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U.S. forfeited merchant fleet superiority, she says, by not pursuing nuclear vessels

BYLINE: By Candus Thomson, The Baltimore Sun

BODY:

The Baltimore Sun's front page on July 22, 1959, carried the news accompanied by a six-column photo: The world's first nuclear-powered cargo ship had been launched at Camden, N.J.

The christening of the \$47 million N/S Savannah was bigger than news about legislation to extend the GI Bill of Rights, bigger than a Cape Canaveral rocket launch, bigger, even, than a federal court ruling to allow the steamy novel "Lady Chatterley's Lover" to be sent through the U.S. mail.

"Not until the Savannah entered the water was one able to tell that she was different than any other ship," the article said. "After the glistening white-topped combination freighter and passenger ship turned broadside in the water, the lack of smokestacks and the sleek lines of her hull and superstructure were evidence that here was a ship of a new era."

The 595-foot vessel was christened by Mamie Eisenhower, whose husband, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, believed the Savannah could be the keystone of his "Atoms for Peace" program, designed to calm a world fearful of destruction by nuclear warheads. The ship could haul 10,000 tons of freight and had rather spartan accommodations for 60 passengers.

The Page 1 byline belonged to Helen Delich, the paper's maritime editor for 24 years. That same year, she married William Roy Bentley and later went on to become chairwoman of the Federal Maritime Commission and a five-term congresswoman. In 2006, the state renamed Baltimore's port the Helen Delich Bentley Port of Baltimore.

Last weekend, Bentley was back aboard the Savannah, which is mothballed in Baltimore, to participate in National Maritime Day ceremonies with U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. The ship is owned and maintained by the

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Federal Maritime Administration and regulated by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Its future is uncertain.

Bentley talked about the lost promise of nuclear-powered commercial vessels.

What's it feel like to know this ship, from the laying of the keel to the launching to its present state?

I want to tell you something. It feels like my home. I know the Savannah, its warts and all, and I know all of its good points. I've talked about its warts, but I'm not going to do it anymore. I'm only going to talk about what a shame it is that we were not able to pursue the use of nuclear power in the whole American merchant marine and that this ship was shut down as early as it was. She's a proud ship. She would have really carried the Stars and Stripes with pride around the world. I'm sorry she wasn't allowed to continue that.

Was it a public relations problem? Did public sentiment turn against nuclear power? Or was it the lack of political will to continue?

I think it was a combination of all of that. First, Japan and some other countries would not allow this ship into any of their ports, and that cut down on potential revenue. The cargo space was really rather limited, so it was difficult to make a profit. And then the government said, "We're not going to spend that kind of money anymore." That was it. You know, there's some things the government needs to spend money on when it is exhibiting the pride of America. It showed our might and our innovation. This ship was put together and was able to function as a passenger ship and a cargo ship. It was a pilot program, and they should have taken advantage of what they learned from the Savannah, expanded on it and continued along that line.

Where would we be today if we had?

We sure as heck would have more American-owned and -flagged ships, which we don't anymore. ... In fact, many of our ships under the Maritime Security Program in the Defense Department fly American flags, but they're owned by foreign interests. That I truly regret. Where is the will? Where is the interest? And why don't people do something about it?

When you went to the N/S Savannah christening more than a half-century ago, did you have any doubt that you were looking at the future? You certainly wrote with that level of confidence.

I was positive it was going to be our future. Here we were providing the world with the first nuclear-powered merchant ship. There was nothing ahead but success -- and it didn't work.

What should be done with the Savannah now? Is there still a role for this ship to play in the maritime world?

Really, the only thing that can be done is what's being done. She's an exhibition, a museum ship. That's it. There's not much more. By the time you replaced the power plant, the cost to operate her would be prohibitive. She does a good job providing people with knowledge of what was done with nuclear power, what can be done and what should be done. I hope some people learn from it.

Is there a role to play for the state of Maryland or the port of Baltimore?

Not really. You can't expect the locals or the state to finance this type of operation. We have a lot of museum ships in the port of Baltimore, and they all are struggling to survive. Some of those are supported locally. When the nuclear submarine USS Baltimore was about to be scrapped in 2000, 2001, and I tried to raise some interest to not allow that to happen, I was told, in essence: "Forget it, Helen. We're not going to put any more money in any museum ships."

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GRAPHIC: Photo(s)

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Photo: Helen Delich Bentley, former chair of the Federal Maritime Commission, speaks at the National Maritime Day observance aboard N/S Savannah, the world's first nuclear-powered cargo ship. It's now mothballed in Baltimore, but in 1959 Delich viewed it as "the future."

Candus Thomson /BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO

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