

INTERVIEW



David Burritt

President and CEO of U. S. Steel

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

David B. Burritt, born in St. Louis, is the President and Chief Executive Officer of U. S. Steel, a role he has held since May 2017. He joined U. S. Steel in 2013 as Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer. Before that, he served as Chief Financial Officer at Caterpillar Inc. Burritt earned a bachelor's degree in accounting from Bradley University in 1977 and a master's degree in business administration from the University of Illinois in 1990. He serves on the boards of Lockheed Martin, the National Safety Council, and is active in several industry organizations.

By Michael Cowden, Editor-in-Chief, Steel Market Update

I sat down for an interview with U. S. Steel President and CEO David Burritt ahead of SMU Steel Summit for a wide-ranging interview.

We talked about the partnership of the Pittsburgh-based steelmaker with Japan's Nippon Steel – a two-year ordeal that placed both companies in the middle of a political maelstrom. We also discussed what's next for U. S. Steel and its plans to invest \$11 billion in American steelmaking.

The transcript below has been edited for length and clarity. But it otherwise preserves Burritt's matter-of-fact style.

Q: You've been through quite the saga with Nippon Steel. Actually, news of the strategic review process broke just before Steel Summit in August 2023. What lessons did you learn along the way?

Burritt: A lot of lessons learned, for sure. One thing is, you have to live by a code of conduct.

And we have what we call our S.T.E.E.L. Principles: Safety First. Trust and Respect. Environmental Stewardship. Excellence and Accountability. Lawful and Ethical Conduct. And we take it very seriously. In fact, in front of every one of our deal team meetings, I would talk about that and make sure people understood that.

Q: OK, a code of conduct is important. What else?

Burritt: We have a main thing that we're working on - one big idea, that when you do it, it so overwhelms everything else that the others are either unnecessary or unimportant.

Q: Got it. Set a clear goal. Anything else?

Burritt: You have to get the right people on the bus. First the who, then the what. And when you have good people, bright people, people committed to mission, they help you figure out where to go. And we are very blessed to have



a lot of really good talent inside our company as well as outside the company.

Q: Once the deal became a political football, people were hanging on your every word. How do you effectively communicate in such a high stakes situation?

Burritt: Some of our best results came because we made extra special efforts to communicate truthfully. We say, "We're the truth tellers." We can emote amongst ourselves. We can get upset. We can be disappointed, whatever. But when we're public facing, we're going to make sure we're taking the high ground.

We communicated early and often with our employees and we made sure that we pursued truth telling in the media aggressively. Because, again, this gets back to the fact that we live by a code.

Q: This is starting to sound more like a philosophy.

Burritt: Actually, there's an old Stoic phrase, "Amor Fati," a lover of fate. No matter what happens to you, you just say 'good.' Because there's always something that you can do to turn it into something good. Even the worst things you can imagine in your life, you can find good things that can come out of it.

Q: It's not often that people quote Stoic philosophy in the pages of SMU. I like it! Did Nippon Steel embrace that approach too?

Burritt: There was no doubt about Nippon, (Nippon Steel Vice Chairman and Executive Vice President Takahiro) Mori, and his team. I'd say, "You're still with us on this, right?" And he'd go, "When we commit, we commit." So, we knew he was all in.

Q: Why was Nippon Steel so committed?

Burritt: I think it's a combination of things: changing demographics as the overall Japanese population is expected to decline over the next few decades, negative inflation, and the relative growth rate of the domestic market in Japan versus the United States.

Q: That makes sense. The US is definitely a growth market compared to Japan. It seemed at times like the chances of this deal happening were close to zero, especially with both presidential candidates opposing the deal last year. What changed?

Burritt: I had built a relationship with President Trump back in 2018 over the original Section 232 tariffs. At the time, in the Cabinet Room, he asked me to take on the then Director of the National Economic Council and debate

U. S. Steel's CEO David Burritt and Nippon's Vice Chairman Takahiro Mori speak of their companies' partnership before President Donald Trump's arrival at the US Steel-Irvin Works on May 30, 2025.

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\$11 Billion

planned investment in American steelmaking.



David Burritt meets with Donald Trump at the White House in February 2025.

globalism. It was a great conversation, and I helped the president move his agenda forward. He put the 25% tariffs on that day. So, I had a relationship with him already. It just was a matter of getting in the office.

Q: Interesting. And what happened after meeting with Trump?

Burritt: It was very clear to me he was going to give us a fair shake ... he's always looking for leverage against others. It's like, "They're slow over here with negotiations. They're slow over there too. What do we do?" Then -boom! -tariffs. And that sends a message: "Okay, make a deal. Or here's what can happen to you." He's playing the big, global game. And I've never seen, at least in my lifetime, a president who controls the global agenda like that. That is the power of this guy.

Q: There is a lot going on in the world. How does steel manage to get Trump's attention?

Burritt: Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick did an excellent job negotiating, once we got him to the table. But it was always - when they're dealing with trillions and you've got a \$14 billion - \$15 billion deal - it's hard to get their attention.

