



A Conversation with Admiral Robert Papp Commandant, United States Coast Guard

The United States Coast Guard has ensured the safety, security, and stewardship of the nation's maritime domain for more than 220 years. Since its inception, the Coast Guard continues its rich tradition of being an adaptable, highly responsive force whose multi-mission authority, breadth of assets, geographic footprint, and unique competencies have made it an essential component in the nation's national security portfolio. In fact, the demand for the Coast Guard's unique capabilities has never been greater. Facing new challenges has required the Coast Guard to organize more efficiently and manage operations more effectively.

What is the U.S. Coast Guard's strategic direction? How will steadying the service make the U.S. Coast Guard ready for today and prepared for tomorrow? Admiral Robert Papp, commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, joined me on The Business of Government Hour to explore these questions and so much more. This conversation is based on that interview. —MJK



On the History and Evolving Mission of the U.S. Coast Guard

I like to describe the Coast Guard as a series of mergers and friendly takeovers over a course of two centuries. We actually started back in 1790. We were the brainchild of Alexander Hamilton, who was the first secretary of the treasury. The service received its present name in 1915 under an act of Congress that merged the Revenue Cutter Service with the Life-Saving Service, thereby providing the nation with a single maritime service dedicated to saving life at sea and enforcing the nation's maritime laws. We kept our military character; during World War II we added the Light House Service aids to navigation, and then the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation which gave us our merchant mariner licensing, ship inspection, [and] ship safety responsibilities. We have added responsibilities throughout our history starting out in the Department of the Treasury, moving to the Department of Transportation in 1967, and now being an integral component of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security since 2003. The Coast Guard is certainly unique as we have a dual military

and law enforcement role. We have about 42,000 uniformed active duty people right now. We have 8,000 civilians, 8,000 Coast Guard reservists that we can call up in emergencies. We have this other unique organization called the Coast Guard Auxiliary that is a volunteer organization. They are a force multiplier for us at virtually no cost to taxpayers, so we're very proud of them. Our budget is roughly a \$10 billion budget.

On the Challenges of Leading the U.S. Coast Guard

I'm a service chief similar to the other service chiefs (i.e., commandant of the Marine Corps, chief of staff of the Air Force, chief of staff of the Army, and the chief of Naval Operations); our primary role is to organize, train, and equip our service to be prepared for the duties that the country gives us. There's one difference for the commandant of the Coast Guard though. The other service chiefs organize, train, and equip, but the forces are transferred operationally to the combatant commanders.



I'm the only service chief that commands all Coast Guard operations. In practice this is exercised through two area commanders—Atlantic and Pacific commanders. Two vice admirals carry out the day-to-day operations of the Coast Guard, but I still hold the responsibility for it.

The top challenge we face is how do you continue to provide the services that the American public has come to expect from their Coast Guard and quite frankly deserves? We like to meet their expectations, but the challenge is we cannot do 100% of all our missions on any given day. We have finite resources with only so many ships, boats, aircrafts, and people that I challenge my two area commanders to decide on a daily basis their highest priorities. I'll give you an example that illustrates this process. When I was Atlantic commander, on any given day I would allocate so many ships to do fisheries patrols, drug enforcement, and alien interdiction. Then, over two years ago, there was the earthquake in Haiti. We had three Coast Guard ships on scene the next morning to start providing aid to the people of Haiti. We don't have earthquake response cutters sitting around, so we diverted three ships from other operations. At that time, we decided, the country decided aid to Haiti was the most important thing on that given day. We took a short-term deficit in drug interdiction, migrant interdiction, and fisheries in order to provide those ships to help the people of Haiti and that's really what we do on a daily basis. We have a wide mission set, finite resources, and we place operational decision-making as far down in the organization as possible. We try to do everything. It's one of our strengths and one of our weaknesses.

The second challenge involves our recapitalization efforts. About 10 years ago, we embarked on a significant recapitalization initiative seeking to replace our aging fleet and aircraft. We've just about renovated our entire aviation fleet. Our ships are the most in need of recapitalizing, but they are also the most expensive to tackle. Our major ships are in excess of 40 years of age. The U.S. Navy generally plans on a 25-year service life for its ships, but the Coast Guard, unfortunately, generally runs its ships to a service life of about 40 years.

