



TESTIMONY OF
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ON
“FRONTLINE DEFENDERS: HOW THE COAST GUARD’S
DEPLOYABLE SPECIALIZED FORCES CONFRONT
NARCOTERRORISTS AND OTHER MARITIME THREATS ON THE HIGH SEAS”
BEFORE THE
HOUSE HOMELAND SECURITY SUBCOMMITTEE ON
TRANSPORTATION AND MARITIME SECURITY
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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. I am honored to be here today to discuss the U.S. Coast Guard’s efforts to deliver peace through strength to control, secure, and defend America’s borders.

The United States is a maritime nation. With more than 95,000 miles of shoreline, 361 commercial ports, and 25,000 miles of navigable waterways, the maritime domain fortifies our national security and economic prosperity. Over 90 percent of overseas trade enters or leaves the U.S. by sea, facilitating more than \$5.4 trillion in maritime commerce annually. The security of this domain is not optional – it is foundational to our national and economic security. The Coast Guard is the Nation’s leading agency in this domain.

In the Department of Homeland Security, the Coast Guard serves as the Nation’s finest maritime fighting force. We are one of the six Armed Services, a federal law enforcement agency, and a member of the Intelligence Community. The Coast Guard controls, secures, and defends the U.S. border and maritime approaches; ensures the safe and secure flow of commerce vital to economic prosperity; and responds to crises and contingencies that often come with little or no warning.

Under the leadership of President Trump and Secretary Noem, the Coast Guard is changing and growing to meet the needs of Americans. This effort is Force Design 2028, a bold blueprint to build a stronger, more agile, and responsive fighting force. Under the leadership and vision of Secretary Noem, this effort directly enhances our ability to enforce the law, secure maritime approaches, protect commerce, and respond to crises. By expanding our workforce and deploying advanced assets and technologies, the Coast Guard is better postured to secure our Nation’s maritime borders and sovereign interests against these persistent threats.

Deployable Specialized Forces

Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces are elite teams capable of rapid worldwide deployment and a wide array of missions. These teams are trained for high-risk scenarios such as direct action; counter-narcotics; operations in chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear environments; and disaster response – providing specialized capabilities to the Coast Guard, Department of Homeland Security, Department of War, and other interagency partners.

Maritime Security Response Teams are the Coast Guard's premier units for counterterrorism and high-risk law enforcement. Trained in conducting direct action and advanced interdiction missions, they specialize in opposed boardings against hostile targets, including in chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear environments. They also possess canine explosives-detection teams and can conduct counter-unmanned aircraft systems operations.

Tactical Law Enforcement Teams are the Coast Guard's law enforcement experts specializing in counter-trafficking operations at sea. They provide highly skilled, deployable teams for counter-narcotics and maritime interdiction from U.S. and allied vessels. Their mission set also includes alien migration interdiction. These teams can conduct both compliant and non-compliant vessel boardings.

Maritime Safety and Security Teams are anti-terrorism and force protection units responsible for safeguarding strategic shipping, high-interest vessels, and critical port infrastructure. Their capabilities are focused on waterborne security, non-compliant vessel pursuits, and the use of canine teams for explosive detection. As a rapid response force, these teams can be deployed globally to meet evolving maritime security threats.

Port Security Units are expeditionary security units, primarily comprised of reservists, that provide sustained force protection for seaports of disembarkation and critical infrastructure. They can deploy within 96 hours of a crisis and establish full operations within 24 hours of arrival, offering both waterside and shoreside security.

The National Strike Force is a highly specialized rapid response unit equipped to handle major oil discharges, hazardous material releases, and Weapons of Mass Destruction incidents. The National Strike Force provides technical expertise, specialized equipment, and incident management support for complex environmental and security crises. The force is a critical national asset, capable of worldwide deployment to mitigate threats, manage containment and cleanup efforts, and provide crucial technical support to federal on-scene coordinators.

Regional Dive Lockers provide full-time diving capabilities for a variety of missions, including the security of ports and waterways, maintaining aids to navigation, and conducting ship husbandry and repair, often in extreme environments like remote polar regions.

In a complex and evolving maritime environment, Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces are critical to America's national and economic security. Most recently, these forces, supported by the Department of War, are combatting the threat of "dark fleet tankers," used to illegally transport sanctioned oil. In these high-stakes, at-sea operations, these forces are prepared to execute complex opposed boardings.

In the Western Hemisphere, these teams are also leaders in drug interdiction, a mission that accounts for a significant portion of their operational focus. Teams frequently deploy on U.S. and allied naval vessels to intercept a variety of drug-smuggling conveyances. These range from high-speed "go-fast" boats to sophisticated, hard-to-detect, self-propelled semi-submersibles. The interdiction of these vessels is a core component of the effort to dismantle the powerful transnational criminal organizations and foreign terrorist organizations that threaten American communities.

