

Remarks by
Congressman John Garamendi
for the
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I want to thank the Center for Humanitarian Assistance for having me today. Thanks also to the many distinguished speakers and panelists who have preceded me in laying out the fundamental considerations when it comes to America's identity as a global humanitarian response leader. In Congress I serve on the House Armed Services Committee, and as Ranking Member of the House Transportation Committee's Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee, where preventing or responding to disasters—both natural and man-made—is our highest priority.

On that subcommittee, we're dealing with a new frontier of sorts—a man-made frontier, where the risk of serious disaster is high. I'm talking about the rapid, wrenching, systemic environmental change taking place in the Arctic—a melting and thawing that now far exceeds the rates projected by climate models. We must ensure that the U.S. can decisively project and protect its sovereign interests in this region—a goal that will require new Arctic deepwater ports, emergency communications and safe navigation infrastructure, and a heavy icebreaker fleet. Today the U.S. has only one heavy polar icebreaker and one medium icebreaker. As the opening of the Northwest Passage along Greenland, Canada, and Alaska, and of the Northern Sea Route parallel to the Russian Coast, enables unprecedented maritime activity through this very dangerous terrain, we absolutely must have the icebreaking capability to respond to disasters. As the Arctic nations of the world negotiate the challenges of how to regulate and manage this region, I – along with my Subcommittee Chairman, Duncan Hunter – am working to ensure a sufficient U.S. fleet is built.

To get this fleet built, we must make policy choices between competing priorities. And to me, those choices are clear. As we're here today speaking about disasters, it is unconscionable to me that the federal government is willing to spend a trillion dollars on its nuclear weapons program—a policy that I believe makes us profoundly unsafe, and vulnerable to the most widespread man-made disaster imaginable. Will we continue spending hundreds of billions of dollars to keep the same nuclear posture we had during the Cold War, or will we use that money to strengthen our nation's critical national security missions, like ensuring the Coast Guard has search-and-rescue or oil spill response capabilities in the Arctic? It will take a minimum of three heavy icebreakers and three medium icebreakers to allow the Coast Guard to carry out its mission responsibilities in the Arctic and Antarctic, and Chairman Hunter and I intend to provide the authorization and appropriations necessary to get construction of these vessels underway now.

That construction will take place in American shipyards, which leads me to another critical piece of our nation's security and disaster response capabilities: the U.S. merchant marine, U.S.-flag fleet, and domestic shipbuilding capacity. In times of crisis, the world must be able to count on the American maritime industry to play a leading role in global security and humanitarian response. The ability to rapidly deploy our military forces and provide humanitarian assistance depends on sealift—our network of privately owned, commercially operated vessels, along with our Ready Reserve Force fleet of 46 ships.

During Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, RRF ships were activated 118 times. We turned to the RRF in the aftermath of the earthquake that rocked Haiti, the Ebola crisis that gripped West Africa, and the domestic devastation wrought by Hurricanes Sandy, Katrina, and Rita. When the international community needed vessels to aid in the destruction of the Syrian government's chemical weapons, the RRF was there. But this fleet is aging, and the federal government will need to deal with its impending recapitalization.

Our disaster response ability is also safeguarded by the Maritime Security Program, a fleet of 60 privately-owned commercial U.S.-flag vessels committed to providing skilled mariners and transportation of military equipment and supplies in times of conflict or national emergency. Last December, years of advocacy proved successful when the President signed into law a bill to expand this program, securing 2,400 mariner jobs and the humanitarian response capabilities that come with it. A number of these ships play a vital role in international food assistance, helping to alleviate hunger and malnutrition by delivering American-grown and produced food to countries in need.

Like the best examples of public policy, the wins garnered by this program are greater than the sum of its parts. The long-standing partnership between U.S. maritime and agriculture helps to secure robust political support for international food aid programs. It also allows for a deeper, more transparent, and more tangible connection between America and the benefitting countries than would be afforded through, for example, the distribution of cash vouchers in war-torn areas. As well, cargo carried through the food aid program helps to keep our U.S.-flag international fleet viable in the event that it is needed for international response.

Each of these pieces fits together to contribute to the health and strength of our maritime industry. Thanks to statutes like the Jones Act, our U.S.-flag domestic fleet is strong, as is our shipyards' ability to build these vessels. But at its foundation, the ability of our shipbuilders and U.S.-flag fleet to compete in international trade is severely flawed. The world relies on maritime transportation to move ninety percent of its global trade, but very little of that travels on U.S.-flag vessels today. Our oceangoing fleet has dwindled down from 1,200 ships just after World War II, to several hundred during the 1980s, to less than 80 today. In 1955, 25 percent of U.S. foreign trade traveled on U.S.-flag ships. Today, that number has dropped to around 1 percent. The erosion of our ability to build and operate ocean-going vessels at competitive rates is a threat to our national security and our industrial base. It forced us to sacrifice good jobs long ago, and with those jobs went the invaluable technical skill and shipyard infrastructure that could have kept costs down for both commercial and naval shipbuilding.

As a major world power, we must recognize the increasing inability of our shipping industry to meet our military and commercial needs which are critical to both national and economic security. And we must do the hard work of addressing this fundamental policy issue. How can the United States reinvigorate our shipbuilding and U.S.-flag industries? In Congress, I'm one of the principal advocates of building commercial ships in the United States because we cannot rely upon ships flagged in other countries to provide the necessary movement of strategic materials in times of war and peace. Imagine if we called upon China today to ask for ships to address trouble in the South China Sea.

The ability to Make It In America—to design, build, and operate ocean-going commercial vessels—is a strategic issue that I'm working to address through my “Energizing American Maritime Act.” This is a bill that will create new shipping opportunities for our fleet and jobs for our mariners by ensuring that when we export strategic energy assets like crude oil and natural gas, a percentage of those exports travels on U.S.-flag vessels. The bill will also include provisions to expand and strengthen the Title XI Maritime Loan Guarantee Program and the Small Shipyard Grant Program, both important tools for financing and modernizing our maritime assets. Without this bill, all exported American crude oil and LNG will travel on foreign-flag vessels. But if we can get this signed into law, we will advance national security, create thousands of mariner jobs, provide valuable training opportunities, spur innovation, and strengthen our Merchant Marine to sustain our readiness in confronting disasters, both domestic and international.

A strong U.S. humanitarian response capability relies on a strong U.S. merchant marine and a Coast Guard that has the funding and assets needed to fulfill its mission requirements. And it relies on leaders like you—those who know our nation cannot sit idly by when disaster strikes and duty calls. The nature of U.S. humanitarian assistance and disaster response remains a question of when, how, and how much, and the conversations you've had here today are pieces of those answers. I hope you leave this leadership conference with new ideas and renewed calls to action, and I thank you again for this important discussion. I welcome your questions.