

Trump's MARAD Pick Signals Commercial Maritime Focus



ARLINGTON, Va. – President Donald Trump's decision to nominate former Maersk executive Stephen Carmel to lead the Maritime Administration, replacing retired Navy submarine commander Brent Sadler as the nominee, signals a strategic pivot toward commercial maritime expertise as the administration pursues its ambitious shipbuilding revival agenda.

The nominee switch reflects the administration's belief that rebuilding America's maritime industrial base requires deep industry experience rather than purely military credentials. Carmel's four decades in commercial shipping – from tanker captain to corporate executive – align with Trump's emphasis on taking a business approach to maritime challenges.

From Bridge to Boardroom

Carmel brings a rare combination of operational and executive experience to MARAD. A 1979 graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, he achieved his first command – a 40,000-ton

clean product tanker – at age 26, according to his biography at the academy where he now serves on the Board of Visitors.

“Steve began his career sailing as a deck officer and Master primarily on tankers for Maritime Overseas Corporation and Military Sealift Command,” his USMMA biography states, before transitioning to corporate roles at Maersk Line Limited, where he served as senior vice president for maritime services.

Currently president of U.S. Marine Management LLC, Carmel was a Ph.D. candidate at Old Dominion University.

The Trump Administration’s April executive order establishing a Maritime Action Plan emphasized commercial competitiveness over traditional military-centered thinking. A fact sheet on the White House website claims that 0.2% of the world’s ships are built by the United States, compared to 74% built by China.

Carmel’s experience with Maersk Line Limited – a major participant in the Maritime Security Program – provides some insight into the public-private partnerships the administration seeks to expand. His corporate background appears to be seen as a plug as the administration focuses on expanding the U.S.-flag fleet for both international and domestic trade, and as MARAD implements new initiatives including the Maritime Security Trust Fund and Maritime Prosperity Zones.

“Steve knows maritime, he knows the American Flag, and he sailed commercially in the U.S. Merchant Marine,” said Dredging Contractors of America CEO William Doyle in supporting the nomination.

Carmel’s selection follows the administration’s pattern of choosing industry veterans for key maritime positions, including the creation of a new Office of Maritime and Industrial Capacity at the National Security Council. This approach contrasts with previous administrations’ emphasis on

military appointees for these types of roles.

If confirmed, Carmel would become the first MARAD administrator since 2005 to hold a Master's Unlimited license, underscoring the administration's preference for hands-on maritime experience.

His advisory experience on the Chief of Naval Operations Executive Panel and Naval Studies Board provides some additional government experience, potentially easing coordination between defense and transportation maritime programs.

Implementation Challenges Ahead

The nominee inherits a MARAD facing significant personnel challenges, with approximately 12% of authorized positions vacant, according to recent reports. If confirmed, he will be a key figure in Trump's ambitious maritime agenda, including expanded shipbuilding incentives and Arctic strategy development.

Carmel has corporate experience managing profit-and-loss responsibility for complex vessel operations, which may be helpful as MARAD balances expanded responsibilities with constrained resources.

The Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Technology will consider Carmel's nomination as the administration pushes to implement its Maritime Action Plan. With Trump promising to "resurrect the American shipbuilding industry," Carmel's confirmation could signal a new commercial-first era in the U.S. maritime industry.