold the Nation's trust because of our enduring commitment to our core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. Around the world, our blue uniforms and iconic red racing stripe are symbols of professionalism and good maritime governance.

However, the world is changing, and the pace of that change is accelerating. Rapid advances in technology, changes in the global economy, great power competition, and the impacts of climate change are all converging on the maritime environment and impacting Coast Guard missions. The Coast Guard's unique capability and culture posture us well to respond to these changes.

We have the enduring responsibility to safeguard the Marine Transportation System and enable the uninterrupted flow of commerce, which sustains more than 30 million American jobs and contributes more than \$5.4 trillion dollars to the U.S. economy every year. More than 90% of the Nation's imports and exports move by water.

Just as important as our major ports, are the 14,000 miles of waterways on our inland rivers that power the economic engine of the heartland. The importance of river transportation was made clear this past fall. Extreme low water levels on the Mississippi River restricted vessel traffic, making it difficult for midwestern farmers to get their harvest to market.

The Coast Guard's inland river cutter fleet worked feverishly to reset the buoys marking the shifting channels. Some of these cutters have been serving since World War II. I am excited about the new Waterways Commerce Cutter, which will give our crews reliable platforms to do their economically vital work on the rivers. The new cutters will also accommodate both men and women, ensuring heartland assignments are open to every member of the Service.

The rivers are not our Nation's only critical freshwater transportation links. On the Great Lakes, the shipping industry moves more than 160 million tons of cargo every year. That flow must continue even during the harsh winter ice season. Your Coast Guard facilitates nearly 1,000 vessel transits every winter with our fleet of seven icebreakers in the region. I am fully committed to fielding critical Great Lakes icebreaking capability to keep that traffic moving.

Farther offshore, new technology is increasing demand for Coast Guard waterways management. The offshore wind industry will soon begin constructing wind turbines in an area of ocean larger than the state of Rhode Island. Our offshore waters are equally important to the growing commercial space industry. American companies launched more than 2000 spacecraft last year, a 36% increase from the year before.

The Coast Guard plays a key role in the development of the offshore wind and commercial space industries. We must balance new activity in our waters with traditional activity such as commercial fishing. Thanks to Congress and the Administration, our 2023 appropriation included critical new staff and field positions for this vital work.

The Marine Transportation System is a complex network of infrastructure, vessels, sensors, and data that enables the efficient movement of cargo and passengers. These essential networks are vulnerable to malign cyber activity. The Coast Guard's responsibility to maintain a safe and secure Marine Transportation System extends to cyberspace, our newest operational domain.

We now have two fully operational Cyber Protection Teams. They work proactively with government and industry partners to protect our ports from cyber threats. I'm pleased to share that a new Cyber Protection Team will soon stand up on the West Coast.

To staff our growing Cyber Protection capability, this year we will assign the first members of the new Cyber Mission Specialist rating in our enlisted workforce. These professionals will enhance the Coast Guard's capacity to protect the maritime industry in cyberspace.

Our operational success in every mission is more closely tied to data than at any time in our history. Data is a strategic asset. We recently stood up a new Office of Data and Analytics. This expert team is accelerating the implementation of a new “big data” platform we call SURVEYOR. This system will integrate enterprise-level data and workforce analytics to enable better decision making.

As we protect the Marine Transportation System, we are always focused on the people who go to sea. Everyone has the right to work in this environment free from fear and harassment. I am committed to supporting the U.S. maritime industry’s efforts to create a workplace culture that does not tolerate any form of harassment or sexual assault. The Coast Guard will promptly address all reports of sexual misconduct on U.S. flagged vessels, and pursue accountability for perpetrators.

Equally important to mariners is our lifesaving work throughout U.S. waters and along our maritime borders. Today we perform this mission on a scale we have not seen in decades. Large numbers of people are embarking on perilous journeys in hopes of reaching the United States. We are surging ships, aircraft, and people to the Caribbean basin, to prevent the loss of life at sea and deter these dangerous voyages.

This mission is led by our Medium Endurance Cutters, many of which are over fifty years old. They are increasingly expensive to maintain, and the current high operational tempo puts even greater pressure on their aging systems and their crews.

We are excited that the replacements for these ships, the Offshore Patrol Cutters, are under construction now, with the first expected to go in the water this year. These new cutters will expand the Coast Guard’s capability to secure the U.S. maritime border and disrupt transnational criminal organizations.

