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Navy Aircraft Carriers: Proposed Retirement of USS John F. Kennedy — Issues and Options for Congress

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Summary

In December 2004, the Department of Defense (DOD) issued a budget-planning document called *Program Budget Decision (PBD) 753* that sets forth a number of adjustments to the FY2006 budget and FY2006-FY2011 Future Years Defense Plan (FYDP) that DOD is to submit to Congress in early February 2005. One of the adjustments is to retire the conventionally powered aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy (CV-67) in FY2006 and thereby reduce the size of the carrier force from 12 ships to 11. The Kennedy is homeported in Mayport, FL. The proposal would not retire any other ships or any of the Navy's carrier air wings. The issue for Congress is whether to approve, reject, or modify the proposal to retire the Kennedy and reduce the carrier force to 11 ships, should such a proposal appear in the FY2006 defense budget.

PBD 753 estimates that retiring the Kennedy in FY2006 would reduce DOD funding requirements for FY2006-FY2011 by a net total of about $1.2 billion, or about 4% of the $30 billion in net savings proposed in *PBD 753*. Prior to *PBD 753*, the Navy's stated plan was to keep the Kennedy in operation until 2018. The Kennedy was scheduled to begin a $350-million, 15-month overhaul later this year. The Navy and DOD reportedly are also considering eventually reducing the carrier force further, to 10 or 9 ships.

Many observers consider the Navy's carriers to be its primary capital ships — its most important ships, both operationally and symbolically. Since the end of the Cold War, Navy carriers and their air wings have participated in numerous operations. Carriers and their air wings are considered particularly useful in situations where U.S. access to overseas air bases is absent or restricted.

One potential issue for the 109th Congress is whether the carrier force should include 12 ships or some other number. Over the years, some observers have argued in favor of 12 or more carriers, while others have argued for 11 or fewer. If a carrier is to be retired in the near term so as to reduce the carrier force to 11 ships, a second potential issue for Congress is whether that carrier should be the Kennedy or another ship. Potential alternatives to the Kennedy include the conventionally powered Kitty Hawk and the nuclear-powered ships Enterprise and Vinson. A third potential issue for Congress concerns the relative military advantages of different homeporting arrangements for the carrier force.

Options for Congress for preserving at least 12 carriers include permanent legislation, annual legislation, binding report language, and bill or report language expressing the sense of the Congress. Options for retiring a carrier and reducing the force to 11 ships include retiring the Kennedy in FY2006 as proposed in PBD 753, retiring the Kennedy when Mayport, FL is qualified as a nuclear-carrier home port, retiring the Kitty Hawk and transferring the Kennedy to the Kitty Hawk's home port in Japan, retiring the Kitty Hawk and transferring a nuclear-powered carrier to Japan, retiring the Enterprise, and retiring the Vinson. Members of Congress from Florida have announced that they intend to propose legislation that would require the Navy to maintain at least 12 aircraft carriers. This report will be updated as events warrant.

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Introduction and Issue For Congress

On December 23, 2004, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz approved an internal Department of Defense (DOD) budget-planning document, called *Program Budget Decision (PBD) 753* that sets forth a number of significant adjustments to the FY2006 budget and FY2006-FY2011 Future Years Defense Plan (FYDP) that DOD is to submit to the 109th Congress in early February 2005. Although the services can appeal these adjustments, observers expect that most if not all of the adjustments will be included in DOD's proposed FY2006 budget and FY2006-FY2011 FYDP.

One of the adjustments in *PBD 753* is to retire the conventionally powered aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy (CV-67) in FY2006 and thereby reduce the size of the carrier force from 12 ships to 11. The Kennedy is homeported in Mayport, FL, near the Georgia border. The proposal would not retire any other ships, or any of the Navy's carrier air wings.

The issue for Congress is whether to approve, reject, or modify a proposal to retire the Kennedy in FY2006 and reduce the carrier force to 11 ships, should such a proposal appear in DOD's proposed FY2006 defense budget. Congress' decision on this issue could affect U.S. military capabilities, DOD funding requirements, the Mayport home port, and the shipbuilding overhaul and repair industrial base.

Background

PBD 753

Although *PBD 753* is an internal DOD planning document, press reports on the document began to appear by the end of December, and the text of the document was posted on a publicly accessible defense trade press website in early January 2005.[1]

The net effect of the various adjustments proposed in *PBD 753* would be to reduce projected DOD funding requirements for FY2006-FY2011 by $30 billion, or an average of $5 billion per year.

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[1] The website is: [http://www.defensenews.com/content/static/dn.pbd753.pdf].

Proposal To Retire Kennedy And Reduce To 11 Carriers

PBD 753 estimates that retiring the Kennedy in FY2006 would reduce DOD funding requirements for FY2006-FY2011 by a net total of about $1.2 billion, or about 4% of the $30 billion in net savings proposed in *PBD 753*. Prior to *PBD 753*, the Navy's stated plan was to keep the Kennedy in operation until 2018.

