

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 6, 2020

The Honorable Mark Esper
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Esper:

We were deeply concerned to read recent reports that the Department of Defense may propose significant reductions to planned shipbuilding procurement in its fiscal year (FY) 2021 budget request to be submitted to Congress in the coming weeks. We write to express our strong support for a 355-ship Navy and to urge continued support from the Department for a robust shipbuilding budget.

In 2017, Congress passed and President Trump signed into law the national policy of achieving a 355-ship Navy, approximating the President's bold campaign pledge and adopting the fleet size called for in the Navy's own December 2016 Force Structure Assessment (FSA). Three other congressionally mandated, independent studies similarly called for a Navy much larger than the current 293 deployable battle force ships in the fleet today. Contrary to this established policy and identified national security need, media reports suggest the Department may propose a budget plan that would actually result in a smaller fleet in 2025 than we have today.

One of the proposed budget cuts would reportedly reduce by five the number of Arleigh Burke (DDG-51) class destroyers planned for construction over the next five years. DDG-51s are truly the workhorses of the Navy worldwide, conducting freedom of navigation missions in the South China Sea, leading maritime security patrols in the North Atlantic, and deterring Iranian aggression in the Persian Gulf. The newest Flight III variant, to be delivered to the fleet in the coming years, will significantly improve the anti-air and ballistic missile defense capabilities of the Navy. For example, the new AN/SPY-6 radar will be 35-times more sensitive than current systems and will allow our destroyers and other defended ships to operate in higher threat areas. In short, we need more of these ships in the fleet of the future, not fewer.

We also are greatly concerned about the impact to the shipbuilding industrial base should significant cuts actually come to fruition. As the Navy's FY 2020 30-year shipbuilding plan correctly identified, "our shipbuilding and supporting vendor base constitute a national security imperative that is unique and must be protected," and portions of the industrial base could be at risk without consistent and continuous commitment to steady acquisition profiles. We need to ensure stability in our industrial base and proposed cutbacks would threaten both our security and our economy.

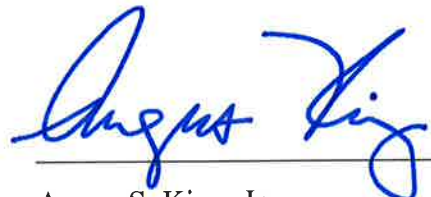
Ultimately, Congress is responsible for annual Department of Defense and Navy appropriations, and we will continue to support a growing fleet in order to protect our national security and ensure our national prosperity as threats around the world continue to grow. Last month, the FY 2020 defense appropriations bill enacted into law provided \$23.9 billion for 14 battle force Navy ships. This included funding to procure three new DDG-51 Flight III destroyers, as well as an additional \$390 million in long lead materials to support construction of three DDG-51's in FY 2021 (one more than currently planned, and two more than reports indicate the FY 2021 budget might propose). We expect this congressional support for Navy shipbuilding and DDG-51 procurement to continue in FY 2021 and beyond, and we hope the Department and administration will join us in these efforts.

As you continue to develop and finalize the Department's FY 2021 budget request, we urge you to reverse course from cutbacks to shipbuilding plans that may be under deliberation and to support a 355-ship Navy. Thank you for your consideration of this important issue, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator

cc: Hon. Russell Vought, Acting Director, Office of Management and Budget
Hon. Thomas Modly, Acting Secretary of the Navy