

**OFFICE OF
THE COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS**

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE COUNTRY

**REMARKS BY
GENERAL JAMES T. CONWAY,
COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS**

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GENERAL JAMES T. CONWAY: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen — Porter, thank you for that marvelous introduction.

This is the 14th in a series of these conversations with the country. It's actually my first one. I was scheduled to do a couple earlier. The schedules just didn't work out, so I was really excited about making this one stick. So I am happy to be here with you.

Right at the outset I want to say thanks to you folks for being here. These things can't occur without reciprocation, without interest on your part, and the fact that you're here tells me that you're patriots with an inquisitive mind wanting to understand what it is this Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard team is all about. So I thank you for that, and I know I speak on behalf of the CNO and the Commandant of the Coast Guard.

I know you've had some discussion this morning on what is this maritime strategy. I'd like to do what the organizers have asked me to do, and that is talk about my Marine Corps first of all, but I'd like to give you just a couple of thoughts, if I can, on how I see the maritime strategy and what it means to our Corps. First of all, we are a maritime nation, and I think there is some concern on the part of the Navy — and I'll certainly say in the Marine Corps — that we not forget that our strength, our commerce, so much of what we depend on on a daily basis comes across those seas out there. And your Navy, in particular these days, is out there securing these sea lines of communication so that we can enjoy the quality of life that we have. We should not take it for granted, and there is cost associated with it. I think that's something that the CNO (Chief of Naval Operations) in particular would ask that you understand.

I believe — and I know it is a part of the national philosophy — that our nation is best defended by forward presence, by our existence elsewhere, so that no threat reaches our shores. If we're going to have a fight, we'd rather it be someplace else other than the east or west coast of these United States. And that forward presence, conducted by Navy ships and embarked Marines, along with the Coast Guard, I think is a very positive thing. It lends itself to what we call engagement, and that's something I think that is a little different about this concept, this strategy.

When you go to a meeting these days with the combatant commanders and the service chiefs, you hear a lot of discussion about engagement with developing nations, in an effort to preclude combat taking place there at a later point in time. We're trying to do things with these nations that will increase their quality of life, that will increase the capabilities of their security forces. We're trying to make sure that fundamentalism or extremism is simply not a tactic. And in the process, perhaps, we'll avoid some of the situations that we see at work right now in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It's not just military engagement. Increasingly we believe — and we have said such to the president in a tank session — that there needs to be engagement through all American elements abroad. The entire interagency of the United States government needs to join us in these developing nations to give them insight and their assistance as may be needed. In certain dimensions, they are much more capable than we are. So we want to partner with those people, have them create an expeditionary capability to join us out there so that the fundamental needs of some of these developing nations can be met.

Lastly, it's my belief that our nation enjoys working with partner nations. We always enjoy a coalition when we want to do something. Now there's an old Russian toast that says, may all your enemies be coalitions. So there's jeopardy in coalitions, I think we'll have to admit that. But the fact is, we like being partnered with other nations — and that certainly includes the high seas. Some of the people who are critical of the strategy have said, general, does that mean that we will have to have a collective vote before we go through something on behalf of this great nation? The answer, of course, is, absolutely no. If it is in our nation's vital interest, we, the Marine Corps, the Navy, and Coast Guard are going to do what has to be done. We are not going to ask for a vote.

In the meantime, I think it is helpful if we can be with these other nations, projecting our capabilities when and where they may be needed. So there are just a couple of bullets on what you may have heard elements of this morning, and my description to you of this thing called maritime strategy.

Let me talk now, if I can, about the role the Marine Corps plays, and talk about where we are, where we think we're going, and then how we're going to get there — and giving, I believe, ample time for questions and comments on your part to see what's on your mind. After all, that's what this is all about.

