

Building the 21st Century Coast Guard: A Conversation with Admiral Paul Zukunft, Commandant, United States Coast Guard

By Michael J. Keegan

The United States Coast Guard offers a unique and enduring value to the country. It serves on the front line for a nation whose economic prosperity and national security are inextricably linked to vast maritime interests. The 21st century Coast Guard operates in a complex and ever changing environment. Increasing demands across the maritime domain require near-term agility while strategically investing finite resources for tomorrow. As a unique force with both military and civil authorities, the Coast Guard and its missions touch nearly every facet of the nation's expansive maritime domain. The Coast Guard—its people and assets—are essential to national security and economic prosperity. For over 226 years, history has proven the U.S. Coast Guard responsive, capable, agile, and most of all faithful to its motto—Semper Paratus—Always Ready.

Admiral Paul Zukunft, the 25th Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to discuss the Coast Guard's strategic direction, its key priorities, and how it is modernizing to meet today's demands while preparing for tomorrow. The following is an edited excerpt of our discussion, complemented with additional research.

On the History and Mission of the U.S. Coast Guard

This year we'll celebrate our 226th year of service. Considered the father of the Coast Guard, Alexander Hamilton played an integral role in its formation and development. As the fledgling nation sought to combat smugglers wishing to avoid payment of import tariffs, Hamilton advised Congress to build a fleet of 10 cutters to help direct ships to specific ports of entry along the East Coast of the country. Hamilton's small fleet proved the basis for establishment of a revenue marine, later known as the Revenue Cutter Service. Congress adopted Hamilton's plan on August 4, 1790, which the Coast Guard celebrates as its birth date.

Fast forward 226 years, and we still have issues with customs, port security, and smuggling. The Coast Guard has grown and



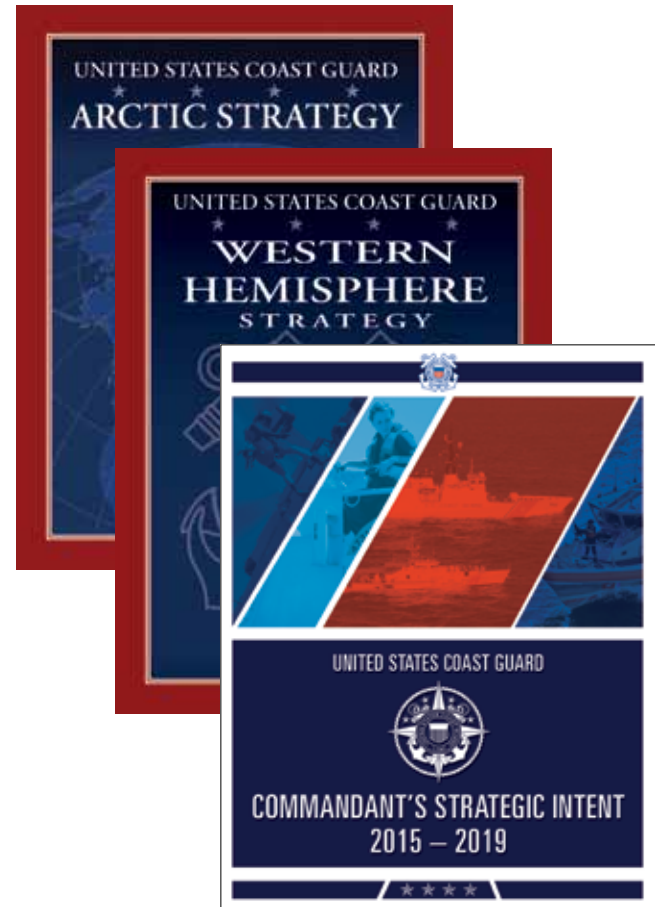
evolved to over 244 ships. We are a force of 88,000 strong, but that includes 32,000 all-volunteer Coast Guard auxiliary. First and foremost, we are a military service under Title 10. I sit with the chairman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on all deliberations when it comes to warfighting and military personnel. We are also a law enforcement authority. We are a member of the national intelligence community. We are a humanitarian service when it comes to safety of life at sea. We are a regulator. We regulate maritime commerce and safeguard maritime commerce.

On the Commandant's Direction

There are three key tenets to my direction, but first let me provide some context. The Commandant's Direction guides the Coast Guard during the tenure of each commandant. This document is founded on our core values of honor, respect, and devotion to duty, and it is guided by the principles of service to nation, duty to people, and commitment

to excellence. Each principle reinforces the others and they collectively inform strategic, operational, and resource decision making throughout the Coast Guard.

