

OPENING STATEMENT OF  
VICE ADMIRAL J. C. IRWIN  
VICE COMMANDANT, U. S. COAST GUARD  
BEFORE THE HOUSE MERCHANT MARINE AND FISHERIES COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD AND NAVIGATION

JULY 29, 1987

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE, I AM PLEASED TO APPEAR BEFORE YOU TODAY TO DISCUSS THE COAST GUARD'S INVOLVEMENT IN POLAR ICE OPERATIONS.

BEGINNING WITH THE PURCHASE OF ALASKA IN 1867, ICE-STRENGTHENED CUTTERS OF THE COAST GUARD'S PREDECESSOR SERVICE HAVE PATROLLED ICE-COVERED WATERS TO EXECUTE FEDERAL RESPONSIBILITIES IN THESE REMOTE AREAS. BUILDING ON THIS EXPERIENCE, COAST GUARD CUTTERS OPERATED EXTENSIVELY AROUND GREENLAND BEFORE AND DURING WORLD WAR II. COAST GUARD ENGINEERS WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR DESIGN OF THE WIND-CLASS ICEBREAKERS IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THAT WAR, CREATING THE FIRST MODERN DEEP-DRAFT ICEBREAKERS. I MIGHT ADD THAT WE ARE STILL ATTEMPTING TO OPERATE TWO OF THESE SHIPS--NORTHWIND AND WESTWIND--43 YEARS LATER, AS PART OF THE NATION'S ICEBREAKER FLEET.

BECAUSE OF THE COAST GUARD'S ACKNOWLEDGED OPERATIONAL EXPERTISE IN ICEBREAKING, THE NAVY'S POLAR ICEBREAKERS WERE TRANSFERRED TO THE COAST GUARD IN THE 1960S. THIS MOVE ALSO RECOGNIZED THE ECONOMIES OF HAVING A CENTRALLY-OPERATED ICEBREAKER FLEET...RATHER THAN SPREADING THESE SPECIALIZED SHIPS AMONG VARIOUS FEDERAL AGENCIES. ICEBREAKERS ARE DESIGNED TO DEPLOY AND OPERATE FOR LONG PERIODS IN REMOTE GEOGRAPHIC AREAS. WITH THEIR ABILITY TO PENETRATE ICE-COVERED AREAS TOO DANGEROUS FOR CONVENTIONAL SHIPS, THEY HAVE TRADITIONALLY PERFORMED A VARIETY OF MISSIONS: ESCORTING OTHER VESSELS, CONDUCTING RESEARCH, CARRYING CARGO, PERFORMING SEARCH AND RESCUE DUTIES, ESTABLISHING AIDS TO NAVIGATION, AND PROJECTING A U. S. PRESENCE.

IN RECENT YEARS, COAST GUARD ICEBREAKERS HAVE SUPPORTED OTHER FEDERAL AGENCIES FULFILLING NATIONAL INTERESTS...

...IN THE ANTARCTIC, IN ACCORDANCE WITH A PRESIDENTIAL DIRECTIVE, ICEBREAKERS SUPPORT THE U. S. ANTARCTIC PROGRAM TO MAINTAIN AN ACTIVE AND INFLUENTIAL PRESENCE THERE. SUPPORT ACTIVITIES INCLUDE BREAKING A CHANNEL AND ESCORTING SUPPLY SHIPS TO MCMURDO STATION, DELIVERING CARGO TO OTHER LOCATIONS, SUPPORTING A VARIETY OF SCIENCE PROJECTS TO THE EXTENT SCHEDULING ALLOWS, AND TRANSPORTING INSPECTION PARTIES TO FOREIGN STATIONS.

...IN THE WESTERN ARCTIC, ICEBREAKERS CONDUCT CLASSIFIED AND UNCLASSIFIED RESEARCH FOR THE NAVY, NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION, AND OTHERS, AND HAVE ASSISTED COMMERCIAL VESSELS OPERATING ON THE NORTH SLOPE.

...IN THE EASTERN ARCTIC, MILITARY SEALIFT COMMAND SHIPS ARE ESCORTED TO RESUPPLY U. S. AIR FORCE BASES IN GREENLAND, AND ICEBREAKERS PERFORM MISCELLANEOUS DUTIES TO ENHANCE THE U. S. PRESENCE THERE. RESEARCH, OFTEN OF A CLASSIFIED NATURE, IS CONDUCTED IN SURROUNDING WATERS FOR THE NAVY AND ICEBREAKERS PARTICIPATE IN MAJOR FLEET EXERCISES. RESEARCH SUPPORT IS ALSO PROVIDED FOR THE INTERNATIONAL ICE PATROL.

