

Media Roundtable

General James T. Conway
Commandant of the Marine Corps
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Bryan Whitman (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Good afternoon, and thank you for coming this afternoon.

It's always my pleasure to welcome General James T. Conway, the 34th Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, to our briefing room. I think he was here with us in about last May, after he'd just returned from Iraq and Afghanistan, to give you kind of an update in terms of the perspectives that he had in seeing our forces in the field. And as I understand it, he's just returned recently also --

General Conway: That's correct, Bryan.

Mr. Whitman: -- and also just passed the one-year mark as the Commandant. So we appreciate you coming here, appreciate you giving us the time, and with that, let me turn it over to you.

General Conway: Thanks, Bryan. I appreciate it.

I was offered three courses of action today. One was a short statement, one was a long statement, and the third was to filibuster for 45 minutes and then take a few questions. So I'm going to take Course of Action A, though, folks. So if you'll bear with me, I do have just a brief opening statement to make:

Good afternoon, and thanks for taking the time to spend part of the afternoon with us. I hope that you find our regular interaction somewhat useful. I certainly appreciate the opportunity to keep the dialogue open with you and believe it's good for our Corps, for you and for our Nation. We'll continue to seek opportunities to bring you up to date with what's happening with America's Marines.

In my first year as Commandant, I've had the opportunity to visit them across the country and really around the globe, and I can tell you, the American people, your Marine Corps is filled with young patriots who live up to the proud traditions and great legacy of the Marine Corps every day. Their success in battle, from the mountains of Afghanistan to the desert heat of western Iraq, has written new chapters in the long history of our Corps. These same adaptable and determined young men and women are professionals in every sense of the word, whether in battle or conducting disaster relief operations, as we've seen in Bangladesh over the course of the past few weeks.

At our last roundtable, I spoke of a disconnect between those of us in uniform and our countrymen regarding the amount of time required for success in Iraq and the amount

of time the country was willing to invest. I think the gap has somewhat narrowed, largely due to more inclusion of things that are going well in the news reports coming out of Iraq. Once billed as lawless, restive, and volatile, Iraq's Al Anbar province is increasingly known as home to the west to east tribal movement founded on alliances with coalition forces and the rejection of al Qaeda and its campaign of terror — powerful stuff, especially when ably reported by you and your colleagues.

In 2003, we found ourselves so far ahead militarily that the experts in diplomacy and nation-building didn't have time to catch up. The result: commanders and others in the field became de facto city planners, engineers, and mayors. Now, as coalition forces continue to gain and maintain momentum across the Iraq, the non-kinetic power of the United States has a real opportunity to take center stage and show the world what a great nation is all about. At the end of the day, however, it's Iraq's elected leadership that is going to have to fully exploit the breathing room that the surge and the tribal activities have brought. Having recently returned from a visit to the Al Anbar province, I can tell you that the place is moving forward, and it's ripe for economic and political progress.

Regarding Afghanistan, I met with the Secretary last week, and we discussed ideas for sending more Marines to Afghanistan. I think the mission is one that matches our strengths and our capabilities. We had a good discussion and I believe he understands what we're proposing and why. While it doesn't appear that additional Marine units will be needed in Afghanistan in the near future, we will continue to be ready to respond if called to serve.

With that, I'd be happy to take your questions. Thank you.

Bob, please.

Q General, your last comments are about — it sounds as if more Marines would not be needed in the near term in Afghanistan. Does that suggest that you are sort of mothballing your proposal for shifting from Iraq to Afghanistan? And if I could ask a second question on the same subject, it would be: based on your visit, do you think that - to Iraq -- that the time has come to draw down Marines from Anbar province?

General Conway: Let me answer the questions in order, Bob. First of all, I think what you described is probably an apt description. I think, after discussion with the Secretary, with my colleagues on the Joint Staff, that there's a determination that right now the timing is not right to provide additional Marine forces to Afghanistan. That's not to say that in the future, were there additional U.S. troops needed, that we would or would not be called. That would be a determination made on what the nature of the request was at the time and what the availability of forces were between probably Army and Marines.

In terms of a drawdown, the Al Anbar province is still a dangerous place. We still get casualty reports coming out. But the trend lines are all very, very good out there and continue to be that now over a number of visits. So, probably too early to draw down. I

think we'll know more when General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker come back in the spring, after we've seen the five BCTs and the two battalions that are there come home. We will be doing, of course, a drawdown associated with the additional two battalions that we sent as a product of the surge. That is already scheduled though, and I don't include that as part of your question. Beyond that, I think, we just have to wait and see how things go, and that will probably be springtime.

Q On Afghanistan, you mention that it's not the right time for additional troops in Afghanistan. But have you discussed at all swapping out soldiers for Marines, say, the Marine Corps -- (off mike)? And then also on Iraq, the two battalions that you mentioned, when exactly? Can you give us a better time frame on when exactly they will be drawn down, when they'll be completely out?

General Conway: You know, we did not discuss specifically replacing soldiers for Marines. That's still a possibility, I suppose, although there are equipment issues associated with that that you have to understand. The Army replaces pretty much in kind. We have different equipment sets, to some greater or lesser degree. If we're going to do it, it would have to be sort of a prolonged effort to make it worth our while to get all that equipment in there, potentially some aviation units and some CSS units and those types of things. So unless it is more prolonged and, I think, more in terms of a long-range strategy with potentially more forces, it would probably not be something that the Global Force Management Board, which is the joint agency that decides that, would see as worthwhile.

The second part of your question --

Q The two battalions: When will they be out?

General Conway: There are two options. We could start withdrawing them as early as January. The latest on that is probably as late as March. I think at this point, we're probably trending later than sooner, just because we do not have an additional commitment to send them elsewhere, vis-a-vis the Afghan discussion. So I think you're probably talking sometime in the spring, as opposed to winter.

Barbara.

Q Just for the record, what was the actual proposal you made to the Secretary?

