

Looking Out to 2020: Trends Relevant to the Coast Guard

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Introduction and summary

Background

In December 1995, the Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard asked CNA to help support the development of a capstone document that describes today's Coast Guard and includes a framework within which to portray its continued relevance to the United States.¹ Because of the range of its responsibilities, the Coast Guard is connected in some way with many outside organizations also involved in the maritime environment. These are governmental (federal, state, and local) and private entities of the United States and many foreign nations. Due to this complex web of responsibilities and relationships of varying scope and significance, it is difficult to concisely explain what the Coast Guard does and what it might look like well into the next century.

CNA responded with its Future Directions Study for the United States Coast Guard. The study focused on three issues:

- The traditions, enduring qualities, and core values that define the Coast Guard and underpin its unique contributions to the Republic
- The trends (and contingencies) that will influence the nature, relative importance, and combination of future Coast Guard missions and operational relationships
- The implications of the service as a whole, given those trends and possible contingencies, and how particular future directions would translate into principles or guidelines for future operations.

In November 1996, the Future Directions study team briefed the senior Coast Guard leadership—including the Commandant, Vice Commandant, Chief of Staff, and the two Area Commanders—on our initial findings. The product of this presentation, CNA Annotated

1. Letter from the Vice Commandant, dated 20 December 1995.

Briefing (CAB) 96-96, includes a discussion of Coast Guard core values and characteristics, Coast Guard-relevant trends and contingencies, and four notional end states representing the potential impact of these trends.

Approach

This document supports our initial, summary presentation of trends in CAB 96-96 with a more detailed description of our research. We focus on trends in order to describe relevant external variables. We define trends as changes in now-identifiable phenomena, and focus our research only on those trends that are likely to affect Coast Guard missions. Countless other trends we could have examined will have no effect on the Coast Guard, cannot be tracked beyond a few years, or are not adequately supported by evidence. There are also trends that will affect the Coast Guard but are beyond the scope of this study.

- Trends internal to the Coast Guard. No amount of study or exposure would confer the necessary understanding, sensitivity, and cultural awareness to justify speculation here.
- Resources availability. While it might seem logical to extrapolate today's tight fiscal environment well into the next century, we found little evidence that this will necessarily be the case.
- The shape and direction of American and foreign policies and relations. The number of possible variations one could imagine is large and diverse enough to overwhelm any analytical technique.

The first five sections of this document represent the five major trend categories that emerged during our research: societal, technological, political, economic, and environmental. We relied primarily on open-source literature and discussions with experts on various aspects of the maritime environment, in government, academia, and the private sector.

Trends are not the only external pressures affecting the Coast Guard. Contingencies also arise. They may be consistent with observable, long-term trends, but they are discrete events that take place rapidly

and are likely to have an immediate impact on both the missions and the organization of the Coast Guard. Contingencies imply a greater degree of uncertainty and unpredictability than trends, so it is difficult to forecast the future of the Coast Guard based upon their occurrence. Nonetheless, they are important to consider, having profoundly affected Coast Guard organization and missions in the past. CAB 96-96 describes in more detail those contingencies that would have the most dramatic effect on the Coast Guard. They include a major oil or chemical spill, an explosion in a port facility, a passenger ship disaster, repeal of the Jones Act or major maritime deregulation, war or major conflict, and a terrorist incident.

Findings

Table 1 (not included) summarized our finding. With one exception, we found no trends that could, in themselves, fundamentally transform the Coast Guard between now and 2020. The one exception, the anticipated evolution of the Navy surface combatant force into a circa-100-ships, high-tech, deeper-draft force, could force the Coast Guard into a greater naval support role, especially in low-end conflict or OOTW scenarios. Any number of contingencies—especially those we describe—could have a dramatic impact on the Coast Guard, but their occurrence, scale, and effect are difficult to predict.

The study team had expected to find a number of trends that would bring about fundamental changes. Many of the trends we examined will, in fact, bring about significant changes in how missions are performed (especially in regard to the technologies available to the Coast Guard). However, these trends, for the most part, will not fundamentally change the type and number of missions that are performed. What this means is that the Coast Guard's future will be determined by contingencies, by congressional preferences, and by the preferences of its own leaders. With this in mind, we concluded that it would be best if Coast Guard leaders defined a course of action to achieve its desired end state.