

TRANSCRIPT

Defense Writers Group

A Project of the Center for Media & Security
New York and Washington, D.C.

General James Conway, USMC
Commandant, US Marine Corps
February 1, 2008

THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT AND MAY CONTAIN ERRORS. USERS ARE ADVISED TO CONSULT THEIR OWN TAPES OR NOTES OF THE SESSION IF ABSOLUTE VERIFICATION OF WORDING IS NEEDED.

Q: I went through the transcript from when you were here about a year ago, let me read a little bit of this. You were talking about what the Marines are into this time. You said, "You're going to the desert to do Mojave vipers. You're not doing amphibious warfare training. You're not getting with the Navy to practice operating aboard ship and going ashore. We're not doing what we used to do annually about ten times with our battalions. That's combined arms, live fire maneuver, 29 Palms," et cetera.

About a year has gone by now. I guess it was last month you were talking about how the Marine Corps was kind of becoming a second Army. So take some time here and talk about that development. What it portends for the Corps, what kind of long term change, if any, this is causing in the Corps. And then finally, if you would sort of put it in the context of the new roles and missions review that Congress has initiated. One of the great clichés always is that the United States has two light infantry, why can't we have one? Four air forces, that sort of thing. So talk about it in that context if you would.

A: Okay. First of all, conditions haven't changed markedly over the past year. We continue to do for the nation in the Al Anbar Province in particular what we were doing at this time last year. And of course you all read the news. There will be additional Marines going into Afghanistan in a slightly different but actually very similar role.

I think one of the things that it represents, first of all, is adaptability, and the very fact that our Corps is able to do that I think speaks legions in terms of the flexibility of our leaders, of our training, and the capability to respond to the nation's needs, whatever they may be. Be it as light infantry, be it as a second land Army heaved up with armored vehicles, be it as a combined arms kind of force that can go with its organic pieces and

accomplish a mission.

That it changes our nature is absolute. Does it cause me concern? You bet. Because I think that what we do offer to the nation is that multi-capable force that does have an organic combined arms capability with the help of the Navy and TRANSCOM can go virtually anywhere, and in any climate get a job done. And conditions have not changed, Bob, to the extent that we are not doing that kind of multi-capable training that we historically do in order to be able to bet that swing force and arguably the first to fight.

It also has impact on our individual Marines. If you accept that four years is a generation of Marines or a generation of officers, because that's what most will sign on for, we now have a generation of young men and women who do not have a complete understanding of what expeditionary is. And we I believe still, although a lot of people now bear the title, we are the nation's premier expeditionary force. We have had that as a core competency now for decades. But people now believe that three square meals a day courtesy of KBR and a cot is expeditionary, that is just not true--[Laughter]--in most of the environments where we would expect to find ourselves in the early going of a contingency. So we've got to make those kinds of adjustments, and we are. We signed on to a new strategy with the Navy, we can talk more about that later.

We look forward to a roles and missions discussion because we think the things that we offer are unique. Are they in some ways duplicated? Yes. Piece by piece. But they're unique as a package and they lend themselves very nicely, I think, to a joint environment.

The dilemma that I have on my plate weekly is how do we get back? Because there's a real I think decision out there that's going to have to be made in terms of the weight of the force. The ships and the airplanes can only carry so much, yet there is a force protection requirement out there that leadership bears for its Marines. What is that balance?

IEDs are with us now. We have not found a way to totally defeat them. They're going to be out there in the future. So if we believe light and lean, hard hitting, that, heavy doesn't add to that list of adjectives. So how light can we be and still maintain a level of force protection sufficient to protect our Marines to get the job done?

I used to believe that our nation would accept casualties if people truly perceived it was in the nation's vital interest. I'm not sure I believe that any more. I'm not sure that is as accurate a statement as once I perceived it to be. So that increases a leader's responsibility to make sure that you don't somehow have your mission terminated prematurely by virtue of the fact that you have a heavy dose of casualties, maybe on entry.

I hope that sort of at least gets in the fore ring on the question.

Q: That was all important, but that last statement I thought was extremely important because it seems to, you seemed to be saying that the nature of the battles you're going to be facing, the nature of the foes you're going to be facing for the foreseeable future requires you to be heavy. That is not consistent with the Marine Corps view of the world.

A: It certainly poses a dilemma for us. I'd love to have someone walk to us with a piece of technology that says this weighs two ounces but it will protect you against a 50 caliber round. That's the panacea. Technology that will allow us to be light and protect our troops and at the same time be able to get the job done.

So we're leaning on technology for that. The new Joint Light Tactical Vehicle we hope is, and some of the things that the Army may bring forward out of FCS, you know, we hope will offer us some insights in terms of how we can be lighter and yet equally effective.

Q: General, yesterday before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Afghanistan was the topic of the day. You had Assistant Secretary of State Boucher up there saying everything's going really pretty well. Your predecessor, General Jones, came on after him and said you know, I don't really think so. We're in danger here. There were some angry words back and forth with each side looking at the situation much differently, almost "malice in wonderland". [Laughter].

I'm wondering from your perspective, sir, who's got the better half of that argument?

A: There is a dilemma out there. If you listen to the commanders in Iraq, they will emphasize to you that we have made--

Q: Iraq of Afghanistan?

A: I'm sorry, I meant Afghanistan. They will tell you that there has been progress. That last year, for instance, we expected a spring offensive. It didn't come. We said maybe a summer offensive. It didn't come. There were a number of mid to high level Taliban leadership that were killed and they hold no provincial capitals, they do hold ground.

