

# A Call To Serve

An Interview with The Honorable Carlos Del Toro, Secretary of the Navy, United States of America

**EDITORS' NOTE** The Honorable Carlos Del Toro was sworn in as the 78th Secretary of the Navy on August 9, 2021. As Secretary, he is responsible for over 900,000 sailors, marines, reservists, and civilian personnel and an annual budget exceeding \$210 billion. His priorities include securing the training and equipment for successful naval operations demand and addressing the most pressing challenges confronting the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps –



The Hon. Carlos Del Toro

*China's naval ambitions, climate instability, COVID's ongoing impact, and strengthening a naval culture of inclusiveness and respect. Born in Havana, Cuba, Del Toro immigrated to the U.S. with his family as refugees in 1962. Raised in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York City, he attended public schools and received an appointment to the United States Naval Academy where he earned a BS degree in electrical engineering. Del Toro was commissioned as a Surface Warfare Officer upon his graduation in 1983. His 22-year naval career included a series of critical appointments and numerous tours of duty at sea, including First Commanding Officer of the guided missile destroyer USS Bulkeley; Senior Executive Assistant to the Director for Program Analysis and Evaluation in the Office of the Secretary of Defense; and Special Assistant to the Director and Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget – where he helped manage the budgets of DOD, the U.S. Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Reconnaissance Office, and the Peace Corps. After retiring at the rank of Commander, Del Toro founded SBG Technology Solutions, Inc. in 2004. As its CEO and President, he supported defense programs across a host of immediate and long-term Department of Navy issue areas, including shipbuilding, AI, cybersecurity, acquisition programs, space systems, health, and training. He holds a master's degree in national security studies from the Naval War College, a master's degree in space systems engineering from the Naval Postgraduate School, and a master's in legislative affairs from George Washington University.*

**What interested you in serving as Secretary of the Navy and made you feel it was the right fit?**

A call to again serve our country and more specifically to serve our sailors and marines. I was absolutely honored when President Biden asked me to join the Biden-Harris Administration and most thankful to the American people. With 26 years of operational naval service reinforced by 17 years of private sector business experience, I felt I had the prerequisite experience to resiliently tackle the many difficult

national security challenges we face today as a Navy, Marine Corps, and nation. I felt confident I would bring strong mature leadership, operational experience, and much needed acquisition skills to a department that had faced much senior civilian turnover in the previous four years.

As the first Cuban-American refugee to serve as Secretary of the Navy – one that also swore an oath to serve at 17 years of age, I knew I would also relate well to the hundreds of thousands of young Americans from all backgrounds who themselves or their parents or grandparents came to this country as immigrants to participate in this great democracy we call the United States of America. We are indeed a nation of immigrants bound together by a common set of core values in one American Constitution.

Born in Havana, Cuba, I immigrated to the U.S. with my family as refugees in 1962. I was raised in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York City, attended public schools, and received an appointment to the United States Naval Academy where I earned a BS degree in electrical engineering and was commissioned as a Surface Warfare Officer upon graduation in 1983. Over my career, I served in a series of critical appointments and numerous tours of duty at sea including commanding and overseeing the construction of a destroyer – the first Secretary of the Navy to do so – and serving as a White House Fellow in the Executive Office of the President. After retiring from naval service in 2004, my spouse and life-long friend, Betty, and I founded and operated a small engineering business enterprise for 17 years.

Today, I am again proud to serve and now lead the world's greatest and most powerful Navy and Marine Corps, leading nearly a million sailors, marines, and civilians while managing a global \$255 billion enterprise in service to the nation.

**Will you highlight your priorities as Secretary, including securing the training and equipment successful naval operations demand and addressing the most pressing challenges confronting the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps?**

My mission as Secretary of the Navy is to provide combat capable forces and capabilities to the President, Secretary of Defense, and Combatant Commanders around the globe to execute the President's orders. We do so as a team in the Department of the Navy by recruiting, training, equipping, and organizing to deliver combat-ready naval forces to deter, and if necessary, win conflicts and wars through sustained forward naval presence in support of the joint force. For the past two and a half years as Secretary of the Navy, I have been unbelievably proud of our achievements as a Department to date as we focus on three enduring priorities: Strengthening Maritime Dominance, Building a Culture of Warfighting Excellence, and Enhancing Strategic Partnerships.

The challenges and threats we face today are global, ranging from Ukraine's war with Russia to restore their national sovereignty, the PRC's continued aggression across the Indo-Pacific, and Iran's malign influence throughout the Middle East region. Every day, our Navy and our Marine Corps are deployed around the globe, countering a diverse set of challenges posed by nations and non-nation state actors.

In the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, for example, we continue to work alongside our NATO allies and Middle East partners to counter the Iranian-aligned Houthi attacks against commercial shipping – attacks that threaten the lives of sailors and other innocent civilian mariners. The Red Sea is one of our world's most strategic shipping routes, with 12-15 percent of maritime trade passing through it. Since November 2023, trade volume through the Suez Canal has dropped 42 percent, with most major shipping companies opting to bypass the Red Sea altogether over security concerns, adding weeks to delivery timelines and raising the price of transporting a standard 40-foot cargo container from Asia to Europe from \$1,500 in December to over \$5,500 today.

These near daily attacks on our forces are countered courageously and most professionally by our fleet and force. Disruptions, increased shipping costs, and rising insurance premiums are paid for by citizens around the world at

the grocery store, the gas pump, and the pharmacy – the impacts of which are felt most by countries that rely on their global partners for food security and vital medicines to protect their populations from some of the world’s deadliest diseases.