WHEN THE COAST GUARD ASSUMED TOTAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE NATION'S ICEBREAKER FLEET, THERE WERE SEVEN WIND-CLASS

ICEBREAKERS AND THE SLIGHTLY-NEWER ICEBREAKER GLACIER. TWO POWERFUL POLAR-CLASS SHIPS WERE BUILT IN THE MID-1970S. WITH GLACIER'S DECOMMISSIONING LAST MONTH, THE FLEET NOW CONSISTS OF TWO POLAR-CLASS AND TWO WIND-CLASS ICEBREAKERS. THIS DECREASE IN FLEET SIZE IS THE RESULT OF A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO ACCEPT FEWER, MORE CAPABLE ICEBREAKERS, SUCH AS THE POLAR-CLASS AND ANY PLANNED REPLACEMENTS.

SIX MAJOR STUDIES OF ICEBREAKER REQUIREMENTS HAVE BEEN DONE SINCE 1973. THE LAST--AND MOST COMPREHENSIVE--OF THESE WAS THE POLAR ICEBREAKER REQUIREMENTS STUDY, OR PIRS, WHICH WAS DIRECTED BY THE OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET AND FINISHED IN JULY 1984. PIRS WAS UNIQUE BECAUSE OF ITS THOROUGHNESS AND MULTI-AGENCY PARTICIPATION. THE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION, COAST GUARD, NAVY, MARAD, NOAA, NSF AND OMB ALL PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY.

PIRS CONCLUDED THAT A POLAR ICEBREAKER FLEET IS ESSENTIAL TO THE NATIONAL INTEREST, SHOULD BE OPERATED BY THE COAST GUARD, AND REQUIRES IMPROVEMENTS IN CAPABILITIES, ESPECIALLY FOR SCIENCE SUPPORT. PIRS RECOMMENDED THAT THE COAST GUARD MAINTAIN A FLEET OF FOUR ICEBREAKERS TO MEET STATED REQUIREMENTS, AND THAT WORK START IMMEDIATELY ON A NEW ICEBREAKER DESIGN WHICH WOULD PROVIDE ENHANCED RESEARCH SUPPORT WHILE RETAINING ESSENTIAL ESCORT AND LOGISTIC CAPABILITIES. THE CONGRESS AFFIRMED THE PIRS CONCLUSION ON REPLACEMENTS IN THE COAST GUARD AUTHORIZATION ACT OF 1984 (PUBLIC LAW 98-557) BY DIRECTING THE SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION TO "...PREPARE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION PLANS FOR THE PURCHASE OF

AT LEAST TWO POLAR ICEBREAKING VESSELS." THE ACT ALSO REQUIRED CONSULTATION "...WITH OTHER INTERESTED FEDERAL AGENCIES FOR THE PURPOSES OF ENSURING THAT ALL APPROPRIATE MILITARY, SCIENTIFIC, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL INTERESTS ARE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT." THE COAST GUARD SOLICITED EXTENSIVE INPUT FROM ICEBREAKER USERS BEFORE AND DURING THE DESIGN PROCESS AND IS NEARING COMPLETION OF A REPLACEMENT ICEBREAKER DESIGN.

WE ARE ALSO CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVE PROCUREMENT APPROACHES TO ACQUIRE THE NEEDED ICEBREAKER CAPABILITY MOST EFFECTIVELY AND ECONOMICALLY. WE ARE CURRENTLY DEVELOPING A LEGISLATIVE PROPOSAL WHICH WOULD PROVIDE THE COAST GUARD THE NECESSARY AUTHORITY TO ACQUIRE NEEDED ICEBREAKER CAPABILITY USING ALTERNATIVE PROCUREMENT METHODS. SPECIFICALLY, WE ARE ACTIVELY CONSIDERING THE MERITS OF LEASING RATHER THAN BUYING THE ICEBREAKER CAPABILITY. A LEASE OR BUY OPTION COULD BE INCLUDED IN THE REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL (RFP), PERMITTING US TO COMPARE THE COST AND BENEFIT OF THESE OPTIONS. WE ARE ALSO EXPLORING THE OPTION OF CONTRACTING FOR THE VESSEL'S OPERATION. THE DECISION OF WHETHER TO PROCEED WITH AN OPERATING CONTRACT WILL BE MADE LATER. IN ADDITION TO LEASING, WE ARE EXPLORING PROCUREMENT STRATEGIES FOR COAST GUARD DESIGN OR ALTERNATIVE PROPOSALS THAT WOULD PERMIT THE INDUSTRY TO MEET OUR REQUIREMENTS.

THE NEED FOR REPLACING OUR AGING ICEBREAKERS GROWS MORE AND MORE CRITICAL. AN EXAMPLE IS THAT WE WERE RECENTLY FORCED TO ASK FOR CANADIAN ICEBREAKER ASSISTANCE TO SUPPORT THE GREENLAND AIR FORCE

BASE RESUPPLY, BECAUSE ENGINEERING DIFFICULTIES DELAYED THE DEPLOYMENT OF A WIND-CLASS ICEBREAKER. THE COAST GUARD AND NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION ARE WORKING TOGETHER TO ENSURE THAT INTERIM AND LONG TERM REQUIREMENTS WILL BE ADEQUATELY ACCOMMODATED. THIS WILL HELP UPDATE THE COMPREHENSIVE WORK DONE BY PIRS.

I WOULD BE HAPPY TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS.