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Ranking Member Smith Opening Statement (As Prepared)

Full Committee Hearing on “Department of the Navy FY27 Budget Request”

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Over the last months, we have seen our Sailors and Marines consistently perform their jobs at the highest level. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, they have demonstrated to the world how immensely capable they are and that they can rise to the challenges that are put before them.

The Department of the Navy is also bearing a significant amount of the load for this administration’s unrealistic defense strategy. The Tripoli amphibious readiness group with the 31st marine expeditionary unit, approximately 2,500 Marines, are currently serving in the Middle East. Until the USS GERALD R. FORD recently left the region, after one of the longest deployments in U.S. Navy history, the Navy had two aircraft carriers in the Middle East, leaving only one in the Indo-Pacific, and no carrier presence in the Mediterranean. The herculean effort to partially repair the damage from the March fire onboard the FORD, allowing her to return to station, was an impressive feat of engineering and ingenuity. As always, our service members and the civilians who support them have risen to the occasion in the face of considerable adversity and performed in a manner that truly represents the absolute best of American grit and professionalism. But to what end?

The administration’s inconsistent strategy and constantly shifting priorities are burning readiness, exacerbating maintenance issues, depleting magazine depth, and taking a toll on our service members. And yet the administration can articulate neither its goals for the current war in Iran nor a coherent strategy for how to achieve peace through strength.

This phenomenon can also be found in its budget request. While I agree with the administration’s stated goal to reinvigorate American shipbuilding, recapitalize vessels classes that have been long ignored, and bring digital design and innovation to the shipbuilding industry, it is simply not possible to magic into existence mature designs, an experienced workforce, and long-overlooked infrastructure investment.

This year's Department of the Navy budget request seems to attempt to do just that with unrealistic, borderline reckless, timelines that will further stress an industry that is just now starting to see the dividends of congressional initiatives to support wage increases and force Navy investments in the industrial base. By setting timelines that are motivated by the president's vanity projects instead of reality, I am deeply concerned that the administration is going to push the shipbuilding industry to a breaking point. And, by going at a pace driven by politics, we are going to repeat the failures epitomized by the now cancelled Constellation class frigate and continue the too often seen mistake of pushing forward with vessel construction before designs are adequately mature. Design maturity is not merely a goal; it is a statutory requirement designed to ensure that the Navy does not repeat the mistakes of the past.

The battleship is the most striking example of the administration's turn away from this guiding principle, but certainly not the only one in this year's budget request. And while we can have a healthy and reasonable debate about the requirements and affordability of the Navy's next large surface combatant, the timeline and the cost estimates presented in this year's budget request are unreasonable to the point of fantasy. As a nation, we can't afford to rush to failure, pouring billions into poorly conceived projects to provide sound bites and social media posts. It will do nothing to strengthen our Navy nor our ability to control the maritime domain. This year's budget request, coupled with the Navy's inability to adequately articulate how it will use emerging technologies to keep costs from spiraling out of control, is deeply troubling. I hope that the testimony today will begin to fill in the considerable holes in the details of the Navy's vision for its force of the future. And with that, I yield back.