Now fast forward to the intelligence assessments year after year since about 2004 and it will show you that the numbers of attacks have increased, the numbers of casualties have increased, the amount of ground and tribal influence may have increased over the tribes in Afghanistan. So I think it is a bit confusing at this point. We as a department need to see it the same way, and quite frankly, at this point in time we just don't. I think that was manifested yesterday in what you saw before the Congress. I didn't see much of it and have not read the testimony, but I gather it broke about like you described.

Q: After six years should it be that way?

A: No. Again, we as a department need to have a common view so that we can agree upon the actions that need to be taken. No question about that.

Q: General, on the theme of [inaudible], and you needing to get back to being expeditionary.

How can aviation priority, now that the V-22 appears to be on track, the Joint Strike Fighter STOVAL version.

A: Yes.

Q: There's still, as far as I can tell, a conflict between the Corps and the Navy on how many you're going to buy and the Navy doesn't want [inaudible] on the big deck carriers, and the Marine Corps is committed to putting a fair number of fighter squadrons on [inaudible]. Talk about how the internal discussions have gone on the future of the Joint Strike Fighter.

A: I'm happy to, Otto.

Q: The STOVAL version.

A: Both Admiral Mullen when he was CNO and now Admiral Roughead and I, have built the basis of our relationship on a single premise, and that is that we will not surprise each other. It sounds simple, but in fact there have been breaches of that protocol in the past, I'll simply say, and yet for us it seems to be working and it seems to be a pretty effective way of doing business.

In that context we have had what we would call a warfighter with the Navy where we, in the year that I've been Commandant, where we brought in our commanders from the field and we've had several Big 8, Big 10 discussions which represents basically the people around the Pentagon in the senior billets in the Marine Corps and the Navy, to talk about this very issue and others. Principally our discussions have come down to shipbuilding and airplanes, of course, as we look at how we spend money in those two venues.

Some very frank discussion around the table, as you would hope, and in the end an agreement that one, the Marine Corps is wed to what we call TAI. That is the idea that Marine squadrons will go aboard the carriers in some form or fashion based upon a requirement, based upon the schedule and the deployment tempo of the squadrons. That continues to work well.

But more importantly, to the 35 Bravo which is our VSTAL aircraft, an agreement with the Navy that there will be no decisions made on its carrier viability until the first squadron is active and we've had the opportunity to put it aboard ship and simply experiment, do operational testing and evaluation between us to determine whether or not squadrons, STOVAL squadrons can operate effectively in the carrier rotation.

As a Corps we tend to think they will because we had similar discussions and experimentation when the Harrier was brought into the inventory. In fact it was found they were a real complement to operations on deck because a Harrier can land and take off while the carrier's still going downwind. To launch and recover a carrier needs to turn into the wind and get 30 knots across the bow and all that type of thing. I was aboard a carrier for 18 months. That's sometimes a 35-40 minute process. You can launch and recover a whole flight of aircraft at that point, and we do so routinely with the Harriers, and I tend to be able to think we'll do so with the Joint Strike Fighters.

Q: The Navy's never accepted Harriers on the big decks. So you're saying you're going to actually put a 35 Bravo squadron on one of the big deck carriers and test it out?

A: Yeah. And in fact I think the nation would expect us to. We're going to have a squadron of 35's three years before the Navy gets their first squadron of CVs. It is our naval fifth generation capability and I think there should be an expectation on the part of you and our countrymen that we have our first line capability out there, forward deployed, where it could be used. So we're going to get a lot of questions answered. The Navy looks forward to it and we look forward to it, and what the rest of that buy will look like will be in part determined by how successful our squadrons are aboard ship.

Q: On this topic of discussions of heavy versus light, aside from the discussion, any studies? How [inaudible]?

A: Actually it's already underway. The battalion Table of Equipment that our infantry battalions had when we crossed the berm in '03 is dramatically different from what it is today. The battalion that resides in Iraq today has a vastly heavier equipment set than the 2015 battalion, the projected battalion that we have for determining numbers of amphib ship requirements, weight of that force, and so forth.

So we've gone to our people at Quantico, which is sort of the engine that runs our car in terms of conceptual and studies and that type of thing and said okay, tell us what the battalion TE needs to look like so that when we do start drawing down forces out of Iraq we know what we need to buy, we know what we need to reset. We don't want to reset gear that's going to be set aside because it's not needed or it's not authorized in a battalion Table of Equipment at that point. So we're looking at that right now.

Again, we're facing some of the hard sort of choices that Bob's question introduced in

terms of that maneuver space, that finite ground between force protection, taking care of the troops and getting them the best protection we can against the weight considerations of being light and expeditionary.

Q: I know there [inaudible] concerned with the [inaudible] decision to reduce the MRAP buy. They have said that the Marine Corps maybe [inaudible].

A: It's interesting because I didn't have a single congressman or senator contact me and say you're dumber than dirt. [Laughter]. Actually, most were just the opposite in saying hmm, if you can save the government \$1.7 billion, that you have not sort of sucker punched the industry because they had all this steel and tires and batteries and alternators laid in, you did this in plenty of advance, that you are concerned about getting too heavy is fine, because we realize the mission the Marine Corps provides. We haven't heard any blow-back on that, frankly, and I still am fairly confident. I'm a Scotsman, and if we can save the government \$1.7 billion, that's a good day.

Q: So you [inaudible]?

A: We did the proper notifications. We didn't want to blindside anybody. And remember now, it was really not our decision. It was our recommendation to curtail our buy. But when we sat down and notified what we call the Big Eight--HASC and SASC and those kinds of folks, we advised them as to why we were making the decision, partly because we were finding that the vehicle was not as robust off road as we had hoped it would be and that our commanders out there, the guys on the ground that are forced with making them all work for us were simply not getting the value of trying to force the vehicle into scenarios where it would not function as well.

Q: What's the level of support for the Air Force and Navy today [inaudible]? [Inaudible] opposition? What's the [inaudible]?

