



CRS Report for Congress

Navy Ship Names: Background For Congress

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Summary

Names for Navy ships traditionally have been chosen and announced by the Secretary of the Navy. Congress in recent years has proposed, and sometimes passed, legislation regarding the naming of specific ships. This report will be updated when events warrant.

Who Names Navy Ships?

Names for Navy ships traditionally have been chosen and announced by the Secretary of the Navy, under the direction of the President and in accordance with rules prescribed by Congress. For most of the 19th century, U.S. law included language explicitly assigning the Secretary of the Navy the task of naming new Navy ships.¹ The

¹ A law approved in 1819 (Res. of March 3, 1819, §1, 3 Stat. 538, No. 7) stated “That all of the ships of the navy of the United States, now building, or hereafter to be built, shall be named by the Secretary of the Navy, under the direction of the President of the United States” in accordance with rules specifying that ships of the first class were to be named after states of the Union, and second and third class ships were to be named, respectively, after rivers and principal cities and towns. A law approved in 1858 (Act of June 12, 1858, c. 153, §5, 11 Stat. 319) provided a similar rule for “steamships of the navy...,” except that third-class vessels (those with fewer than twenty guns) were to be named by the Secretary of the Navy as the President may direct, taking care that no two vessels in the Navy shall bear the same name.” Section 1531 of the Revised Statutes of 1873-1874, citing the 1819 and 1858 laws, states: “The vessels of the Navy shall be named by the Secretary of the Navy, under the direction of the President...” in accordance with rules similar to those above, varying slightly depending on whether the vessel was a sailing ship or a steamship. In 1898, Congress passed a law (Act of May 4, 1898, c. 234, 30 Stat. 390 [appropriations for the naval services]) prescribing rules for the naming of “first-class battle ships and monitors,” which specified that these were to be named after States and “shall not be named for any city, place, or persons until the names of the States, shall have been exhausted.” The provision did not explicitly state whose duty it would be to assign names to vessels. Congress repealed this provision in 1908 as it pertained to monitors, permitting those vessels to be named “as the President may direct.” (Act of May 13, 1908, c. 166, 35 Stat. 159.)

reference to the Secretary of the Navy disappeared from the U.S. Code in 1925.² The Code today (10 USC §7292) is silent on the issue of who has the authority to name new Navy ships,³ but the Secretary of the Navy arguably retains implicit authority, given the location of §7292 in subtitle C of Title 10, which covers the Navy and Marine Corps.

What Is The Navy's Process For Selecting Names?

In discussing its name-selection process, the Navy cites the above-mentioned laws and states:

As with many other things, the procedures and practices involved in Navy ship naming are as much, if not more, products of evolution and tradition than of legislation. As we have seen, the names for new ships are personally decided by the Secretary of the Navy. The Secretary can rely on many sources to help him reach his decisions. Each year, the Naval Historical Center compiles primary and alternate ship name recommendations and forwards these to the Chief of Naval Operations by way of the chain of command. These recommendations are the result of research into the history of the Navy and by suggestions submitted by service members, Navy veterans, and the public. Ship name source records at the Historical Center reflect the wide variety of name sources that have been used in the past, particularly since World War I. Ship name recommendations are conditioned by such factors as the name categories for ship types now being built, as approved by the Secretary of the Navy; the distribution of geographic names of ships of the Fleet; names borne by previous ships which distinguished themselves in service; names recommended by individuals and groups; and names of naval leaders, national figures, and deceased members of the Navy and Marine Corps who have been honored for heroism in war or for extraordinary achievement in peace.

In its final form, after consideration at the various levels of command, the Chief of Naval Operations signs the memorandum recommending names for the current year's building program and sends it to the Secretary of the Navy. The Secretary considers these nominations, along with others he receives as well as his own thoughts in this matter. At appropriate times, he selects names for specific ships and announces them.