GEN. CONWAY: Okay, well, Barbara, we talked in terms of when the drawdown comes in Iraq. We have, over the past years, and it goes back to my time even as the J-3, had a certain ratio of soldiers-to-Marines that we have observed. And it's pretty much driven our assignment to the request for forces that have come in from the combatant commander.

My point to the Secretary is — if and when we are able to continue our drawdown in Iraq, and it comes time for Marine units to start leaving the country, not associated

with the surge, should we bring them home or should we start looking at putting them where there is still an active fight, in this case, Afghanistan? And we were prepared to do that. That's why young Americans join the Marine Corps — to go fight for their country.

And although there are some other things that we need to look to in the not-so-distant future, with regard to things that we traditionally offer the Nation, I think. If there's a fight going on, we probably need to be there in large measure. So that was the thought process. When it comes time for the regiment to leave, does that regiment come home or does that regiment go to Afghanistan?

Q I'm still, sorry, I'm still confused. Were you proposing it as additional forces if they were theoretically needed? And clearly you're aware there's no requirement at this point. Or were you proposing them as replacement, which you now say, of course --

General Conway: Either/or, depending upon what the commanders felt they needed at the time. If they needed additional forces, you had 3,500 to 4,000 potentially associated with a regiment and more than that associated with its combat support and aviation support. So it could be added to it, if the commanders thought they needed it; it could be instead of, which I think then potentially made the option attractive to the Army.

Q And to what extent would that have restricted the Marine Corps' ability to participate in Iraq —

General Conway: Well, we were conscious of the fact they were simply not big enough to be able to do both. We did not want to get caught in between with equal numbers of forces attempting to both operate in Iraq and Afghanistan. So, as the drawdown would continue and as Marine forces would close out of Iraq, we would see the focus shifting — focus of our efforts shifting more and more to Afghanistan.

Q I guess I still don't understand why that is, because why not continue to do the mission in Iraq — to ease the strain on what everybody had said -- (inaudible) --

General Conway: Oh, Barbara, quite frankly we're going to do that now for the near term. At some point when you get to the number of forces that will provide the long-term security to Iraq, those become sustainment forces or forces that — occupation is not the right word here — but the long-term security forces. That's not a Marine function. That's not what U.S. Marines do for the country. We're expeditionary, and we do not get engaged in some of the long-term-type of duties that you see in Germany or in Japan or in Korea. We are much more mobile than that, and we want to keep that mobility and that flexibility and not get tied down.

So we're looking a long way out here, admittedly, with regard to some of these thoughts, but we just don't see those types of duties as a Marine function. We're not equipped or trained to do those things.

Yes?

Q Kind of building off of that, your counterpart in the Army – Gen. Casey has talked about how the deployment schedule — the optempo is unsustainable for the Army. Talk just a little bit, if you can, about the strength of the Marine Corps. Clearly, the deployment schedules are different, but talk about how — what has been the mission, perhaps, the Marine Corps is not traditionally done in terms of length of time; how that has affected the equipment, what it's going to reset the Marine Corps, even recruiting, that sort of thing?

General Conway: First of all, I'm not going to miss an opportunity to just brag about those marvelous young men and women out there that wear our uniform. Yes, well, I won't be long. (*Laughter.*) But they are truly incredible. I mean, if you play it out, our people are achieving the same essential deployment to dwell as the Army. I mean, in a 27-month period a soldier has gone from 15 months, the worst case — and I know General Casey's going to do some things to fix that — he's home for 12 months. In a 28-month period, a Marine's gone for 14 months and he's home for 14. So just about equitable.

And again, our Global Force Management Board has gone to great lengths to make sure that that has been the sustainment over time really for both services. But our people have weathered it marvelously, and I could not be prouder of our Marines and their families in large measure for being able to stay with us, sustain these kinds of efforts in spite of what it means with regard to family separation and just stay in it because they know what they're doing is important, they know that it's a time of crisis for the Nation, and they're just marvelous people.

You know, in seven months home, you cannot have a baby. You got your choice either being there at the front end of it or the back end of it, but you can't do both. Okay? (*Laughter.*) And yet our families, you know, have really been marvelous with that. So I can't tout them really enough.

There has been a heavy usage of our equipment; we compute about seven times what would normally be the case in terms of peacetime use. We have gotten heavier, and that's not necessarily a good thing. It gets back to Barbara's question, you know; if you want to stay light and adaptable and hard-hitting and get all that aboard Navy shipping and Air Force or TRANSCOM aviation, you've got to guard that. You've got to make some tough decisions along the way about what is proper force protection but what gives you the lightness and the ability to get there quickly and get a job done. So those are things that the leadership and I sort of deal with on a regular basis.

But I've been delighted to see, when I go out and talk to the families and visit the troops that they're hanging in there. There are some expectations. They're going to hold us, you know, to our duties to try to make this as palatable as we can through some family programs and through staying with the seven-month rotation. They really like that. But thus far, all cylinders seem to be stroking.

Q General, it's interesting that you want to keep the Marines employed, by talking about moving over to Afghanistan. Are you concerned at all — I mean, we always hear about the Army being stretched maybe to the breaking point. Are you concerned that the Marines need a break from the seven on, seven off? And is there an issue of full-spectrum training? And when you talk about sending Marines to Afghanistan because it's a shooting war and that's what the Marines do, how well-suited do you think the Marines are for full- spectrum counterinsurgency operations, which under the new doctrine is obviously not all about shooting?

General Conway: You got about a dozen questions in there; I'll try to answer six of them.

First of all, we are being a little bit self-serving — and I don't suppose that's too strong a term — to say that right now we've got 25(000) to 26,000 Marines in Iraq. If you, again, play this out long-term, what I would like to have is about 15,000 Marines in Afghanistan if the commanders there would agree with that and the Secretary would endorse it. Guess what? That gives us one to two. That gives us a seven-month deployment and fourteen months home. That's kind of a magic figure for us. And that would both keep us engaged — I think the fact that the Marine Corps is still fighting the Nation's wars would continue to bring in those great young Americans who want to be Marines and fight for their country. So there is a little bit of a recruiting consideration here in this, I'll admit to you.