- Service to nation:** We serve our nation before we serve ourselves whenever we are called to serve. I seek to align Coast Guard strategies with DHS (Department of Homeland Security) priorities to advance national interests. We will continue to invest in the 21st century Coast Guard. We will enhance partnerships with stakeholders in the maritime community. It is critically important to foster intelligence capabilities and promote cybersecurity in the maritime domain. To illustrate this aspect of my direction is our counter-drug mission. We have more planes and more ships doing this mission than ever before. Is that because we have more ships and planes? No, we are just focusing resources on a core set of priorities to better serve the nation.
- Duty to people:** We will honor our duty to protect those we serve and those who serve with us. It is about leadership. We are dedicated to the citizens we serve and those who serve beside us. The Coast Guard's strength resides in its people and the different perspectives and talents they bring to the service. We are aligning recruiting, career progression, and workforce structure to meet future requirements. We are really focused on cultivating the well-being and professional development of our people, and we are definitely committed to driving sexual assault out of our ranks. We are making great progress as the number of reported instances is down. We are moving in the right direction, but more needs to be done. We are also ensuring a workforce that reflects the same diverse thought, experience, and talent found in the richness of American society.
- Commitment to excellence:** We will commit ourselves to excellence by supporting and executing our operations in a proficient and professional manner. Excellence is our standard. To do this, we must strive to achieve the highest standards of readiness and proficiency. We must remain true to our service's motto: Semper Paratus, be always ready. But gone are the days where we can be a Swiss Army knife—a jack of all trades, master of some. The work we are doing in intelligence, cyber, and marine inspection programs is very technical in nature. We cannot just have journeymen doing this type of work. We have to grow specialties in order to excel in these areas. We will advance our commitment to a proficient workforce. I want to ensure efficiency across all Coast Guard activities through effective planning and



Source: U.S. Coast Guard

sound risk management. We are looking to modernize our financial management system and enhance our unity of effort through operational planning, logistical support, and execution. We need to demonstrate that we are good stewards of public dollars. A key part of that is ensuring that we can open our books and provide a clean financial audit opinion, which we have done for three consecutive years now. We are the only military service that can make that statement.

On the Coast Guard's Strategic Intent

We developed the five-year strategic intent making sure it aligns with national and departmental level strategies with a focus that reflects a risk-informed approach to our strategic landscape. Let's face it: Tranquility is not exactly breaking out across the world. The purpose of the strategic intent is to understand the external environment, what it will take to answer all of these calls, and if you don't get all of the funding, then how do you manage risk across the competing challenges that we see in the 21st century.

The Coast Guard must confront significant challenges in the Western Hemisphere, such as the rise and convergence

of transnational organized crime (TOC) networks. TOC networks are fueled by immense profits from drug and human trafficking. We've been successful at interdiction and disrupting these activities. However, long-term success demands a government-wide effort to sever financial supply lines and TOC networks at the source. We are also working to enhance our southern maritime border security. We will continue to promote information sharing and building unity of effort in the maritime domain in support of the Department of Homeland Security Southern Border and Approaches Campaign Plan, continue to deter illegal migration activity via maritime means, and provide necessary situational awareness and warnings for the U.S. concerning maritime mass migration.

The prosperity of our nation is inextricably linked to a safe and efficient Maritime Transportation System (MTS). Increased domestic energy extraction and transport, deeper U.S. ports, and the expansion of the Panama and Suez Canals create MTS congestion and demand robust safety and security regimes. To address increasing maritime commerce, the Coast Guard will continue to enforce compliance with the laws and regulations that promote a safe, efficient, and resilient MTS; continue prevention and response initiatives that enhance marine safety competency; keep pace with industry changes and minimize the adverse effects of maritime incidents; and improve regulatory frameworks to keep pace or stay ahead of industrial advancements.

Cyber technology has fueled unprecedented growth and efficiency in our increasingly globalized economy, but it has also spawned increasing challenges and risks to both public and private sector cyber networks. The Coast Guard's strategic focus is on efforts to strengthen internal Coast Guard networks and promote strong cybersecurity practices for critical systems that operate in our nation's ports and on our waterways. To address emerging cyber risks, the Coast Guard will implement its recently promulgated cyber strategy and coordinate cyber regulatory and technical assistance activities across federal, state, and local maritime industry stakeholders.

We are also focusing on the polar regions given our vital national interests. To support this effort, we will accelerate the current acquisition of a heavy icebreaker and plan for additional icebreakers, continue to build unity of effort with the Department of State and other federal and international partners in support of the U.S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council, advance the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, and support the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) ratification.