The Coast Guard will keep pace with changes impacting the Marine Transportation System as we conduct our missions on our coastlines, rivers, lakes, and maritime borders. But we are aware of looming threats that could challenge our ability to succeed in the future. We must apply foresight and take action today to be ready for tomorrow.

The impacts of climate change are affecting Coast Guard missions now. More frequent severe weather, retreating Polar ice, migrating fish stocks, and coastal infrastructure damage all demand new approaches to how we operate and maintain our assets. Calendar year 2022 was the eighth consecutive year the Coast Guard responded to a severe weather disaster that caused more than ten billion dollars in damage to American communities.

Our recently released Climate Framework plots a course to build resilient infrastructure, enhance our leadership in crisis response, and strengthen partnerships to be ready for future demands. We are building our own energy resilience, through projects like a new solar power micro-grid at Training Center Petaluma, California. And we are doubling down on our traditional role of leadership during any maritime disasters, including hurricanes, oil spills, and vessel accidents.

Thanks to Congress and the Administration, our 2023 appropriation provided new resources – both people and assets – to help us lead maritime incident response and protect the American people when disaster strikes.

As an Arctic nation, the United States seeks a polar region that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative. The Arctic is becoming even more critical as diminishing sea ice opens new waters to commercial and military activity. The Coast Guard protects our national sovereignty through enduring presence in the high latitudes. We operate the Nation’s surface fleet of polar capable ships – the heavy icebreaker POLAR STAR, and the medium icebreaker HEALY.

Our icebreaker crews demonstrated their capability this year. HEALY transited to the North Pole in October, and this evening POLAR STAR is sailing home from Antarctica to complete its 26th voyage south. But a fleet of only two polar icebreakers does not deliver the high latitude presence the Nation requires.

The National Strategy for the Arctic Region specifically calls to grow our fleet beyond two ships. The three future Polar Security Cutters will enable a shift from episodic presence to year-round Coast Guard presence in the high latitudes.

Voyages to the high latitudes, like every Coast Guard mission, begin and end at a shore facility. Maintenance and recapitalization of our buildings, piers, and runways are essential to mission success. Today we have units operating from shore infrastructure that is over 100 years old, like Station Rockland, Maine, which was built in 1881. Maintaining this aging shore infrastructure is a demanding task. It requires consistent funding that our current budgetary topline does not allow. We must invest in new construction, particularly in critical locations such as Seattle and Charleston, as we build out homeports for new cutters.

The condition of our shore infrastructure challenges both readiness and resilience. Investment in new construction and strong funding for maintenance will secure the shore facilities we need to complete our missions at sea and in the air.

The impacts of climate change, our national security interests in the Polar Regions, and aging shore infrastructure all challenge the Service. But in these challenges, there is opportunity. We will answer the call and live up to our legacy of service to the American people.

I am confident in making that statement because of our support from Congress, but also because of our Coast Guard workforce. I am proud of the dedication, professionalism, and passion of every individual who serves in the United States Coast Guard. These sentinels are my highest priority.

To make their service a meaningful and rewarding experience, we will transform our talent management system, provide Coast Guard families the world-class support they deserve, and make new investments in our recruiting infrastructure.

The first order of business is to align the talents, desires, and experiences of every individual with the needs of the Service, to maximize the performance of both. The way we hire, train, assign and promote our people has not changed significantly since the 1960s. We must adapt to remain an employer of choice. I am proud to announce a Talent Management Transformation Task Force, a new team that will build the agile and integrated human resources structure we need to manage our workforce more creatively.

We are already implementing policies that provide greater flexibility in service. Many people join the Coast Guard already possessing the skills and credentials that we need. We are now allowing them to begin service at the rank appropriate for their experience. We are finding new opportunities for our workforce to maintain geographic stability, making it easier for them to continue to serve where they have roots like a spouse's career or family ties. And we are moving away from the fixed promotion and assignment timeline that forces people to choose between two options: "up" or "out." There is much work to do in this area. I am certain that changes to our talent management system will make service in our Coast Guard more rewarding and enhance our mission effectiveness.

An external network of support is equally critical to the success of our workforce. The demands of military service mean that while we recruit individuals, we retain families. We will ensure our workforce and their dependents have access to the world-class housing, healthcare, and childcare they deserve. Congress and the Administration have already done much to help us provide that support. As a result of new authority, we have extended 12 weeks of parental leave to all servicemembers. Many are already taking advantage of this new benefit.

