
Defense Report

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Sealift—The Achilles Heel of Contingency Forces?

When President Bush drew the line in the desert sand, he did it with the bayonet of an American soldier. Spearheading Operation Desert Shield was the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, followed shortly by air and naval units and by marines flown to Saudi Arabia to be married up with fighting equipment stored on ships in the Indian Ocean.

A whole lot of people can take pride in the manner in which more than 200,000 of America's finest fighting troops, with millions of tons of supplies and equipment, were projected halfway around the world in less than three months. But a lot of other people have expressed concern that if Saddam Hussein had continued to march into Saudi Arabia, our military forces would probably not have been there in time to stop him.

By straining our airlift capacity almost to the breaking point, we made clear to ally and aggressor alike our commitment to halt any further aggression. At the same time, Operation Desert Shield has already brought home the lesson that we are in dire need of more fast sealift if we are to maintain the ability to reinforce rapidly our forward deployments.

We entered this operation with eight 33-knot SL-7 fast sealift ships, ideally suited for deployment of heavy Army units. Military Sealift Command also ordered up from the reserve fleet some 45-50 older, slower steamships to reinforce and sustain Operation Desert Shield. At least 10 of these aging rustbuckets have fallen out because of boiler or engine failures, further delaying the arrival of needed arms and ammunition to the Persian Gulf region.

The need for greater fast sealift capacity hasn't gone unnoticed on Capitol Hill either. In the 1990 budget, Congress appropriated \$592 million for the purchase of more fast transport ships, but more than a third of that was diverted to health and medical programs and the rest was simply not used. The recently-completed budget for fiscal 1991 contains another \$250 million for the purchase or conversion of additional fast sealift.

Right now the Navy needs to reevaluate and reallocate those resources required to assure that our landpower forces can be deployed, supported and sustained when and where they are needed in defense of our vital national interests.