While there is no set time for assigning a name, it is customarily done before the ship is christened.⁴

² The reference to the Secretary of the Navy found in §1531 of the Revised Statutes of 1873-1874 (see previous footnote) is absent from the U.S. Code of 1925, which covers Navy vessel names in Title 34, §461-463.

³ 34 USC §461-463 of the 1925 U.S. Code (see previous footnote) were later recodified as 10 USC §7292. 10 USC §7292 provides that battleships are to be "named for a State. However, if the names of all the States are in use, a battleship may be named for a city, place, or person." It specifically authorizes the Secretary of the Navy to "change the name of any vessel bought for the Navy," §7292(c), but does not explicitly assign responsibility for ensuring that no two vessels have the same name, §7292(a), or for naming battleships, §7292(b).

⁴ Naval Historical Center, "Ship Naming in the United States Navy," available online at

Are There Naming Rules For Ship Types?

Rules for giving certain types of names to certain types of Navy ships have evolved over time. Attack submarines, for example, were once named for fish, then later for cities, and most recently for states, while cruisers were once named for cities, then later for states, and most recently for battles. The Navy states that while it “has attempted to be systematic in naming its ships, like all institutions it has been subject to evolutionary change, and the name sources of the Navy’s ships have not been immune to this change.”⁵ For ship types now being procured for the Navy, current naming practices can be summarized as follows:

- The 10 most recently named **aircraft carriers** have been named for U.S. presidents (8 ships) and Members of Congress (2 ships).⁶
- **Virginia (SSN-774) class attack submarines** are being named for states.
- The first **DDG-1000 class destroyer** has been named for Admiral Elmo R. “Bud” Zumwalt, Jr., who was the Chief of Naval Operations from 1970 to 1974. This is consistent with past practice of naming U.S. Navy destroyers for U.S. naval heroes and leaders.
- **Littoral Combat Ships (LCSs)** are being named for small and medium-sized cities. The Navy has named the first two LCSs Freedom and Independence, after multiple U.S. cities with these names.
- **San Antonio (LPD-17) class amphibious ships** are being named for U.S. cities.
- The Navy procured the first **LHA Replacement, or LHA(R)**, “big deck” amphibious assault ship, also known as the **LHA-6** class, in FY2007. The previous eight Wasp (LHD-1) class big deck amphibious assault ships were named for World War II-era Navy aircraft carriers and earlier Navy ships.
- **Lewis and Clark (TAKE-1) class cargo and ammunition ships** are being named for legendary explorers.

There have been exceptions to the Navy’s ship-naming rules, particularly for the purpose of naming a ship for a person when the rule for that type of ship would have called for it to be named for something else.⁷ The three-ship Seawolf (SSN-21) class of attack submarines — Seawolf (SSN-21), Connecticut (SSN-22), and Jimmy Carter (SSN-

⁴ (...continued)

[<http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq63-1.htm>].

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For further discussion, see Norman Polmar, “Misnaming Aircraft Carriers,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, September 2006: 30-31.

⁷ Ohio (SSBN-726) class ballistic missile submarines, for example, were named for states, but one (SSBN-730) was named for Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson of Washington, who died in office in 1983. Los Angeles (SSN-688) class attack submarines were named for cities, but one (SSN-709) was named for Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, the longtime director of the Navy’s nuclear propulsion program. Ticonderoga (CG-47) class cruisers were named for battles, but one (CG-51) was named for Thomas S. Gates, a former Secretary of the Navy and Secretary of Defense.

23)— were named for a fish, a state, and a president, respectively, reflecting no apparent rule. Some observers in recent years have perceived a breakdown in, or corruption of, the rules for naming Navy ships.⁸

Can Ships Be Named For Living Persons?

The Navy historically has named few ships for living persons. As shown in **Table 1**, since the 1970s, at least 10 U.S. military ships have been named for persons who were living at the time the name was announced.

