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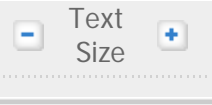
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Ships that don't dare to sail

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The Coast Guard, supposedly America's first line of defense against water-borne terrorists and drug smugglers, has been staggered by a shipbuilding scandal of enormous proportions. A long-term modernization program to replace nearly all of the Coast Guard's ships, planes and helicopters — begun four years ago in the wake of 9/11 — is foundering while its projected costs are skyrocketing. In Iraq, lax government oversight and incompetence or profiteering by contractors have disabled reconstruction efforts. Now the same disease is undermining U.S. coastal defenses.

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The misjudgments and slipshod work would be grist for slapstick comedy if the consequences, in cost and weakened defenses, were not so serious. The estimated costs of the project, known as Deepwater, have ballooned from \$17 billion when it started in 2002 to \$24 billion today. The plans call for 91 new ships, 124 small boats, 195 new or rebuilt helicopters and 49 unmanned aerial vehicles. But don't count on any of the new vehicles working.

The initial venture — converting the Coast Guard's rusting patrol boats into bigger, more versatile cutters — has been canceled because hull cracks and engine failures made the first eight ships unseaworthy. Plans for a new class of ships with an innovative hull design were halted after the design was found to be flawed. And even the radios placed in small open boats proved faulty; they shorted out because they had not been made waterproof.


In the latest chapter in this disgraceful performance, the Coast Guard did not inform Congress that it was warned two years ago by its chief engineer that a proposed National Security Cutter, meant to be the flagship of its fleet, had "significant flaws" in its structural design and should not be started until the problems were addressed. The Coast Guard began construction anyway. It plans to reinforce the first two versions that are being built and change the design on the remaining six.

How could this happen? Mostly because the Coast Guard, in an astonishing abdication of responsibility, gave two large military contractors, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, near total freedom to plan, supervise and deliver the new ships and helicopters. In some cases, the contractors made boneheaded decisions, as when their shipyard partner ignored warnings by Coast Guard engineers that the converted patrol boats might buckle under the extra weight.

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No wonder the contractors are ducking for cover as the scandal reverberates, and are leaving all comment to the hapless Coast Guard. The Coast Guard seems, belatedly, to be moving in the right direction by giving its own engineers more supervisory power over the work and creating a division to oversee procurement and maintenance of ships and planes. Even so,

the new Congress and the Department of Homeland Security, which is responsible for the Coast Guard, will need to keep a sharp eye on the Coast Guard's performance. The industrial contractors have proved they were not up to the job.

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
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