I can't talk with any audience without bragging a little bit on our Marines that are positioned in Iraq and Afghanistan, probably about a total of about 30,000 Marines these days. The sergeant major and I just got back from a trip to Iraq, probably about six weeks ago now, and I've got to tell you, things are incredibly better in the Anbar province — where most Marines are assigned these days — than we ever thought they would be at this point in time. We spoke with our commanding general there, Major General John Kelly. He said my problem in this province is not kinetic. It's not that I need large numbers of grunts kicking down doors. What I need is more and better quality support from the Baghdad government to assist these people out there from a political and an economic perspective. He says, if we can get that, the Iraqi Security Forces have

got it because the al Qaeda definitely overplayed their hand out west. They were murdering and intimidating the Sunnis in the Anbar province. The sheikhs came to our leadership in the fall of 2006 and said, we've had it up to here with these guys. If you will help us, we will turn on them and we will slaughter them — their term.

Ladies and gentlemen, that's exactly what's been happening since about November of 2006. So today the Anbar province is really a model of what takes place in the rest of Iraq, as incredible as that seems. Now out there in 2004, there was no way I thought that that was going to be the result by 2007, 2008 — but that's precisely what we see.

Now, as good as the trend-lines are in Iraq, they are probably just about that bad in Afghanistan. I won't pull punches with you here. The numbers of attacks, the casualties, the ability now of the Taliban to hold ground in Afghanistan should be disconcerting to us all. In Afghanistan you've got a major source of income for the terrorists and insurgents and the drug dealers that are in the south, and you've got a safe haven across an international border. When those things exist for an indeterminate period of time, you've got a problem. And I don't know how long it's going to take to solve the problem, but I can tell you that there are smart people are after it.

We recently had a Marine Expeditionary Unit, about 2,200 Marines in the South, partnering with a Marine battalion, 2nd battalion, 7th Marines, in the mountains and in the high desert in the south. Those people are ending their deployment there very soon. It put us at surge — a one-to-one deployment to dwell.

What do I mean by that? I mean the Marines are gone for seven months of deployment, they're home for seven months before they turn around and go again. When I talked to a group this size of Marines, I'll ask, how many times have you deployed? And at this point, ladies and gentlemen, they take their hands down when I start talking about four and five deployments. You can feel for the intensity of it all and what it means to the force.

In any event, it's my personal belief that we probably need to be sending more Marines to Afghanistan to settle that situation, as opposed to sending Marines to Iraq. That is a decision that's made well above my level. Most folks understand how I feel. My views are being taken into consideration, and we'll see what happens. We live with what's decided at the highest levels of our government. But I do think the Afghan problem is going to be with us for a time, and we've got to beat down that threat, lest they be planning potentially another attack on our great nation.

You would be really encouraged, I think, by what we see out there today with this great young generation, really in a couple of regards. Some old guys like me sat down about 10 years ago and we actually questioned — is this young generation going to be of sufficient quality to give us good Marines and soldiers? Will they make good troops? We were concerned about not enough time outdoors, maybe not enough physical training,

too much time with the joystick in their hand, maybe not enough discipline. Let me tell you, we could not have been more wrong.

I have seen these young men, and in some cases women, in combat. Their raw courage, their sense of team play, their self-sacrifice is eye-watering. It is absolutely incredible to watch them work. And some of you I know are parents of some of those young people. You should be very proud of them because I have a great level of confidence in our Corps, and I would suggest our country is going to be in great shape for a long time to come as these people reach increasing levels of responsibility.

We were given authorization to grow the Corps and the Army about a year and a half ago now by the President and the Congress — the Army 65,000 soldiers along with 27,000 Marines. When we spoke to our personnel people and our recruiters, they said, you know, we probably ought to spread it over a five-year period if in fact we're going to keep the quality high. That was really essential to us. Our recruiters went about their business. We needed 5,000 people that first year in order to be able to demonstrate that we could grow, and in order to be able to, again, keep the ranks full and the quality high.

Well, folks, they didn't give us 5,000 that first year. They gave us 7,000, 96.2 percent high school graduates. This year they didn't give us 7,000, they gave us 10 (thousand). And next year we're going to close that growth out. That's an amazing thing when you consider that the propensity for all three major ethnic groups in the country to join the military today is down. And yet when you talk to them, there's a great young group of Americans out there who are the real vein that runs our society that feels very deeply that they have to do what's right for their country.

