

Remarks of  
Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James T. Conway  
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Folks, it’s great to be with you tonight in America’s most cosmopolitan city. I intend to offer a few remarks, and then I certainly look forward to your questions.

I sat this week and listened to a United States Senator who criticized the U.S. effort in Iraq as being involved in an Iraqi civil war while ignoring the real fight against terrorism that was taking place in Afghanistan.

With due respect to the senator, I would offer that he is wrong on two counts. The fact is that there is no civil war taking place in Iraq by any reasonable metric. There is certainly sectarian strife, but even that is on the declining scale over the past six months. Ironically, this strife was brought about and inflamed by the very terrorists some claim do not exist in Iraq. The sectarian strife is a tactic aimed at creating chaos with little risk to the instigator while it ties down coalition forces.

Other misnomers abound. Many in our country routinely characterize what is taking place in the Gulf as the “War with Iraq.” I would ask you to think of it differently. I believe we are seeing the first real battles against the field forces of terrorism, both in Afghanistan and Iraq, in what will be a generational struggle. Instead of the “War with Iraq,” it is more correctly said, the “Battle in Iraq” or the “Battle in Afghanistan.” Words and phrases are important in terms of how we understand critical decisions that this Nation will face and how we frame our thinking as we go about dealing with them.

Our Nation’s forces have been in Iraq over four years now. No doubt that mistakes have been made and opportunities lost, but progress continues at an incremental pace — slower progress than our countrymen might like — but generally apace of historical norms — nine to eleven years that we see when we study successful counterinsurgencies. We have over 170,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, roughly 25,000 of them Marines, and another 11,000-plus coalition troops. Marines are almost exclusively located in the Al Anbar Province, west of Baghdad, until recently termed “the deadly” or the “volatile” Al Anbar.

The region is still a dangerous place, make no doubt – but the Marines and soldiers assigned to the Marine Expeditionary Force have made tremendous progress over the past nine months. At one point, Baghdad believed that the province would be the absolute last to achieve an acceptable level of stability and security. Today, conditions in the province have become the model for what’s happening in the rest of the country.

The reason for the progress is that during October of '06, the leading Sunni sheik's in the province decided that U.S. forces were less an enemy to them than the al Qaeda. They finally had their fill of the murder and intimidation campaigns the al Qaeda was subjecting them to, and suddenly, themes the Marines had held fast to for over two-and-a-half years began to resonate. As was their culture, the tribal leaders determined that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," and thus began a partnership that has over the intervening months all but cleared the hard-core terrorists from the region.

The metrics show the results. Attacks are down 60 percent. Cache discoveries are up 400 percent because tips from the local population are up 150 percent. Sunni tribes now offer more of their young men each month for the Iraqi Security Forces than the coalition can train. And, yes, casualties are down almost 14 percent for U.S. troops in Al Anbar. A normalcy has returned to the province, not seen in over three years, and the people like it.

Al Qaeda can be expected to counterattack, but they have lost the support of the populace, and when that happens, an insurgency cannot survive. Economic progress must follow, however, for us to fully capitalize on the security gains, and that also is happening. Marketplaces in all of the major cities are opened and a decentralized economy flourishes. International businesses have been watching the security situation closely in Al Anbar, and many now feel the time is right for those willing to accept some risk, but perhaps realize significant gains to act.

The final leg of the stool is the political link. At the national level, the political patchwork is problematic, and the Maliki government has been repeatedly cautioned that it must make better use of the time coalition forces have bought them. In the Al Anbar Province, things are slightly more encouraging. Prime Minister Maliki has met in Ramadi the lead sheiks and is scheduled to meet with them again in al Qa'im this summer. The sheiks realize that in order for the country to stay together, there must be reconciliation with the Kurds and the Shi'as at the national level.

Reconciliation conferences are taking place amongst tribal leadership, the clergy, and elected officials. Recently, just such a conference was attacked by a suicide bomber. While the attack may make subsequent efforts more difficult, it also shows the participants how much the al Qaeda fear the success of these efforts.

As one might expect, the morale of the Marines and Sailors who are living the successes in the West is off the page. Although our deployment tempo is intense – Marines are normally deployed for seven months and are at home for seven months — or in some cases less — the absolute best morale that our Corps has is found in units getting ready to go to Iraq or that are already there.

I'll give you a couple of examples. The Second Battalion, Fifth Marines was in Ramadi on their last deployment and lost 15 Marines killed and another 150-plus wounded. Scheduled to return to Ramadi again, the battalion commander approached his

combat veterans who were nearing their end-of-active service that would occur either before or during the deployment.