The Kennedy has recently returned from a deployment and was scheduled for an overhaul. If the Kennedy were retired in FY2006, this overhaul would not take place. The overhaul was to begin at its home port of Mayport, FL, on May 2, 2005, shift to the government-operated Norfolk Naval Shipyard at Norfolk, VA, on June 17, 2005, and be finished there on August 18, 2006. The total cost of the overhaul was estimated at about $350 million. Congress provided funds for the total cost of the overhaul in the FY2005 defense budget. Of the approximate $350-million total cost, the work at Mayport was estimated at roughly $20.5 million, another $254 million was budgeted for the Norfolk Naval Shipyard, and another $75 million or so was budgeted for work to be done, or materials to be provided by, various public- and private-sector organizations in the Norfolk area and other locations. As of early January 2005, a total of about $24 million had been spent for advance planning for the overhaul.[2] Competitive bids for work involved in the overhaul were originally scheduled to be submitted by January 19, but the Navy has postponed that deadline to March in light of *PBD 753*.[3]

Although *PBD 753* proposes cancelling or reducing many DOD weapon procurement programs, the retirement of the Kennedy and the resulting reduction of the Navy's carrier force to 11 ships is the only adjustment in *PBD 753* that clearly calls for a reduction in the operational force structure of a military service.

Table 1 on the next page shows the year-by-year funding changes of retiring the Kennedy in FY2006, as estimated in *PBD 753*. As shown in the table, retiring the Kennedy would result in an estimated steady-state savings of roughly $300 million per year starting in FY2008, including roughly $200 million per year for crew pay and allowances, and roughly $100 million per year in ship operation and maintenance (O&M) costs. The $179 million additional cost in FY2006 is a financial payment to the Norfolk Naval Shipyard to compensate that yard for the loss of the Kennedy overhaul. The payment is intended to avoid furloughs at the yard and prevent a steep increase in the man-day rates (i.e., daily laborer costs) that the yard charges for overhaul and repair work to be done there on other Navy ships.

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[2] Source for information on the Kennedy overhaul: Telephone conversations with Navy Office of Legislative Affairs and OPNAV N431 (a branch of the Navy's Fleet Readiness and Logistics (N4) office), Jan. 7, 2005.

[3] Allison Connolly, "Navy Delays Overhaul Bids On JFK," *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, Jan. 7, 2005.

Table 1. Estimated Funding Changes From Carrier Retirement
(FY2006-FY2011, in millions of then-year dollars)

	FY06	FY07	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY11	FY06-FY11 Total
Personnel pay & allowances		- 90.0	- 184.0	- 189.0	- 197.0	- 203.0	- 863.0
Ship operations	- 33.8	- 26.8	- 49.9	- 46.4	- 47.3	- 40.2	- 244.4
Ship maintenance	- 10.9	- 40.5	- 54.4	- 41.0	- 60.0	- 63.3	- 270.1
Workload loss	179.0						179.0
TOTAL	**134.3**	**- 157.3**	**- 288.3**	**- 276.4**	**- 304.3**	**- 306.5**	**- 1,198.5**

Source: U.S. Department of Defense. *Program Budget Decision, PBD 753*. Washington, 2004. (Dec. 23, 2004) pp. 8, 11, 12.

Reported Consideration Of Reduction To 10 or 9 Carriers

In addition to the proposal to retire the Kennedy and reduce the carrier force to 11 ships, the Navy and DOD reportedly are considering reducing the carrier force further, to 10 or 9 ships, perhaps following the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) that DOD is scheduled to submit to Congress in late 2005 or early 2006.[4]

Size Of Carrier Force In Recent Years

The Navy's force of large-deck aircraft carriers has generally fluctuated between 12 and 15 carriers since FY1951. It reached a late-Cold War peak of 15 ships in FY1987-1991, and began declining after that, along with the size of the Navy as a whole. The carrier force declined to 12 ships in FY1994, and has remained there since, even while the total number of ships in the Navy has continued to decline.[5]

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[4] Jason Sherman, "More Cuts To Major Weapons Programs Could Be On The Way," *Inside the Pentagon*, Jan. 6, 2005; Bryan Bender, "Arms Reductions, Troop Increase Eyed," *Boston Globe*, Dec. 17, 2004: 1. See also Loren B. Thompson, "QDR Targets Weapons Programs; FCS, JSF Likely Hit," *Defense Today*, Dec. 10, 2004: 1, 3-4. For additional discussion on the possibility of reducing the carrier force to nine ships and other potential Navy force-structure reductions, see CRS Report RL32665, *Potential Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

[5] The carrier force reached 16 carriers in FY1962 and FY1965. The carrier force numbered 13 ships from FY1976 through FY1981, 14 ships from FY1982 through FY1986, 15 ships from FY1987 through FY1991, 14 ships in FY1992, 13 ships in FY1993, and 12 ships since FY1994. These figures are for the end of each fiscal year. The total size of the Navy reached a late-Cold War peak of 568 battle force ships in FY1987 and began declining thereafter. In 1994, when the current total of 12 carriers was reached, the total number of

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From FY1995 through FY2000, the Kennedy was operated as an "operational/reserve training carrier" with a partially reserve crew. During this period, the Navy's force of 12 carriers was often characterized as an "11+1" force. The Kennedy reverted to being a fully active carrier in FY2001.