Pardon the colorful language, but I'll share with you a conversation I had with a young Marine at a mess tent in Ramadi. I asked him why he joined. He said, sir, I was 11 when they attacked the towers. I was scared. I could not imagine our country could come under such a vicious assault. He said, by the time I got to be 13, I was pissed off. And now I'm 18 and doing something about it. That's the quality of the young men and women that we bring in these days and again, they're doing some marvelous things out there in defense of this great land.

We are concerned about this deployment to dwell, not so much for the Marines because of their resiliency. The metrics that we follow are absolutely incredible, with their ability to go and do what has to be done, come back for a while, and get ready to do it again. But, we are concerned about our families. They are the most brittle part of the equation, and about 40 to 43 percent of our Marines these days are married. We've talked to – in fact, I remember distinctly a conversation I had with a young sergeant's wife down here, in what we call the Carolina MAGTF. She said, you know, Sergeant Sasquatch over there gets four evaluations every time he deploys for PTSD and whatever else might be ailing him. Pretty soon someone's going to have to counsel me and then my two sons because they're growing up without a father. That resonates. That strikes home pretty piercingly, so we're trying to do something with that.

We cannot reduce the deployments. What we can do is go to force and try to make the quality of life better in the home stations for our families. I will assure you, we're putting a great deal of money against that, more than ever before, and relying on great folks like you, citizens of North Carolina and California and Pennsylvania, wherever you may be, in order to be able to help us take care of those families while the Marines are gone. So that's a lot of work that we're doing today. That's kind of where we are, folks.

Where are we going? Well, I asked that question when I became the commandant, and I said, who is it that does our long-range planning? I don't know if you folks have seen that cartoon of the two bears, one's got the crosshairs on his chest and he's doing this to the guy next to him. Well, that was kind of the response I got, you know, in terms of who does all our long-range planning.

We now have a group that does that — a smart Colonel who's assisted by half a dozen Majors and smart Lieutenant Colonels. We've got them looking at the period 2020 through 2025. Why there? Because we think beyond that is really looking at a crystal ball. Short of that is not influencing some of the very expensive programs that we have that are played out over time really until about 2020. So we're saying to them, what's the world going to look like at that point in time, what's going to be the role of the United States and the Department of Defense, and how does the Marine Corps support all of that? And they've given us some very interesting answers. I'd like to share some of those answers with you today.

First of all, they said that demographics are going to change this world in ways that we might never expect — that the countries that you and I studied when we were growing up have changed dramatically in the last couple of decades. The developing countries are getting younger. The developed countries are getting older. There is, in some ways, what's called a silent invasion taking place in Europe, where the actual face of those countries is changing fairly dramatically and it's going to be only a matter of time before it influences the policies and the alliances we think that have traditionally been in place.

They tell us that the Navy-Marine Corps team is going to have a very viable role in the future because by about 2025, 75 percent of the earth's population will live within 35 miles of an ocean or some sort of salt water. And they'll live in what's called urban sprawl, huge cities that just spread out over time. Again, for the most part, poorer nations that are still developing.

They tell us that oil will continue to be a primary resource to grease our machines, to give us power. There will be other means that we're looking at to try to determine if there is something that will be there by 2025, and so we need to understand and appreciate this dependence on oil and the importance that that means then for us in the Middle East.

But they also say, interestingly, that nations will be prepared to go to war for water. That water will be as important as oil by 2025. It is a basic human need, and increasingly nations are looking at various controls that have not been witnessed before. A nation simply has to have fresh-water drinking supply for its population.

They tell us that the threat, for the most part, through 2025 will be what we call a hybrid threat. It will be both smallish in design, perhaps third state or non-state actors, but very capable in terms of its weapons systems.

The best example to point you toward is Hezbollah with the dust-up with the Israelis in '06. Here you had what was essentially – we call it a political party, others would call it a terrorist organization that had the ability to reach out 12 miles to sea and knock out ships, and use fifth-generation anti-tank systems to take out a battalion of Israeli tanks. That doesn't sound like your typical terrorist organization, but their training and their equipment have brought them to that level. Our experts think that is for the most part what we're going to see.

Now, does that preclude the possibility that we might not see a peer competitor? Not at all — it could happen. Russia, China, and increasingly important, India, are all out there. They tell us that the most likely threat is within this hybrid threat that we're going to have to deal with.

