

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

COMMITTEE ON
FOREIGN RELATIONS

COMMITTEE ON
THE BUDGET

COMMITTEE ON
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR,
AND PENSIONS

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4607

March 19, 2026

The Honorable John Phelan
Secretary of the Navy
Department of the Navy
1000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20350

Dear Secretary Phelan:

The men and women of our nation's Navy and their families—many of whom live in Virginia—sign up to serve our country knowing that there will be hard days, long deployments, and significant time away from loved ones. However, I am deeply concerned about the lengthy deployment of *USS Gerald R. Ford* (CVN-78), which has been extended twice after the President ordered military action in the Caribbean and Middle East. *Ford* is on track to break the record for longest carrier deployment since the end of the Vietnam War. Continued extended deployments like this one have serious implications for the maintenance and deployment cycles of our ships, Sailors' morale and wellbeing, and retention.

I am concerned that we are handicapping our future readiness by delaying much-needed maintenance to fulfill these deployment extensions. The extended deployment of *Ford*, our newest and most expensive aircraft carrier, has forced Sailors to improvise with broken equipment and ship support systems. It also requires our shipyards to adapt to volatile and unpredictable deployment schedules, delaying and impeding other required maintenance. When ships finally return from an extended deployment, their maintenance periods often run beyond the anticipated time and budget, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of decreased readiness and shipyard delays.

Planned deployment cycles ensure that the U.S. Navy is forward deployed when and where it is needed. Though deployment extensions temporarily maintain forces in an area, keeping them in-theater beyond their planned deployment window causes delays and schedule shifts that affect later deployments. Further, deployment requirements have not substantially changed despite the decreasing size of the Navy. Managing the same level of presence abroad with fewer ships puts enormous strain on the Fleet and decreases the margin of error for scheduling shifts.

Most importantly, these lengthy deployments put immense strain on our Sailors. It has been reported that *Ford* has been plagued by persistent sewage system failures and inoperable laundry facilities. I am deeply concerned about the compounding mental and physical toll this long deployment and uncertainty is taking on our Sailors. These are some of the brightest and most resilient minds our country has to offer, yet they and their families in Virginia are being pushed

to a breaking point by a schedule that shifts without warning and a ship that, despite its \$13 billion cost, is failing to provide basic quality-of-life standards.

I am requesting answers to the following questions by April 15, 2026:

- What was the impact of the fire on *Ford*? How were Sailors impacted? What systems within the ship did it impact?
- Will *Ford*'s extension delay its future scheduled deployments? By how much?
- We have limited docks for aircraft carriers. How does *Ford*'s extension impact the maintenance schedule for the CVN program, and future refueling and decommissioning efforts?
- Of *Ford* CSG Sailors eligible for reenlistment since June 24, 2025, what percentage have elected to end their service? How does that compare to the service's average retention rate?
- What support is being given to families with service members deployed the *Ford* CSG?

I am immensely proud to represent so many military members and their families who live in Virginia. They work each day to protect our country and uphold our nation's values. We owe it to them to ensure that the sacrifices we ask of them are worth it. This includes providing them with the resources they need to do their jobs and supporting their families. This growing pattern of deployment extensions, both for *Ford* and the broader Fleet, is directly contributing to decreased ship readiness and spiraling morale among our Sailors. I urge you to take substantive steps that put our Sailors and ships first.

Sincerely,



Tim Kaine
United States Senator