Current Carrier Force

Table 2 on the next page summarizes the Navy's carrier force. As shown in the table, the force currently includes two conventionally powered carriers — the Kitty Hawk (CV-63) and the Kennedy (CV-67) — and 10 nuclear-powered carriers — the one-of-a-kind Enterprise (CVN-65) and nine Nimitz-class ships (CVN-68 through -76). The paragraphs below provide information about individual carriers that is of potential relevance to the proposal in *PBD 753* to retire the Kennedy in FY2006.

The **Kitty Hawk**, Navy's oldest carrier, entered service in April 1961. In 1991, the ship completed an extensive service life extension program (SLEP) overhaul that was intended to extend its service life from about 30 years to about 45 years. The ship is scheduled to be replaced in 2008, at age 47, by the George H. W. Bush (CVN-77), which was procured in FY2001.

The **Enterprise**, the Navy's next-oldest carrier, entered service in November 1961, seven months after the Kitty Hawk. In 1994, the ship completed a nuclear refueling complex overhaul (RCOH) that was intended to extend its service life by about 20 years, to 2014. The ship is scheduled to be replaced in 2014, at age 53, by CVN-21 (also called CVN-78), a new carrier that the Navy plans to procure in FY2007 or FY2008.[6] Unlike the Navy's newer Nimitz-class carriers, each of which is powered by two nuclear reactors, the Enterprise is powered by eight nuclear reactors, making the Enterprise's reactor plant more complex and expensive to maintain, at least in the view of some observers, than the reactor plants of the Nimitz-class ships.

The **Kennedy**, the Navy's third-oldest carrier, entered service in 1968. Unlike the Kitty Hawk, which was given an extensive SLEP overhaul, the Kennedy was given a less extensive (but still fairly substantial) complex overhaul (COH) that was completed in 1995.[7] Prior to *PBD 753*, the Kennedy was scheduled to replaced in FY2018, at age 50, by CVN-22 (also called CVN-79), an aircraft carrier that the

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[5] (...continued)
battle force ships had declined to 391 ships. The Navy has since declined to 289 battle force ships as of January 7, 2005.

[6] For more on CVN-21, see CRS Report RS20643, *Navy CVN-21 Aircraft Carrier Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

[7] The SLEP overhaul for the Kitty Hawk lasted about 3½ years, from January 28, 1988, to August 31, 1991. The complex overhaul for the Kennedy lasted two years, from September 13, 1993, to September 15, 1995, and was budgeted at about $491 million. (Source: Polmar, Norman. *The Naval Institute Guide to the Ships and Aircraft of the U.S. Fleet*. Annapolis (MD), Naval Institute Press, 1997 (17th edition). p. 118.

Navy plans to procure in FY2011 or FY2012.[8] Since the Kennedy never received a SLEP overhaul at about age 30, some observers have questioned whether the ship could be kept in service to age 50.

Table 2. Current and Projected Navy Aircraft Carriers

(projected carriers in italics)

Hull Number	Name	Procured	In Service	Notes
CV-63	Kitty Hawk	FY56	4/1961	Home port Yokosuka, Japan. SLEP completed 1991. To be replaced by CVN-77 in 2008.
CVN-65	Enterprise	FY58	11/1961	Home port Norfolk, VA. RCOH completed 1994. To be replaced by CVN-21 in 2014.
CV-67	John F. Kennedy	FY63	1968	Home port Mayport, FL. COH completed 1995. Was to be replaced by CVN-22 in 2018 .
CVN-68	Nimitz	FY67	1975	RCOH completed 2001.
CVN-69	Dwight D. Eisenhower	FY70	1977	RCOH to be completed 2004.
CVN-70	Carl Vinson	FY74	1982	Home port Bremerton, WA. RCOH scheduled 2005-2008.
CVN-71	Theodore Roosevelt	FY80	1986	
CVN-72	Abraham Lincoln	FY83	1989	
CVN-73	George Washington	FY83	1992	
CVN-74	John C. Stennis	FY88	1995	
CVN-75	Harry S. Truman	FY88	1998	
CVN-76	Ronald Reagan	FY95	2003	
CVN-77	George H. W. Bush	FY01	2008	*Is to replace CV-63 in 2008.*
CVN-21	*TBD*	*FY07 or FY08*	*2014*	*Is to replace CVN-65 in 2014.*
CVN-22	*TBD*	*FY11 or FY12*	*2018*	*Was to replace CV-67 in 2018.*

Notes: CV = conventionally powered carrier; CVN = nuclear-powered carrier; SLEP = service life extension program overhaul; RCOH = refueling complex overhaul; COH = complex overhaul. CVN-21 and CVN-22 also known as CVN-78 and CVN-79, respectively. Home port locations as of December 2004.

The **Nimitz** (CVN-68), the first of the Navy's Nimitz-class carriers, entered service in 1975, completed an RCOH in 2001. The **Dwight D. Eisenhower** (CVN-

[8] For more on CVN-22, see CRS Report RS20643, *op cit.*

69), which entered service in 1977, was scheduled to be complete an RCOH in November 2004. These RCOHs, like the Enterprise RCOH, are intended to permit each ship to remain in service for an additional 20 years.

