

Comments of Captain Robert G. Ross, U.S. Coast Guard
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Admiral Watkins, Distinguished Members of the Commission, Good Afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to address a few issues here today.

Admiral, you asked yesterday for a letter from the Commandant to provide input on a few issues. I have already drafted a response and I will work with Malcolm Williams of your staff to help ensure it is responsive to your concerns. Even with that letter, however, I think there will be benefits in addressing a few issues in person before the Commission.

The recent GAO Report on Coast Guard levels of effort in its various missions was mentioned several times yesterday. This report is based largely on the level of resources expended in individual Coast Guard missions or functions. This is a valid measurement but it is perhaps the crudest measure available. Another, more pertinent measure is Results. For example, despite a significant drop in resources devoted to drug interdiction in 2002, we achieved the third highest seizure total in history. We did this by adopting new technologies and new techniques, especially better use of operational and tactical intelligence. Our interdiction operations are increasingly cued by specific intelligence.

Another example of this is in Search and Rescue (SAR) where we have been embarked, for a number of years, on a campaign to "Take the Search out of Search and Rescue." By using new technologies, such as EPIRBs (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons), and new capabilities, such as the position localization capabilities of the Rescue 21 system we are now building, we have been improving our ability to quickly locate vessels and people in distress. In Search and Rescue, time is, quite literally, the difference between life and death. Rapidly sending one boat, cutter or aircraft to a known location, rather than using multiple assets to search a wider area, increases our probability for success while simultaneously reducing the number of platform hours required for SAR.

With regard to comments made yesterday about reduced Coast Guard attention to SAR, I think those comments may be based on a misunderstanding of the situation. I checked this morning with the SAR program management staff at Headquarters. They are not aware of any SAR call that went unanswered as a result of our post-9/11 homeland security tasking and priorities. This does not mean that every SAR case since 9/11 has been successful or that lives haven't been lost. But the unfortunate reality is that success is sometimes simply unattainable, even if we do everything right and even if we throw everything we have at the case. This was just as true before 9/11 as it is after 9/11.

Protecting American lives remains the Coast Guard's highest priority, whether those lives are at risk from terrorist threats, from natural disasters, from accidents at sea, or from any other threat arising in the Coast Guard's assigned areas of responsibility.

All of that said, given our full mission suite, the Coast Guard does suffer from a capability gap. However, this is not just a Coast Guard capability gap, it is a national capability gap. There is no agency with unused capacity sitting in a Ready Locker to which one or another Coast Guard mission or function could be shifted. Doing so would not close the gap; it would only shift ownership of the problem. The solution is to grow the national capability.

My personal belief is that the fastest path to closing the gap runs through the Coast Guard, not around it. We have the requisite infrastructure in place today – the Deepwater contract for new offshore assets, the training institutions to properly prepare an expanded workforce, the necessary operational expertise and doctrine, the naval and aeronautical engineering expertise to support the assets, etc., etc.

And the Coast Guard is closing its capability gap, perhaps not as fast as either the Coast Guard or the Commission would like, but we are on a growth trajectory. The Commission might want to consider recommending a steeper slope but, from a fiscal responsibility perspective, we must avoid growth so rapid that it ends up being wasteful or disruptive.

I heard a question yesterday about monitoring VMS information. I believe I am on safe ground saying that VMS is only one of many information sources that will feed into the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capability that we are now building. Within the MDA architecture, there will be Coast Guard people looking at VMS and other information on a 7 x 24 basis. This will take place at national and regional intelligence fusion centers, as well as at lower level command and control nodes such as the First District Command Center in Boston and the 17th District Command Center in Juneau. Of course, we also expect the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to use VMS data, but whether or not NMFS will have the ability or need to provide real-time monitoring on a 7 x 24 basis is a question for NMFS to answer.

Finally, I would like to talk about the international leadership issue. Yesterday, the need for U.S. leadership in a number of important but relatively limited areas was raised. I would submit that there is a bigger issue here – U.S. international leadership in Ocean Issues writ large. The issues mentioned yesterday would fall into this, but there are other, vitally important aspects such as UNCLOS, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Association of Navigation and Lighthouse Authorities and other international fora.

The U.S. is a leader in IMO because we sought that role as a specific national strategic objective and then earned it through our sustained involvement, our technical expertise and our proactive but respectfully couched efforts to win international consensus for improved safety and environmental protection standards.

I would also suggest to you that our national approach to IMO might serve as a model for U.S. interactions with other international bodies. For IMO, the Coast Guard is the de

facto national lead agency. We head U.S. delegations to IMO, including up to the level of full diplomatic conferences, and we coordinate the interagency and public input processes for developing U.S. positions on issues being considered by IMO.

This does not change the State Department's overall authority with respect to managing international relations. The State Department approves delegation composition and U.S. policies and State is represented on all U.S. delegations to IMO. This approach does, however, put the working level responsibility on subject matter experts who give significant focused attention to U.S. policy positions and to maintaining our important international leadership role. Again, this approach might serve as a model for other issues and international bodies involved in ocean affairs.

Admiral Watkins, Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you and Congratulations on reaching this important milestone in your work.