

Senator Grills SECNAV on Amphib Ship Plans



SASEBO, Japan (Sept. 15, 2021) The amphibious dock landing ship USS Germantown (LSD 42) departs Commander, Fleet Activities Sasebo, Japan (CFAS), Sept. 15, 2021. Germantown will shift home ports from Sasebo to San Diego after serving as a forward-deployed ship in U.S. 7th Fleet since Jan. 5, 2011. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jasmine Ikusebiala)

ARLINGTON, Va. – A senator used a congressional hearing to point out that the Navy would be violating the law by letting the number of amphibious warships drop below a Congressionally mandated level of 31 in fiscal year 2024.

The President's 2024 budget calls for the decommissioning of three Whidbey Island-class old dock landing ships and not procuring any Flight II San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock ships (LPDs) over the next five years to replace them. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2023 requires the Navy to maintain a fleet of 31 large and medium-size amphibious warfare ships.

In an otherwise convivial April 18 hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska), a reserve Marine Corps colonel, confronted Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro about the Navy's shipbuilding plans.

"The 30-year [shipbuilding] plan shows that the Navy has no intention of meeting this statutory requirement," Sullivan said, noting that he worked with Marine Corps Commandant General David H. Berger to legislate the requirement into the law, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2023, a requirement which Berger affirmed during the hearing.

During the hearing, Sullivan read an excerpt from the law: "The naval combat forces of the Navy shall include not less than 11 operational aircraft carriers and not less than 31 operational amphibious warfare ships of which not less than 10 shall be amphibious assault ships."

The senator said he sympathized with Berger's awkward position.

"I want to compliment the commandant," Sullivan said. "It's not easy to be sitting next to your boss saying, 'We need this.' Your boss obviously doesn't agree, General."

Taking note of all of the planned studies and analysis on the subject, Sullivan declared all of it irrelevant in that the requirement has been set in law.

"The Congress of the United States did the balancing, Mr. Secretary, working with the Marine Corps," Sullivan said. [...] You are violating the law. Would you come before this committee and say, 'Sorry, we're not going to do 11 carriers'? [...] You can't do it sir. I simply find it unacceptable that that we're all just letting you say, 'Eh, maybe that was a suggestion by the Congress.' It wasn't a suggestion; it was a mandate."

Sullivan pursued the issue further.

"Why are you violating the law?" he asked. "And why does your shipbuilding plan have no remote interest for the next 3 years, as far as I can tell, of hitting the statutory mandate that we told you to hit. I have no idea what your answer is going to be, but you need to follow the law, sir. What's the answer?"

"Senator, as a member of the executive, it is my responsibility to follow the law," Del Toro said. "It's also my responsibility to ensure that we just don't waste taxpayer money on vessels, for example, that will never see the light

of day.”

“This Congress has given you multi-ship procurement authorities in the past three NDAAAs,” Sullivan said. “This is the third year in a row that amphibs are not being procured with this cost-saving authority. So, it’s a little rich when you talk to me about taxpayer savings when you’re not using the ability to save money that we gave you on amphibs. ... I’m requesting that you come back to this committee soon and tell us how you’re going to follow the law. That’s your only option, Mr. Secretary.”

“Senator, you have my commitment that I will come back to you with a statement on how we can fix this,” Del Toro said. “Yes, sir, it is my intent to follow the law. [...] As we develop the president’s budget for ’25, I will look at that as an option that we can pursue to get us back on track with multi-ship procurement for LPDs.”

“It’s not an option for you, Mr. Secretary,” Sullivan replied. “The committee, the Congress, the President have spoken. [...] This is a big issue, and right now the secretary of the Navy is ignoring the Congress of the United States. This is unacceptable.”