A: Once again, Tony, I sat next to General Moseley the other night at the Alfalfa Dinner and we are locked at the hip on the value of the 35. He wants a mixed fleet out there. He wants 22's and he wants 35's and a bunch of them. And he thinks we need to have that jump jet kind of capability. He talks expeditionary as well, but he must have an airfield. The beauty of the JSF-35B is that it can operate aboard his expeditionary airfield if it's 5,000-6,000 feet. It can operate aboard the carriers. And it can operate beyond the next tree line. So it's got a multi-faceted capability. His point to me was if I can't get there to support you then you can help yourself until such time as we can.

So nobody's throwing elbows at each other at this point to try to curtail one person's program for the sake of another, and we hope it doesn't come to that, of course.

Q: On Iraq. The Anbar awakening has been highlighted as the supreme example of the

convergence of [inaudible] surge. Given your conversations with commanders, how fragile is the Anbar awakening? And might it collapse as the U.S. draws down? Is this somewhat irreversible? What feedback are you getting from the field?

A: The last time I was there, which was about Thanksgiving, I go back again late this month. It is not reversible in the Anbar Province. Those Sunni sheiks initiated a blood feud with the al-Qaida based on the things that they were doing to their families, to their children, with the whole thought process of inter-marrying their women so as to be able to put down roots that would then keep them there for a long time.

And I might add, the awakening was sort of the publicized aspect of this thing, but if you go back before that, Western tribe were giving us the desert wolves. In Ramadi about a year before the awakening, you had tribal sheiks at that point rise up against the al-Qaida. They didn't come to us and ask for help. They just sort of learned a valuable lesson there. But they rose up against al-Qaida on their own. A number of them got killed as a result of it. Again, they learned a valuable lesson a year later when the awakening then took full force, I think, and with U.S. assistance, we all were made aware of it. I mean the nation was made aware of it.

But I say that only to highlight that there's been a level of dissatisfaction in the West for some time before last year's awakening sort of brought it to full value.

Q: So you don't think it's reversible. Have you communicated that to Gates, to the presidential level when they've asked this question?

A: We have a conversation coming up in March or so when General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker come back. And I think it will be a topic of discussion at that point.

We've always said that Iraq is a big country and you've got different conditions at work in different provinces out there. I can't tell you whether or not it's reversible in Baghdad or in Diyala. I feel pretty strongly that it is irreversible in Al Anbar.

Q: Because of the blood feud nature of it and not because of U.S. assistance to the local community groups?

A: U.S. assistance helps immeasurably, but there will be U.S. assistance out there at a minimum in the form of these transition teams and training teams for some time to come. So that we could put forces back there if they started somehow coming under duress. But the thing that's really different is that you've got so many layers out there now of security forces. They call them concerned local citizens in most part of the country. We call them neighborhood watch. And they've got ball caps and T-shirts and belts and they're very identifiable. That's your first line of defense. And you've got the police who are, by the way, tribal sons, sons of the sheiks and so forth, and they're

uniformed and they're authorized and they're paid by the Ministry of the Interior. Then you've got the Iraqi Army and then you've got Marines. So we're not getting many calls these days, quite frankly, because most of that's being handled in either the first or second tier.

Q: General, what's the plan for Afghanistan? I ask that because I take your point about strategic or operational uncertainty within the government here, but you've got the MEU going out to Helmand Province, I guess. It doesn't seem to me that there's enough of them to seize and hold ground. They don't seem to be certain of what their mission is going to be or how they're going to do it. And the Pentagon spokesmen at least have said they won't be replaced. What's the plan?

A: Dave, I've got to couch my comments a little bit because we are talking tactical operations and I'd like not to make it too public. But I will say that we have just in recent days arrived at the mission statement for both the MEU and the battalion. The MEU will not hold ground but they will have a tremendous reactionary capability in the south and in the east and where the commander may see a need for a rapid employment of forces. That's probably as much as I ought to say about that.

In the case of 2/7 which is the battalion that's been earmarked to work. They will be more oriented on terrain. They will be working in close conjunction with the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police.

It's arguable as to whether or not that will be a long term requirement for us. We have told the Secretary that this, we're taking one for the team here. We are staying at surge through October and we would very much like to reverse that process of one to one or even worse. One to one being our deployment to dwell ratio. Or even worse in the case of some of our low density units and some of our infantry battalions. But we'll do this through the rest of the year because it's important. Admiral Fallon wants to see it happen. The Secretary judges that the risk is worthy, so we're going to do that. But the point we have made in the discussions is that we can't continue to do it without relief elsewhere. So that needs to be a part of the consideration come October, or even before, hopefully before, so that we can do proper planning, proper training for our young men and women before they go in some place.

Q: That raises a thousand questions. [Laughter].

Q: To follow up, one of the thousand questions. [Laughter]. Talk about numbers. The dream of Don Rumsfeld back when was the world would go high tech and machines would [inaudible]. Now [inaudible]. Talk about what numbers you need and how you can [inaudible] that.

A: Peter, we were given an opportunity to take our best shot at that not long after

Secretary Gates arrived, but quite frankly, I think even before he left, Secretary Rumsfeld, General Pace would have said that they were starting to reshape their thinking with regard to boots on the ground requirements as well.

We said that we thought we needed an additional 27,000 Marines or so to be able to satisfy the requirements that were existent at that time or that we could foresee with what I think is a necessarily rotational kind of status, and we were granted those numbers. We wanted to keep that annual requirement manageable in terms of our growth to the extent that we could keep our quality high, and we have been able to do that.