The **Carl Vinson** (CVN-70), the third Nimitz-class carrier, entered service in 1982. The ship is scheduled for an RCOH that is to begin in November 2005 and finish in November 2008. The total estimated cost of this RCOH is $3.22 billion, of which $869.5 million in advance procurement funding has been provided from FY2001 through FY2005. The Navy plans to request remaining $2.35 billion in the FY2006 budget. Nimitz-class RCOHs are performed by Northrop Grumman's Newport News (NGNN) shipyard, located at Newport News, VA.

Roles and Missions of Carriers

Many observers consider the Navy's carriers to be its primary capital ships — its most important ships, both operationally and symbolically.[9] Shorthand descriptions of the Navy have often been based on the number of carriers in the fleet. The 600-ship Navy planned by Reagan administration in the 1980s, for example, was often referred to as a 15-carrier Navy. Observers have noted over the years that when a crisis occurs overseas, one of the first questions asked by U.S. leaders has often been, "Where are the carriers?"

Carrier-based aircraft are capable of performing various missions. Since the end of the Cold War, Navy carriers and their air wings have spent much of their time enforcing no-fly zones over Iraq and conducting land-attack operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Carriers and their air wings are considered particularly useful in situations where U.S. access to overseas air bases is absent or restricted — a circumstance that some observers believe has become more likely since the end of the Cold War. Carriers can also be used for other purposes. In 1994, a carrier was used to transport a helicopter-borne Army unit to the vicinity of Haiti, and in 2001-2002, a carrier was used to embark helicopter-borne special operations forces that were used in Afghanistan. Carries have also been used in disaster-relief operations, such as the recent one for assisting countries affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami. Given their ability to embark different combinations of aircraft, carriers are considered to be highly flexible naval platforms.

Carrier Home Ports

As of December 3, 2004, the Navy's 6 Pacific Fleet carriers were homeported at San Diego, CA (2 ships), Bremerton, WA (2 ships), Everett, WA (1 ship), and Yokosuka, Japan (1 ship), while the Navy's 6 Atlantic Fleet carriers were homeported at Norfolk, VA (5 ships) and Mayport, FL (1 ship — the Kennedy).

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[9] The Navy's ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) are also often considered the Navy's primary capital ships. SSBNs are dedicated to the specialized mission of strategic nuclear deterrence.

The Kennedy, whose crew numbers about 2,900, contributes about $250 million each year to the local Mayport economy.[10]

In addition to the Kennedy, Mayport as of December 3, 2004 was the home port for 20 other Navy ships — four cruisers, five destroyers, and 11 frigates. Some of these ships belong to the Kennedy battle group. Mayport currently is not qualified to serve as the home port for a nuclear-powered carrier, but some studies on what it would take to qualify Mayport as a nuclear-carrier home port have been undertaken in recent years. Mayport is close to the naval air station at Jacksonville, FL, where some of the Navy's aircraft are based, and to the naval aviation depot at Jacksonville, which repairs some of the Navy's planes.

The Navy has forward-homeported a carrier at Yokosuka (pronounced yo-KOS-ka) since the early 1970s. The forward homeporting of a carrier in Japan considerably reduces the total number of carriers needed in the force to maintain day-to-day deployments of carriers in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean. The Kitty Hawk is the third Navy carrier to be homeported there. All three have been conventionally powered. (The other two have since been retired.) In light of strong anti-nuclear sentiments in Japan that date back to the U.S. use of two atom bombs against Japan in World War II, observers believe that a Navy proposal to homeport one of its nuclear-powered carriers there would meet with potentially substantial public opposition.

The Navy is reportedly considering transferring one of its carriers to Hawaii or Guam. Homeporting a carrier in Hawaii or Guam would further reduce the total number of carriers needed in the force to maintain day-to-day deployments of carriers in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean.

BRAC 2005

The proposal to retire the Kennedy, which would leave Mayport at least temporarily without a carrier, comes in the midst of the 2005 round of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process. BRAC rounds can generate concern among Members and their constituents regarding the potential fate of military bases in their areas. In the midst of a BRAC round, actions that might reduce the importance of a base — such as the removal of a major military unit — can increase concerns regarding the fate of that base.[11]

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[10] Source for crew size and $250-million figure: January 19, 2005, email from Navy Office of Legislative Affairs. The figure of 2,900 is for the crew that operates the ship. An additional 2,500 or so personnel operates the ship's embarked air wing, but most or all of those personnel are based in locations elsewhere in the United States.

[11] For more on BRAC 2005, see CRS Report RL32216, *Military Base Closures: Implementing the 2005 Round*, by David E. Lockwood.

Issues for Congress

DOD's proposal to retire the Kennedy in FY2006 and thereby reduce the carrier force to 11 ships raises potential issues for Congress concerning the appropriate size of the carrier force, the Navy's selection of the Kennedy as the carrier to retire, and carrier homeporting arrangements. Each of these is discussed below.

Size Of Carrier Force

The appropriate size of the carrier force is a frequent, even classic, topic of debate in military force-structure planning. Over the years, as strategic, technological, and budgetary circumstances have evolved, some observers have argued in favor of a force of 12 or more carriers, while others have argued for a force of 11 or fewer carriers.