But that would be sort of the panacea for us.

We could do that for a long time, and the stress and strains would still be felt, but we would be doing the right things, I think, for the Nation, for the Corps and for those young Marines who have held up so beautifully over this period of stress.

That's about the best description I can give you.

Q And the Marines and counterinsurgency?

General Conway: Well, we are probably one the world's premiere counterinsurgency forces at this time because that's what we've been doing for the past five or, arguably, six years. We have been doing it at the risk — and "risk," I think, is the right word — of not doing other things that are our core competencies like amphibious operations, cold weather training, mountain training, training in the jungles. You get those things now almost through happenstance because you're assigned to a MEU or because you're going to the Pacific on a rare UDP rotation or those types of things.

We have got to get back to those things, and when we get to this one to two, we're going to have to make again intelligent decisions in terms of how much of that fourteen months home is spent doing additional training because the families are going to, again, hold us to task here to make sure that we don't get that time back from them and spend that time in Panama or in Alaska or at Twentynine Palms doing live-fire training.

So it's a continual balancing act, and we're trying to do, again, what's best for our Marines, knowing that a contingency could arise very quickly and we need to be prepared to go address that; and at the same time realizing that we've put our families through some pretty tough wickets now for some time.

Q Thank you.

General Conway: Yes, sir.

Q Sir, the — I guess, going back to the expeditionary root is the reason behind the MRAP decision to cut the number of vehicles that you're buying?

General Conway: Well, that's part of it. That's only part. Actually, the CAT 1 MRAPs, the smaller of the three of the family of vehicles, are going to serve a long-term value to us even in an expeditionary environment because we have for decades probably, for at least twenty years, labored with what should be our engineer combat vehicle. And we really haven't had one. You know, the dump truck is probably the closest thing that we've had to serve that purpose. Now we've got one; now we've got one that's 360-protected. It can wage into a fight and protect those young men and women, in some cases, deliver them to whatever the obstacle is and in some cases even breach it. So we're going to have to develop that vehicle to its fullest, I think, as an engineer and EOD combat vehicle.

But yes, I mean, to the extent that we thought — we think that we could put 48,000-pound MRAPs aboard ship or carry them around on an airplane — not very many and not very far because it would impede that. That's, I have to tell you, sir, only a part of the decision.

The other part has to do with pure need and the relative expense of the vehicle is a factor here. In September of 2006, when my commanders in the field — and at that time I was not Commandant, but I recall the moment — when our commanders decided that they wanted to replace every up-armored HMMWV that we had in Iraq with an MRAP because of the success we were having with the vehicle and because of the volume at that point of the under-body explosions, I think we also said that's absolutely the right thing to do. It's a moral imperative to protect our people as soon as we can, as soon as we can get those vehicles built.

What's happened since September of 2006 has been absolutely amazing by most counts. We have not lost nearly the numbers of vehicles that we were experiencing because attacks have gone down dramatically.

And I will say that in incorporating greater use of the vehicles, we found that especially the heavy variants don't give us the combat flexibility that a smaller, lighter vehicle does. And commanders in the field have said off-road, you know, it's just a little problematic in places.

So what we found is that they're mixing their convoys and their patrols with some MRAPs, maybe as route clearance, but also with some, you know, some seven-ton vehicles and also with some up-armored HMMWVs. So that mix has also driven down our requirement. That we could save the government \$1.7 billion with our decision, that would have us scratching our head about what we're going to do with this excess number of vehicles then in five years. Seems to me, it's all win-win. So, that's why our recommendation to the JROC to curtail our buy, hope that the Army can then simply get their vehicles faster.

We did check, by the way, to make sure that we weren't somehow being unfair with industry, who has really supported us marvelously here, that they hadn't laid in such quantities of steel and tires and transmissions that they were going to be left holding, you know, an expensive bag. So we're comfortable that our timing was pretty good and that no one is really being injured in the process. And let me say one final thing is that I am absolutely comfortable that no Marine or Sailor will experience additional risk in Iraq as a result of the recommendation.

Q General, did the Afghanistan plan have any impact on the MRAP proposal? And then also on MRAP proposal, what needs to be done now to make it final? What final steps are there?

General Conway: Yes and no. I mean, if there was a chance that we would go to Afghanistan in significant numbers, our MRAP requirement would have been reduced. Because if you look at sort of 'go' terrain, where MRAPs are involved, there's much less of it in Afghanistan even than there is in Iraq. So, if we were to have gone there, we would have taken, I don't know, probably several hundred vehicles, not a few thousand, with us, simply because of that geographic situation.

Second part of your question?

Q (Off mike.)

General Conway: Well, at this point the JROC will receive our recommendation. They will make a determination, again taking into consideration a lot of the things we already talked about, what are the program buys, what are the needs of the other services and that manner of thing. We tend to think that they will receive it favorably because there are other requirements — at least right now — out there that would use those additional few hundred vehicles that we're saying, oh, we're not going to buy, so —

Q (Off mike.)

GEN. CONWAY: The executive council has already received word on it. I'm not sure when their next meeting is.

Bryan, do you know?

Mr. Whitman: No -- (off mike).

General Conway: I don't know it. It meets at least monthly, so I suspect it'll be within the next 30 days and we should hear something.

Q (Off mike) -- the JROC at this point? You don't need General Petraeus or the Joint Chiefs or anyone else to weigh in?

General Conway: We certainly coordinated that determination. I mean, there are a whole lot of people that knew about it, and we had done our proper due diligence with staff work and so forth to make sure that the Army understood, the Joint Chiefs of Staff understood, General Petraeus and General Odierno understood, certain members of Congress who have been our very ardent supporters on it understood. And so we tried to do all of that before there was any public discussion in terms of our requirement change. Okay?

