

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4606

January 6, 2017

Admiral John Richardson
Chief of Naval Operations
2000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350-2000

Dear Admiral Richardson:

I write to express concerns about the current gap in operational coverage by U.S. aircraft carriers operating in the Middle East. The USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69) departed the U.S. 6th Fleet area of operations on December 26, 2016. With its departure, the area has been left without a critical defense asset for our nation's strategic efforts in the region. It is my understanding that maintenance delays on the USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77), which was scheduled to relieve CVN 69, contributed to this most recent gap of service.

In fact, in each of the past two years, there has been a gap in carrier coverage in the Middle East. The absence of an aircraft carrier not only harms our force projection capabilities and limits some of our military's flexibility to quickly respond to any number of unforeseen events that may arise, it removes from the table an incredibly important asset in our ongoing fight against the Islamic State.

While I appreciate the Navy's diligent work to mitigate the challenges associated with having fewer aircraft carriers than are legally and operationally required, I have several questions about how we can avoid similar strategic gaps in the future.

- When did the Navy know it would have a gap in carrier coverage in the Persian Gulf, and how was that operational gap communicated to interested members of Congress?
- While maintenance on the USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77) was scheduled for six months, it ultimately required 13 months to complete. Why was the Navy's estimate of the time required for maintenance so far off the mark? What is the Navy doing to improve its forecasting of required maintenance down time?
- Press reports suggest that delays at Norfolk Naval Shipyard contributed to the scheduling challenges with CVN 77, and that some of the scheduling challenges were due to lack of trained personnel. Was this a factor, and if so, what, if any, consideration did the Navy give to seeking help from other shipyards?
- Does the Navy have a plan to address shipyard manpower and training issues to alleviate these reported personnel challenges? Are there statutory or fiscal issues Congress could address to help alleviate these issues?
- Are there any other factors that contributed to the delays that occurred in CVN 77 being ready for deployment?

- After the Navy became aware of the delays in CVN 77's Planned Incremental Availability, did the Navy consider any plans to compress the pre-deployment training period so that the ship could embark in time to relieve CVN 69 as scheduled? What effects would compression have on the crew's ability to carry out the mission? How were training decisions affected by, and how did they comport with, the Optimized Fleet Response Plan?
- Is there an accelerated effort underway to close the current gap in carrier coverage created by these delays? If so, what costs does that impose upon the Navy?
- How will operations in the combat theater be affected by the absence of a carrier?

Thank you for your service and your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



MARK R. WARNER
United States Senator