Supporters of maintaining a force of 12 or more carriers, at least for the time being, could argue the following:

- Decisions on important force-structure issues like the size of the carrier force should not be made through a budget-planning document such as *PBD 753*, but rather through a more deliberate policy process such as the 2005 QDR. A decision to reduce the carrier force to 11 ships prior to the completion of the QDR is premature.

- If the carrier force is reduced to 11 ships and the retired carrier is disposed of, then returning to a 12-carrier force at some point in the future, should that become necessary, would not be easy. Given the unit procurement cost of new carriers (roughly $9 billion for the next one) and the time needed to construct a new carrier (about seven years), building the carrier force back up to 12 ships would require significant funding and take several years to accomplish.

- During the past half century, carrier force has never dropped below 12 ships, illustrating the enduring need for a force of at least that many ships.

- After experimenting with an "11+1" carrier force in FY1995-FY2000 (11 fully active carriers plus one operational/reserve training carrier), DOD returned to a force of 12 fully active carriers, suggesting that DOD was dissatisfied with a force of less than 12 fully active carriers.

- Since the end of the Cold War, carriers have been kept very busy and have proven their value in numerous operations.

- In an era of uncertain U.S. access to overseas air bases, the value of carriers as sovereign U.S. bases that can operate in international waters, free from political constraints, is particularly significant.[12]
- The increasing number of targets that can be attacked each day by a carrier air wing[13] is making carriers even more cost effective as U.S. military platforms, which argues in favor of retaining them in the U.S. force structure, not retiring them.

- The Navy, like the other services, is moving to implement network-centric warfare, which refers to the use of computers and networking technology to link individual military units into a series of local- and wide-area networks.[14] Carrier-based aircraft are to constitute many of the "nodes" in the network, which argues in favor of retaining carriers in the U.S. force structure, not retiring them.

- Retiring the Kennedy would produce only 4% of the $30 billion in net cost reductions in *PBD 753*. This relatively small contribution to the total net savings in *PBD 753* is not worth the operational risks of reducing the carrier force to 11 ships. In addition, the Quadrennial Defense Review may result in additional reductions to weapon procurement programs, permitting the savings that would result from retiring the Kennedy to be achieved in other ways.

Supporters of reducing the carrier force to 11 or fewer carriers starting in FY2006 could argue the following:

- Historical figures for carrier force size are not necessarily a reliable yardstick for assessing the adequacy of a future planned carrier force size, because carrier missions, the technologies that are available to carriers and their air wings for performing missions, and policies for basing and deploying carriers all change over time. Due to changes in these variables, historical figures for carrier force size are at best a partial guide, and at worst a potentially misleading guide, to whether a future carrier force size would be adequate for performing its required missions.

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[12] For a discussion of base access and its potential effect on military force planning, see CRS Report RL31946, *Iraq War: Defense Program Implications for Congress*, coordinated by Ronald O'Rourke.

[13] This increase is due in large part to the advent of precision-guided munitions, which has changed the traditional situation of needing multiple aircraft to attack a single target (i.e., multiple sorties per target) into one where a single aircraft can attack several individual targets per flight (i.e., multiple targets per sortie). Carrier air wings, which in previous years were able to attack scores of aim points, or perhaps a few hundred aim points, per day, will be able to attack more than 1,000 aim points per day.

[14] For more on NCW, see CRS Report RL32411, *Network Centric Warfare: Background and Oversight Issues for Congress*, by Clay Wilson, and CRS Report RS20557, *Navy Network-Centric Warfare Concept: Key Programs and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

- The increasing number of targets that can be attacked each day by a carrier air wing will make it possible to conduct future contingency operations with fewer carriers than were required in the past, reducing the number of carriers needed for warfighting purposes.
- The Navy's recently implemented Fleet Response Plan (FRP) has increased the Navy's ability to surge carriers to respond to overseas contingencies, which likewise reduces the number of carriers needed for warfighting purposes.

- The Navy is currently considering a proposal to transfer an aircraft carrier to Hawaii or Guam. Such a step would make it possible to maintain day-to-day deployments of carriers in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean/Persian Gulf regions with a smaller total number of carriers, reducing the number of carriers needed for purposes of maintaining day-to-day forward deployments.

- The Navy also has the option of adopting a variant of multiple crewing for its aircraft carriers, which would also reduce the number of carriers needed for purposes of maintaining day-to-day forward deployments.[15]

- DOD and the Navy have studied the issue of carrier force size for many years and are familiar with the policy consequences of moving to a force of 11 ships. In this sense, it is not inappropriate to reduce the carrier force level to be announced through a document like *PBD 753*, and there is no need to wait for the completion of a major policy review such as the QDR.

- If it appears likely, due to one or more of the above factors, that the carrier force is to be reduced to 10 or 9 ships, perhaps as a result of the QDR, then starting that reduction sooner, without waiting for the QDR to be finished, would permit the Navy to implement the reduction more gradually, with less disruption to Navy operations and personnel and to the carrier industrial base than if the reduction were implemented in a single step.

- Keeping the carrier force at 12 ships rather than reducing it to 11 as proposed in *PBD 753* would add $1.2 billion in funding requirements back into the FY2006-FY2011, which could require making offsetting reductions to other DOD programs, such as Navy, Air Force, or Army procurement programs, or other elements of DOD force structure. Those offsetting reductions could pose greater operational risks than reducing the carrier force to 11 ships.