Yes, sir, in the back.

Q General, as your commitment in Iraq comes down and let's say you don't get a significant mission over in Afghanistan, could you provide a justification for the additional Marines that were announced earlier this year, given the high personnel costs you'd be incurring?

General Conway: I believe, and I think an increasing number of people believe, that Afghanistan and Iraq represent the first battles of this Long War. We have continued to accept the term "Long War" as being meaningful and as a depiction of the situation that we're in. General Casey calls it "Persistent Conflict," another term for somewhat the same belief and ideals.

We don't know what the future's going to hold. We do believe that there will continue to be extremists who look for ungoverned spaces and weak nations where they can, you know, find safe haven and continue to plan against us. So, we're prepared to engage. If you ask me if 202,000 Marines for the millennium is the right number, I'd say, "no, it's probably too high." But if you ask me if it's right for this Long War, I would say I think it is, because it's going to give us a much better rotation base for some future conflict, for a new maritime strategy that's out there and for some of the other duties that I think we're going to find Marines engaged in.

And I'll assure you, personnel costs are high when you've got 202,000 Marines that you expect to bring aboard. So as soon as we have a determination that we don't need that many, I'll be asking permission, probably, to come back down.

Q Do you know when you'd be revisiting -- (off mike)?

GEN. CONWAY: No idea. No idea. I don't know what the bad guy's got planned out there. But I feel much better at this point that we're prepared to engage it.

Q General Conway?

General Conway: In the back, yes.

Q You just returned from Anbar Province, did you hear reports from your men that they're having trouble with returning refugees? Are there a large number of returning refugees coming because Anbar is quieter now? Are they facing problems? Any numbers you could associate with internally displaced people and returning refugees?

General Conway: It is something that's happening, and as you can imagine, there's a major thoroughfare there right down through Anbar for those people that have been in Syria that are coming back right down the Euphrates River Valley. The only discussion we had in that context had to do with the fact that we had a concern that some of these people coming back might be familiar with our entry control points and our abrupt checkpoint system, and we did not want to see an increase in escalation of force incidents where a vehicle coming back at 10:00 at night unfamiliar with the process, you know, will try to run through these checkpoints and will be brought under fire.

So they were going to even more extreme measures, greater distances, you know, more signs, more lights. We've got now what we call a dazzler that will essentially blind the person — not physically blind them, but on their wind screen cause them to jam on their brakes or if they have other intent that becomes obvious, too. So, all of those methods are increased now in Anbar as we have some unfamiliar citizens of Iraq coming back through, in one of the cases on the way to Baghdad.

Q But are you seeing a surge in returning refugees?

General Conway: I believe the numbers are up. I mean, that's what the commanders will inferring to me is that there's a lot more traffic, and it's almost all west to east on the roads and entry ways through — we have two major checkpoints. So, one down near Jordan and one near Syria. The one in Syria is much more busy, but there is a significant flow. I couldn't begin to tell you what it is.

Yes, sir.

Q General, just to bring you back to MRAPs for a second. It sounded like you were saying — I wanted to check that you were saying — as your requirement goes down, you expect some of those vehicles to be picked up by the other services so there would be no gross reduction or no net reduction, rather, in the numbers, and also if you could talk a little bit about whether you expect any pushback from Congress on that decision?

General Conway: We stopped at 2,300. That was all we had contracted for through this month. There was another purchase order that's going to be submitted during December is what Mr. Young has told me, and there's yet another that's coming in March, so that we, you know, do not place any additional purchase orders, I think, is an important fact here. And as I say, I think that it simply allows other Services — and of course the Army is the primary mover here because of just pure numbers — it allows them to get their vehicles at a sooner date than might otherwise have been the case.

Up to this point, we have had a distribution board — a joint distribution board that is determining where the vehicles go based on the threat. And the Army has gotten more than we have in recent weeks and months simply because they're dealing with the greater threat in Baghdad and particularly north of Baghdad in what we're seeing in the Al Anbar province. We support that 100 percent, and we're fine with that.

So they get their vehicles even sooner now because our numbers aren't all delivered. Please don't misunderstand. We don't have 2,300 vehicles we can point to. But we've contracted for that number and we'll end, hopefully, at that number if our recommendation is bought.

In terms of the Congress, no, I think probably just the opposite. Those people that we contacted who, again, were our supporters sort of nodded and said, “well, it made sense.” Another one said, “well, I always thought we were buying too many.” Another said, “you know, if you don't need it, why would you spend \$1.7 billion of taxpayer money to go ahead and make the purchase?” So at least at this point, we haven't heard anything negative coming out of the Congress.

Q I think there are a significant number of Special Forces. Did your plan envision MARSOC returning to Afghanistan? And are they ready for that?

General Conway: Yes. You may not know this, but after the first MARSOC came home, we very quickly put another one in there, and we have had MARSOC in Afghanistan now — we're on the third rotation, probably about a four-month rotation of those folks. They're coming off the MEUs as the MEUs deploy. And so ship movement times and so forth cuts it back from a full seven-month deployment in Afghanistan to something less than that. But because they're Special Forces, I won't say much, except that they're having huge success in conjunction with the Army teams that they operate with and the other coalition force nations whose sectors they serve in.

Okay? Yes, sir?

Q Just to go back to — you mentioned recruiting earlier, that that's at least somewhat of an issue when it comes to the optempo and the deployment schedule. Can you talk any more specifically about that? I know the Marine Corps has obviously been meeting its monthly recruiting targets, but are you seeing more waivers? Are you seeing a different crop of recruit? You know, there's going to be that worry you that down the road you could see some difference in quality.

General Conway: Let me start off by saying that our recruiters are operating in an environment where the propensity to join is down. We sample that, obviously, with regard to our recruiting sort of business procedures, and all three major ethnic groups in the country now show less of a propensity to join than perhaps previously we saw on the chart.

