

# WebMemo



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## Massive Oil Spill Makes Case for Reversing Obama Coast Guard Cuts

*James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.*

The President's fiscal year 2011 budget request for the U.S. Coast Guard would further undermine a service already under strain. This budget proposal greatly exacerbates a trend begun after 9/11 of asking more and more from the Coast Guard without providing the resources to do the job. The recent disaster in the Gulf Coast, where a massive oil spill now threatens to cause billions of dollars in environmental damage, demonstrates how under-funding the Coast Guard is adding unacceptable risk to the safety, security, and prosperity of all Americans.

**From 9/11 to Now.** After September 11, the duties of the Coast Guard expanded significantly. This expansion resulted in a far greater "operational tempo," the daily requirements for using the service's planes and ships. An increase in operational tempo, however, means that because equipment is used with greater frequency, it will wear out faster. Older equipment wears out even more quickly and is more expensive to maintain.

Even before 9/11, the Coast Guard recognized that it had a big problem. There are 39 major naval fleets in the world. In terms of age, the Coast Guard ranks near the bottom. "Deepwater," the pre-9/11 modernization program funded by the Congress, envisioned retiring the service's aging inventory of ships and planes over 30 years. The retired inventory would be replaced with an integrated set of assets, including new vessels as well as sophisticated communications equipment, computers, and sensors. The 30-year timeline was completely inadequate for a post-9/11 Coast Guard. Now, budget

cuts and management challenges have slowed this modernization program even further.

Despite adversity, however, the Coast Guard has performed remarkably. For example, during Hurricane Katrina, "Coast Guard assets began conducting rescue operations immediately," a presidential after action report concluded, "four hours before the next available outside responders—Army National Guard units—arrived on the scene." In addition to saving 24,000 lives during search and rescue operations, the Coast Guard assisted in the medical evacuation of 9,000 more individuals. The Coast Guard also provided food, water, shelter, and medical supplies to survivors and managed the response to environmental threats, such as cleaning up oil spills. Under Admiral Thad Allen, who was named the principal federal official during the disaster, the Coast Guard provided critical post-Katrina leadership.

**Coast Guard in the Gulf.** Despite these triumphs, the Coast Guard remains a force under siege. For instance, the current disaster in the Gulf has found the Coast Guard scrambling to reposition sufficient assets to respond while straining to accomplish other missions as well. Admiral Allen has been tapped again as the primary federal offi-

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cial, putting further stress on the Coast Guard to oversee the response.

Yet even before this recent disaster, there were plenty of signs that the service was under stress. Recently Allen reported, “Of the 12 major cutters assigned to Haiti relief operations, 10, or 83 percent, suffered severe emission affecting casualties. Two were forced to return to port for emergency repairs, and one proceeded to an emergency dry dock.”

**Hollow Force.** While the Coast Guard is responding, responsible officials in the Obama Administration are pushing a budget that will significantly undercut the service’s capacity to respond to disasters like the Gulf Coast oil spill. In fact, under Obama’s proposed budget the Coast Guard will have to shed nearly 1,000 personnel, five cutters, and several helicopters and aircraft.

Among the assets scheduled for downsizing is the National Strike Force, the part of the Coast Guard specifically organized to respond to oil spills. Ironically, the cuts were on the table because of the decreasing trend in incidents. The Administration assumed it could get by with less. “The problem is that if you take away our equipment, like in Alaska or in Hawaii,” admits Commander Tina Cutter, Deputy Commander of the National Strike Force, “you’d be taking as much as 75 percent of the ability to respond in an offshore or near shore environment. If you take away our equipment in the rest of the ports, it is one third of the ability in that port to respond in an offshore environment.” If the Administration follows through on these cuts, the Coast Guard will lose capability to surge in times of crisis—like now.

Admiral Allen seems willing to accept reduced readiness levels in order to find some money to modernize—the government equivalent of paying off credit cards with credit cards. Tightening the

Coast Guard, budget, however, will not be enough to save its sinking modernization program.

**Preventing Crisis.** Proceeding with plans to under-fund the Coast Guard will only ensure that its response to the next disaster at sea—whether a storm, another spill, or a terrorist attack that creates a similar catastrophe—will be even feebler than the response to the current crisis. Consequently, Congress should:

- *Reject cutting the Coast Guard.* U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security Chairman Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV) was right when he called the President’s budget cuts of Coast Guardsmen “pennywise and pound foolish.”
- *Expand and accelerate Coast Guard modernization.* At a minimum, Congress should insist on additional helicopters, maritime patrol, aircraft, and cutters as envisioned by the Deepwater program.
- *Accelerate Procurement of the Sentinel Class boats.* These craft have the reach and range for providing support for managing the environmental challenges in the Gulf Coast region.

**Clear Lessons from the Gulf Oil Spill.** Slow-going Coast Guard modernization and cutting back on force structure to save money were mistakes even before the Gulf Coast catastrophe. Continuing with that wrong-headed plan makes even less sense now. A robust Coast Guard is essential to preventing future disasters at sea by enforcing regulations that prevent industrial accidents or thwarting deliberately malicious activity. Furthermore, cuts will only ensure that the federal response to the next disaster will be worse.

—James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., is Deputy Director of Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies and Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Davis Institute, at The Heritage Foundation.