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[15] For more on the Fleet Response Plan, the possibility of transferring a carrier to Hawaii or Guam, and the option of using a variant of multiple crewing for carriers, see CRS Report RS21338, *Navy Ship Deployments: New Approaches — Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

Carrier To Be Retired

If a carrier is to be retired in the near term so as to reduce the carrier force to 11 ships, a second potential issue for Congress is whether that carrier should be the Kennedy or another ship. Potential alternatives to the Kennedy include the Kitty Hawk, the Enterprise, and the Vinson.

Supporters of retiring the Kennedy rather than the Kitty Hawk, Enterprise, or Vinson could argue the following:

- The Kennedy did not receive a full service life extension program (SLEP) overhaul at about age 30, so keeping it in service in coming years could become increasingly difficult and expensive. The Kitty Hawk, in contrast, received a full SLEP overhaul at about age 30, giving it a firmer engineering foundation for being operated to about age 45.

- Retiring the Kitty Hawk would leave the Navy without a carrier forward homeported in Japan, making it significantly more difficult for the Navy to maintain carrier forward deployments in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean/Persian Gulf region with its remaining 11-carrier force. Shifting the Kennedy to Japan to replace the Kitty Hawk there would mean, at least for some time, that all the Atlantic Fleet carriers would be based in a single location (Norfolk, VA), which might not be prudent in light of the potential ability of terrorists to make a catastrophic one-time attack on a U.S. home port somewhere. Shifting a nuclear-powered carrier to Japan to replace the Kitty Hawk there would take time and money, given the need to qualify Yokosuka as a nuclear-carrier home port, and might very difficult politically, given anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan.

- The conventionally powered Kennedy is less capable than the nuclear-powered Enterprise and Vinson.[16]

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[16] As nuclear-powered ships, the Enterprise and Vinson can make high-speed transits over long distances to respond to urgent crises without need for stopping or slowing down to refuel along the way. They do not need to be refueled upon arriving at the area of operations, ensuring that they can commence combat operations immediately upon arrival. And since they do not need large fuel tanks to store fossil fuel for their own propulsion plant, they can devote more of their internal volume to the storage of aircraft fuel and ammunition, which permits them to sustain combat operations for longer periods of time before they need to be resupplied. The capability advantages of nuclear power are what justify the higher procurement and life-cycle costs of nuclear-powered carriers. In addition, since the Enterprise (90,000 tons full load displacement) and Vinson (91,500 tons) are somewhat larger than the Kennedy (81,500 tons), the Enterprise and Vinson might be more able to remain stable in the water — and thus capable of conducting air operations — in certain rough seas.

- The Navy invested more than $2 billion for the Enterprise RCOH; retiring the Enterprise in the near term rather than in 2014 would not realize a full return on this investment.

- Retiring the Vinson and not performing the RCOH now scheduled for the ship would significantly reduce the work load at Northrop Grumman's Newport News shipyard (NGNN), the yard that would perform the work, which would increase the cost of other work being done at the yard (including construction of new carriers and construction of new attack submarines) due to reduced spreading of fixed costs and other factors at NGNN. Increases in costs for other work being done at NGNN would offset, perhaps significantly, the savings associated with avoiding the Vinson RCOH and the Vinson's annual personnel, operation, and maintenance costs.

Supporters of retiring the Kitty Hawk, Enterprise, or Vinson rather than the Kennedy could argue the following:

- The Kitty Hawk is generally no more capable than the Kennedy, and is about 6½ years older than the Kennedy. Since the Kitty Hawk is currently scheduled to be retired in 2008, about 4 years from now, retiring it in the near term would not represent much of a change from current life-cycle plans for the ship. The Kennedy, in contrast, is scheduled to remain in service until 2018, 14 years from now, so retiring it in FY2006 would involve a significant change from current life-cycle plans for the ship.

- The Kennedy could be shifted to Yokosuka to replace the Kitty Hawk there. The first carrier homeported at Yokosuka, the Midway (CV-41), never received a full SLEP overhaul, but careful maintenance on the ship during its stay at Yokosuka permitted it to remain in operation to age 46. In the meantime, Mayport, FL could be qualified as quickly as feasible as a nuclear-carrier home port. A nuclear-powered carrier could then be transferred there so as to once again divide Navy's Atlantic Fleet carriers between two ports rather than concentrating them at a single home port. Since the Kitty Hawk is currently scheduled to be retired in 2008, retiring the Kitty Hawk in the near term might only accelerate a plan that the Navy may already have for taking these actions.

- The Enterprise's propulsion plant can be difficult and expensive to maintain. The ship has an eight-reactor propulsion plant that differs considerably from the two-reactor propulsion plants on the Nimitz-class carriers. Although the Enterprise was given an RCOH with the intention of keeping it in service until 2014, retiring it in the near term would give the Navy an all-Nimitz-class nuclear-carrier fleet, streamlining nuclear-carrier logistics and reducing nuclear-carrier support costs.