My third challenge has to do with emerging missions. The foremost in my mind is our expanding responsibilities in the Arctic. It is expected that Shell Oil may start drilling in the Chukchi Sea and the Beaufort Sea this summer. If so, our responsibilities in the Arctic will increase with no commensurate increase in resources.

On the Importance of Steadying the Service

It's not just the ships and the aircraft, it's also the people. We'd been through 10 years of rapid growth since 9/11 with increasing responsibilities. In addition to increasing responsibilities, both my predecessors had embarked upon major structural reorganization within the Coast Guard.

Eight years ago, Admiral Collins initiated the Sector concept, which was a major field change. He stressed that the need to strengthen unity of command necessitated the adoption of integrated, operational field commands, called Sectors. The new Sector organizational construct represents a transformation from a Coast Guard traditionally organized around its operational programs to one organized around core operational service delivery processes. Four years ago, Admiral Allen started the modernization process, which continues today, taking the upper level of the organization and seeking to restructure it. He wanted to find a better way to provide support to our field activities. We designated a deputy commandant, establishing a vice admiral for mission support that organized all field support activities (i.e., logistics, engineering, and personnel) executed through 13 bases around the country under a single command. The original modernization plan sought to do away with the Pacific area command. I was the Atlantic area commander and I had enough work to keep me busy just minding the Atlantic. It was my decision to retain the Pacific area commander.

When I became commandant neither restructuring initiative had been completed. Both were taking up institutional energy and having an impact on our operations. As a result, I want to steady the service, which really goes back to my roots as a sailor. Whenever you feel like your ship is a little out of kilter you've got to shift ballast and get your ship

“The challenge as a leader is finding balance between mission and expectation. I’m trying to convince our people that we have to live within our means. If we don’t, not only are you going to wear out the equipment, but we’re also going to wear down our people.”

— Admiral Robert Papp



steady. I am not going to bring any wholesale changes or restructuring. My focus is on completing the major initiatives we’ve been pursuing over the last eight years.

I also want to refocus on building our workforce proficiency and perhaps cutting back a few responsibilities in order to focus on core competencies that have distinguished us over the years. I have been concerned about the stress our organization has been under given years of increased operational tempo. Recently, we’ve also experienced a rash of aviation and surface accidents that has prompted me to focus on really getting back to basics.

My wife and I have both embarked upon a project to do better for our Coast Guard families. We sometimes don’t give people the opportunity to develop their competencies and their operational experience because we transfer them too quickly. We’ve slowed that process. In fact, this year just by enacting a couple personnel rules in terms of trying to provide stability, we actually saved 20 million dollars in transfer costs. We’re trying to improve housing and other things for our people.



On Asset Recapitalization and Capacity Building

The flagships of our fleet are our 378-foot Hamilton class high endurance cutters. Unfortunately, these ships were built in the 1960s containing 40-to-45-year-old systems that are very expensive to maintain. We’re facing block obsolescence of the fleet very soon, so a decision has to be made. We either build the replacements or we stop interdicting drugs, interdicting illegal migrants, or protecting fisheries. We won’t be able to do these missions, so it’s very important to get new ships built.

We have done very well recapitalizing forces closer to shore. We’ve replaced almost the entire boat fleet along the coast. We’ve built new patrol boats. Our aircraft fleet has been completely renovated. However, we want to catch threats before they arrive in port. We need to interdict them at sea and that capability is the layer of our infrastructure which is crumbling.

On the Coast Guard’s Acquisition Process

The history of the deepwater program will be debated for years. I was chief of Congressional affairs as we were trying to do this in the late 90s. The fact of the matter is during the 90s the Coast Guard lost 6,000 people. The staff that was cut was engineering and acquisition; it probably made sense because we weren’t getting any money to build ships anyway. We would have been in even worse shape except 9/11 happened and after that the money started flowing. We started getting people and money to build ships and aircraft. We didn’t have the internal acquisition staff to be able to do that so we went with something new, unique, and innovative—use of a lead system integrator. In fact, early in the process, the Coast Guard received an award for pursuing this approach. In the end, it didn’t work well; we ran into problems.

Over the last four years, we have brought ourselves to where I really believe we have the best acquisition workforce in government for a similarly sized organization. Clearly, we don’t have the capacity that some of the larger services possess, but we have some very good people. We brought in the Defense Acquisition University. We started hiring people

away from NAVSEA, a sea systems command, and bringing in acquisition experts. For example, the National Security Cutter acquisition was established as a fixed price contract. We drove a hard negotiation. We have numerous other projects that are running smoothly now, executed properly with predictable costs, and providing us a quality product. It's been an evolution. It's been hard, but like anything else the Coast Guard takes on, when we set our mind to it we're going to do it right.