The last thing they say is that the United States has, for the most part over the last two decades, enjoyed pretty much a single polar kind of environment. Since the fall of the wall, we have been, arguably I suppose, but certainly in my perspective the most powerful nation on earth. By 2025 that's going to change some, folks. We'll still be very important on the world scheme, but again, Russia, China, India, a collective European Union are going to make it a multipolar world and we're going to have to learn to live with it. Dimensions of American military strength, American business, and American diplomacy will still be important, but we're going to have to deal with all those other very important players as well. That's just not something that we've been accustomed to over the last two or three decades.

We think that this global war on terrorism is going to be a long war. It's already been a long war compared to what our Nation has experienced previously. But it's not going to be over for a while, and I think I should not talk to with a group as distinguished as this without discussing with you what we know about the al Qaeda strategy. It's basically four or five phases.

The first phase is to call all brothers to jihad, to rebel against Western influence, against Western presence of any sort, in what they would call the old caliphate. That's only been partially successful. You have experienced out there the war-fighting, but the vast majority of people of the Muslim faith are considered moderate, and they don't like some of the extremists any better than we do.

The second phase is to attempt to exorcise Western influence from the Middle East — what they would call the old caliphate. I think that's the phase that we're in right now. It's having mixed success. Again, I think the trend lines are not good in Afghanistan. But my belief, ladies and gentlemen, is that the al Qaeda has badly overplayed their hand strategically in Iraq. I can't say they're crushed, but I can certainly say that there's tremendous momentum and it's a pursuit operation at this point, which I think is a good news story.

Their strategy, nevertheless, calls for a third phase, which would attempt to bring Western nations to their knees. Not militarily. I think they realize that they can't beat us on the battlefield, but they would attack us through our economics, and then more specifically through oil. They feel like that if they can disrupt the oil supply or, worse yet, take control of the refineries and the oil producing network, they can control the price any way they want to and they can literally wreck the Western economy without the benefit of the availability of this oil through 2020-2025.

In the process, when they think that we cannot sufficiently respond, they will turn their attention to and try to destroy Israel. They despise the Israelis, they despise what that nation represents, and they can't wait until the day when they can literally wipe it off the map.

Lastly, they say that theirs is indeed an expansionist strategy. It may take 100 years, but in time, the whole world will fall or appreciably follow, will fall under their domain. We would live by their laws, use their religion, and we would all be subject to what these people want to do. Now, if you listened closely in that, I mentioned at least two vital national objectives. So our view is that we do it right while we are there now. Otherwise we're going to be going back. So it is a long war. There's no question at least in the military mind that al Qaeda must be crushed.

Okay, so how do we get there? Well, in the case of our Corps, right now because of our deployment to dwell, we have become a highly effective counterinsurgency force, and yet that's not what we offer to the nation. We like to think that we can do counterinsurgency but that we also have a responsibility to be this Nation's forcible entry capability. I'm not talking about Tarawa or Iwo Jima, but I am talking about force protection against a nation that we need to have a discussion with.

To date, that capability is not nearly as robust as it used to be. We believe that we've got to get that deployment-to-dwell back to about one to two, seven months deployed and 14 months home, so that we can do the proper kinds of training that give us the capability not only in the counterinsurgency environment where we may be headed, but also in a major contingency where we have been productive in the past. We certainly need more time at home to be able to share time with families, but also to have some of this training.

Our Marine Corps needs to get back to being expeditionary. We have turned into a second land army in Iraq because we had to. That was the mission. That was the

threat, and we have now grown much heavier with regard to 48,000-pound MRAP vehicles, many more numbers of rolling stock in the battalions, heavier weapons, longer-range communication, all those types of things that start to take away from your ability to get out of town quick, be agile and on your way, and be lethal on the other end.

We simply can't get aboard the ships and the airplanes that are there today to get us there with the weight of the equipment that we've got in our Corps today. We have got to go through filters in order to be able to make that better because that's a unique capability that we offer to the nation, more so than anybody else. We are the expeditionary force of choice, and this great Nation needs that capability. So we've got to get it back and we're anxious to do so, given more time at home to train our young lads.

