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The Navy's Gators: An Endangered Species?

Benjamin Armstrong

For over five decades the nuclear powered Aircraft Carrier has been the center of naval strategy and policy for the United States of America. In the 1950's the big guns of the gray-hull battleships had been America's capital ships since the Spanish American War. In the six decades that the battleships ruled the seas they brought the United States from a regional power to a global leader in the bipolar world of the Cold War. The Carrier and its embarked air-wing have dominated the oceans, littorals, and near-shore, taking the United States to its current position as the world's lone Superpower. In the post-Cold War world, filled with asymmetric threats, a global war on terrorism, and the prospect of mounting regional stability operations, it is time for the Sea Services to re-evaluate what they consider their capital ship. In the 21st century the busiest and most important naval vessels, and therefore our capital ships, are the Amphibious Assault Ships, known affectionately by their Sailors and Marines as The Gators.

Throughout the United States Navy's 233 year history strategy and policy have dictated what vessel was the focus of our nation's shipbuilding plans. The early Navy was based around the strategic concept of *guerre de course*, and its missions of commerce protection and commerce raiding. The result was an American Navy based around Humphrey's Fast Frigates as the capital ship. As the nation left the age of sail and the littoral warfare of the Civil War behind us, and began to move toward the world's stage, it became clear that a blue water fleet was required. Visionaries like CAPT A.T. Mahan helped lead to a fleet dominated by battleships and the battlefleet. After years of struggle against the "battleship mafia" by men like ADM Moffet, World War II dramatically demonstrated the importance of the Aircraft Carrier. The struggle against the Soviets placed it and the Air Wing as the central vessel of the time. American naval strength throughout history has been ensured by the ability to recognize when new strategic challenges present themselves. It is time to consider what asset best accomplishes the strategic missions of the new century as a guide to identify today's capital ship and shipbuilding priority.

In the recent past amphibious shipbuilding plans were centered on the 31/13 plan of 13 big deck amphibies (LHD/LHAs) and 31 small decks (LSD/LPDs). The 31/13 plan accounted only for the lift and deployment requirements of the Marine Corps for amphibious power projection. It did not consider the additional requirements of humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, theater security, stability operations, littoral stability/anti-piracy, and other missions assigned to today's ships. While the shipbuilding discussion with Congress and the Pentagon has focused on the future of our Destroyers and the Littoral Combat Ship, it ignores the strategic issues of the 21st century and the amphibious fleet. According to latest budget planning the total number of

amphibs in the coming decade will fall from the 44 in the 31/13 plan to 33 or less. Rumors surrounding the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) suggest that the number might fall even further. There is a strategic disconnect between Department of Defense plans to expand the size of the Marine Corps and increase naval irregular warfare while cutting back the size of the Amphibious Fleet.

The operational tempo, deployments, and the underway time per ship in the Amphibious Fleet are all significantly higher than the rest of the surface navy. Gators have conducted operations in nearly every spectrum of modern warfare in the last decade. In 2003 they conducted traditional amphibious missions as Amphibious Task Forces East and West carried the Marines to the fight and landed them ashore at the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. At the same time the USS Bataan proved the viability of the “Harrier Carrier” as she became a dedicated TACAIR platform, in essence a modern Jeep Carrier, launching strikes in country during the run to Baghdad. The LHD and LPD have become the assets of choice for theater security and humanitarian assistance operations, as demonstrated in Operation Continuing Promise and the Africa and Southern Partnership Stations. Operations with the Adaptive Force Package from the Naval Expeditionary Combat Command have been conducted from Gators, with maritime security detachments, naval special operations teams, and riverine forces. Operation Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2008 and Operation Brimstone, part of a 2008 Joint Task Force Exercise (JTFX), proved that NECC forces and amphibious ships can project combat power and conduct stability operations as organic Navy assets, freeing Marines for other missions.

In the new century the United States faces many threats, both conventional and unconventional. It is time for the Department of Defense to reconsider the amphibious requirements of a balanced and diverse fleet. There is only one type of vessel that can provide ground forces, air support, and maritime security capacity all at the same time. The Gators serve at the heart of the irregular warfare capability that the Navy must expand in order to address the asymmetric threats of the modern world. At the same time they provide traditional power projection, crisis response, and humanitarian capability. The flexibility of the amphibious force is vital and real. In the coming decade of hybrid conflict and rising powers, action must be taken early before full blown military crisis develops. When a global challenge presents itself, the President will ask one question: Where are the Gators?

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