He expressed concern that his younger Marines who were not combat experienced would miss their leadership and their know-how. He asked them to consider staying aboard through the next rotation. Ladies and gentlemen, without a penny of incentive pay, 200 Marines — most of them NCOs — stepped forward to deploy again with that battalion.

*[Applause]*

In another instance that happened just last week, Corporal Garret Hawkins had his right leg shattered in a IED blast northwest of Karma. Before he was medevaced out by helicopter, he told his First Sergeant that he first needed to go back to the base. Once at the treatment station, he announced he wanted to reenlist before he was evacuated. His platoon commander read the oath, the corporal raised his right hand as he laid on the stretcher, and his fellow Marines shook their heads in amazement and could only say, “That’s motivating as hell.”

*[Applause]*

Another reason that Marines and Sailors feel good about their mission and themselves in Iraq and Afghanistan is that they are certain that they are defending this Nation against terrorism. They feel that the reason the country has not been attacked since 9/11 is because they are killing the same terrorists in both places that might otherwise be attempting to find their way to the U.S. Most would agree that a direct attack on terrorism was not the initial reason for going into Iraq in 2003, but it took a little less than three weeks for us to see religious extremists there.

On the march to Baghdad, my division commander, then Major General Jim Mattis outside of a little town called Azzizah radioed back that he had just run into a beehive. He said that there were about 300 fighters in the area who were not retreating, and to the contrary, they were dying in place on their guns. These people were fanatics. The last squad was cut down charging a 50-caliber machine gun on a tank. When we searched the bodies, we found that they were not Iraqis — but were from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Yemen.

In the interim years, we have watched the forces of al Qaeda increasingly make it their fight. Indeed, they are the single most dangerous enemy we face. There is no way our troops want to back down from that fight until they and their Iraqi counterparts have substantially destroyed the al Qaeda organization or forced it to go elsewhere.

The al Qaeda in Iraq are increasingly on the run. We have faced two enemies in the country — one we call the ACF, or the Anti-Coalition Forces — the other AIF, or the Anti-Iraqi Forces. The Anti-Coalition Forces are basically local tribesmen or former Iraqi army who believe we have become occupiers. These types are essentially

nationalists. They want to see a strong Iraqi government, the coalition forces gone, and ultimately, a better quality of life for their children. They might very well engage a U.S. patrol moving through their area with lethal fires, but if the patrol were Iraqi, they would cheer their boys on.

The Anti-Iraqi Forces are different. They are principally al Qaeda, foreign fighters, and criminals. They do not want to see a strong Iraq government. Indeed, their objective is to return to the caliphate and 15th-century law. They are not likely to ever reach an agreement with a recognized authority and will simply have to be captured or killed. For roughly 36 months, these forces allied together to oppose coalition forces. For the past nine months, the Anti-Coalition Forces have joined with us to eliminate the Anti-Iraqi Forces.

The terrorist leader Zarqawi foretold the day would come before his death. He said to Iraqi Security Forces in 2004, “We fight them and this is difficult because of the gap that will emerge between us and the people of the land. How can we kill their cousins and sons linked to the inhabitants by kinship, blood, and honor? The real sons of this land will decide the matter through experience. Democracy is coming; there will be no excuse thereafter.”

We are hopeful that the so-called “Awakening Movement” of the tribes in al Anbar will continue to be a west-to-east phenomenon that has evolved. Baghdad is admittedly different with the ethnic mix found in the city, but even there, we have recently some bonding against the al Qaeda influence. The recent surge, or plus-up, that has been directed by the President comes at an advantageous time to keep pressure on the al Qaeda.

I must caution, however, that the source of the additional troops to Iraq has created an impact on available force flow that can only be judged as severe. The effort has brought both ground services to a precipitous edge — for future rotations are in jeopardy of not being fully rested, trained, or manned to go forward. Our message to the commanders in the field and to our leadership is that based on our current deployment model, the troop levels associated with the surge cannot be sustained indefinitely.

That said, I have heard this effort described as a Hail Mary — a last desperate attempt to achieve success. The analogy follows that if the effort fails — that is to say, if the pass falls incomplete — then the clock runs out and the game is over. Folks, I think that what we have at stake in Iraq is far too important for us as a Nation to take that view.

