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This is a model of what the USS Nassau could look like if refurbished and repurposed to carry out disaster-relief missions. Coalition of Hope

OP-ED

# Revive USS Nassau to help save disaster victims' lives

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EDWARD MINYARD

The news reports in the aftermath of hurricanes Harvey and Irma have been merciless: many killed and injured; communities destroyed; thousands homeless, and billions of dollars of destruction. And the grim toll continues to rise: Humanitarian supplies, fuel, first-responders and heavy equipment are stymied until vital roads, airfields, and other transportation systems are reopened around Houston, east Texas, the Florida Keys and the Caribbean islands.

Without fresh water, food, electricity, and communication, shocked and bewildered survivors must endure chaos — even lawlessness — until help arrives. The Defense Department and the states have dispatched military and National Guard units to respond. But as dedicated and as effective as they are, these units are trained and equipped for military missions, and few have experience working with relief organizations, states, or local governments.

The frequent result is the equivalent of a pick-up team of units — each well-meaning and with specific skills, but not optimally organized or appropriately equipped for this mission. We believe there is a solution that is now pending before the Senate — a solution that comes at little to no cost to American taxpayers, yet could bring near-immediate relief to

communities hammered by such natural catastrophes as Harvey and Irma.

A nonprofit, humanitarian relief organization, the Coalition of Hope Foundation, was established in Florida in 2005 by people with leadership experience in a variety of professions, including the military, the U.S. Navy, the maritime industry, mass communication, and diplomacy. The Coalition was among the organizations engaged in the responses to hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, earthquakes in Haiti and Ecuador, and currently is participating in relief efforts in Texas and Florida.

It now is seeking authorization to acquire a retired U.S. Navy amphibious assault ship, the former USS Nassau, and refurbish the vessel as a flexible, state-of-the art, humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief platform. The ship would be refitted with hospital facilities that would support extensive medical services; fresh water production and electricity-generating systems; and living spaces for as many as 4,000 displaced people as well as first-responders.

The USS Nassau already is capable of providing airlift and landing-craft capability that can move heavy equipment and emergency supplies to needed areas ashore. And when on site, the ship would create a mission-ready, expertly staffed

command-and-control base. The USS Nassau was retired in 2011 and currently rests in the Navy's Atlantic Fleet "graveyard" in Beaumont, Texas, ironically a city hard hit by Hurricane Harvey and which the ship was powerless to assist.

Unless the ship is transferred to the Coalition of Hope, it likely will be sold for scrap metal or sunk in a naval ordnance training exercise, which could cost taxpayers as much as \$170 million. The Coalition of Hope's ability to acquire the USS Nassau depends on Senate approval of language within the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act, which is pending before the Senate, and approval by the Secretary of the Navy.

Detailed plans for such a retrofitting are complete. Fund-raising for this effort is under way, and offers of support have come from an array of individuals, international-disaster response organizations, maritime interests, and U.S. allies. Once funding is secured, the ship could be ready within 36 months to respond to a disaster site almost anywhere in the world reachable by sea.

The Senate and the secretary have a choice: They can convey the USS Nassau to a permanent graveyard, of no use to anyone. Or they can allow us transform this ship of war to a ship of peace.

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