Table 1. Ships Named For Persons Who Were Living At The Time

Ship type	Hull number	Ship name	Procured	In service
Aircraft carrier	CVN-70	Carl Vinson	FY1974	1982
Attack submarine	SSN-709	Hyman G. Rickover	FY1974	1984
Destroyer	DDG-51	Arleigh Burke	FY1985	1991
Aircraft carrier	CVN-74	John C. Stennis	FY1988	1995
Sealift ship	TAKR-300	Bob Hope	FY1993	1998
Aircraft carrier	CVN-76	Ronald Reagan	FY1995	2003
Destroyer	DDG-94	Nitze	FY1999	2005
Attack submarine	SSN-23	Jimmy Carter	FY1996	2005
Aircraft carrier	CVN-77	George H.W. Bush	FY2001	2008
Destroyer	DDG-108	Wayne E. Meyer	FY2004	2009

Source: Compiled by CRS. SSN-23 was originally procured in FY1992. Its procurement was suspended, and then reinstated in FY1996.

What Is The Public’s Role in Naming Ships?

Members of the public are sometimes interested in having Navy ships named for their own states or cities, for older U.S. Navy ships (particularly those on which they or their relatives served), for battles in which they or their relatives participated, or for people they admire. Citizens with such an interest sometimes contact the Navy, the Department of Defense, or Congress seeking support for their proposals.

What Is Congress’s Role In Naming Ships?

Congress has long maintained an interest in how Navy ships are named,⁹ and has influenced the naming of certain Navy ships. For example, one source states that “[the aircraft carriers] CVN 72 and CVN 73 were named prior to their start [of construction], in part to preempt potential congressional pressure to name one of those ships for Admiral

⁸ See, for example, Donald R. Bouchoux, “The Name Game,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, March 2000: 110-111, and Norman Polmar, *The Naval Institute Guide to the Ships and Aircraft of the U.S. Fleet*, 18th edition. Annapolis (MD), Naval Institute Press, 2005. p. 241.

⁹ For example, the 1819 and 1858 laws cited in footnote 1 set forth naming rules for certain kinds of ships. Today, 10 USC §7292(b) still requires that battleships (which the United States has not built since World War II) be named after states.

H.G. Rickover ([instead,] the [attack submarine] SSN 709 was named for the admiral).”¹⁰ Another example was a rivalry of sorts in Congress between those who supported naming the aircraft carrier CVN-76 for president Truman and those who supported naming it for president Reagan; the issue was effectively resolved by a decision announced by President Clinton in February 1995 to name one carrier (CVN-75) for Truman and another (CVN-76) for Reagan.¹¹ One press report suggests that the decision to name CVN-77 for President George H. W. Bush may have been influenced by a congressional suggestion.¹² Section 1012 of the FY2007 defense authorization act (H.R. 5122/P.L. 109-364 of October 17, 2006), expressed the sense of the Congress that the aircraft carrier CVN-78 should be named for President Gerald R. Ford, and the Navy announced on January 16, 2007, that CVN-78 would be so named. The Navy suggests that Congressional offices wishing to express support for proposals to name a Navy ship for a specific person, place, or thing contact the office of the Secretary of the Navy to make their support known. Congress may also introduce and pass legislation relating to ship names.

What Past Legislation Has There Been On The Issue?

Table 2 shows recent enacted provisions regarding the names of Navy ships. All of

Table 2. Recent Enacted Provisions

Fiscal Year	Public Law	Bill	Section	Ship	Name(s)
2007	109-364	H.R. 5122	1012	CVN-78	Gerald R. Ford
2001	106-398	H.R. 4205	1012	CVN-77	Lexington
1999	105-261	H.R. 3616	1014	an LPD-17 class ship	Clifton B. Cates
1996	104-106	S. 1124	1018	LHD-7	Iwo Jima
1996	104-106	S. 1124	1018	LPD-17 class amphibious ships	Marine Corps battles or members of the Marine Corps
1996	104-106	S. 1124	1019	an appropriate ship	Joseph Vittori
1991	101-510	H.R. 4739	1426	the next DDG-51	Samuel S. Stratton
1989	100-456	H.R. 4481	1221	the next SSBN	Melvin Price
1989	100-456	H.R. 4481	1222	an appropriate ship	Bob Hope
1989	100-202	H.J.Res. 395	8138	CVN-74 or CVN-75	John C. Stennis

Note: All of these provisions expressed the sense of the Congress about how a Navy ship should be named.