The much-advertised September report from commanders in theater will provide us an insight as to the progress on the ground. In the wake of that report, we as a Nation need to take an objective look at where we are in this struggle. We should not overestimate our progress made or underestimate the momentum the enemy would gain if we were to conduct an unabated withdrawal of forces. There are many options left available, and we need to be pragmatic in terms of what is best for the Nation — both in the near term and in the context of this Long War.

You know, ladies and gentlemen, the Iraqis are a very proud people. They consider themselves fortunate to be Iraqis, and they look forward to the day when they can live in security and prosperous surroundings. A professor told me long ago that a sovereign nation needs five things to make it prosper: fresh water, arable land, an educated population, an exportable product, and a seaport. Iraq has all of those things. I would add the sixth element to the list, I think: leadership.

But the point is, Iraq is potentially a very rich country. Her neighbors look on that wealth with a lusty gaze, and al Qaeda would like nothing better than to control such resources for the Long War. We in turn, when we do draw down, must develop a regional strategy that protects Iraq within such time as she can build back her armed forces sufficient to defend national sovereignty, and yet we need to limit the footprint of our forces inside the country.

Let me switch topics at this point and talk about regional security and the next steps in the War on Terrorism. The drawdown of our forces in Iraq is inevitable, and I would argue necessary in order to be able to reset our corps, train more broadly for other contingencies, and prepare ourselves for the next engagements with extremists.

The key question will be, are we reducing our forces in Iraq, confident in the ability of Iraqi Security Forces to carry the preponderance of the fight and the ability of the Iraqis to self govern, or are we drawing down because we feel progress is not sufficiently dramatic — that Iraq is simply not worth the cost in treasure and blood — or because, as some say, we have already lost?

For those who subscribe to the latter point of view, I would offer to you that there is something else inextricably tied to our presence in Iraq, and that is the credibility of the United States of America. Whether or not we want to admit it as a Nation, the fight in Iraq has evolved into a struggle between us and al Qaeda — the religious extremists of our modern-day world and the people we must defeat in this long war.

Our enemies have said from the outside that Americans are weak of spirit and will lose our will to win if the fighting gets tough. He has looked at our other withdrawals in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia, and has gained confidence that he can recreate yet another such scenario. I said to you earlier that Iraq and Afghanistan are the first battles of the Long War. He knows, just as we should know, that whoever wins the first battles gains incredible momentum. The loser faces a vastly different and much more daunting set of circumstances.

The keys to a successful struggle in Iraq are developing the rudimentary elements of self-governance sufficient for protecting citizens of the country, hold the nation together, and provide basic services to the people. The keys to a successful regional strategy will be posturing the moderates for success and regaining control of the Muslim religion, preventing wider outbreaks of sectarian violence amongst nations, and containing the Iranian threat.

Notwithstanding possible development of nuclear weapons, Iran is already the recognized power in the region amongst Gulf states. The nations in the region are watchful and uneasy — not yet willing to accommodate but in no position to challenge their Persian neighbor.

Iran for its part is also uneasy. She has significant coalition presence on both her eastern and western borders and an entire fleet of coalition combat ships in Gulf waters. The Iranian response to this thus far has been covert – that is to say, deniable support for both the insurgents in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. She is exporting the successful Hezbollah model in an attempt to prolong both conflicts in order to avoid greater focus on Iran. The strategy to date has only been minimally successful but carries with it a high degree of risk.

The stability of the region is in the best interests of the industrial world as 30 percent of the world's oil-supply flows from the Gulf ports, and that will continue to be the case through at least the next couple of decades. However, the threats are also enduring: al Qaeda, Iranian-sponsored, and surrogate terrorist organizations, and internal movements associated with virtually every Middle Eastern nation, to name the most serious.

But there has been unrest in extremist movements in the past. Indeed, there have been five previous jihads in history and relative peace were only possible after the moderates were sufficiently mobilized to say enough and regain control of their religion. Western nations have had little impact on settling previous jihads. The solution must invariably come from within. But with wise statecraft, we can, with our partner nations, positively influence events in the region and help shape the environment for success.

One of the things that Western nations can and must ensure is that this Long War does not somehow evolve into a cultural war between Muslims and Christianity. Of course, the extremists would like nothing better, and just as they have been able to engineer sectarian strife in Iraq, we can accurately predict they will attempt to inflame religion on a global scale.

We must continue to focus like a laser on extremism but extend the helping hand to other nations, particularly Muslim nations who seek it. Secretary Rumsfeld used to say that the most important success we have had against terrorism to date was the tsunami relief, and we didn't fire a single round. There have been other successes in the wake of the tsunami disaster where our military responded magnificently: during the Pakistani earthquake, the Philippine mudslides, and even the Lebanon non-combatant evacuation.