That said, we are delighted with the job that our recruiters have been able to do over this past year, and I'll explain that to you. You know, with our growth, we needed this year — in about a nine-month period in the FY (Fiscal Year), because we threw the lever in January, we needed 5,000 additional Marines over and above the 35(,000), 36,000 that we recruit annually. We need 5,000 more in order to able to start that march to 202,000.

We felt that there was some credibility issues there associated with that 5,000, because if in that environment we were not able to do it, then some of the people who questioned the value in the first place were going to say, "Well, hell, you can't get them anyway, you know. What makes you think you can ever reach 202(000)?"

So we understood that challenge, and our recruiters, I would say, certainly stepped up to it.

We put an additional rock in their pack. We said to them, "we are not going to change the standards." I had some very studious people come to me and said, "You know, in order to reach a wider audience, you're going to have to adjust your standards" - not violate, perhaps, the DOD standards, but come off our Marine standards.

Let me elaborate. The DOD standard for high school graduates is 90 percent. We impose a 95 percent, and our recruiters have historically brought in about 96 percent. We said we're not going to change the standards to reach this wider audience. I'm sorry; that's what being a Marine is all about. And so we said, "Get after it, boys, girls." And they did.

And at the end of the FY, they did not bring us 5,000 new Marines; they brought us 7,000 new Marines. And the high school graduate percentage was 96.2 (percent).

And so it's cost us. We've had to put additional recruiters in the field. Our advertising budget is up some from where it has been. We simply have to work harder to go after those quality kids than would ordinarily be the case.

We noted, not long after I became Commandant, we were at a little bit of a deficit in terms of our minority percentages vis-a-vis the face of America. And I said: "Okay, not only not do I want you to bring in those numbers, I want you to go after fixing that problem."

Our minority recruiting this year among African-Americans was up 40 percent compared to last year's figures.

So it's a tough market out there, but we got tough people doing it, and doing it very well. And again, my buttons just kind of pop off with pride when I talk about the job these kids are doing.

Yes, sir.

Q General, I want to go back to a speech you made at the Press Club, I think.

General Conway: You're not going to hold me responsible for what I said in the past are you? This is a new day. I mean —

Q (Off mike.)

General Conway: *(Laughs.)*

Q I think it was in October. And you observed that there was now a whole generation of young Marine officers who'd not served aboard ships or, at least, were not used to operating from aboard ships. And you mentioned this today, that we're in for a long war, and Marines are going to be in Iraq for some time.

Should the Corps, is the building, should the Congress be rethinking the nature of the Corps? And is the nature of the Corps changing in any kind of fundamental way? And if so, what does that mean for decisions that are being made about what kind of ships you buy in the future, amphibians, et cetera?

General Conway: Yeah, the short answer to your question is no. I think it's my job, and the job of my three-star generals and the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps and our senior enlisted, to be thinking about those things, and we are. I think they're repairable. I think that with time, we can fix those things.

We look forward to the day when we can go back aboard ships and exercise with other nations and do large-scale amphibious types of exercises. There's a whole new concept out there called Seabasing that we're very excited about. And the ship development is making progress, but we're simply not there, in the numbers I'd like to be, to be able to expand on it and see just what it offers.

We're doing some things to try to fix that. The statement came as a result of the realization that we now have officers who have been with us for a four-year period, a generation of officers if you accept that a lieutenant signs on for four years. I think a generation of Marine officers is about every four years then. And those great young men and women are combat-hardened. They've been to Iraq two or three times in most instances but, in some cases, now are leaving us never having stepped aboard ship.

So we're bringing back a program that we used to have at The Basic School down in Quantico, Virginia. We call it BASCOLEX, Basic School Landing Exercise, where they go aboard a ship or two, spend two or three days at sea, then pull in down at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and conduct a landing, an offload if you will. And that familiarization with the Navy and with shipboard life and all the planning that goes with the landing tables and those types of things are something that just in a very basic or rudimentary way we want our officers to understand.

There are other things that we're talking about doing in the planning stages at this point to try to mitigate the fact that we're not spending as much time aboard ship, but it'll truly be fixed that day when we're able to start getting out again for these major opportunities with the Navy, and increasingly now the Coast Guard.

Yes, sir.

Q The V-22 has been operating in theater for a little bit of time now. Can you talk about some of the missions it's been running and how it's operating over there?

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah. We purposely, of course, visited the V-22 squadron — HMM-263 by name — out at Al Asad Air Base. And their deployment at this point, I would simply say, is going well. We don't a lot of things still to be determined. We'll know more — and I think, it's fair to say, say more — at the end of their seven-month deployment.

But their maintenance rates are about where we would want them to be. Historically with new aircraft that are going into a sort of a — oh, I don't know, I wouldn't call it adverse, but a tough climate — their mission profile is precisely that of the aircraft it's replacing, and that's out of absolute necessity. They're going to replace the old 46 Echo that was, you know, Vietnam vintage, and the 53 Delta, which was the first efforts at a CH-53 helicopter, our heavy hauler. They're doing everything those airplanes do, except they're doing it three times faster.

I think this last couple of weeks or so just started getting into what we call an aeroscout function, which is — for the raids that we do in the Al Anbar Province — and they're not as frequent, of course, as they used to be — they're getting much more heavily engaged into those types of things. In fact, I think we're seeing more use of helicopter mobility because it's an asymmetric advantage that we have, perhaps than ever before.

The 22 is very quiet. That's a characteristic that you don't appreciate unless you've sort of been up close to one. And so it's an added advantage when it comes to getting troops on the ground without hearing a helicopter coming from a couple miles out that people are experiencing with this aero scout concept.

Q General, just to get back to the Afghanistan proposal, if that has been mothballed, does it increase the likelihood that your Marines may go elsewhere in Iraq — as they draw down in Anbar, they may be deployed elsewhere in Iraq?

I know you're personally disappointed that the decision was not taken to go forward with the plan at the moment.

