

“Catastrophic.”

That’s just one of the words used to describe the effects of the additional \$600 billion in cuts set to strike our nation’s military, resulting from the abject failure of the 12-member super committee charged with shaping cuts in the federal budget as directed by the Budget Control Act.

The Joint Committee on Deficit Reduction is becoming but a memory of another failed initiative in Washington. The effects of its failure, however, are enormous and won’t soon be forgotten. The lack of urgency in Congress is bitterly disappointing and, quite frankly, endangers the security of this nation.

Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee in November, one of our nation’s highest military leaders, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan W. Greenert, said “sequestration” would cause “irreversible damage” to our nation’s naval forces.

The U.S. Navy faces its smallest force since before World War I. Sequestration will cause irreparable damage to the Navy’s manpower and ship force structure. Aging ships in the fleet are already on overdue maintenance schedules, lacking the appropriate funding levels to conduct life-cycle maintenance and modernization work.

Without changes to sequestration, ships will be taken out of service before their scheduled decommissioning. What the United States will ultimately sacrifice here is presence and power projection. We will not have the assets to effectively project power and display a forward-deployed presence in regions of the world that demand our attention and oversight.

To retain the greatest Navy in the world, we need to maintain our fleet capabilities, or we will lose the ability to project power in the 21st century and our competitive edge at sea and in our industrial base. In order to retain this influence, we must increase our investment in shipbuilding, not cut it.

An iconic symbol of American freedom domestically and abroad and a potential item for the sequestration chopping block, the aircraft carrier could face detrimental cuts to her fleet and capability because of a flawed defense strategy driven by looming budget cuts. The Navy has 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers in her fleet. While six remain deployed across the world, supporting operations, others are in rotation, utilized for training or remain in the shipyard for necessary maintenance.

In 50 years, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier has made history and shaped the world into what it is today. The USS Enterprise (CVN 65), the first of the 11 nuclear-powered carriers, has served during Vietnam, the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Libya, Desert Shield/Storm, Bosnia, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

The aircraft carrier also symbolizes the industrial engine within the United States that will sputter if sequestration remains in its current form.

The construction of these great ships is supported through business and industry spanning 50 states and built by our greatest asset: the American people. They are designed, manufactured and engineered by the most skilled American tradesmen and craftsmen in our entire industrial workforce.

Some of the most skilled workers in the shipyard train for seven years to attain the proficiency necessary to build these nuclear-powered carriers. These carriers take five years to build, and if we do not move without interruption from completing one and beginning construction on the next, the American workforce cannot be maintained. The shipbuilding industrial base — those skilled workers — cannot stop and start work.

The men and women who build our ships will go to the back of an already long unemployment line, and those critical skills, that knowledge base and experience, will be lost as they seek employment elsewhere. That is not simply American job loss. It is a loss of critical national security capability.

Every aircraft carrier represents peace, prosperity, leadership and democracy, while standing ready and fully capable of being an instrument of warfare.

Since World War II, each crisis that threatened the national security interests of the United States has shown the need for an aircraft carrier to transport our men and women serving to protect freedom around the globe. The American aircraft carrier is the pinnacle of industrial engineering, ingenuity and genius; where mechanical, nuclear, aerospace and electrical engineering converge with naval architecture to form a magnificent 100,000-ton, 1,092-foot-long piece of America.

All this hard work by Americans — the years of designing, building, manufacturing and training — must not become a forgotten trade.

The super committee chose failure over making tough choices for the greater good of this country. Sequestration cuts threaten our national security capability to defend our nation and respond to conflict in the 21st century. Failure is an outcome we must not and cannot accept.

Rep. Rob Wittman (R-Va.) is chairman of the Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations and co-chairman of the Congressional Shipbuilding Caucus.

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