Over the last two years Congress has also provided \$155 million to build capacity and make improvements at our Child Development Centers. And the 2023 appropriation included an additional \$5 million for Child Care Subsidies to help our servicemembers find childcare in locations where it works for them and their families.

Our families deserve safe, affordable housing that they can be proud of. In the many remote communities home to our smaller units, families often rely on Coast Guard-owned housing. I thank Congress for the support they provided in the past to help us build beautiful new homes in places like Eastport, Maine.

We are also continuing to invest in expanded access to healthcare. This year we added to our cadre of organic medical providers, and we built a medical school pipeline for our own Coast Guard doctors.

Behavioral and mental health care providers are critically important to the wellbeing of our workforce. Thanks to a new partnership with the Department of Defense, we are training Corpsmen as behavioral health technicians, to assist our growing roster of mental health professionals.

Like the other branches of the Armed Forces, and much of private sector, the Coast Guard is experiencing a workforce shortage. We are struggling to recruit the people we need to hire into our ranks.

Our recruiting shortfall threatens our readiness and ability to serve the American people. I have a sense of urgency to address this challenge. We must ensure that every American, from coast to coast and throughout the inland states, knows who we are and what we do. I am grateful for the \$6.5 million above our original budget request Congress provided to increase our recruiting capacity. We are opening seven new recruiting offices, to be present in more American communities. And we are standing up four new Junior ROTC units this year, bringing the Coast Guard's total to ten across the Nation. This is a large expansion of a very exciting program.

We need to do a better job telling the Coast Guard story. Nothing is more important to our recruiting effort than building awareness of the Coast Guard brand. And to help do that, tonight I am thrilled to announce a new marketing campaign. I invite you to join us in the atrium after the Address for the unveiling of the campaign's new branding, inspired by our Coast Guard Ethos.

This work to build Americans' awareness of their Coast Guard will help us fill our ranks, particularly the buses to our Recruit Training Center at Cape May, New Jersey. Once recruits arrive, they deserve to complete their training at a world-class facility with barracks, classrooms, and physical training spaces worthy of the traditions of our Service. I am excited for the planned construction of a new barracks building, and look forward to working with Congress to gain support for future investments, including an all-weather training facility and additional barracks.

When we make the talent management, family services, and recruiting transformations we need, we will be prepared to meet the demands of the future. I am fully confident of the Coast Guard's ability to succeed in this work.

There is no better example of the Coast Guard's full potential than our work in the Indo-Pacific. With modern cutters, resilient infrastructure, and a thriving workforce we can advance the Nation's strategic objectives through expanded presence, training, and engagement.

The Coast Guard's long-held global reputation as a trusted partner opens new doors and builds new coalitions in a region critical to great power competition. We help smaller nations protect their own sovereignty by countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated (or IUU) fishing. IUU fishing has replaced piracy as the leading maritime threat to the rules-based order. The U.S. Coast Guard is a global leader in IUU fisheries enforcement.

Throughout the Indo-Pacific, Coast Guard cutters, aircraft, and people are welcomed representatives of the United States. Other countries model their own navies or coast guards after our example of a professional military and maritime service. By strengthening our partners and allies, we strengthen our own Nation's standing in a way that has enduring benefits for the American people.

This is true around the world, in places like West Africa, South America, and the Arabian Gulf. We are a Global Coast Guard. This is our value to the Nation.

We may be small, but we are incredibly capable. Everywhere the United States has maritime interests, we protect, we defend, we save. We are the United States Coast Guard.

Every day, our crews do difficult work. They brave wind and waves to complete their missions. We will apply that same determination to confront the challenges we face as a Service and will emerge even stronger sentinels of our maritime safety, maritime security, and economic prosperity.

I can say this emphatically because I am encouraged about the support we continue to receive from Congress and the Administration. Thank You. I am confident that our trajectory of enhanced mission excellence can be matched by a similar trajectory of consistent, 3 to 5 percent annual budget growth.

This means that by 2033, the United States Coast Guard would be a \$20 billion a year organization. I am certain you will not find a better return on investment for the American people.

Thank you once again for your attendance here this evening, and thank you for your enduring support of your United States Coast Guard.

Semper Paratus!