General Conway: To your first question, I don't know the answer to that. We are occupying ourselves in Al Anbar Province. We're doing nation-building kinds of things. We're tied in to economic progress, and our people are helping where you can with the political, but that's tougher. I mean, that's sort of their business, although we try to make sure the tribes continue to talk and advance the effort of the Sunni population in Baghdad.

That General Petraeus might recommend something like that. I don't know. We'll see. It would have to make sense to us. You know, again, I think the day will come when we will see fewer and maybe zero Marines in Iraq, so we probably need to plan towards that transition. More territorial responsibility would make that even tougher when that day comes, so we probably need to think that through.

Personally discouraged? No. I mean, frankly, our casualty count is going to continue to be lower, and that's a good day when I can, you know, not have to look at that casualty report first thing in the morning or last thing in the evening. That we offered it, that we're trying to think strategically and help our Nation to win both of these fights as soon as possible, I mean, all those things are positives in my mind.

(The) discussion with the Secretary was very positive. He understood completely where we were coming from and why. He's heard anecdotal reports that lance corporals are complaining they don't have anybody to shoot, and -- (*laughter*) -- God love 'em! But that doesn't drive strategic thinking, of course. And I understood and support his thoughts on why the timing is not right - right now to do that.

Q General Conway, can I just follow up on that? Seriously, how much of the proposal is because in the recruiting environment that you've described you feel, very seriously, to recruit young people into the Marine Corps, you have to have a war to offer them?

You just said lance corporals are complaining they have no one --

General Conway: Very, very little, Barbara, is the answer to your question.

Q Well, then give us your thinking on this. How much of the --

General Conway: Okay.

Q — because you were looking — you felt the Marine Corps needs to be in combat, in a war, for the future, if it's going to leave Afghanistan — leave Iraq. Pardon me. Please explain your view on that.

General Conway: The Marine Corps is one of two ground services. Afghanistan and Iraq are ground wars. And we need to do our part, as much as we possibly can, to win these wars and win them as soon as possible. Okay? That we are out there recruiting Marines to go fight and represent their country? Absolutely. That we think we have to have a war to do that?

I will say this — and I think you can acknowledge the difference — we recruit to a different objective, and we probably recruit a slightly different population than the United States Army, Air Force, and Navy. The kids that we bring into our Corps are patriots. They're Americans who are still a little bit angry with what happened on 9/11. It's their turn to go fight for their country, and they want to do it as a Marine.

So, that that drives my thinking or the Secretary's strategic thinking, though, is sort of way off target.

Q Well, no. I just want to follow up. You – said a little, so what are you really talking about?

General Conway: Two percent.

Q Two percent of what?

General Conway: Two percent that we would feel compelled to be in a war to recruit Marines. We recruited Marines before 2001 with no problem. So to think that we have to have a war or that we want to stay plugged into a war so that we can continue to recruit that is not in any way on our screen as a primary objective or as a primary motivation.

Q General, can you — well, the Army issued out preemptive orders to its staff to start looking at cutbacks on the civilian side, that sort of thing, to make the budget adjustment if they don't get the war supplemental. You — the Marine Corps supposedly has a little extra time, but what are you doing as far as preparation in case you don't get that additional supplemental?

General Conway: Well, we have gone out on a data call to our commanders, and we've asked them for their impressions at each major base and installation, to include right here in the headquarters, on what that means to them, what the disruption would potentially mean in each and every case.

We first asked for that to be in on Friday. We've actually moved it back a day. The Chairman goes to testify next week, and he thinks that'll be an issue. We'd like to give him just a summary page statement of what the commanders have given us, not our plan to deal with it, but just sort of the commanders' statement of where they are. So we're going to try to get that in by tomorrow and then make an assessment.

The date that's been established, and this is after consultation with our money guys, is 24 March. And I think, you know, it could go plus-or-minus ten days either way, I suppose. We're going to try to hang on to a consistent day there so we can plan against that. There are considerations out there that by law, we have to give our civilian employees a sixty day notice if they are to be furloughed. And we have to give the presidents of the union a ninety day notice.

I got to tell you, if you do the math, ninety days from March 24th is Christmas Eve, and I do not want to do that. And so we're going to — I'm anxious to see those commanders' sort of assessments. And if it's what I suspect it might be, we want to make that notification as soon as possible.

Q So you're looking at basically cutting back civil service employment and filling in with Marines, or just closing things back?

General Conway: We have about 24,000 civilian employees that could be affected by disruption. Some of those are absolutely critical employees to just keeping the institution functional and viable. So I'm afraid we're going to have to look at who are our essential personnel and who are non-essential, and start categorizing who we would be able to let go and who we would not be able to let go.

But after 24 March, that's a pretty serious drop in terms of capacity. And I think even then, we're talking about a fairly brief period of time. So we're hopeful that, you know, that this thing gets resolved well before then, and we don't — we're not faced with what would be some really tough decisions.

Yes, sir.

Q General, just to follow on that, my understanding is you have about 39,000 civilian employees at your bases. Are you saying that if you have to go to furloughs, that 24,000 would be furloughed?

General Conway: I'm not prepared to say anything yet until I read the commander's estimates, and that's why we put that out there. But there would be a distinction between essential personnel and non-essential personnel, and we'd have to rely on our commanders to help us determine, in a fairly rapid period of time, just which are which.

Q But even though you don't know the exact number, are you thinking it might be about 24,000?

General Conway: I'm hesitant to cite that at this point. I really am. It will be a distinction between, who can we afford to let go, and who are sort of the keepers of the keys on the civilian side that keep our institution viable for as long as we could maintain it?

Yes, sir.

Q Budget question.

There's been a building drumbeat in the building that the Pentagon, that military spending needs to increase from 3.3 percent of gross domestic product to up to 4 percent. Put your hat on as one of the members of the Joint Chiefs. What are some of the pressures and requirements in 09, 013 plan that would justify that kind of increase?

General Conway: Yeah, well, you heard some of them talked about today.