¹⁰ *The Naval Institute Guide to the Ships and Aircraft of the U.S. Fleet*, op cit, p. 113. See also p. 70 and p. 86.

¹¹ Patrick Pexton, “Clinton Compromise: Carriers Truman *And* Reagan,” *Navy Times*, February 13, 1995: 19. See also “Navy Announces Aircraft Carrier To Be Named For President Truman,” *Associated Press*, February 2, 1995. CVN-75 had been preliminarily named the United States.

¹² The article, which reported on the ship’s official naming ceremony, states: “[Senator] Warner recalled that he first suggested naming a carrier in the senior Bush’s honor last year [i.e., in 2001], during a ceremony in Newport News to christen the [previous] carrier Ronald Reagan.” (Dale Eisman, “Navy Names New Aircraft Carrier For Elder Bush,” *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, December 10, 2002.)

these measures expressed the sense of the Congress about how a Navy ship should be named. **Table 3** shows examples of proposed bills and amendments regarding the names of Navy ships going back to the 93rd Congress. Some of these measures expressed the sense of the Congress about how a Navy ship should be named, while others would mandate a certain name for a ship. Although few of these measures were acted on after being referred to committee, they all signaled congressional interest in how certain ships should be named, and thus may have influenced Navy decisions on these matters.

Table 3. Examples of Proposed Bills And Amendments

[Congress] and Bill	Ship	Proposed name(s)
[109 th] S. 2766	CVN-78	Gerald R. Ford
[107 th] H.Con Res. 294	a new naval vessel	Bluejacket
[106 th] S.Con.Res. 84	CVN-77	Lexington
[105 th] S.Amdt. 2812 to S. 2057	LPD-17 class ship	Clifton B. Cates
[104 th] H.J.Res 61	CVN-76	Ronald Reagan
[104 th] H.R. 445	CVN-76	Harry Truman
[104 th] S.Con.Res. 62	SSN-774	South Dakota
[104 th] S.J.Res. 17	CVN-76	Ronald Reagan
[104 th] S.Amdt. 2277 to S. 1026	LHD-7	Iwo Jima
[104 th] S.Amdt. 2277 to S. 1026	LPD-17 class ships	famous Marine Corps battles or heroes
[104 th] S.Amdt. 4350 to S. 1745	a SSN-774 class submarine	South Dakota
[103 rd] H.R. 5283	an appropriate ship	Joseph Vittori
[102 nd] H.Con Res. 354	a guided missile cruiser	Pearl Harbor
[102 nd] H.R. 6115	CVN-76	Harry S Truman
[100 th] H.Amdt. 614 to H.R. 4264	next SSBN-726 class submarine deployed after enactment	Melvin Price
[100 th] S.Amdt. 1354 to H.J.Res. 395	CVN-74 or CVN-75	John C. Stennis
[98 th] H.Res. 99	an aircraft carrier	Wasp
[97 th] H.Con.Res. 312	a nonlethal naval vessel*	Corpus Christi*
[97 th] H.Res. 174	an aircraft carrier	Wasp
[97 th] H.R. 4977	CVN-72	Hyman G. Rickover
[93 rd] H.Con.Res. 386	CVN-70	Carl Vinson
[93 rd] H.Con.Res. 387	CVN-70	Carl Vinson
[93 rd] H.J.Res. 831	CVN-70	Carl Vinson

* The resolution expressed the sense of Congress that the attack submarine Corpus Christi (SSN-705) be renamed, and that a nonlethal naval vessel be named Corpus Christi.