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Lobbying Group Seeks Lawmakers' Support For Aircraft Carriers

BY DAVE AHEARN

Problem: while the Northrop Grumman Corp. unit Newport News shipbuilding in Virginia enjoys a monopoly in building Navy aircraft carriers, politically the company needs support from lawmakers in the other 49 states to gain funding for carriers in the defense budget.

Solution: Form a new lobbying group, in which leaders of companies scattered across the nation that supply the carriers program can buttonhole senators and representatives of their respective states to seek federal money for carriers.

Thus the Aircraft Carrier Industrial Base Coalition (ACIBC) came to be.

At a breakfast in the Rayburn House Office Building, Michael Petters, president of Newport News shipbuilding, and Rep. Jo Ann Davis (R-Va.), fired up a room full of carrier-program subcontractors and suppliers.

Their marching orders were to seek out their senators and congressmen in a day-long lobbying marathon to explain why carriers are important and deserve funding.

The driving force behind the birth of ACIBC, as with so many movements in Washington, is a crisis.

Navy support for a next-generation aircraft carrier has been tepid to non-existent at times, according to some critics.

Carrier Program Delays

Talk of a successor class of aircraft carriers to follow the venerable Nimitz Class has continued for more than a decade. One proposal was bruited about. Then there was a plan to build CVN(X). Now it's called CVN 21.

But the plan was to begin building CVN 21 in the fiscal year ending Sept. 30, 2006. In other words, work might have begun on CVN 21 this fall.

Then the funding and construction start was put off to fiscal 2007. And last month President Bush unveiled a Department of Defense (DOD) budget proposal that puts off the start of construction until fiscal 2008.

But work is proceeding apace on the tenth and last of the Nimitz Class carriers, the George H.W. Bush (CVN 77), with the final section of the keel now being put in place. What will Newport News shipbuilding do after the Bush is built if the

company has to lay off highly skilled workers, only to have to pay higher wages to lure them back later when work finally begins on CVN 21?

Three years ago, Thomas Schievelbein, then president of Newport News shipbuilding, worried about just such a scenario. But his successor, Michael Petters, said at a Northrop Grumman briefing in the National Press Club that there is no sense in speculating about layoffs, which wouldn't occur any time soon, if at all. Petters noted that while Schievelbein was concerned he might have to lay off 1,000 workers, "we worked through 2002, 2003 and 2004 and never laid off anyone."

But Newport News isn't the only point of pain in this story of repeated delays. All the subcontractors and suppliers who have been poised for work coming from the CVN 21 construction job will be out of luck, too. That's about 1,600 companies in 46 states.

A Milwaukee Firm

One of the firms is Milwaukee Valve Co., headed by Rick Giannini, president and CEO. A co-chairman of ACIBC, he journeyed to Washington to help lead the lobbying campaign.

These firms can't exist without work, he said, and repeated delays in starting construction of CVN 21 may mean that some suppliers will go out of business. So the carrier program needs funds, soon.

"I'm going to need all the fire power and ammunition that I can get" for the lobbying campaign, Davis said.

She is hoping to reverse the Bush budget plan for fiscal 2006, where it calls for delaying the funding for CVN 21 from fiscal 2007 to 2008.

"The president proposes a budget, and the Congress disposes of the budget," she told the subcontractors. "I hope it disposes of the budget without too much pain" for Newport News and its subcontractors and suppliers.

But that may be tough if Congress doesn't decide to increase the total DOD budget for the next few years. And that isn't likely to happen, according to Cynthia Brown, president of the American Shipbuilding Association, whose members include Northrop Grumman Newport News.

That means that defense acquisition programs are caught in a zero-sum game, where more funding for any given procurement program likely will be found only by subtracting a similar sum from another program, she noted in an interview. One exception to that might be restoration of funding for the Air Force C-130J transport plane, a Lockheed Martin Corp. product. Acting Secretary of the Air Force Peter Teets said recently that the administration will amend the fiscal 2006 budget it proposed to Congress, to continue funding for the aircraft.

But no such amendment appears to be in the works for CVN 21, so the ACIBC has its work cut out for it.

Carriers Needed

The ACIBC message is two-fold: a huge number of companies and jobs are at stake, dependent on CVN 21. And more, the United States needs aircraft carriers for its national defense.

Davis was incensed that the Navy also is proposing to cut the number of aircraft carrier groups to 11, from the current dozen, by retiring the John F. Kennedy (CV 67), which is homeported in Mayport, Fla.

While one argument for retiring the Kennedy, which was commissioned in 1968, is that it is in poor shape, Davis demanded to know why the Navy permitted that to happen. "We let the John F. Kennedy significantly degrade because of a lack of [proper] maintenance," she said. For example, she added, the non-skid coating on the flight deck "was beginning to show significant wear." "We ask these ships to do a lot," and maintenance budgets should reflect the extensive wear and tear that carriers endure, especially during periods of combat, she said.

The Navy needs carriers, so it makes no sense to be reducing their number, Davis said. While she earlier authored legislation calling for the Navy to deploy 375 ships including 15 carrier groups, at this point she said she would be willing to settle for 12 carrier groups as "a significant step forward" from the Bush budget plan retiring the Kennedy and delaying CVN 21 by a year. She reviewed the contribution that aircraft carriers have made to U.S. force projection.

After the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, "our first course of action was to deploy carriers around the world," she recalled.

The Kennedy and the George Washington (CVN 73), immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks, moved just off the New York coast to guard against any possible further attacks by airliners hijacked by terrorists.

And in the invasion of Iraq, before the intense fighting ended, "we had deployed every available carrier," she said. "I think some people at the other end of the bridge [over the Potomac River, in the Pentagon] forgot that."

Davis expressed frustration at the repeated delays in funding the next-generation aircraft carrier, by whatever name it may have been known over the years. She said decisions in writing the Navy budget were driven by fiscal concerns, rather than by focusing on what the United States needs militarily. But, she noted, delaying the start of construction on CVN 21 by a year won't save money, it will cost money in the long run.

A Congressional Research Service report by analyst Ronald O'Rourke estimates that deferring CVN 21 for a year will add about \$1 billion to the total price tag for the carrier.