So that was always the issue. Amongst all this noise, we had to push because we knew this

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deal was great for all, including our employees that are USW members.

Q: I should have asked this earlier. Did you want to sell U. S. Steel?

Burritt: The entire board, myself included, did not want to sell the company. We did not want to, but we did our jobs and took our fiduciary responsibility to our shareholders seriously. We got the highest value above an undisturbed price in the history of mid-caps and above.

Q: I grew up in Pittsburgh. I never thought you'd hear anyone talking about investing billions in Mon Valley again. What's the plan? And why did a previous planned investment in Mon Valley end up going to Big River Steel instead?

Burritt: Our strategy changed with our investment in Big River Steel, and we embraced a strategy we called “Better, not Bigger.” We found a very business friendly environment in Arkansas, where we were able to get a mill - a three-million-ton facility (Big River Steel) - quickly built and operational in Arkansas. Nippon's strategy allows us to get Bigger AND Better. Now, we're planning to put in a new hot strip mill in Mon Valley and we've been in touch with the governor, with local politicians, all of whom support the investment and I'm optimis-



An electric arc furnace at U. S. Steel Big River Steel Works.

tic that the permitting process will be smooth and efficient.

Q: How does permitting in Pennsylvania compare to permitting in Arkansas?

Burritt: I talked with (Arkansas) Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders. They are using the Army Corps of Engineers to reshape the Mississippi River and the roadways to accommodate additional investments. In Pennsylvania, I'm based in Pittsburgh, we have a lot more hoops to jump through to get things done. They've got to make it easier for us to do business. But fortunately, the governor's team, and our local county leadership, have all reached out and expressed their commitment to help us.

Q: Across your US operations, how much are you investing and where? Also, where will the new mill be located?

Burritt: The largest amount is in Indiana, \$3.1 billion. Then \$3 billion in Arkansas, \$800 million in Minnesota, \$500 million in Alabama, and \$2.4 billion in Pennsylvania. Now we'll have competitive tension because there's going to be another mill, likely a mini-mill. That's really exciting, an opportunity to build a state-of-the-art greenfield mill. That could go in any of these locations or any other state

in the union. But we want competitive tension for that, and we want to make sure it's an environment that makes it really easy for us to operate.

Q: In addition to money, Nippon brings a lot of technology to the table. Do you have any way to quantify that?

Burritt: They've got something like 40,000 patents. And they invest more in R&D on an annual basis than all the steel companies in the United States combined. So even if we put their investments aside, that technology transfer is just incredibly valuable. Plus, they're going to be investing in U. S. Steel's own R&D capabilities, including a new R&D Center.

Q: Let's pivot to raw materials. We've seen tariffs on metalics. At past Summits, we've talked about scrap being the next precious metal. How is U. S. Steel navigating all that?

Burritt: We've got the best iron ore mines in North America, the lowest cash cost by far. It will be a big competitive advantage as we continue to build DRI facilities and expand. Because that iron ore - it's effectively gold. You know the challenges with scrap. Right now, we have some dependence on Brazilian pig iron at Big River. But over time, that challenge is going to go away.



Employees working at the U. S. Steel Gary Works pig iron caster.

Q: What about hydrogen? That was a big topic just a few years ago. Now it's rare to see headlines about it in steel.

Burritt: Nippon has got a lot of leading capabilities. I think there's a big opportunity there for us – especially with what Nippon Steel has done there. They're a clear leader in that. They have proven that technology. And I'm excited by that.

Q: At Summit, we're going to try to look to the future more than we've done in the past. So, with that in mind, where do you see U. S. Steel 20 years from now?

Burritt: Twenty years from now, you're gonna be talking about U. S. Steel the way you talk about Nucor. Nucor is the undisputed leader right now. They are a beast in the industry. Nucor, last I checked, they're around No. 16 in terms of volume. But in terms of market cap, they're the highest.

Q: Clearly, you admire Nucor. Does that explain why you've invested so heavily in acquiring and then expanding Big River Steel?

Burritt: We needed to make sure that we did both integrated mills and mini-mills. That's what got us this multiple from Nippon. We

did a good job on Big River, buying half of it and then buying the rest of it. With Big River 2, we've got to get it qualified and commissioned. And we've got to get the thing filled up. But when that happens, by the end of 2026, we will we have a really formidable competitor against Nucor and Steel Dynamics. And, by the way, we will block out imports because of the investments that are here.

Q: We've talked about why the Nippon partnership benefits U. S. Steel, its workers, and the country. How does it help steel buyers?

Burritt: I would say the innovation that is brought here and the new products that follow. For example, NGO (non-grain-oriented electrical steels). Nippon shows up, they put two guys on NGO, and already we have success stories. And then they are the best in grain-oriented steels. So, the customers will benefit from products that they can't even get here right now domestically.

Q: Thanks for your time, David. Any final thoughts?

Burritt: It's been a heavy lift. We had a great team on this, very focused on what we call "the main thing," and we lived our code. I'm incredibly excited for the future of U. S. Steel. ■

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