Last year we felt that we needed to grow 5,000 Marines to take the first tranch of that growth, and that we wanted to keep our standings right where they were. We felt we had to show that we could grow 5,000 Marines in a single year. That's over and above what we had been recruiting, because the propensity for all three, I think, major ethnic groups in the country is on a downward trend.

We recruited 7,000 Marines in that first year and the DoD standard for high school graduates is 90 percent. The Marine Corps standard is 95 percent. Our recruiters brought in folks at 96.2 percent.

So is it an all volunteer force? No. It's an all recruited force. And we've had to put additional recruiters in the field. We have upped the ante as far as our retention numbers are concerned, and with the help of some bonuses and so forth, we're meeting those numbers. So I'm just delighted with that aspect of what is taking place. And we're contemplating permission from the Secretary to even advance the schedule against an even greater expectation of what we can do on an annual basis.

Q: In terms of the total [inaudible] to the size of the Marine Corps, do you think you can stay at 27, or do you think you'll have to increase [inaudible]?

A: I think we'll have to make that determination when we get there, based on what's happening at that time. There are critics of growth. Growth is expensive. People are 65 percent of our budget. There are critics that say wait a second, by the time you get those troops, even if it's 2010, there's going to be reductions of your requirements elsewhere and you probably won't need those people and we're probably not going to see another major contingency operation, and you probably--Well, underline the word probable.

We don't do very well as a department or even as a nation predicting what's going to happen. The one constant element, it seems to me, over the decades that I've been in the service, is surprise. And the nation is at war. And war begets surprises. So I think that until such time as we're through this generational struggle, we need capable ground forces, Army and Marine, because what we do right now is fairly boots on the ground

intensive.

Does the Marine Corps need to stay at 202,000 for perpetuity on the far side of engagement? No. That's probably too big for us. But I have a level of comfort that while we are engaged with people that want to kill us, there's a certain comfort level in having those number of Marines on deck.

Q: If I can just do one more of Dave's one thousand follow-ups before I get to my question. [Laughter].

You said this is going to be difficult unless you get relief elsewhere. The underlying assumption there, I would imagine, not to put words in your mouth, but we know General Patraeus has said drawdowns in Anbar. Should we read into your comments that there will be further drawdowns in Anbar before the spring/summer when the units go to Afghanistan?

A: That's not my determination to make. I'm a force provider, or as General Franks once said, a Title 10 [inaudible], okay? [Laughter].

But our supply is 13 infantry battalions. So Mr. Secretary employ them however you want, and it would be good if I had some lead, of course, in terms of where those folks are going to go and how we're going to train them. But the point is, I [owe] it to the young men and women who are Marines to try to get our deployment-to-dwell ration to one-to-two and we can sustain for a long time at that. That's not panacea, but one-to-two is reasonable for us to have somewhat akin to normal family lifestyles. Keep our families. And if you keep the family, you're going to keep the Marine. And do that other training, by the way, that we're not doing.

So I think there's justifiable reasons why we want to get to one-to-two. But we cannot sustain this one-to-one forever. So how you use those 13 battalions is again going to be a department level decision and one ultimately, probably, made by the President. But as I say, we take one for the team through October. Beyond that, I'd like some reconsideration.

Q: Let me get to my main question which is leadership development. There's been much discussion, including by the Secretary of Defense, about this issue in the Army. He, at the ASA speech, said there really has to be reform in the promotion and development systems in the Army to shift from conventional arms to more concentration on asymmetric COIN related stuff.

In the Marine Corps that hasn't really come up. Maybe you were sort of ahead of the game on this or not. But I'm wondering how much of that has come into your thinking when you look at the leaders you are picking, particularly general officer corps,

particularly infantry leaders. How much is a shift or a mindset change from conventional to more asymmetric COIN skills is going into your thinking as you sort of pick leaders?

A: Again, because we're small, because we have a history of small wars. I mean arguably, I don't want to pound our chest, but in some ways we wrote the manual back in the '20s and '30s. The small wars manual is the model for just about every piece of contemporary writing that you've got on it.

We think that we flow into that kind of capacity pretty well. Now have we made some mistakes in the past? Of course. I mean I think every institution does. But we were quick to realize it and we were quick to make adjustments and as early as 2004 our schools were starting to look at language training, better understanding of culture. Our infantry officer training programs, we're looking once again at counter-insurgency instead of major contingency operations. And again, by virtue of the fact that we're simply not doing those things. The ten live fire combined arms maneuver exercises at 29 Palms, we have replaced that with the Mojave Viper that Bob introduced. I think we're ahead of that and I think our young people are very comfortable, that they don't see many surprises when they get to Iraq based on the training workup that's prepared them very ably here.

Q: My question is more about the senior leadership. The criticism of the Army has been you see guys like John Nagel and [inaudible] and guys who have the skill set [inaudible]. You seem to be able to retain some of these guys better. I'm just curious why that is. Is that a product of you identifying these guys earlier, promoting them to general officers earlier? What exactly is--

A: No, we actually promote later than the other services. Our generals on average are older than their contemporaries. I think part of it just gets to experience.

When we crossed the berm in '03 we probably had 66, 68 percent of our Marine Corps there. So that personal experience helps. Again, you spiral off your experiences to do other things, be better, correct mistakes, those kinds of things. So I have a high level of confidence in our general officers. And if you look, and it will probably shift this year, but if you look at the combat experience it's probably going to be at 90-95 percentile.

Q: On the [inaudible] ground vehicle. The Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, you said the Marine Corps' sort of going through the motions, preparing to OR contracts for new prototypes. And as this is happening there are also people on the Hill expressing a lot of concern about the design of the EFV, want to see it have a V-shaped hull or other [inaudible] under belly. It seems there are two different things going on here.

I understand that [inaudible] personally on this. Do you think that the EFV program as

you know it is going to be substantially changed?

