

U.S. Navy In New Crisis: Says USS Connecticut Debacle Was Avoidable

In the latest sign of serious, systemic decay within America's national security enterprise, the U.S. Navy announced last week that the USS *Connecticut* (SSN 22), one of America's three multi-billion-dollar *Seawolf*-class attack submarines, was crippled in an entirely avoidable mishap.

Though precise details on the mishap have yet to emerge, the Navy, in a terse November 4 statement, said that "sound judgement, prudent decision-making and adherence to required procedures in navigation planning, watch team execution and risk management could have prevented" the Navy's latest fiasco, a controlled flight of an irreplaceable submarine into terrain.

In essence, a major American naval asset is now inoperable because the personnel aboard fooled around and then found out—the hard way—that the sea is an unforgiving place.

The Navy's Command Chain Is Breaking Down

The seriousness of the incident was reflected by an initial round of therapeutic blood-letting. The U.S. Seventh Fleet Commander, Vice Admiral Karl Thomas, sacked the USS *Connecticut*'s entire command trio—firing the sub's Captain, Executive Officer and the Chief of the Boat due to loss of confidence. Other disciplinary steps—both up and down the command chain—are either still pending or have yet to be publicly announced.

While the firings offer a welcome dose of accountability, they will not fix the Navy's ongoing operational crisis. The Navy already knows what is wrong—but, in about a year, the Navy will produce a “root cause” analysis of the USS *Connecticut* debacle, pointing out the same problems as those “discovered” after other recent mishaps.

The real root of the problem is that the Navy, as an enterprise, lacks the will to execute recovery plans, and, until the Navy decides to deal with the current operational crisis, avoidable accidents will just keep on happening.

Navy's reluctance to implement tough, necessary steps to prevent major preventable accidents—accidents that have, over the past four years, resulted in the unacceptable loss of at least 17 lives and billions of dollars in irreplaceable Navy and Marine Corps assets—is getting harder and harder to ignore. The Navy's command chain is breaking down, with far too many naval personnel defying authority and, basically, “picking and choosing” what rules and regulations apply.

Amid terrible signs of institutional decay—[unpunished honor violations](#) at the Naval Academy, revelation of a second major [naval bribery ring](#), and other incidents—the avoidable ship losses and avoidable deaths have come and gone with minimal accountability.

Navy leaders are running scared, too meek—or too arrogant—to restore good order in the ranks.

Real accountability is as tough as it is unpopular. Constant officer corps whining over the extensive discipline meted out after the 2013 “Fat Leonard” Navy bribery scandal, as well as politicized “concerns” over the Navy's purported “Zero Defect” culture, has made the made the U.S. Navy a

refuge for far too many “gun-deckers” who are empowered to lie with impunity. This is the real threat. With the recent revelation that China’s Navy has grown to more than 355 ships, far too many in Washington fear that America’s Navy is becoming hollow, when, instead, the actual danger is that the U.S. Navy is rotting out from the inside.

A round of brutal, rapidly-executed reform—followed by a sustained, accountability-focused rebuilding of the Navy from the top down—may be the only way forward.

Always Waving Away The Problems

The operational issues identified in the USS *Connecticut*’s command investigation have been called out year after year, in one Navy mishap investigation after another. But, rather than deal with them, the Navy has gone to great lengths to wave away the problems, either by allowing un-briefed or otherwise uninformed leaders to declare victory too early, excusing poor performance as “the cost of doing business” or treating these matters as some isolated problem within a particular command, fleet, or Navy community. Some even blame the “[Fat Leonard](#)” scandal.

These trends are perfectly encapsulated in public statements by Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro. Before the former ship-driver went to his confirmation hearing, he wrote, “my understanding” is that the Navy has “conducted a thorough review of these mishaps and have implemented recommendations” to prevent avoidable mishaps. During the hearing, Del Toro declared victory, saying, “I’m quite inspired by the changes that have been made in our surface Navy” since a spate of fatal operational mishaps in 2017.

The Navy Secretary might have been “inspired,” but he was also wrong. Barely two months after Del Toro was confirmed, the Navy released two devastating reports, tracing the fiery loss of the multi-billion dollar amphibious assault ship USS *Bonhomme Richard* (LHD 6) in a shipyard fire to “a lack of familiarity with requirements and procedural noncompliance at multiple levels of command.” Despite Del Toro’s assertion to the Senate Armed Services Committee that junior officers were being taught the “very basics of proper operations of the equipments that are necessary to keep these platforms safe and to be able to effectively fight them as well,” the Navy—as well as Del Toro’s briefers—knew the USS *Bonhomme Richard* fire suggested otherwise.

And then, days later, a Navy crew drove their front-line submarine into the ground.

Consistent Failure To Execute Reform

The problems that led to the Navy’s recent string of operational debacles are long-standing and well documented.

In fact, the Navy’s mishap reports are so well documented that they have an eerie similarity. [Sixteen years ago](#), former Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral J.W. Greenert, endorsed a Command Investigation into the grounding of the USS *San Francisco* (SSN 711), writing, “if command leadership and the navigation team followed basic specified procedures and exercised prudent navigation practices, they would have been aware of imminent navigation hazards and therefore compelled to operate the ship more prudently.”

Similar language was used in 2017, after the Arleigh Burke class destroyers USS *Fitzgerald* (DDG 62) and USS *John S. McCain* (DDG 56) collided with civilian vessels, the Navy [identified failures](#) aboard the USS *Fitzgerald* in safety

planning, a failure to “adhere to sound navigation practices,” a failure to “execute basic watch standing practices,” and a failure to “properly use available navigation tools.” On the USS *John S. McCain*, investigators identified failures in seamanship and navigation risk management—same problems identified in the USS *Connecticut*’s initial Command Investigation.

These basic, fundamental operational problems have been cited [again and again](#) in one incident after another. But the Navy has, time and time again, worked mightily to avoid accountability, compartmentalizing the extent of the problems.

Rather than take an enterprise approach, looking at the growing Navy-wide tendency to take orders into their own hands and cut corners, the Navy has minimized matters—dismissing catastrophes as a result of a failed officer or a wardroom gone bad, or just a problem for Navy ship-drivers, and, even then, really only a problem for those ships operating in the far-away Seventh Fleet, out of Japan. Nobody with authority in the Navy has the desire to grapple with the challenge at hand—a Navy that is rotting from inside.

Accidents happen, but the constant and uninterrupted drumbeat of avoidable accidents throughout the Navy and Marine Corps suggest a growing tendency for personnel at every level to disregard longstanding Navy rules, regulations and practices, where Navy operators—for a variety of reasons—feel they—and they alone—are the best arbiters of what rules to follow. And that, frankly, is doing a far better job of sinking the Navy than any “pacing threat” yet.