Carriers Forever - A Carrier Admiral Writes In Defense of the Navy's Nuclear Aircraft Carriers

By RADM Jeremy Taylor, USN (Ret.)

At the end of WW II, the world immediately entered a period that history records as the the Cold War. The U.S. and the free world adopted a strategy to contain communism, the totalitarian political system of both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Included in the containment measures to keep and protect the peace and freedom of the democratic nations of the world was the total commitment of the U.S. to position powerful naval forces forward in the Mediterranean Sea and in the western Pacific Ocean. This Maritime Strategy was sustained for more than 50 years. In the "Med," the Sixth Fleet operated and led scores of multi-mission ships, submarines, aircraft, and tens of thousands of Sailors and Marines. For five decades, our allies locked arms with us to prevail in thwarting the ambition of the Soviet Union and its surrogate states. We won without fighting. We won with vigilance, sacrifice, power, position, firm resolve, and bold leadership. A great lesson was learned. Or was it?

From 1950 to 2003 our country maintained fast carrier striking forces in the Med to carry out an expansive list of roles and missions. We were there - forward, present and powerful - for all to see, friend and foe alike. President Ike called it, "Power for Peace," and we sent our Sailors ashore in dress uniforms to execute his "People to People Program." We were working-level diplomats and friends of the free. Our Sailors and Marines "saw the world and sold America." We were there to aid in disasters and provide humanitarian assistance as my USS *Kalamazoo* (AOR 6) troops did in Rapallo, Italy when the city's July 1980 fireworks set fire to a hotel. The city honored the first-responding and life-saving *Kazoo* Sailors with a parade.

USS Ronald Reagan (CVN 76) in the South China Sea, April 2007, in company with USNS Flint (T-AE 32) an ammunition ship.(Photo by MCC Spike Call)

Every Sixth Fleet ship has many such stories. We were soft-walking good guys. We were people to people peace keepers. Carriers and the Sixth Fleet were there to execute the full range of peaceful interactions, and we were respected and appreciated.

The carriers were also there with "the big stick" from the mid-1950s through the 1960s, ready to execute the full spectrum of warfighting, including nuclear war. So were the Soviets. The competition for hegemony in the region was intense. Opposing maritime forces cruised eye to eye in a long and potentially deadly standoff, especially during periods of regional and world crisis. During the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, I was a nuclear weapons delivery pilot in VA-12 embarked in USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVA 42) in the Aegean. Air group attack pilots were briefed and ready to man their A-4s, A-3s, and A-1s, loaded with nuclear weapons, as the crisis approached critical mass, and until the Soviets recalled their fleet from Cuban waters. WWIII was averted.

During the 1973 regional Yom Kippur War between Israel and several Arab nations, the Soviets positioned more than 90 subs and ships in the Eastern Mediterranean to match the more than 60 subs and ships of the Sixth Fleet, including USS *John F. Kennedy* (CVA 67) and my squadron (VA-46). We were there to support Israel, while the Soviets supported the Arabs. We were also there to stand our ground, lean forward, and to defend our national interests and values.

During the years of the Vietnam War, the Navy maintained five forward-deployed carriers in the Seventh Fleet, with three on Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin. At the same time another of our 15 large-deck carriers patrolled the Med with a Soviet tattletale close by. For more than 50 years our carriers and the Sixth Fleet were a force to be reckoned with. Scores of incidents and minor conflicts were contained and resolved as a consequence of the on-site presence and readiness of our carrier striking forces to be rapid responders. We were there to anchor the right flank of NATO and visibly, and physically, demonstrate our national commitment to our foreign partners and allies, and to demonstrate our readiness and willingness to carry out our nation's global responsibilities as the leader of the free world.

The performance of the aircraft carriers assigned to Seventh Fleet in the Pacific and Fifth Fleet in South Asia and the Mid-East during the Cold War, and since, replicated the contributions of the Sixth Fleet to peace-keeping and deterrence of war with the Soviets and the PRC. The operational record of the carrier strike forces in our wars in Korea, Vietnam and the current combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, are indicative of the mobility, flexibility, and versatility of the big deck, nuclear-powered aircraft carrier components of our nation's power projection war fighting forces. The Navy currently plans to operate 11 of these capital ships for the next 50 years.

When the Cold War ended, and after we completed Desert Storm operations in 1991, our citizens and political leadership opted to declare a "peace dividend" and cut our military budgets and forces to fund other priorities. Military end strength, R&D, modernization, and procurement were cut by 40 percent. Over the next decade the "death from a thousand cuts," little