We will continue to take the necessary resilient actions – both diplomatic and military – as part of international coalitions of like-minded nations to return stability to the Red Sea. Addressing the threats that adversely affect the U.S., our allies, and our partners who seek to use the global maritime commons for peaceful ends requires both a national and international commitment.

### **How is the Navy addressing climate instability?**

As the Secretary of the Navy, I proudly can tell you we have made climate one of our top priorities since the first day I came into office. The consequences of our climate instability are an existential threat. That is why the Department of the Navy is focused on building a climate-ready force. That is a key element to strengthening our maritime dominance so we can deter potential adversaries, and if called upon, fight and decisively win our nation’s wars. And it’s not just an issue for us – it is an increasing issue for many of our allies and partners. This is why the Biden-Harris Administration is globally combatting this threat and we are embracing it as a combat-ready issue for the Navy and Marine Corps.

The Navy and Marine Corps team has been working on climate and energy security for a long time, and we are accelerating and broadening those efforts. We released Climate Action 2030, setting the Department of the Navy on a path to achieve the Nation’s commitment to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, while becoming a more capable, agile, and lethal fighting force. The strategy directs follow-on implementation efforts for U.S. Navy and Marine Corps counterparts to identify initiatives to be a modern, lethal, agile force that can fight and win anywhere in the world.

Climate change is expected to intensify the rate of trans-boundary threats the Department of the Navy will need to meet. These conditions require the Navy and Marine Corps to adapt to meet new operational requirements, respond to increasingly common humanitarian response missions, promote regional stability, and address risks to installations and defense communities.

We have backed our targets with investments, weaving in resilience investments in energy infrastructure, water resilience, and nature-based solutions. Our approach yields results. We have renewable energy at bases all over the world, as well as 18 highly reliable and resilient microgrids. We continue to aggressively transition to renewable energy with a pipeline of projects including a 42-megawatt installation in our island state of Hawaii, at our facilities at Pearl Harbor. We are upgrading water and electrical infrastructure right here in the Bahamas at our Atlantic Undersea Test and Evaluation Center (AUTC). We are bringing on more renewables which means fewer fossil fuels and lower emissions. We have achieved DoD’s

first Net Zero installation at our Marine Corps Logistics Center in Albany, GA. In fact, over the last decade we have added more than 1 gigawatt of renewable energy to the grid.

We are harnessing the power of nature to draw carbon out of the air and to build coastal resilience for our bases and neighboring communities. We are fighting drought and restoring water security thru grasslands rehabilitation at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma. We are funding efforts to help restore coral reefs and are eager to pursue further efforts on coral reef research, regrowth and even creation.

Finally, Climate Action 2030 makes explicit what we already know – that no one can fight climate change alone. The plan calls for partnerships. We want to share and trade information, resources, and expertise with governments and NGOs around the world.

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Embracing climate-focused technologies and adopting a climate-informed posture strengthens our capability to stand by our partners and allies. The Secretary of the Navy has delivered Office of Naval Research funded climate resilience decision superiority technology and personnel to the heads of state of critically strategic Pacific Island partners.

### **How are you working to strengthen a naval culture of inclusiveness and respect?**

Our people are our greatest strength. They provide the competitive warfighting advantage over our competitors. Building a culture of warfighting excellence is founded on strong leadership that is rooted in treating each other with dignity and respect. Taking care of our people is absolutely critical to our mission. We continue to strengthen our culture of inclusiveness and respect by continuing efforts to improve quality of service and quality of life for our sailors, marines, civilians and their families.

We continue to work to ensure their experiences within and outside the workplace are enriched. We are critically assessing where we are now and where we are going to identify the most pressing infrastructure problems, prioritizing facilities, barracks, water, energy, and internet. That’s directly connected to mission readiness and to recruiting and retaining the best possible talent. We treat each other as the professionals we are. We embrace diversity and inclusiveness and do not tolerate discrimination of any kind, sexual harassment or assault or extremism. When revealed in our ranks, we address it quickly to stamp it out as you would expect professionals to do so. We are one team.

### **How did your early years emigrating from Cuba to the United States impact your career journey?**

My parents fled Cuba with me – a ten-month-old, and very little else – one suitcase per family member. They did not see me become Secretary, but my mother did see me become Commanding Officer of our nation’s newest warship. Their sacrifice working two jobs for most of their lives while my grandmother cared for me at home humbles me to this day. It’s the common story for so many immigrants to this country. We charge forward because of the example they set for us and to fulfill their hopes and aspirations.

I grew up in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of New York City in a rat-infested tenement on 42nd Street in New York, between 11th and 12th Avenue. It was just one block away from the Hudson River. I often joked that we were so poor that the only thing my father and mother could actually afford to do is walk us up and down the Hudson River. I think, subconsciously, I was attracted to the sea, attracted to boats, attracted to sailing the oceans because of that experience. My parents, Raul and Martha, and grandmother, Maria, definitely instilled in me a work ethic that still motivates me today. They also encouraged me to pursue my intellectual curiosity and passion about history, engineering, arts and the sciences. I attended Thomas Edison High School, a vocational technical high school in Jamaica, Queens which led to my acceptance to Annapolis. I often thought I would never be accepted to “a place like that” and even hesitated to apply. My father then told me, “I would never know if I did not try” and so I did thanks to his encouragement. Undoubtedly, these many experiences made me resilient to the challenges I faced as a young child and adult and afforded me the opportunity to embrace the many opportunities offered to me. I will be forever grateful to my dying days for the freedoms that this country had offered me and my family and that’s why I wanted to serve our country.

### **How important has resilience been throughout your career?**

As mentioned, my parents provided me the inspiration to always be resilient in life. Over my lifetime, I drew on those lessons they instilled in me and always relied on hard work and determination to reach my goals. Full Speed Ahead – the journey continues. ●