

# NAVY BUDGET

## - - SCRATCH ONE FLAT TOP

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*USS JOHN F. KENNEDY (CV 67)*

DISPLACEMENT: 82,000 tons full load
LENGTH: 1,052 feet
BEAM: 130 feet
AIRCRAFT: Approx. 80
SPEED: 30+ knots
POWER PLANT: Steam Turbine
LAUNCHED: 27 May 1967
COMMISSIONED: 7 September 1968
BUILDER: Northrup Grumman, Newport News, Virginia

Although the Administration's proposed budget for the Navy for fiscal year 2006 calls for a \$6.4 billion increase over last year's approved budget, it is disappointing in several respects. Foremost among these is the proposal to retire one of the Navy's aircraft carriers this year ahead of schedule. The early retirement is

supposed to result in a cost savings of \$1.6 billion over the next six years. However, it would reduce the number of carriers to 11 - - the smallest number since World War II. Moreover, considering that one carrier is usually in long-term refit, the effective number of carriers in service will actually be 10.

The budget proposal does not identify which carrier will be retired and the Navy refuses to divulge which one is at issue. However, the assumption on Capitol Hill is that the carrier at risk is JOHN F. KENNEDY (CV 67). Although KENNEDY has had operational problems in recent years - - she failed a Board of Inspection and Survey review in 2002 - - the reason for retiring the carrier is not because she is unseaworthy, but rather the federal budget deficit. In an attempt to reduce the deficit and to offset the cost of the Iraq war, the White House Office of Management and Budget directed that the Pentagon make \$30 billion in budget cuts. Part of the package of cuts is the proposal to shrink the carrier fleet.

Even though both KITTY HAWK (CV 63) and ENTERPRISE (CVN 65) are older and were scheduled to be retired earlier than KENNEDY, "Big John" was reportedly selected for retirement because she is the most expensive carrier to operate. Originally

designed as a nuclear-powered carrier, then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara decided that the ship should be conventionally-powered. As a result, the ship contains vestiges of her nuclear-design such as extra large water tanks that were to be used in cooling the reactor. In addition, KENNEDY was scheduled to begin a \$340 million refit in May needed to extend the ship's life to her scheduled retirement date in 2018. The refit has been postponed.

The idea of reducing the fleet to less than 12 carriers is not a new one. In fact, Bill Clinton campaigned on such a proposal in 1992. However, a bottom-up study in 1993 concluded that while the country could defend itself with 11 carriers, 12 carriers were needed in order to maintain a global presence. The 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review came to similar conclusions. Of course, these studies were done before September 11, 2001, at a time when all the threats facing the nation were not readily apparent.

Since September 11, 2001, the carriers have proven their value. In Afghanistan, the carriers showed that they were able to project American power well inland. Given the paucity of air bases in the vicinity, it is difficult to see how that war could have been fought without the carriers. Similarly, in Iraq, the carriers were able to provide air power at a time when usually friendly nations were opposed to the war and reluctant to have U.S. forces use their facilities. Most recently, the carrier ABRAHAM LINCOLN (CVN 72) provided a very visible United States presence in the tsunami relief efforts.



*The JFK during Fleet Week 2005. (Photo: R.H. Wagner)*

Proponents of the 11 carrier fleet argue that with the Navy's Fleet Response Plan, the Navy will be able to "surge" so as to put more ships at sea in times of need, and thus, more can be done with less. But, more time at sea eventually leads to higher maintenance costs and, potentially, reduces the service life of ships, offsetting to some extent the cost savings of having fewer ships. More importantly, the reality is that no ship, no matter how efficient, can be in two places at once. Thus, there must be enough ships to cover all of the potential trouble spots. Moreover, as Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated, sometimes more than one carrier is needed per trouble spot. A fleet that effectively has ten carriers is stretching things very thin.

A bill has been introduced in Congress to require that the Navy maintain a minimum of 12 carriers in the active fleet. The bill's sponsors are Florida's two senators, Bill Nelson (D) and Mel Martinez (R), and Representative Ander Crenshaw (R), whose district includes KENNEDY's homeport of Mayport, Florida. Indeed, the future of Mayport may be the factor that saves KENNEDY. Without a carrier, it is widely-believed that the naval base at Mayport will be closed in the next round of base closures, which would have an adverse effect on the

Florida economy. To assuage such concerns, the budget calls for a \$10 million study of the environmental consequences of upgrading Mayport to handle a nuclear-powered carrier. The idea is that one of the five nuclear-powered carriers could be transferred to Mayport from her current homeport in Norfolk, Virginia. However, the prospect of such a transfer has raised the eyebrows of Virginia's congressional delegation. Since either Florida or Virginia will suffer if KENNEDY is retired, the two delegations may unite to keep the ship active.

An alternative idea is to retire the Navy's other conventionally-powered carrier, KITTY HAWK, this year rather than as scheduled in 2008. This alternative does not, however, avoid the cost of the KENNEDY refit. In addition, KITTY HAWK is homeported in Japan and the Japanese are opposed to having a nuclear-powered carrier homeported in Japan. Thus, to maintain this forward deployment, KENNEDY would have to be transferred to Japan which would leave Mayport without a carrier.

The budget proposal also impacts the carrier fleet in another way. It delays by one year funding of the construction of the first of the new class of carriers known as "CVN 21" This ship is to replace ENTERPRISE when she is retired in 2013. Inasmuch as the new ship is supposed to have significant operational cost savings over ENTERPRISE, this proposal in effect obtains cost savings today at the price of increased costs in the future - - assuming that ENTERPRISE continues to operate until the new ship is commissioned. The alternative is to decrease the fleet to 10

carriers and retire ENTERPRISE as scheduled.

The blue water Navy also suffers with regard to surface combatants. There is no money for additional ARLEIGH BURKE-class guided missile destroyers and the number of DDXs, the next generation destroyer, that will be constructed over the next five years is to be reduced from 9 to 5. No new cruisers will join the fleet until 2011.

Overall, the number of ships in the fleet will drop to 285 this year, grow to 289 in 2006, and then to 305 ships by 2011. However, projections often fail to materialize. Instead of the six ship new construction that was projected for this year, there will be four. Moreover, while the budget proclaims "new platforms feature tremendous capability increase[s] over legacy ships," 21 of the 49 ships that will be constructed over the next five years will be small coastal Littoral Combat Ships (LCS).

In general, the budget reflects a focus on combating asymmetric threats. While it can be argued that we were too blind to such threats during the last decade, we should not overcompensate. India has announced that it plans to build its navy so as to project power beyond the Indian Ocean. China continues to modernize and expand its fleet. France is building excellent warships both for itself and for sale to others. While none of these countries is openly adverse to the United States, one must wonder why others are building blue water navies if the only danger is from small rogue nations and terrorist groups? Furthermore, although no nation has a navy to rival America's, as Theodore Roosevelt recognized nearly 100 years ago, peace is best maintained when the

fleet is so strong that no one could seriously consider challenging it.

*Note: While Congress blocked the proposal to retire the KENNEDY in the 2006 budget, the ship was decommissioned in 2007.*