The Day

Opinion

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USS District of Columbia keel laying proves our region gets big things done

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On June 4 our nation marked the long-awaited, official start of constr

uction of the USS District of Columbia — a boat that has been the number one priority of the U.S. Navy since 2013. On that date, DC Columbia's keel laying ceremony took place at Electric Boat's Quonset Point facility, which marked the end of the first leg in the decades-long endeavor to launch the first Columbia-class submarine by 2027. The Columbia's fleet of 12 will replace the aging Ohio-class submarines that have been on persistent patrols around the globe since 1981.

"Keel laying" is an ancient maritime term whose historic definition marks "the formal recognition of the start of a ship's construction." As DC Columbia's workforce in Connecticut, Rhode Island and Virginia know well, however, the race towards construction hardly began on June 4. In fact, the origins of the Columbia-class go back to 2007 when admirals William Hilarides and Cecil Hany raised the alarm that the number of our nation's submarine designers and engineers was in steep decline, despite the obvious need to begin work on the Ohio-class replacement.

Spurred by their warnings, as a freshman on the House Seapower Subcommittee, I succeeded in "plussing up" the Navy's budget in 2008 with the first $8 million down-payment to hire new designers for what is now called the Columbia-class submarine program. That initial investment spurred new hiring of engineers and designers in New London. Since that modest beginning, the Columbia-class has steadily grown into what is now the single largest shipbuilding program in the Navy's budget.

In the 2010 budget, Congress increased support for the Columbia program to fund development of newly enhanced nuclear propulsion and deterrence systems. In 2014, my office secured $6 million in federal funds from the U.S. Department of Labor to size up the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board's (EWIB) manufacturing pipeline job training program — a critical tool to meeting Columbia's increased workload. As ranking member of the Seapower Subcommittee in 2015, I co-wrote the bipartisan law that created

the National Sea Based Deterrence Fund, which allows for bulk purchasing for materials and parts for Columbia, saving money and time for the Navy and taxpayer. It operates the same way as shoppers buying in bulk at stores like Sam's Club and Costco and, according to the Navy, the fund has saved at least $1.5 billion on the Columbia program since the 2015 law went into effect.

Finally, in 2020, the Seapower Subcommittee, which I chaired, enacted the official authority for the Navy to purchase the first two Columbia subs — the USS District of Columbia, and the USS Wisconsin.

The impact of the Columbia program on the Northeast is unmistakable. In Groton, the South Yard Assembly Building and similar facility expansions at Quonset Point have transformed the region's skylines. New housing units for a growing workforce are adding to southern New England's population and tax base. The hiring blitz for Columbia has elevated Electric Boat to the position of the number-one private employer in both Connecticut and Rhode Island, surpassing Pratt and Whitney and insurance giants like CVS-Aetna, Travelers and UBS. It's an amazing turnaround from the industrial base doldrums of 2007 that Hilardes and Hany spoke of. The EWIB Manufacturing Pipeline helped fuel that blitz, of course. In 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, the pipeline celebrated the placement of their 2,000th graduate into a new manufacturing career, with over 1,100 of them directly supporting submarine construction. Pipeline classes are now enrolling more than before COVID, and funding from the state and the Navy is in place to continue to close the skills gap for new trainees.

Over 2,000 guests attended the keel laying, including Washington, D.C.'s delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives, Eleanor Holmes Norton, the submarine's sponsor. Much of the crowd appropriately consisted of shipyard workers and Navy sailors and officers, who worked over the last 15 years, since the initial seed money was approved by Congress, to reach this milestone. As delegate Norton's initials were welded onto DC Columbia's hull, there was a feeling, as Winston Churchill once said, that the laying of the keel was "not the beginning of the end, but perhaps the end of the beginning." Much more work still remains, but the planning testing, and skills on display that day are on track for a launch out of Groton in 2027.

U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney represents Connecticut's Second Congressional District.

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