On Leading the Nation's Maritime Engagement in the Arctic

We've operated in the Arctic before, primarily with icebreakers and doing research. There's been an absence of human activity year-round in the Arctic, but that's changing now. I can recall trying to get to Kotzebue, Alaska, in July of 1976, but couldn't make it through the ice. Fast-forward 35 years later in August of 2010, I flew into Kotzebue for a visit and as I approached I could see no ice. The ice has receded and with that a significant increase in human activity. Any human activity on U.S. waters means there's a Coast Guard

play whether it's search and rescue, environmental response, or law enforcement.

Presuming the permits are approved, Shell Oil will begin drilling in two locations in the Arctic. They will introduce 33 ships, two mobile drilling platforms, and about 600 people. They'll be transferring people by helicopter, rotating crews which throw in the potential for rescues. We know that there are environmental groups that will try to protest this that may even try to obstruct the process. Law enforcement comes into play. We'll need to provide for the security of not only the protestors, but also the legitimate commerce that will occur. There's also the potential for environmental damage which we have a responsibility for as well. In most areas of the country, we'd have shore-based infrastructure, but we have none in the Arctic. We're going to send one of our new national security cutters to the Arctic to operate as a command center with worldwide command and control capabilities. We have hangars for two helicopters on the ship and three boats with crews that can be launched from the



Disaster Relief

Lifesaving

Arctic Operations

cutter as well. It'll be like having a Coast Guard sector office up there except it's going to be afloat. We've been actually experimenting over the last four years sending equipment to the Arctic, seeing what functions in the weather extremes. We have a good idea of the equipment we'll need to execute our mission in the Arctic.

We need to devise a plan for long-term shore infrastructure. I don't think this is a cost that the Coast Guard should bear alone. We've been talking to the Alaska National Guard as well as General Jacoby of the U.S. northern command. We're working with our partners to see what sort of facilities—communications, landing strips, hangars, and other things—we're going to need there. We'll put forth resource proposals and coordinate with our partners to ensure we limit any resource redundancies.

On Balancing Mission and Expectations

I tell my leaders in the field that I will indemnify them for things that they can't do. We have a rich and proud "can do"

culture. The challenge as a leader is finding balance between mission and expectation. I'm trying to convince our people that we have to live within our means. If we don't, not only are you going to wear out the equipment, but we're also going to wear down our people. Emergencies are always going to arise; we'll need to surge in response to those events. However, I think it's legitimate at times to take a pause and catch our breath. I want to ensure that we're in it for the long haul. People don't join the Coast Guard unless they're motivated to serve. As I talk to folks I'm just amazed by their patriotism, their excitement, their dedication, so the challenge for us is more how do you sustain it? How do you keep it going? We've got a pretty resilient bunch, but sometimes they don't know what they deserve. I want to do so much better for our people. I think we're making progress, but there's still a long ways to go.

On Being a Sailor and Leader

There are many people that make a lot of money writing fancy books talking about leadership theory. To me it's all seemed very simple. You're given a job and you've got to get a job done. Every leader should have clearly defined responsibilities, the authority to carry out the job, and then be held accountable. When I joined the Coast Guard all I wanted to do was to go to sea and be a ship captain. I was fortunate to be able to get that opportunity for a major segment of my career. It formed my view of life and how things worked because when you're on a ship if you're a captain, you quickly realize you can't get the job done by yourself. You've got to work through your officers. You need to make sure they are all aligned with your philosophy, goals, and objectives, and then use them to manage the crew and your resources to get the job done—[leading] is working through others. Recently, I was sent an essay on leadership with all kinds of fancy diagrams. I sent it back and said you have to simplify it. I couldn't understand it, yet I can understand simple concepts like authority, responsibility, and accountability. I don't think it has to be more complicated. ■

To learn more about the United States Coast Guard, go to www.uscg.mil.



To hear *The Business of Government Hour's* interview with Admiral Papp, go to the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org.



To download the show as a podcast on your computer or MP3 player, from the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org, right click on an audio segment, select Save Target As, and save the file.



To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour's* interview with Admiral Papp, visit the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org.