- Retiring the Vinson in the near term would avoid a $2.35 billion cost in FY2006 to fund the remaining portion of the cost of the Vinson's RCOH. It would also eliminate the annual personnel, operation, and maintenance costs for the Vinson, which might be comparable to, or even greater than, those of the Kennedy. Equipment purchased with the $869.5 million in FY2005 and prior-year funding for the Vinson RCOH could be used, where possible, for the RCOH on the next Nimitz-class ship.[17]

If DOD plans to reduce the carrier force to 10 or 9 ships, perhaps following the QDR, then the leading candidates for the additional carriers to be retired would be the Kitty Hawk, the Enterprise, and the Vinson (or if not the Vinson, then perhaps the Theodore Roosevelt [CVN-71], which is next in line for a RCOH after the Vinson). If so, then one or more of the arguments made above for retiring the Kitty Hawk, the Enterprise, or the Vinson (or if not the Vinson, then the Roosevelt) might soon be made by DOD officials themselves.

Carrier Homeporting Arrangements

A third potential issue for Congress raised by the proposal to retire the Kennedy concerns carrier homeporting arrangements. In addition to the local economic benefits associated with homeporting a carrier (e.g., carrier crew members spending their pay and allowances in the local economy and thus generating local jobs), a potential additional factor to consider concerns the relative military advantages of different homeporting arrangements.

If the Kennedy is retired, then as mentioned earlier, all of the Atlantic Fleet's carriers would be, for some time at least, located in a single location (Norfolk, VA). Possible advantages of such an arrangement include economies of scale in carrier maintenance and the training of carrier crew members. Possible disadvantages include the effect on fleet operations of a terrorist attack on that single location.[18]

Potential questions for Congress to consider include the following:

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[17] For an article mentioning the Kitty Hawk, the Enterprise, and the Vinson as candidates for retirement in the context of a potential reduction in the carrier force to 10 or 9 ships, see Christopher P. Cavas, "Carrier Carl Vinson Considered For Early Retirement," *NavyTimes.com*, January 3, 2005.

[18] In the 1980s, the Navy initiated a program, known as strategic homeporting, to disperse its ships to a greater number of home ports around the United States, so as to reduce the vulnerability of the fleet to a potential Pearl Harbor-style attack by Soviet/Warsaw Pact forces at start of a NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict. For a discussion of strategic homeporting, see CRS Issue Brief IB85193, *The Navy's Strategic Homeporting Program: Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke; and CRS Issue Brief IB90077, *Strategic Homeporting Reconsidered*, by Ronald O'Rourke. (Both archived and available from the author.) See also Alva M. Bowen and Ronald O'Rourke, "Ports for the Fleet," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, May 1986: 136-151.

- How much time would be required to qualify Mayport, FL as a nuclear-carrier home port? How much could this schedule be accelerated, and what actions would be necessary to accelerate it? How much would it cost to qualify Mayport, FL as a nuclear-carrier home port, and how might this cost be affected by accelerating the schedule?

- What would it cost to transfer a nuclear carrier from Norfolk, VA, to Mayport?[19]

- On a steady-state basis, what would be the annual difference in cost between homeporting all Atlantic Fleet carriers at Norfolk vs. homeporting one nuclear carrier at Mayport and the rest at Norfolk?

- What are the relative operational advantages and disadvantages of homeporting all Atlantic Fleet carriers at Norfolk versus homeporting one nuclear carrier at Mayport and the rest at Norfolk? What are the relative vulnerabilities of Norfolk and Mayport to a potential one-time terrorist attack?[20]

Another potential additional factor to consider concerns the possibility of transferring a carrier to Hawaii or Guam, an action that could form a significant part of the justification for reducing the carrier force to 11 ships. Potential questions for Congress here include the following:

- What home port would the carrier be transferred from?

- How the transfer might affect the local economy of that home port?

- Would the homeporting of a carrier in Hawaii or Guam affect the issue of whether to homeport a carrier at Mayport, FL, and if so, how?

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[19] One recent press article stated: "The movement of a nuclear-powered flattop would be particularly expensive — in excess of $200 million, according to some authorities' estimates. A 1994 study commissioned by the city of Jacksonville, Fla., put the cost at $141.2 million." (Dale Eisman and Jack Dorsey, "Battle Begins Over Carrier Kennedy," Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, January 6, 2005.)

[20] A recent press article focusing on a Navy submarine base in Groton, Connecticut, quoted Admiral Vernon Clark, the Chief of Naval Operations as saying,

> We understand the rule of economies of scale, and you can concentrate everything in one place, but then you've got all your eggs in one basket. Is that the way you want to do this? My view is, that's not a successful strategy. You've got figure out how to balance it between being overly dispersed and overly centralized....
>
> We'll see where the analysis takes us," Clark said. "It's a key part of the BRAC discussions, and the analysis. And honestly, I don't know where we are or where we're going to end up on it.
>
> (Robert A. Hamilton, "CNO's Doctrine Could Bode Well For Sub Base," *New London (CT) Day*, January 5, 2005.)