But the response should not, unless absolutely necessary, always be a military response. Perhaps more than any other conflict we have engaged in, this generational struggle calls out for the application of other elements of American power. A fledgling country in North Africa susceptible to fundamentalist ideologies might not welcome a squad of Marines in the back of an Osprey, but they would be anxious to have a fire team

of Americans from Agriculture and Justice, Border and Drug Enforcement to help them get their institutions right and prosper a higher standard of living. We need to properly resource and develop a deployment mentality among our U.S. government agencies so they can stand at the shoulder of our armed forces during this Long War.

Just as we must broaden our own ability to respond, we must welcome the contributions of other nations. Who would have guessed it 10 years ago that NATO would be as engaged in Afghanistan as we see today. Moreover, I don't think that when they did agree to go in that they did so realizing their forces would be under frequent attack by a resurgent Taliban. By my estimation, however, NATO forces in the southern region have done pretty well this past spring, yet there are those in Washington who grouched that "they owe us more" — that "this nation or that one is not doing as much as it should."

Folks, I am reminded of a phrase, "a nation will invariably do what is in the best interest of that nation to do." I'm convinced our country appreciates a coalition effort, and we need to do all in our power to encourage it. If it's not in a nation's capability to provide combat troops, then we ought to ask for military advisor teams, police trainers, or those who can counter drugs. Each nation should be encouraged to do as much as it can, but the key is to keep their flag active in that circle of flags that are engaged in this Long War on Terrorism.

One more element of information for you that may impact how you see the problem: Our Nation must make some very critical decisions in the next several months. I am supremely confident in the power of democracy to make tough decisions. We elect men and women of character, and the people of our great land feel free to engage in the debate. It is therefore critical that our countrymen, certainly our elected officials, understand the enemy's strategy. We have both intercepted it and he has arrogantly placed it on his websites.

The strategy has five phases. The first phase calls for jihad — for all the brothers to rise up and slaughter the infidel. That phase has only been partially successful as we calculate there are probably a couple of thousand hardcore al Qaeda worldwide, and maybe a few tens of thousands of fighters.

The second phase calls for the removal of all Western influence out of the old caliphate – read "the Middle East." I believe that that's the phase we're in now. Based on the discussions taking place in our government, one can argue that the enemy is perhaps more on plan in Iraq than we are.

During the third phase, the jihad plans to turn on and destroy what they would call the apostate governments of the Middle East, those that have partnered with the infidels; those that have sold us oil. In the execution of this phase, something very important happens. The enemy knows that he cannot defeat us on the battlefield, but he believes he can defeat our nation by wrecking our economy — bankrupting and making it impossible for us to deploy our forces. He intends to do that through control of the Middle East oil

supply — either by destroying the capacity to produce, or if he takes it intact, by so distorting oil prices – hundreds of dollars per barrel – that Western economies come to a standstill.

The next phase includes the destruction of Israel and increasingly devastating terrorist attacks in the West. Finally, he says – and this may take 100 years – he extends the caliphate to encompass the globe, and every nation adopts his laws and his religion.

Folks, if you listen closely, you know that I mentioned at least two vital U.S. national objectives. My view is if we don't get the job done right in Iraq the first time, we will be going back, and things are always tougher the second time around.

Let's talk briefly about one last topic, and that is the role of the U.S. Marine Corps in the future. There are those who point out that the Marine Corps has, over the past few years, started to perform the function and take on the look of a second land army. That's true. That rather remarkable transformation began in 2003 when we lined up along side an Army Corps and then matched them stride for stride all the way to Baghdad — several hundred miles beyond our traditional operating ranges adjacent to sea. Then a Marine Task Force attacked another 100 miles supported by organic air to capture Saddam's hometown of Tikrit.

I mention it because it reflects the adaptability and the versatility of our Corps to respond to whatever the force the Nation needs. My belief is that for this Long War, there is no more relevant or capable force in the Nation's inventory than the U.S. Marine Corps.