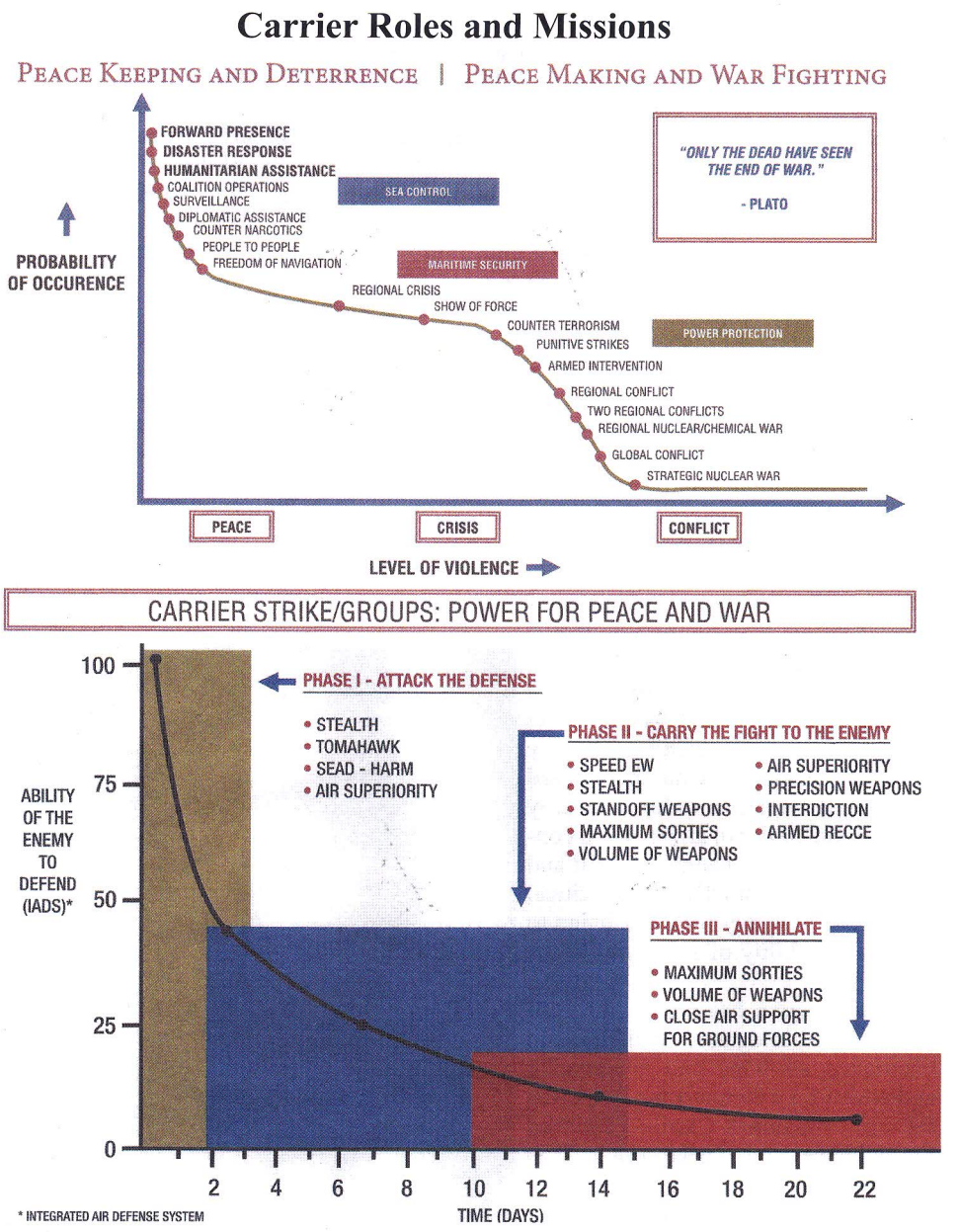
slices across the board on all programs, as well as devastating vertical cuts of entire programs, were meted out to all the services. They were directed to live within their diminished resources. All were advised to "do the same with less." And so they did, until we mobilized and went to war in Afghanistan after 9/11. Then the guidance became: "do more with less."And they did.

Unfortunately, the little cuts absorbed in stride mounted up. Numbers of aircraft and pilots per squadron were reduced. The number of carrier air wings was cut. The number of big deck carriers was cut to 12. Marine squadrons replaced some Navy squadrons aboard ship. Overhaul and repair accounts were reduced and backlogs of maintenance repair escalated. Modernization packages were delayed or cancelled. Training times were shortened. In other words, Naval Aviation bit the bullet and got the job done out of hide. Where there is a will there is a way - up to a point.

The carriers, aircraft and troops have been run hard and put away wet after multiple, back-to-back extended cruises. They were turned around in short order and run again and again in waging a war that has become the longest war in American history. As a consequence, troops, aircraft and ships are showing fatigue. The pace continues.

Then came the Great Recession; more horizontal and vertical budget cuts; increased requirements to deal with mounting domestic entitlement programs and unemployment; more borrowing and more national debt; more global instability; and new political leadership. Caught in one of the most difficult dilemmas in American history, the new president executed a wide range of transforming initiatives. Among them was a decision to reduce our forward presence, including our "provocative" forward-deployed naval forces. "Hope" became a strategy and "leading from behind" the mantra for success in our national security and foreign policy arenas.

In 2003, during Operation Iraqi Freedom our Sixth Fleet was steaming 40 ships, including two carriers, and flying more than 150 tactical aircraft. Situation normal. Cast forward to the night of 11 September 2012: no Sixth Fleet carriers or aircraft in the theater. No presence. None. There was a total absence of support for a beleaguered ambassador in Benghazi, Libya, when a storm of terrorists attacked and murdered four Americans, including the ambassador. The absence of an aircraft carrier and an air wing to support our diplomats and state department in this case serves to validate the value of aircraft carriers as peacekeepers and quick responders. Carrier strike forces make a difference in the behavior of regional rascals and provide our forward deployed government operations the security they merit.



The Way We Will Fight

The consequences of two decades of squeezing everything possible out of our military forces, including Naval Aviation, must now be accepted and dealt with. Our nation is $18 trillion in debt. The Great Recession lingers, and half of our population relies on government monies. Real unemployment remains in double percentage points. Our government, all branches, is unable to agree on solutions to even the easiest of problems they are charged with resolving. Our leaders don't look or act like leaders. Our citizens have become disillusioned and divided. At the very time we need to come together, we are coming apart. The annual national budget is on the table. The allocation of scarce resources for the next fiscal year is about to be decided.

Washington is abuzz, and every special interest group is camped inside the Beltway to make their respective case for more money. Think-tank gurus are pouring out ideas on where to cut and add. Lobbyists are lined up to get the ear of the

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