



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

From Drug Interdictions in the Caribbean to National Security Patrols in the Arctic: Examining U.S. Coast Guard's Role in Securing the Homeland

July 24, 2024

We are here today at a critical time for the Coast Guard. To ensure the safety, security, and stewardship of our Nation's waters, the Coast Guard is charged with carrying out a wide range of important missions. Its activities include everything from disrupting transnational crime in the Caribbean to search and rescue efforts off our shores, to addressing the impact of human activity in the polar regions as ice caps recede.

Successfully achieving all that the Coast Guard is called upon to do has never been so complex. The threat of global adversaries, the impact of climate change, and an increase in illegal fishing pose significant challenges to Coast Guard's mission.

The Coast Guard must have a workforce and fleet of unparalleled strength and readiness to meet this moment. Yet, we have learned that in the past, the Coast Guard has not always treated its workforce with the respect, fairness, or transparency it deserves. In fact, the service has actively covered up assaults and discrimination.

Through the Operation Fouled Anchor investigation, we learned that the Coast Guard improperly handled dozens of allegations of sexual assault at the Coast Guard Academy over the course of two decades. The Coast Guard allowed individuals accused of rape and other sexual assaults to avoid criminal investigation. Administrative punishments, if they happened at all, were as minor as extra homework or lowered class standings.

As a result, some of the accused ascended to top roles within the Coast Guard and other branches of the military. The Coast Guard's inaction led to many victims leaving the Academy after reporting their assaults, ending their hopes of a career in the service. The Coast Guard failed to protect its own people, and the damage caused is truly incalculable.

My heart goes out to every survivor who the Coast Guard failed to protect, and my gratitude goes to those who have bravely shared their stories with investigators, reporters, Congress, and the public.

The Coast Guard compounded the deep betrayal of its Service members' trust by failing to fully and transparently disclose the results of its investigation to Congress, the public, or even the victims involved. I am particularly disturbed that the Coast Guard withheld information on Operation Fouled Anchor from this Committee given our concurrent investigation under my chairmanship into harassment, bullying, retaliation, and mismanaged investigations at the Coast Guard Academy.

That investigation—which I led with my late colleague, Oversight Committee Chairman Elijah Cummings—included voluminous document requests, transcribed interviews with multiple Coast Guard senior leaders, and a joint committee hearing.

In addition, former Commandant Karl Schultz testified before this Committee at a hearing in 2021 on the Coast Guard's culture and the need for accountability for misconduct. Throughout this period, this Committee specifically asked the Coast Guard about sexual assaults at the Academy, investigative processes, and whether Coast Guard leaders had actively covered up failures within the service. Yet at no point did the Coast Guard provide us information about Operation Fouled Anchor until CNN began reporting on it last year.

Documents provided by the Coast Guard to the Committee show that Coast Guard leaders considered our investigation into issues at the Academy in deciding whether to disclose Operation Fouled Anchor to Congress—**and still chose to hide the information.** Admiral Schultz did not discuss it at our June 2021 hearing focused on the culture of the Coast Guard, nor did he raise it with me when we met privately on relevant topics.

The Coast Guard's failure to disclose Operation Fouled Anchor in the face of this Committee's oversight can only be described as **deliberate and deceitful.**

I recognize that the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General's investigation into the Coast Guard's actions is ongoing, but I want to be clear: I expect those responsible for orchestrating this coverup to be held accountable. It is imperative that the Coast Guard restore trust with its workforce, Congress, and the public by changing the culture that allowed these events to occur and ensuring they never occur again.

The Coast Guard rebuilding trust with its workforce is all the more important because—as with all military branches—the Coast Guard is facing a workforce shortage. The Government Accountability Office reported last spring that Coast Guard was more than 4,000 members short and had missed recruiting targets over a number of years. Though the Coast Guard has taken actions to address this workforce shortage, including providing hiring bonuses to new recruits, more needs to be done.

Today I hope to learn how Congress can support Coast Guard recruitment and retention. Finally, the Coast Guard's physical assets—its fleet and shore infrastructure—are aging and in need of replacement and repair.

Despite the strategic importance of the Arctic region, the Coast Guard has only one heavy polar icebreaker and one medium icebreaker. Both are decades old, yet the rollout of new icebreakers is delayed.

The Coast Guard also faces an enormous backlog of shore infrastructure improvements. In 2019, the Government Accountability Office reported it would take the Coast Guard 395 years to address its backlog of maintenance and construction projects, absent increased funding. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act signed by President Biden in 2021 provided the Coast Guard \$429 million to address the backlog. But more is needed. While I applaud Coast Guard's practice of 'making do' with its available resources, I also know that Congress can help.

None of the issues I have discussed today—rebuilding trust, increasing the workforce, and updating an aging fleet and infrastructure portfolio—will be quickly or easily addressed. Solutions will require the full attention and commitment of leadership, buy-in from the Coast Guard workforce, and resources from

Congress. I hope to hear from you today how the Coast Guard can meet the moment, address its challenges, and remain always ready.

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