
Defense Report

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The U.S. Merchant Fleet — Sailing in a Sea of Trouble

One of the assets the U.S. armed forces would need if they ever had to fight a major war is a healthy, capable fleet of merchant ships. While the Navy has some cargo vessels, their number is limited because we have always assumed that civilian vessels would be available in adequate numbers to carry the heavy bulk cargoes needed to support fighting forces in distant battles.

Unfortunately, that assumption is no longer valid. Where the flags of the U.S. merchant fleet were once preeminent on the world's oceans, we now rank eighth in size. The fleet that consisted of more than 1,500 ships at the start of World War II has shrunk to just 580 and many of those are of types that would be of little value in moving cargoes to remote areas where there are no sophisticated port facilities. Hundreds of other ships actually owned by U.S. companies have been registered in foreign countries to escape the more stringent U.S. safety and crewing requirements. These ships might become available in an emergency, but they could not respond as fast as the U.S.-flag vessels, and their foreign crews might object to sailing into dangerous situations.

The managers of the merchant fleet and the officers of the maritime unions point accusing fingers at each other to indicate the cause of the fleet's demise. The shipowners say union demands to overstaff some ships by as much as 25 percent and to give many seamen as much as six months' paid vacation each year has made U.S. shipping costs non-competitive. The unions say the owners have not fought for markets to keep their ships busy, thereby reducing the number of ships at sea and forcing featherbedding as a way to keep seamen employed. Impartial commentators are convinced that the blame must be shared by both parties, with some added culpability for the U.S. government's management of subsidies.

Management of the maritime program has been transferred recently from the Commerce Department to the Department of Transportation where Secretary Drew Lewis says he will do something about improving this vital mobilization asset. The armed services wish him well. They need a responsive merchant fleet.