The upward angle of Polar Star's bow is designed so that the hull rides up onto the ice surface during icebreaking operations. (Photo from United States Coast Guard)

On Investing in the 21st Century Coast Guard

Coast Guard mission demands continue to grow and evolve. The complexities and challenges facing the nation require well-trained Coast Guard men and women with capable platforms providing the persistent presence necessary to conduct operations. Given the age and condition of the Coast Guard's legacy assets, future mission success relies on continued recapitalization of Coast Guard boats, cutters, aircraft, systems, and infrastructure. Our FY16 appropriation awarded a ninth national security cutter. We went from eight to nine. We are building very capable patrol boats. We call these "fast response cutters" commanded by a lieutenant.

Our offshore patrol cutters will really define the Coast Guard going forward. We are looking to build 25. We have three contractors vying for that final bid. We will select one probably in the August timeframe of this year, which will launch the largest acquisition in Coast Guard history.

Finally, the really big piece in all of this is the recapitalization of our icebreaker fleet. Our 2017 budget does have \$150 million set aside to at least get into the design work. We have already reached out to industry that is keenly interested in building heavy icebreakers here in the United States, which we have not done in over 40 years.

The FY 2017 budget request accelerates acquisition of a new polar icebreaker to meet growing demands in the polar regions. It provides funds for the acquisition of four fast response cutters, continues to invest in an affordable offshore patrol cutter, and funds vessel sustainment projects

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for two 140-foot WTGB icebreaking tugs and a 225-foot seagoing buoy tender. The budget also continues sustainment and conversion work on in-service fixed and rotary wing aircraft, missionization of the C-27J aircraft received from the Air Force, and investment in Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems.

On Leadership

As a leader, it is important to know your purpose. To lead, you must know who you are. What gives you purpose, energy, and passion? My purpose is service to nation. Purpose is the force that aligns your personal honor and integrity to the vision and core values of your organization. Take time every day to refocus your energy. Consider how you are contributing to something greater than yourself.



Become the kind of authentic leader who inspires others to find their calling—to become great leaders in their own right.

As a leader, my greatest concern is being surrounded by a team of “yes” people who lack the courage to act. Most mistakes are recoverable and leaders have a responsibility to use teachable moments to develop their people. However, departures from core values cannot be tolerated; this is an important distinction leaders at all levels must understand. The interwoven and enduring strands of honor, respect, and devotion to duty remain paramount for service in the Coast Guard; that is my “bright line” that shall not be crossed. Your decisions and behavior create the culture in which those you lead will live and work.

Trust and empower your people. You may find yourself in a situation where you don’t have all the answers or the right information. As a leader, you can’t place all decisions squarely on your shoulders; this weight will drag you to your knees. Good ideas, the right solution, and the way forward come from all levels of the organization. Actively seek out these ideas and empower people to come forward.

Take decisive action. A bias for action is one of the foundational attributes I learned at the most junior level of command. In taking action, embrace the three knows: Know your mission, know your people, and know when to say “no.” As a leader your decision making will be tested. Be bold and take appropriate risks. There is room for honest mistakes. You may have a great plan, but it’s okay if your plan doesn’t survive the day. Learn, adapt, and execute your mission.

My leadership approach goes back to my earliest days as a commissioned officer. I want to be a humble and approachable leader. I realize that the smartest person in the Coast Guard does not sit behind my desk. The leader I have always looked up to is former Coast Guard Commandant, Admiral Jim Loy. He was a commandant who really led from the deck plates. People always came first. His example inspires my



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efforts to modernize our fleet. It is not being done because I want shiny new ships. We are modernizing the fleet because we put our most valuable asset, our people, on board to carry out our mission, often in very unforgiving conditions. They deserve the best.

On Building a Leadership Pipeline

Our retention rates are the highest among any of the armed services. Part of that is we place a premium on our mid-level to senior enlisted paygrades. I don't need a brigade of privates. I need more experienced petty officers in the Coast Guard. This comes at a point in time where we have the best educated enlisted workforce in Coast Guard history. My challenge is to retain them with the purpose of building that leadership pipeline with a smart and experienced cadre. No doubt there is, and will be, competition for the skills our people possess. I can't pay them what an IT firm may be able to pay. I look to attract and retain them in other ways. It's important that right now we have people that are directly connected to the mission regardless of what they do in the organization. I want them to say and acknowledge: "I am

going to save a life. I am going to improve our economy. I am going to get drugs off the street." We need to make sure that there is always that connective tissue between what we do and who does it. If we aren't vigilant, we will find ourselves with a hole in the organization. You can't surge experience and you certainly can't surge leadership. ■

To learn more about the U.S. Coast Guard, go to <http://www.uscg.mil>.



To hear *The Business of Government Hour* interview with Admiral Paul Zukunft, go to the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org.



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To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour* interview with Admiral Paul Zukunft, visit the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org.