

## NAVY SECRETARY SUGGESTS CARRIER FORCE COULD GO BELOW 11 SHIPS

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The Navy's plans to retire the aircraft **carrier** John F. Kennedy (CV-67) will drop the **carrier** force to 11, but Navy Secretary Gordon England told a Senate panel last week the force may even drop below that number when future big-deck amphibious and prepositioning ships -- essentially small carriers -- enter the fleet.

England previously has explained how LHA Replacement ships and Maritime Prepositioning Force Future ships would act as carriers with short-takeoff-and-vertical-landing Joint Strike Fighters and tiltrotor V-22 Ospreys that take off and land like helicopters but fly like airplanes. His comments on possibly further shrinking the **carrier** force, however, raise the stakes for **carrier** advocates in Congress and industry, as they try to prevent a proposed delay to the future class of carriers, CVN-21.

An analysis of war plans and what is anticipated in this year's Quadrennial Defense Review shows that 11 carriers will meet combatant commanders' requirements, England told the Senate Appropriations defense subcommittee March 16. The maximum number of carriers needed is 11, and it may not stay there either, he added.

"It's quite possible, frankly, the number of carriers will go down because we will go to other type ships that utilize our STOVL capability, smaller decks," England said. "LHA(R), for example -- it will carry a lot of STOVL airplanes, which also give us striking power. So I think in the future, you're going to see a different mix of capability, and you're probably talking the topside of our **carrier** force at 11."

CVN-21 is the next-generation **carrier** class that will succeed today's Nimitz-class carriers. It is being designed by Northrop Grumman's shipyard in Newport News, VA, which will also build the class. England's written testimony for a March 3 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing calls CVN-21 the "centerpiece" of future **carrier** strike groups.

Congressional advocates for the Kennedy's Mayport, FL, home port and the carriers based at Norfolk, VA, are trying to prevent **carrier** reductions. Rep. Ander Crenshaw (R-FL) has introduced legislation that would prevent the **carrier** force from going below 12. Rep. Jo Ann Davis (R-VA) has introduced legislation that would require a 375-ship fleet, including at least 15 carriers. (She also supports Crenshaw's bill.)

The Aircraft **Carrier** Industrial Base Coalition formed in January and has drawn more than 70 members -- out of 2,000 aircraft **carrier** suppliers -- in 44 states. The group started lobbying Congress this month, asking for a **carrier** construction rate of one every four years. In addition, the group wants officials to use advanced appropriations in the shipbuilding budget. Industry sees advanced appropriations as a way for the Navy to provide level, predictable funding. Maintaining a 12-**carrier** fleet and expanding the Congressional Shipbuilding Caucus are other goals of the coalition.

Rick Giannini, co-chairman of the industrial base coalition, said in an interview last week that the group's main concern right now is keeping the CVN-21 on schedule and preventing the Navy's plan to delay its procurement from FY07 to FY-08.

Also at the Senate subcommittee hearing, Navy officials continued to make the case for the Kennedy's retirement. When asked by subcommittee Chairman Sen. Ted Stevens (R-AK) about keeping the Kennedy, England replied, "We would be terribly disturbed to keep the Kennedy where it is."

The Navy has not budgeted for the **carrier's** continued use, so keeping it in the fleet longer would require taking \$1.2 billion from other programs, he noted. The **carrier** has never been through an upgrade, making its 40-year age "an old 40-years-old," he said. The Kennedy was scheduled for an overhaul that would have lasted until late 2007, giving it about 10 more years of service life, he added.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Vern Clark said keeping the Kennedy in service for 50 years would be a "great stretch" because it was not designed to serve that long. Forty years is about what the Navy expected to get out of the ship when it was designed, he said. -- Jason Ma