You know, the continued growth. We expect to reach our 202(,000) by 2011, 2012. The reset will carry on for a period of time after we begin to see, you know, positive lights, I think, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I don't think anybody can predict that.

But I think a major one has to do with the great team play that we've seen on the part of the Air Force and the Navy, in a couple of contexts. Going back to my days as the J-3, when we would have a request for forces come in, the Army and the Marine Corps were already strapped. This is 2004, 2005. And so with every request, we ask ourselves, "does that require a Marine or a soldier, or can an airman or perhaps a sailor serve that function?" They have stepped up to the plate marvelously. I think both Services have in excess of 10,000 people on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Admiral Roughead will tell you he's got more sailors on the ground than he now has aboard ships in the Gulf. And I think that's a marvelous thing.

And that's just the people. In terms of platforms, they have said this is a ground fight, and we realize that the Army and the Marine Corps needs MRAPs and needs Strykers and needs additional people and needs this and needs that. And they have simply sat there with their hands folded, I think accepting that we have got to win this thing and we've got to do it on the backs of our soldiers and Marines, principally.

The aircraft age every year. The fleet doesn't get any bigger. And if we are going to remain, you know, a nation with superpower credentials, we've got to make sure that there's real capability there, that there's currency there and that there's technological superiority, I would hope, as a ground guy, in all of that. And it doesn't come cheaply.

So I think that it's out there, it needs to be examined closely, we need to economize every place we can, but I certainly want those systems in support of me in that uncertain future, I think, that we face as a nation.

Q Just one follow-up. Do you see any signs in the '09 budget process going on right now that these additions will start showing up in '09 or '010, or are we talking about the '011, '013 time frame?

General Conway : I don't think you'd see it in '09 as much as you would see it beginning in '10 and potentially after that. New administration, admittedly, and we've got to be convincing. There are a lot of other priorities out there. And I just told my guy (Congressional rep) this morning, I need to understand what those other pressures are going to be that our congressmen and women are going to tell us are competing with discretionary funds in the DOD budget so we can make our case and let our elected representatives decide.

Q General, can I get you back to the issue of full-spectrum operations that you're not practicing now, and you're volunteering to send the Corps to Afghanistan. It sounds to me like you were betting in making that offer that the future holds more COIN operations for the Marines than full-spectrum operations, and I'm wondering if that's a correct read.

General Conway: I think it is, I pray it is, because I think COIN is less threatening to us a Nation than would be a full-spectrum kind of scenario, and so I think that if there is going to be conflict, I would hope it's of that nature. I've got a visions group that works down at Quantico, some really smart guys and gals that are trying to look at the period about 2020 through 2025, and that's a precise measurement because we think beyond 2025 is too much crystal ball work. Inside that period you've got to be able to influence programs. Some of our programs go all the way to 2021, 2022, so it's not too early to be thinking about what other programs or other procurements might look like and why.

So what they would tell you is sort of a world in turmoil — demographics, changing nations as we see them today. Water being as important as oil. Nations going to war on a regional basis for a fresh water supply because it's one of Maslow's basic needs. A population that is increasingly in what we would call urban sprawl up against the coastline, so that if conflict is amongst the populations, it's going to be in built-up areas and in places that are tough to campaign in.

So those are the types of things that they're projecting, so if we accept that, and if we want to remain a two-fisted force, which is kind of an expression we've used, about full-spectrum or multi- capable, we've got to be prepared to go either way.

So I really am uncomfortable with the balance, you're exactly right. When we sit in a Tank and talk about what's happening right now, we say there is an accepted risk here because at least the ground forces are just not focused on those things right now. Again, the Air Force and the Navy are sort of our insurance or our hedge against some of those things, if you will. But no, you're exactly right — there is a risk, and at this point, we're simply determining that we have to accept it.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Are you concerned that MARSOC may be taking some of your best people? And what does that do to your ability to have experienced officers and very skilled people in the Marine Corps?

General Conway: Yes, 2,500 Marines with the qualifications that these guys have to have is painful, but the determination has been made that we will be players — full players, as much as our numbers will allow — in MARSOC. We have found that our investment is paying off already to a degree, based on the reputation these folks are achieving in Afghanistan.

But if you simply set that aside and say go do great things, there is a price to pay. When I was a MEF commander, I had an entire Force Reconnaissance Company that I could deploy long range. These guys were very good at what they did. They were our equivalent of Special Forces inside the Corps, and they were just tremendous. Now we have a Force Reconnaissance Platoon.

And it is helpful and healthy to the degree that someone with the MOS, someone that is highly trained and highly qualified, has yet another place that he can go and not feel like he's sort of reached the pinnacle after once he leaves the Force Reconnaissance Company and then maybe change services and goes on to join Army Special Forces. General Jones once said that if he met another Marine in Army Special Forces who said he would have stayed if there was someplace to go, said he was going to jump off a bridge somewhere because it was happening to him all the time.

We don't have that problem now. We got another problem, and that is, what do we do with our own internal requirements when so many highly qualified people are now finding their time in MARSOC?

What I have reached agreement on with both (*Major*) General Hejlik and Admiral Olson is that those highly, highly qualified folks will spend a four- or five-year tour in MARSOC and they rotate back into the Corps in some capacity, and then maybe go back to MARSOC later on in a more senior billet and rotate in and out, unlike what happens in the Army once you have the designation and I guess even the Air Force, although I'm less familiar.

We can regenerate some of that talent, but it hurts to have those number of highly qualified people off doing something else.

Q So are you competing — I mean, are they exclusively recruiting within the Marine Corps, or can they recruit elsewhere?

General Conway: It's not really a competition or a recruitment effort. We have monitors now that have a special eye; they monitor that population of people with those special credentials, and they're continuing to fill the ranks as we start to see rotation out.