Options For Congress

Options for Congress arising from the proposal in *PBD 753* to retire a conventional carrier in FY2006 and reduce the carrier force to 11 ships include the following:

Options for Preserving 12 Carriers

Permanent Legislation. This option could involve adding a provision to Title 10 of the U.S. Code (the primary title covering DOD) stating that the Navy shall include not less than 12 large-deck aircraft carriers or prohibiting the Navy from taking any steps to reduce the carrier force to less than 12 ships. The provision could be somewhat similar to 10 USC 5063, which Congress amended in 1952[21] to state in part: "The Marine Corps, within the Department of the Navy, shall be so organized as to include not less than three combat divisions and three air wings, and such other land combat, aviation, and other services as may be organic therein."[22]

Annual Legislation. This provision could involve adding a provision to the annual defense authorization bill or appropriation bill (or both) directing DOD to maintain a force of at least 12 carriers for the fiscal year in question, or prohibiting DOD from expending any funding that year to plan or carry out the retirement of an aircraft carrier. Such a provision could be used to defer the decision on whether to retire any aircraft carriers until, for example, the completion of the Quadrennial Defense Review.

Binding Annual Report Language. This option is similar to the previous option except that the direction to DOD would be provided through report language rather than bill language. Such a provision, like the previous one, could be used to defer the decision on whether to retire any aircraft carriers until, for example, the completion of the Quadrennial Defense Review.

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[21] Public Law 416, June 28, 1952, Chapter 479, Section 1, 66 Stat. 282.

[22] Supporters could argue that a provision in permanent law specifying a minimum number of carriers would formally recognize the operational value of carriers and follow the precedent set by 10 USC 5063 regarding the minimum number of Marine Corps divisions and air wings. It would also be consistent, they could argue, with the fact that the carrier force has not dropped below 12 ships since 1951, and has frequently included more than 12 carriers during that time. Legislating a minimum of 12 carriers, supporters could argue, would help stabilize Navy force-structure planning and budget planning by reassuring Navy leaders that this important element of Navy force structure would consist of a known minimum number of ships.

Opponents could argue that such a provision would reduce DOD's flexibility in determining military force structure levels so as to best balance DOD capabilities against projected threats, and set a modern precedent for writing additional provisions into Title 10 covering other elements of military force structure, which would further reduce DOD's flexibility in this area. Opponents could argue that 10 USC 5063 is not as strong a precedent as it might seem at first because it does not specify the size or composition of the divisions or air wings, or whether they are to be active or reserve units, and that the provision in any event is a sole exception, dating back 53 years, to a pattern of not legislating military force structure levels.

Non-Binding Language. This could take the form of bill or report language expressing sense of the Congress that the Navy should maintain a force of not less than 12 carriers. This option would have considerably less force than the previous options, since it would do nothing concrete to compel DOD to maintain a force of 12 carriers. Its effectiveness would depend on how much weight DOD would give it in DOD's own deliberations. DOD could decide to politely ignore the provision, making it totally ineffective.

Options For Retiring A Carrier And Reducing To 11

Retire Kennedy In FY2006, As Proposed in *PBD 753.* This option could be supplemented by taking steps, such as adding military construction or other funding to the DOD budget, to accelerate the process of qualifying Mayport as a nuclear-carrier home port. It could also involve passing bill or report language directing the Navy to transfer a nuclear-powered carrier to Mayport as soon as the port is qualified to receive it.

Retire Kennedy When Mayport Is Nuclear-Qualified. This option would defer the retirement of the Kennedy until Mayport is qualified as a nuclear-carrier home port. As with the previous option, this option could include taking steps to accelerate the process of qualifying Mayport as a nuclear-carrier home port, as well as bill or report language directing the Navy to transfer a nuclear-powered carrier to Mayport as soon as the port is qualified to receive it.

Retire Kitty Hawk and Transfer Kennedy To Yokosuka. This option, too, could involve taking steps to accelerate the process of qualifying Mayport as a nuclear-carrier home port, as well as bill or report language directing the Navy to transfer a nuclear-powered carrier to Mayport as soon as the port is qualified to receive it.

Retire Kitty Hawk and Transfer A Nuclear Carrier to Yokosuka. Compared to the option of transferring the Kennedy to Yokosuka, this option would not require taking steps to accelerate the process of qualifying Mayport as a nuclear-carrier home port (though such steps could be taken anyway). Another difference is that this option could require more extensive consultations with the Japanese government (and possibly local Japanese authorities and private groups as well), and in the end could be deemed politically unacceptable by the Japanese government due to anti-nuclear sentiments in Japan.

Retire Enterprise. This option could be timed so that the ship is retired following the completion of its next deployment.[23]

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[23] According to the ship's website [http://www02.clf.navy.mil/enterprise/], the Enterprise as of January 2005 "is three months into an Extended Selected Restricted Availability [i.e., a type of overhaul] in the shipyard, during which extensive repair and maintenance work is being performed on the ship by shipyard personnel, civilian contractors and the crew."

Retire Vinson. This option, too, could be timed so that the ship is retired following the completion of its next deployment.[24]

Legislative Activity

On January 5, 2005, three Member of Congress from Florida — Senator Bill Nelson, Senator Mel Martinez, and Representative Ander Crenshaw — held a press conference to announce that they intend to propose legislation that would require the Navy to maintain a force of at least 12 aircraft carriers.

[24] The Vinson in mid-January 2005 began a six-month deployment and is scheduled to arrive st Norfolk, VA in November 2005 to begin its RCOH. (Source: "Carl Vinson Heads To New Home," *NavyTimes.com*, Jan. 13, 2005.)