To be that force, however, we must understand what the environment will look like in the out years and the role our expeditionary strategy will play. We see a world in 2025 still suffering the effects of Islamic extremism. The dangers of weapons of mass destruction being used against the homeland will increase. Alternative energy sources will not be mature, so industrial nations and increasingly the developing nations will depend on the free flow of oil; however, fresh water will be equally important to petroleum products. During the 20th century, while the population increased 300 percent, the demand for water increased 600 percent. Demographics and the aging of the population of industrial countries, accompanied by a youth bulge in developing countries will literally change the face of the world as we know it. The U.S. technological advantage, economic power, and military might will still exceed that of other nations, but will not be nearly as dominant by 2025.

The Marine Corps, Navy, and Coast Guard are developing a maritime strategy to meet this changing world. It relies heavily on forward presence and extensive use of the global commons — in this instance, the oceans. The key elements of our strategy include: integration with the naval forces of other nations to keep open sea lines of communication; a form of strategic distributed operations wherein a small number of Marines embark aboard ship and work in partnership with the forces of developing nations; sea basing, our capability in an effort to minimize U.S. presence ashore on any

other nation's land; and, yes, maintaining a sufficient forcible entry capability should the situation demand it.

To continue to be the Nation's force of choice, the Corps of today will have to require some changes. Post-Iraq, we will once again have to attain our expeditionary flavor. We have grown heavy in our effort to accomplish the mission and protect our troops in an IED-laden environment. Another layer of armor has a good feel to it, but it also limits the ability of an expeditionary force to be mobile and agile.

Our battalion equipment sets in the motor pools have become populated with over three times the gear that we once felt was sufficient. Most of it's good stuff for the environment we're in now, but the day must come when we sort out what we can carry — what we must have versus what is nice to have.

We will have to intelligently add the 27,000 Marines the President has authorized. Most of that number will be used to grow additional units that have been hard-pressed in this War on Terrorism. New capabilities, however, will also be created. We see the need for a training and advisory group that will provide advisor teams to nations developing a professional military or who are perhaps already engaged in the fight with extremists. We will have to train all our new Marines, active and reserve, in our bread-and-butter competencies — amphibious operations, combined arms maneuver, and mountain and jungle warfare training — to ensure that they are indeed ready for any clime and place.

There are a couple of other areas we have to fix as well. Recently, an Army mental health study pointed to the fact that Marines in a recent rotation in Iraq — in percentages that I was not comfortable with — was a little loose in their interpretation, maybe even application, of battlefield ethics. At the same time, we have a couple of incidents involving civilian deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq under investigation or engaged in trial. New information emerged just last week on yet another alleged incident. Now we're going to let those things play out. No one is prematurely judging guilt or innocent, but the very convergence of all these events concern me, and so we are examining as a Corps how we prepare our young squad leaders to become that Strategic Corporal.

The Long War is indeed a small unit leaders' fight, and we have to make sure our young warriors, operating sometimes with little sleep and in 120-degree heat, are up to the task of making rapid tactical decisions that may have strategic impact.

Because of the importance of the quality of the individual Marine, we will grow the force roughly 5,000 Marines a year over the next five years, but we do not intend to lower our standards. That makes it tough, but our recruiters are working hard, and we are making our quotas. I believe it helps that there will always be a certain number of great young Americans out there who want to be Marines. Once again, however, I have concerns, this time not with our Corps but with the Army. Folks, we have a great army, and I'll be the first to tell you that the Marine Corps wins battles but the Army wins the Nation's wars. Our Army is not having a good time of it right now recruiting, and yet

their successes are inextricably tied to the successes of the Nation. I've encouraged our recruiters — I encourage you tonight, to help where you can. If a young American is never going to be Marine, there is tremendous pride in serving this country as a soldier in the United States Army.

Folks, let me leave you with just a couple of positive thoughts. Everything we read about in the future indicates that well-trained, well-led human beings with a capacity to absorb information and rapidly react to their environment have a tremendous asymmetric advantage over an adversary. That advantage goes to us. Our young Marines of today are courageous, willing to make sacrifices, and are marvelous team players. I am confident our Corps, and indeed our Nation, will be in great shape for a long time to come as these people continue to grow and assume greater positions of responsibility.

Finally, I recently named the book, "*First to Fight*," by Lieutenant General Victor Krulak as the Commandant's selection — a must-read from our reading list. In the book, he says that there will always be a Marine Corps because America loves our Marines. That is, unless one of two things were to happen — one would be that we as an institution were found to be somehow abusing the sons and daughters of this great land. The other would be if the Nation were to call on the Corps at a time of emergency and somehow we failed to answer that call. Ladies and gentlemen, let me assure you here tonight. Neither of those two things are going to happen on my watch. Thank you very much.

[*Applause*]