We also are going to need refreshing on the equipment sets. We need a joint strike fighter. It's been 10 years now — we call it a procurement holiday — but we have actually skipped a generation of aircraft that allows us to go to this joint strike fighter. And we can't wait until the day when those squadrons start to fill our airfields, to give us a fifth-generation kind of capability.

We need the expeditionary fighting vehicle. If you're not familiar with it, it is a new form of amphibious landing craft. Our old one is a great vehicle and it putters through the water at about eight miles an hour. The United States Navy has put us on notice, and it makes complete sense, that they cannot go closer than 25 miles to a coast because anti-access systems will sink entire ships. So they're going to operate in a safe distance from shore that makes our problem more and more difficult in terms of getting the Marines in.

This expeditionary fighting vehicle is two vehicles in one. It is a capability that skims over the top of the water at about 30 knots — picture a bass boat with a 75-millimeter cannon just to try to give you an idea — but then when it goes ashore it becomes our armored personnel carrier. And again, it's a very capable vehicle that we think we've simply got to have.

The Osprey is fielded. The first operational squadron has deployed and it's done some great things, and our second operational squadron is there now. The Osprey is the vertical lift helicopter that rotates these two huge nacelles forward, and it becomes a fixed-wing aircraft, cruises at 13,000 feet, at about three times the speed of a helicopter, gets to the other end, can land on a runway, or in a jam, lower itself just like an elevator. Has a pretty checkered past — we've had some accidents, we've lost some great young Marines in the testing — but ladies and gentlemen, today that airplane is proving itself to be everything that we hoped that it would be. It's a marvelous capability that we're going to have now for the next several decades.

All of that comes together to be able to support what we in the Navy call the sea base, which if you can envision five or six ships mated together, out beyond that 25-mile reach, that are able to provide to us a port and an airfield, to shuffle men and equipment and aircraft and tanks ashore, that's in essence what we're talking about here. A

tremendous concept that has been exercised once now and we're pretty pleased with the first trial and what we've seen, much more to follow. But this gives us a capability, in wartime or in peacetime, if we want to project American aid, we can do it much more effectively on a sea base. It is indeed a vital part of this whole thing called maritime strategy.

Well, it sounds like a lot of gear. What I want to leave you with, my last comment before we take some questions perhaps, is that we do need equipment. I think as a nation we owe it to these great young Marines and sailors that support us if we're going to put them in a fight. But for the Corps, it's always about the individual Marine. It's about that Marine that we bring aboard and make him or her a rifleman first, before we send him someplace else.

I would share with you a story that took place back in the spring in Iraq. I say that Iraq is better, but Iraq is still a very dangerous place. On the morning of 22 April, outside an entry control point in the city of Ramadi, we had two young Marines standing post at that entry control point. One was from 1st battalion 9th Marines, the other one was from 2nd battalion, 8th Marines, two different battalions because there was a turnover taking place, one battalion to the other. Inside this compound where we were with the Iraqis were about 40 Marines, some of whom were sleeping because they'd had night patrol the night before. Some of who were going about their daily routine.

At about 9:30 that morning a 20-foot tanker truck busted through the outer cordon of Iraqis and headed towards an old flimsy metal gate. At 500 yards, the Marines realized what was taking place and they started putting aimed rifle fire on that cab. There is an escalation process that takes place but, in fact, they didn't go through that process because they recognized immediately what was occurring.

At about 25 yards, the machine gun opened up and the truck then came to a halt about 10 yards the post. The truck exploded, we think there was probably a dead-man switch. They had 2,000 pounds of explosive that was ignited. Young Corporal Yale from Burkeville, Virginia, and Lance Corporal Haerter from Sag Harbor, New York, really never had a chance with the explosives that close.

The Iraqis who had been manning the gate when we opened fire ran. And later, an hour or two later when General Kelly and the Iraqi commander came to view this hole that was seven feet deep and 20 feet across, the Iraqi commander said to General Kelly, why didn't they run? My men ran and they lived. General Kelly said, they couldn't run. I hope some day you will understand that, but they couldn't run because there were 40 Marines on the inside of that gate depending on them.

I'll tell you, folks, if our country continues to provide us with great young Marines like that, we can go anywhere and do anything that this nation asks. God bless you all. Thank you very much.