A: No, I do not, Emily. Bottom line, up front.

First of all, let me say that we desperately need the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle and we need it today. Today. The United States Navy will not go closer than 25 miles to another nation's shore because of the anti-access systems that have been proven very effective. You only need to go back to the Hezbollah and Israeli conflict two summers ago now to see that even in the hands of non-state actors you've got some very viable systems. So the Navy's simply not going to close the beach or another nation's shore where those things exist with billion dollar ships.

Today there's a vulnerability that we have that we need to close as soon as possible to get Marines ashore over the water, not in the water. Our current amphibious vehicle will swim eight miles an hour, but you put Marines on that beach or on some other nation's shore three and a half hours later after having been tossed around in sea state, and they're in no condition to fight.

So we need something that rapidly goes over the top of the water that gets us there and that's the EFV.

We have curtailed the program almost by half because of the expense that's accrued over the years. I shake my head at how we somehow took vehicles who were beyond their expected life cycle and tested them to prove reliability for the program, and that's set us back in ways that I think you clearly understand.

But the fact is we have to have the vehicle. That well-intended congressman would simply parlay a V-shaped bottom and security for the troops and protection and all of that into the vehicle, perhaps, and say well wait a second, my bass boat has a V-shaped hull, why is it that you can't put one on this EFV? All that makes sense but the engineers and the people that have to put tracks on these things and look at the proportion to lift and surface and all that, have shown the congressman it's not feasible. We've tried to look, okay, if that won't work how about V-shaped inside that flat bottom? Once again, based on the space compartment requirements inside, that's really not feasible at this point either.

So we have taken their concerns, we've studied their concerns, we've gone back to them, and we think we're where we need to be with regard to the program, but it can't happen too soon, from our perspective.

Q: What about this past month, the inspections that you had with senior Army leaders. I believe you were involved with those. About the summit in early January on issues including land vehicles. Any take-aways from that? Either EFV, the Joint Light Tactical

Vehicle program?

A: The Army has, I think rightly so, sort of a new-found excitement over the sea base. We explained to them in detail how we visualized the MPF future program, giving us a sea base which really represents off a coast, miles off a coast, both a port and an airfield for purposes of armored movement of forces ashore. It gives the commander ashore, the Marine commander ashore, tremendous flexibility in terms of not having to go immediately to capture that port and the airfield because he's got one servicing his needs out at sea. The Army can flow through that sea base which becomes a joint sea base and help us take that port and airfield for, again, a better introduction of follow-on forces. We're all coming together on it and we feel very good about it at this point.

Q: General, let me take another stab here at Afghanistan. Considering some of this debate over how things are or a not going quite so well, the Secretary obviously reached back and decided to use the Marines over the next seven or eight months. What do you see as the Marines' role going forward in Afghanistan given your earlier plan that has not moved forward, obviously, about [inaudible]? Do you use the Marines as having a continuing and perhaps increased role in Afghanistan as we go ahead?

A: I'll be definitive and say maybe. [Laughter].

Here's why. Once again, we would have to have relief elsewhere in order to be able to do that. But frankly, if you, let's just play forward the drawdown and we reach ten brigades and regiments in Iraq at some point in the future. I don't know when that's going to be. But at ten it's generally agreed upon between Army and Marines, based upon what our force distribution ration has looked like, that nine of those would be Army brigades and one of those would be a Marine regiment with its enablers and its reinforcements.

Okay, so what do we do with the other regiment? Do we bring it home and reduce our deployment to dwell and take a look at doing some of the other training? Or is there a definable need once we solve this debate, in Afghanistan? As Marines, we see our responsibility to fight the nation's wars. If the war in Afghanistan at that point is not going well, I think there's going to be at least a strong argument to say that maybe we ought to put more forces into Afghanistan. But again, I would simply say we can't sustain one-to-one forever, and our Corps is not big enough to do both. We can't have one foot in Afghanistan and one foot in Iraq. I believe that would be an analogy to having one foot in the canoe and one foot on the bank. You can't be there long because we can't feed like that with the numbers that we've got.

So if there is a determination to send more Marines to Afghanistan, I would certainly be respectfully requesting that we reduce our presence in Iraq beyond the one-to-one to get us to a more likeable ratio that our troops and their families can live with.

Q: Just to follow up on that, is there any breathing room at all with the Army in Iraq that you can see that would provide some way for the Marines to draw down another regiment in Iraq? Even if there's a pause.

A: I don't know. I'm not the best person to answer that, your field commanders are.

When I talk to my commanders, and I talk to the Iraqis when I visit the country. The people in Anbar describe it as post hostilities phase. That's their term. They would say they understand the other legs of the stool, as General Pace used to say. They say over a cup of tea, you could probably help us some with economics. You really can't help us with the politics. But that's what we're concerned about these days.

The al-Qaida is not coming back. Our Sunni nationalists understand now that our efforts have to be devoted toward integrating this government and getting what we can for the province. Provincial elections are big in their eyes. And we're seeing, of course, the predictable elbowing amongst the tribes for authority and economic opportunity, those types of things. We've got people that know the players and are trying to help and make sure that it doesn't get hostile. But those are the things we're doing these days.

We had a Marine killed on October 4th in Anbar, and we had a Marine killed here about two weeks ago. We've had some scattering of wounded. But that has been the extent of it. So that gives you a context of where we are versus how it used to be. Those are the things that we're doing these days.

Q: General, Admiral Mullen made the widely publicized comment last year that in Iraq we do what we must; in Afghanistan we do what we can. You also said you built your relationship with Admiral Mullen on just the promise that you guys wouldn't surprise each other.

I was wondering if you were surprised at all by that comment. The intimation too, of it was that this is kind of a back burner war. Is that your sense of it too? Is the effort to send Marines an effort to kind of put it back on the front burner?

