BACKGROUND
The Nimitz Class aircraft carriers, currently making up the Navy’s entire carrier fleet, are the largest warships ever built. While the designs of the final seven ships beginning with USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71), are slightly different from those of the three earlier ships, beginning with the USS Nimitz (CVN-68), the Navy considers all 10 active carriers a single class. The Nimitz Class was developed in the 1960s after sea trials of the first nuclear-powered carrier, the USS Enterprise (CVN-65), revealed only two nuclear reactors, rather than the eight CVN-65 had, were needed to maintain reliable combat operational speeds. All 10 nuclear-powered Nimitz Class carriers were built in Newport News, VA.

The first ship of the class, the USS Nimitz (CVN-68), was commissioned in 1975. The last ship of the class, USS George H.W. Bush (CVN-77), was commissioned in January 2009. Other hulls include: USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69) in October 1977; USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70) in March 1982; USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71) in October 1986; USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72) in November 1989; USS George Washington (CVN-73) in July 1992; USS John C. Stennis (CVN-74) in December 1995; USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) in July 1998; and USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) in July 2003. These ships averaged a cost of $4.5 billion.

IMPORTANCE
Nimitz Class carriers provide the U.S. Navy with the ability to deploy 85 to 90 warplanes to almost any area in the world on very short notice. With over 6,000 personnel (ship’s company and aircrew), these carriers have a displacement of 100,000t, a flight deck length of 1,092ft, and a beam of 252ft. All ships of the class are powered by two A4W nuclear reactors kept in separate compartments to allow more ordnance, fuel, and aircraft storage space. The ship’s propulsion comes from four propeller shafts which produce a maximum speed of over 30 knots (56 km/h). Nuclear power allows the carriers to operate for about 20 years without refueling and they have a projected service life of 50 years.

When older carriers come in for Refueling and Complex Overhaul (RCOH), the ships’ nuclear power plants are refueled and upgraded to the standards of the latest carriers, including better radar systems and facilities. This costs, on average, $2.6 billion, which Congress authorizes funding for. Fitted with Common Undersea Picture (CUP) technology, the Nimitz Class uses sonar to allow for better assessment of the threat from submarines. The USS Nimitz, USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the USS Carl Vinson all received their midlife RCOH, with the USS Theodore Roosevelt recently completing its mid-life overhaul in August 2013. The USS Abraham Lincoln began its RCOH behind schedule in March of 2013, to be complete November 2016. The FY16 budget proposal authorizes $678 million for the USS George Washington’s RCOH. Delays in funding RCOH can potentially reducing the fleet to 10 carriers, and if the Ford Class also faces delays, the fleet could be reduced to as low as nine carriers.

The Nimitz Class aircraft carriers are assigned as follows: USS Nimitz (CVN-68) in Bremerton, WA; USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69) in Norfolk, VA; USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70) in San Diego, CA; USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71) in Norfolk, VA; USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72) in Newport News, VA; USS George Washington (CVN-73) in Yokosuka, Japan; USS John C. Stennis (CVN-74) in Bremerton, WA; USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) in Norfolk, VA; USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) in San Diego, CA; and the USS George H.W. Bush (CVN-77) in Norfolk, VA.

RECOMMENDATION
The Association of the United States Navy believes that the Nimitz Class aircraft carriers need to be adequately maintained to allow them to remain at maximum operational status until the Ford Class carriers are inducted into the fleet. As carriers are retired, i.e. the USS Enterprise (CVN-65), Congress must continue the expedited procurement of new Ford Class carriers and regular mid-life modernization of older platforms through RCOH funding. This is especially important during lapses when our Navy’s 11 carrier fleet size is temporarily reduced to 10.