Maritime Drug Interdiction

Maritime drug trafficking remains one of the most direct threats to U.S. homeland security and public safety. As directed by the President, the Coast Guard is on the front lines securing the global supply chain against drug trafficking and reducing the availability of illicit drugs that devastate American communities. Narco-terrorists exploit maritime routes to move drugs, generate enormous profits, and fuel violence, instability, and crime. These revenues are increasingly leveraged by hostile actors and transnational networks to fund human trafficking, weapons smuggling, sanctions evasion, and other malign activities that destabilize regions and drive illegal migration. The Coast Guard is often the only agency with the authority, capability, and presence to act at sea. The Coast Guard interdicts more illicit drugs than all other federal law enforcement agencies combined.

Since January 2025, the Coast Guard seized over 511,000 pounds of cocaine from the maritime domain - representing over 189 million potentially lethal doses. This all-time historic high more than doubles the amount of cocaine removed in FY 2024 and nearly triples the removals from FY 2023. These seizures save American taxpayers over \$10 billion in social programs, including over \$2.3 billion in healthcare costs from cocaine interdictions alone.

Combating fentanyl and its illegal precursor chemicals remains one of the Administration's top priorities, and the Coast Guard has taken significant action in this effort. Fentanyl is the leading cause of U.S. drug-related deaths since 2016, accounting for approximately 70 percent of drug overdose deaths in 2023. Mexican narco-terrorists are the primary source of the synthetic opioid flow into the U.S. Accordingly, the Coast Guard leverages its broad authorities to seek out and interdict both fentanyl and its precursor chemicals. On January 31, 2025, Commandant Admiral Lunday directed immediate action to bolster these operations, focusing on interdicting precursor chemicals and disrupting the revenue streams that fund fentanyl trafficking.

Illegal Migration

The Coast Guard also secures 220 river miles along the Rio Grande, from the Gulf of America to West Texas, part of the U.S. Southern Border, and the maritime approaches to San Diego. These areas continue to experience a sustained and above-average rate of illegal maritime migration. This vector presents a persistent threat characterized by continuous smuggling attempts and is targeted through the Coast Guard's Operation Border Trident, on the southwest maritime border, and Operation River Wall, along the Rio Grande in Texas, both of which seek to achieve 100 percent control of the southern maritime border. Trafficking organizations in this region primarily utilize high-speed boats, jet skis and other personal watercraft, and additional makeshift watercraft. Although a variety of nationalities are encountered, the overwhelming majority of those interdicted are Mexican nationals.

The maritime approaches to the southeastern U.S. are also a leading vector for illegal maritime migration. Most of the migrants encountered originate in Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, or the Dominican Republic, utilizing established transit corridors. Cuban and Haitian migrants typically journey toward Florida, either directly or through the Bahamas. Meanwhile, Dominican and some Haitian groups often cross the Mona Passage to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. They attempt these journeys on a wide array of vessels, from coastal freighters and high-speed "go-fast" boats to dangerously crude, homemade rafts.

The *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy* have a parallel focus to control migration, stop drug flows, and strengthen stability and security on land and sea in the Western Hemisphere. Under the direction of the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Coast Guard maintains a robust and forward-leaning posture to combat illegal immigration. In 2025 we interdicted, deterred, or transported 11,713 aliens illegally attempting entry. This was 120 percent more than in 2024. Our persistent presence both serves to deter departures from countries of origin and enables a rapid response to suspicious vessels, in close coordination with our international, federal, state, and local partners. To enhance this posture, we utilize advanced unmanned systems, such as long-range unmanned aerial systems, surface drones, and small aerial drones launched from our over-the-horizon boats, to provide persistent surveillance and support shore patrols.

Conclusion

Maritime drug trafficking, illegal migration, and dark fleet tankers are distinct challenges, but they share a common feature: each exploits the maritime domain to evade law enforcement and accountability. Through its unique and enduring law enforcement authorities, the Coast Guard directly confronts these threats – securing and defending the Nation’s borders and maritime approaches every day.

These threats are evolving, and the demands placed on the Coast Guard continue to increase. The Coast Guard’s layered security model – leveraging forward presence, elite capabilities, an exceptional workforce, and unmatched legal authorities – allows us to address risks far from U.S. shores before they reach our homeland.

The changes underway through Force Design 2028 are already accelerating enduring change and showing measurable results. By empowering our workforce and enhancing the ways we conduct our patrols and inspections, recent operations resulted in the seizure of more than 511,000 pounds of cocaine valued at more than \$3.8 billion. These outcomes demonstrate both the effectiveness of our authorities and the return on investment they provide.

Since 1790, in peace and in war, a ready Coast Guard has been an indispensable element of national security. With continued Congressional support, the Coast Guard will remain prepared to meet today’s challenges and build a more resilient and capable Service for decades to come.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today and look forward to your questions. *Semper Paratus.*