A: Anna, I would simply say it differently and use military parlance. Afghanistan for us has been an economy of force measure. The focus has been Iraq. And the larger enemy, the larger fight, the larger casualties associated with that, I think probably the larger benefits of success have been seen as Iraq first. And as Admiral Mullen said, doing what we can with forces available in Afghanistan.

Now I think, and you see it projected daily, you saw it in the Congress yesterday, the discussion is going to become as things continue to improve in Iraq, at what point do we shift focus into Afghanistan to try to create the same margins of success there? I think that's a very worthy debate. It's one that's going to be held, I think, when General

Patraeus and Ambassador Crocker come back and Admiral Fallon gets involved in the discussion.

Patraeus will focus on Iraq like a laser. That's his job. He should. Admiral Fallon has a larger responsibility. He's fighting two fights in his area. One's going pretty good. And one, according to some sources, again, not so good. So what will be his perspective on it? I don't know for sure, quite frankly. He's not showing his cards at this point, but we're going to listen to what he has to say with great interest, and then the service chiefs will inject global risk looking at other theaters and things we're not doing in other places, as well as the health of the force. So all those pieces of the stew are going to come together in the tank in March or April. It should be a good discussion.

Q: Holbrooke in his testimony yesterday said that we're going to be in Afghanistan long after Iraq is over and in the long term it was his assessment that Afghanistan is more important. I was just wondering what your take on that is.

A: I didn't see his testimony, nor have I read his statement. But Iraq is going to be a terribly rich country some day. No question about it. It's got everything that a rich nation needs, to include a very valuable export, oil. Afghanistan is not so fortunate. It has no seaport, it's landlocked, it's people are much less literate, in terms of the infrastructure it is centuries probably behind Iraq. So to the extent that we try to make sure that fundamentalism or extremism is not attractive to those people, I suppose I can see his point. But then there also is the national culture. What does that nation choose to accept in terms of U.S. involvement?

Germany and Japan were fine with it. Will Iraq or Afghanistan be? I think that card's not yet turned over on the table, so we're going to have to consider what they see as a long term security requirement or economic assistance, and just how the U.S. would posture in order to be able to support that. And I don't know that yet.

Q: Sir, I wanted to ask you about naval surface fire support. In particular there are a couple of weapons efforts that aren't supported--the Osprey, the [inaudible] sea base deployments ashore. In particular, the advanced [inaudible] system [inaudible] which are really dependent on DDG-1000 being developed. Number two, the extended range munitions, which is not really [inaudible] success after about a decade.

How much are you willing to back some of these efforts? And what else are you looking at in terms of fire support?

A: We were asked earlier about studies and scenarios. We have a fire study taking place right now at Quantico. It's not yet complete. I would be more comfortable answering your question once I see the totality of it.

I did get an update brief here, it's probably been two months or so ago now. And what I saw coming out of that, with the programs that are at work and some that are still developmental. There was an article this morning about the rail gun, after looking at it with the Navy.

I see that a commander ashore has the operational and strategic fires that he needs. The Air Force with its global reach, our own ability to put aircraft ashore in the early going, the Navy carrier support out there. I think a commander is going to have his ability to reach out and touch those targets that he can identify that represent operational or even strategic targets that the enemy owns.

My concern is that we don't have the volume of fires that a company commander or a battalion commander might need in order to advance on the next objective. And you're not going to have those fires when they cost \$1.5 million per round, for instance, going in, or going out.

So we've got to do something about that as well. The idea of suppressing your objective is still a very valid one and I just think that as we look at the equation we've got to make sure that tactical fires are available there as well and are built into our systems. So that's where my head is as we look at naval service fires and others.

Q: Is the Marine Corps still supporting DDG-1000?

A: Yes. DDG-1000 gives us a capability ashore. The program has been reduced, admittedly. But I think there's a paucity there and we do support the idea of naval surface fire support. The battleships are going to stay in dry dock and mothball, so what do we do in their absence becomes the issue.

Q: A question about risk. As you draw forces down in Anbar [inaudible] to send [inaudible] Marines to Afghanistan, characterize for us the risk that you feel you're taking elsewhere. This comes out from time to time, now especially with the new focus on Afghanistan. How do you assess the risk and how do you see it?

A: The risk to the rest of the globe is established, Gordon, and the Chairman's risk assessment has been the same now for three years or so in terms of what we're simply not doing. The risk in terms of not having that combined arms capable force. The two fisted fighter that I've talked about from time to time is there for us as an institution.

The real risk that I think we're taking aboard is with our families. Because my objective should be to work to get a better deployment-to-dwell, not take on additional requirements. But I've got to tell you, I am so proud of our families that it's eye-watering. And I'm so delighted with the resiliency that our Marines are showing in terms of how they're handling this dep tempo. It's absolutely incredible.

We follow maybe a dozen indicators and say just a couple. It's normal. It's what Marines expect to be doing, and they're doing it very well and they continue to be able to do it. I'm just so proud of our people as a service for that resiliency and effectiveness, that I probably can't put it into words.

Q: The first part of it, though, does that increase the concern about your ability to address contingencies elsewhere outside of CENTCOM, in other places?

A: It's real. We've got commanders, we just finished the Defense Senior Leaders Conference over the last couple of days. We've got commanders who give the Secretary and the Chairman and the Joint Staff reports every time we meet on rising threats here or declining threats there. So we certainly keep an eye on it.

There is some buffer that we could react with, just not as much as we're comfortable with. So we live with the risk. And if conditions were to change somewhere else say in SOUTHCOM or in PACOM, AFRICOM, I think we'd have to assess, is that increased risk and do we need to respond some how?

