Superiority at Sea Requires Innovation

By Rep. Roscoe Bartlett

Oceans cover three-quarters of the Earth's surface. The vast majority of the world's population lives within 2 miles of a seacoast. Seventy percent of our trade moves by sea. Clearly, maintaining America's naval superiority is an imperative, not an option.

History teaches us that the United States achieves peace through military strength.

Under Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, Congress is required to "provide and maintain a Navy." During the War of 1812, a combination of revolutionary design, audacious leadership, and superior training resulted in the U.S. Navy prevailing in five of six engagements against the British, then the world's most powerful navy. Those victories validated Congress' earlier decision to appropriate the money to build the USS Constitution and her three sister Super Frigates.

America emerged as a new world sea power based upon the twin foundations of superior training and superior technology. The current Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Vernon Clark explains the stakes better than I ever could: "Help us let Americans know about the advantage that we need so that we can ensure that when we commit America's greatest resource, the sons and daughters of America, to the challenges that we face in the world, that we have given them the best capabilities that we can provide, because when it's all over, we're not looking for any fair fights."

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From my work as a scientist, engineer and inventor before my election to Congress, I can attest that maintaining leadership requires constant innovation. Consider two recent examples.

Andrew J. Betting/KRT

The USS Abraham Lincoln makes its way to North Island Naval Air Station for a one-day port visit to San Diego on May 2. The ship was deployed for 10 months for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

When the Tomahawk cruise missile was first introduced to the fleet in 1982, it took at least one month from target identification and selection to missile launch. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, more than 800 Tomahawks were launched from 35 coalition ships, one-third of them submarines. The time elapsed from target identification to missile launch was 45 minutes — and continues to fall.

During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the Navy's tactical aviation pilots had to wait for courier flight delivery of daily air-tasking orders. The opening salvo of Operation Iraqi Freedom against leadership targets in Baghdad let the world know that America's pilots now fly above a dynamic battlefield and receive near-real-time targeting data in the cockpit.

The gains are spectacular, but challenges remain. The USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier battle group recently received orders extending its deployment. Crew members and their families must endure a separation that may exceed the 10-month deployment of the USS Abraham Lincoln.

The Navy's Cold War fleet of 600 surface warships has declined to nearly half that size. Needless to say, the oceans did not shrink in kind. That has had deadly consequences. Reduced at-sea supply and refueling capacity forced the USS Cole to the harbor in Aden, Yemen, within range of suicide terrorists in a small motorboat.

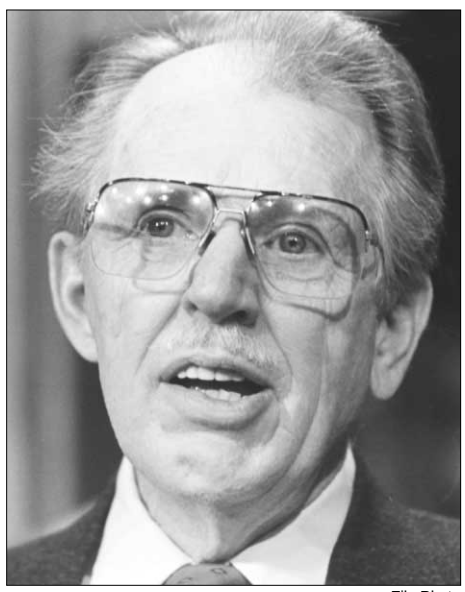
Technicians operating the most sophisticated sonar are the only defense aboard our surface ships and submarines capable of identifying and locating quiet diesel submarines. More than 40 nations, many that are not friendly, have or are acquiring these deadly threats to ships at sea. Only continual training can maintain the vital yet highly perishable sonar skills of these crew members.

The tactical, strategic and cost-benefit advantage of launching a swarm of more than 20 cruise missiles at a cost of $1 million each against a multibillion-dollar aircraft carrier is obvious.

We presume at our nation's peril and an unacceptable risk to America's sailors and marines that future foes will be like Saddam Hussein's Iraq or al Qaeda. What if, as in World War II or the Cold War, America's adversaries are peers?

We must be prepared for the potential that a more formidable foe might engage in more effective attacks against us. Asymmetrical attacks might well transform America's information age advantages into our Achilles heel.

For instance, new generations of computer, telecommunications and wireless equipment utilizing Global Positioning Satellite technology create the necessity to expand satellite and bandwidth capacity. Creating and coordinating joint service equipment interoperability requires a greater need to protect systems integrity with enhanced encryption against cyberterrorism.



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High-altitude detonation of a small nuclear device would release an electromagnetic pulse, an electrical surge that would disable or destroy unshielded electronic and computer components within its line of sight. The military's strategic deterrent systems are EMP hardened. However, most military and civilian infrastructure is unprotected. The proliferation of nuclear weapon and ballistic missile technology increases the potential for threats from this type of asymmetrical attack.

With H.R. 1588, the fiscal 2004 National Defense Authorization Act, the House of Representatives begins to address these vulnerabilities as well as apply lessons learned from Operation Iraqi Freedom. The NDAA is comprehensive, but these are some advances.

Under treaty obligations, four out of 18 of our strategic deterrent SSBN Trident submarines must be retired from the fleet at the halfway point of their 40-year planned lifespan. Instead of throwing this multibillion dollar investment away, these four SSBNs are being converted into SSGNs and will be forward deployed on the front lines of the war on terrorism. These newest members of America's nuclear-powered Silent Service will be poised to strike targets anywhere in the world armed with up to 154 Tomahawk cruise missiles and the added capability and versatility to insert more than 60 special forces SEALs.

Ships in the fleet are actively involved in research and development to acquire ballistic missile defense capability. Defenses against cruise missiles are being enhanced.

The new Virginia Class submarines under construction will bring unsurpassed capabilities to our fleet of more than 50 cruise-missile-armed attack submarines.

Future innovative technologies supported in H.R. 1588 include high-speed multi-mission ships, electromagnetic gun systems, and high-energy laser antimissile systems.

At the dawn of the 21st century, America's naval superiority depends upon an ongoing commitment to the same twin foundations that made our tiny fledgling nation a world sea power in the 19th century. John Paul Jones' challenge to Congress and our country is echoed by every sailor and marine and must be met by every succeeding generation: "Give me a fast ship for I intend to go in harm's way."

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The Future of Sea Power