There's also a growth factor. I mean, we didn't do it all at once. We're growing that capability and — I couldn't tell you exactly where we are, but I think it's in the — in the teens of hundreds against about a 2,500-man requirement. So we're not fully staffed yet, but we will be. And then, once we are, we'll continue to rotate those people as available back into the Marine Corps, and in some cases new people into the special operations.

Q General, based on your recent visit to Iraq, how confident are you in the sheikhs that are now cooperating with us and with the government? And also your confidence level in the concerned local citizens groups that kind of go hand-in-hand with that.

General Conway: First of all, we don't call them "concerned local citizens" out west; we call them "neighborhood watch guys." And they've got t-shirts that says that in Arabic, and they've got AK-47s and they've got ballcaps. They need to be identifiable to our people as well as the Iraqi security forces in order to be able to understand who they are and what they're doing, particularly after dark.

But I'm pretty confident. What has happened in the Al Anbar Province since about October of '06 is a full-scale development of a blood feud between the Sunnis and the al Qaeda of Iraq. And when that happens, there's not much way you can go back. I think the sheikhs realize have seen what the al Qaeda has to offer, and it's pretty grim. I mean, a 14th, 15th century environment; Shari'a law; and in no way taking advantage of the pure wealth and riches of Iraq, I mean, on anything like a contemporary scale.

But the other thing is, they know if these people are allowed to come back — and it has to be through setting down some taproots and being able to integrate within their tribal alliances and the community — that a lot of people would die. Tens of thousands of people would be killed out of pure revenge on the part of the AQI because that's how they operate. That's what we saw on a smaller scale when we would be in an area, start to develop supports, leave that area, only to have, in the case of Hit, 15 or 20 policemen executed in the ballfield there, and other sheikhs that had dealt with us just either missing or dead. So they realize that there is no going back for a number of reasons. I think it's solidifying its base.

Now, they're having their internal squabbles — it's political. They want to be the representatives inside Baghdad. They're vying for power and all of those things that are probably somewhat natural in an elected kind of government. And our guys are watching it from the side and trying to smooth off the rough edges and make sure they talk and make sure they understand. You can have your internal discussions, but when you go into Baghdad, you've got to represent all of your people out here, and you do that with a solid front.

And I think they get it. It's just a matter of getting to that sort of happy place.

Q Do you see a security structure developing with the Army and the sheikhs and the central government that can provide a stable environment to allow for a U.S. drawdown within some sort of foreseeable period of time, like end of next year or early '09?

General Conway: Well, it is developing. I wouldn't want to predict. That's sort of Dave Petraeus' and Ray Odierno's job, Walt Gaskin, in our case, who's the MNF-West Commander, as to when that will actually transition. But every time I go there, I visit with the Iraqis or with their trainers or that type of thing just to get my own sensing, and it is happening at a very rapid rate. And their training, their marksmanship — we've got marksmanship instructors out there working now. And when I was there before, I didn't so much mind Iraqis shooting at me; they weren't very good shots. They are now. *(Laughter.)* We've got some guys teaching them how to handle their weapons, and it's a vastly different scenario.

So, no, I would correct one thing you said, though, sir, and that is that the sheikhs really don't play as much in that security environment except for the willingness to encourage their young men to join. It is an MOI, MOD, Iraqi army, Iraqi police kind of construct, probably with the exception that the sheikhs do have more influence over those neighborhood watch-types who are, I think, the future policemen as opportunities avail.

Yes, sir?

MR. WHITMAN (?): General -- (off mike).

General Conway: Okay. This gentleman has been very patient.

MR. WHITMAN (?): (Off mike.)

General Conway: Okay.

Q Secretary Gates has been emphasizing the importance of soft power, and I know that the military in Iraq has been thrown into many of those functions themselves. Is that something that the military should prepare to do on a permanent basis, in view of the fact that, as you say, it's a world in turmoil and you're going to be facing these kinds of conflicts for a long time?

General Conway: I've got two thoughts for you on that. When we finished the march to Baghdad and then were assigned back south over the initial nine provinces there, in the southern provinces, we were told to expect local governance teams and governance support teams which would help us with those functions and many, many more. Those teams did not arrive. And so my battalion commanders basically turned about against those functions and requirements.

I was amazed at the job they did. I mean, we had never prepared them for that, but they immediately saw the need and they immediately did the absolute best they could.

Now, could professional have done a better job? Of course. But did they do a satisfactory job and did they help to bring those places up as rapidly as they could? They were superb. And they actually started to enjoy it. We had to break them of it when we got back to Camp Pendleton and Twentynine Palms, because they were little potentates.

But they really did respond marvelously.

Now, going back again to my time as the J-3, I think Secretary Gates has it exactly right. I mean, when we would run even national-level exercises, some of the people from the interagency would say to me, you know, you got three exercises going; I can support you on one of them. Tell me which one is most important because I just don't have that kind of depth. So that we could start to resource some of those agencies that we know are going to be players with this soft power and that they could develop sort of an expeditionary mentality; and people who are anxious to get overseas and get their hands dirty. I think that's the right answer. And if for whatever reason they would not be there, then my guys or military men could step up and do it again, absolutely. They got to be prepared to do that across the spectrum of responsibility; but that pure professionals could come in closely behind us and take over those things and work with the host nation and work with our people and work with the NGOs, that to me is the yellow on this.

Q Do you see a willingness on the part of these other agencies to do that?

General Conway: I think so. I think if they're properly resourced and they understand how critically important their role is — it won't happen overnight, it won't be there next month. But I think that capacity can be created out there, and I think there's some great young Americans who would say, you know, I may not want to stick a bayonet in anybody, but I can help, you know, through State Department or border enforcement or just even agricultural. I mean, the most important thing I faced when we got back down south was the date palm spray effort, and I didn't know the first thing -- I learned, but I didn't know the first thing about date palm spray, but there was a window of opportunity there that you dare not miss. And you know, if I'd had somebody like that, he would have won hearts and minds in the first month we were there. So yeah, there are some things that are critically important that someone who is not militarily minded could really help us with.

(End of transcript)