In the mean time we live with it such as it is, and I guess you have to say there's a level of comfort that we've got it about right.

Q: Just a quick follow-up on Afghanistan. You were suggesting that you would not be in [inaudible] only but [inaudible] in eastern Afghanistan?

A: At the discretion of the commander, I would say. In that they're not going to be assigned ground. They have that flexibility inherent. They have their own mobility. They have their own fire support. So in that context the commander can employ them in a number of areas. If they were tied to ground I think that would be a different construct.

Q: So they will be working not for the Canadian command, but for the--

A: They are on OEF rules of engagement, I think I can probably say that. They are working in the same region as the Canadians. At least initially. And I think the commander is comfortable with that. But there's going to be a great deal of discretion applied to what the threat then appears to be come spring time on the part of the commander.

Q: My main question was on [inaudible]. [Inaudible], what is your sense of the wisdom of the [inaudible] to assess [inaudible]? Obviously there are other institutions [inaudible].

A: I understand, I suppose, again if you simply look at Iraq only. If I were in Dave

Patraeus' shoes I would probably be saying the same thing. If Dave Patraeus were in Fox Fallon's shoes he might see this whole thing differently. Where you sit depends on where you stand on a lot of these things.

I will say that in some ways moving around BCTs and RCTs is the simple part of this. They're like a destroyer, they move quickly. If you look at the support mechanisms and the drawdown on those, it's more like moving a carrier. It takes a while to get it turned and to get it headed in a different direction. And those, frankly, are the people that are most stressed when you look at frequency of deployment and so forth.

So I guess the point I'm making is even though you may say I'm going to make a decision here, it's really not executed until down here. So there's additional time there for governments to become more mature and economics to take root and some of those kinds of things.

So I would ask that we all consider those things as well in this equation. It's not just about battalions and BCTs entirely, especially in terms of some of those people that feel ridden hard and put away wet.

Q: Last week Admiral Mullen said that some of the war funds should be gradually shifted into the base budget over the next couple of years, feeding into the whole supplemental debate. As one of the services that receives billions from the supplemental every year, what are your thoughts on that? Are you concerned at all that by doing that it could jeopardize budgets for things like the JLTV, the EFV and programs that are--

A: No. I think supplementals are absolutely necessary now. We welcome them and we're delighted with the support that the administration and the congress has given us to satisfy our needs. But we need predictability in the budget. A lot of our programs are long term programs and we need to be able to look to the out years and with some level of certainty that we're going to be able to do multi-year buys and those types of things.

Supplementals have been compared to crack cocaine. [Laughter]. Believe me, I have no experience in that. [Laughter]. But you can get addicted to it and you've got to have those things. That's not a good condition to be in, obviously.

So I think that to the extent that we can immerse those things into the top line, I would be much more comfortable that we do have a predictable status and that we can look at a FYDP, a five year program with some level of confidence as to what the top line's going to be each year.

Q: [Inaudible] one program [inaudible]. [Laughter].

Q: Why now though? [Inaudible] going to be happening in the '09 budget request. Why

is that--

A: Some of it is, though. You may not have heard, but we think our grow the force costs are going to be, for instance, integrated into the top line so that we can, that is predictable then through the out years. So some are, some are not, admittedly.

We have appealed, I know last year General Schoomaker when he was Chief of Staff of the Army and I appealed to the Congress to have supplementals continue for two or three years after we are significantly out of Iraq and Afghanistan because we see our reset cost as being not something you can drop an iron gate on. They're going to continue as we get gear out, get it into repair, purchase lines, those kinds of things.

So I think it's going to have to be an integrated effort and should not all happen certainly in one year.

Q: A question from one Scotsman to another.

A: Please. [Laughter].

Q: Can you explain a little bit more on the role the Marines and Marine Corps play in Afghanistan? When their deployment was announced it was certainly portrayed as something to bolster the NATO effort, [inaudible] operate under OEF rules of engagement. Are you going to be part of ISAF, in the ISAF chain of command? And maybe following onto that, isn't that part of the problem that you have these two competing chains of command and operations there. Is that something you need to look at?

A: I will not comment on the second part of that. That's not my role as a service chief.

I will say any time forces are committed they have to go through this matrix decision in terms of what's going to be the relationship. But the ISAF commander was the officer who pressed the request. Admiral Fallon saw the need and agreed. And so he submitted the request. And it is the ISAF commander that has principally been involved in mission determination really for both those forces. And I think that's probably as much as I'd be comfortable with saying.

Q: Will they wear the ISAF patch?

A: Marines won't wear any patch. [Laughter].

Q: There's obviously been tremendous tension emerging within the NATO alliance, within the broader American bilateral relationship because of Afghanistan. There have been comments from Canada in recent days being at least an example of it.

Underlying [inaudible] is a belief that our allies are doing a heavier share of the fighting in Afghanistan, taking more casualties proportionally than the U.S. [inaudible] Canada certainly. If you're sending additional Marines to Afghanistan but not giving them a direct role at holding terrain do you worry that the dynamic of other countries believing that because they are holding terrain they're also taking a higher share of casualties, that that dynamic can only intensify?

A: I would hope the reverse is true. To the degree that a Canadian commander who's holding ground could say that I need additional forces to conduct an operation, he could say I am under duress and we have a fix on enemy locations who may be preparing to attack, to have a Marine Expeditionary Force that can immediately be applied against that threat I would hope would give them a level of confidence and a sense of support that may not have existed before.

I'm trying to look at it through the lens of the Canadian commander. Frankly, we have sent liaisons to Canada to talk to the future commander there. He seems pretty pleased with the arrangement as he understands it's going to be on the ground, so we'll see how it falls out.

I have not seen where the Canadian government has said that the MEU represents what they think they need in terms of additional forces there, but I hope in time when the missions are understood by the military and by the governments, that they will be much more comfortable that we understand their plight and we want to help as much as we can.

Q: The original Marines going in [inaudible], do you anticipate they will be involved in regular, fairly intense combat? Or will they be mainly a reserve force that may not take part in regular combat?

A: They will be in combat. The commander has said they're going to live hard and they're going to fight well. I said we've got the guys for you.

Q: General, could you real briefly [inaudible] what the Osprey is doing? What is it doing and what isn't it doing and what you would like to see it do in the future.

A: Let me say at the outset that we have not wanted to over-promise and under-deliver with regard to this first Osprey deployment, the deployment of HMV-263. So we have tried to minimize the amount of reporting that's coming out on the Osprey until nearer to the end of their deployment. We'll have all the facts and figures at that point. We'll have lessons learned coming from the first operational deployment. We'll be happy to share those and let the public know just what we think.

I will tell you though, in the interim we're pretty pleased with what we're seeing. The Osprey is, by design, intended to replace the venerable old CH-46. We love them. We've had lots of decades to love them. And the CH-52D. It is doing just that in theater.

It's flown now, I can't tell you how many hours, but several hundred hours performing every function that's expected of a medium lift aircraft and of a heavy lift aircraft in the case of the 53. WE have not had any incidents. WE have had reliability rates that are increasing because we've learned some things.

We put it out in the western desert to do testing and evaluation, but frankly, our western desert is different from the Iraqi desert. There's a much finer talcum-like sand and dirt there that gets into our engines and our working parts, and we've found that we didn't anticipate, for instance, a slip ring requirement in the case of the Osprey, that has downed some aircraft in the early going, but now that we've gotten those parts and supplies built up, our readiness rates are hovering around 70-75 percent.

So for a first time aircraft in a combat environment, we think we're doing pretty well. Again, we don't want to pound our chest on this. There's tomorrow and the next day. And there are always uncertainties. But that it's involved in combat missions, that it's involved in evacuation missions, that it's been shot at, all those manner of things are true. But it continues to perform very well. Our pilots are delighted with what they're seeing, as are the Marines who are being deployed in the back of the aircraft.

TV just handed me something. More than 2,000 hours at this point on the squadron in theater. They're a little over halfway through their deployment.

Q: The record ought to show that the Commandant has been talking very frankly with 25 reporters for an hour before the first question about the Osprey came up. [Laughter].

[Inaudible] grow the force. And [inaudible] for '09. But there's the investment goals for two, three, four years, and then we got to '11 and '12 and we're in steady state maintenance, 26,000 additional bodies. If I remember the number from last year, the [inaudible] Marine Corps is about \$4 billion, and that's mostly green dollars, [inaudible]?

A: Right.

Q: Conceptually, considering the political pressure on the defense top line, and within the defense top line the pressures within there. I mean O&M costs for troops has been going up two percent a year since the Korean War, for heaven's sake. Give me some reason to hope that the Commandant after next is going to find that extra \$4 billion a year to pay for the 26,000 people once the investment [inaudible].

A: I don't want to take the easy way out, but I will say the Commandant after next is six, seven, eight years away. He may not need 202,000 Marines. I think that a Corps of 175,000 Marines or so is about right for our nation when it's not at war. But if you look at what we have had to grow our Corps to during World War II, during Korea, during Vietnam, it always starts with that smaller cadre and goes to something very much larger to fight the nation's wars.

I will say this, though, and it's not a surprise to you folks at the table, I think. The Army I think describes its strength in terms of divisions, now BCTs arguably; the Navy with ships; and the Air Force with planes. Our core element is the Marine. And that we spend a lot of time in training, that we try to use technology to give us state of the art conditioning for those young men and women for what they're going to experience out there, that we are most effective when the requirement is greatest for boots on the ground, because our regiments are bigger, our battalions are bigger, and that's what we offer. I think if the Commandant after next determines that that's his priority, and he well might, then other programs will simply have to suffer to have those Marines available to the nation.

Q: Just affordability, growth of the force. You mentioned a \$1.5 million shell [inaudible] Congress. You've got something that costs that much and you're trying to grow the Marines. What are we talking about? A \$1.5 million shell. That's not a Tomahawk. This is illustrative of defense spending [inaudible].

A: I threw that out. That was not referencing any particular weapon system out there.

Q: I hope not. [Laughter].

A: Pardon the exaggeration. [Laughter].

Q: [Inaudible] percent of GNP Mullen has talked about that [inaudible] floor for defense spending. Is that a unanimous view among the Chiefs that four percent of gross domestic product should be the--

A: We have talked about a standard predictable measure over time. The four percent figure has been discussed. But I won't say we have had sufficient discussion, Tony, to say that is a uniform Chief's position at all.

We're going to have another shot with the President here soon to discuss what POM '10 ought to look like. What will emerge out of that, I don't know.

Q: This is the last thing, but does that assume you fold the supplementals into the base, or just four percent of--

A: Yes, it would be a flat four percent, no supplementals. Again, it's a predictable figure over time that would be, you know, the nation pays for its insurance, read defense, four percent. And the other discretionary spending goes as it would.

Q: [Inaudible].

A: Well, it is and it's not. We're fighting a war on less than four percent. Maybe the supplementals bring us pretty close to that. But if you look at what it's cost the nation to fight other wars as a percentage of GNP, it was nine during Korea; 13 for Vietnam; 35-38 for World War II. So we're making do with it, but there are lots of programs out there at the same time that are going to I think refurbish the force and reset the force that we do see some needs on the horizon.

Q: Not this \$1.5 shell. [Laughter].

Q: With that, we'll leave it there. We're out of time. Thanks very much.

A: Thanks folks.

END TEXT