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An Interview with General James T. Conway, USMC 34th Commandant of the Marine Corps

Joint Force Quarterly Interview by David H. Gurney and
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JFQ: *For several years, the Marine Corps has been operating very closely with the United States Army in Iraq and Afghanistan. To what degree have sea service skill sets atrophied, and do you sense that some increasingly see the Marine Corps as a second Army?*

General Conway: I'll answer the second part first. The bottom line is that the Marine Corps, as we say, "does windows." That has prompted us in both Iraq and Afghanistan to operate 500 miles from the smell of salty sea air. But that's okay with us. If there's a fight to be engaged in, we're going to be there, and so we've made the necessary adjustments to make it all work. In 2003, we lined up alongside V Corps and 3d ID [Infantry Division], and did something that no MAGTF [Marine Air-Ground Task Force] has ever done—that is, to attack 500 miles from Kuwait to Baghdad and beyond. It really strained our capacity to do that, but we were pretty proud of ourselves that in the end we were able to make those kinds of adjustments. Going back to Iraq in 2004, and subsequently in Afghanistan, we've had to heavy-up, because of the threat, because of the employment methodologies, and so forth. So yes, we have in some ways become a second land Army.

I think we're able to morph in and out of those kinds of conditions and missions based on events, but we do not feel as though we are being properly employed as a second land Army. We have more to offer the Nation. When I go to meetings and I hear "Army and Marine Corps" talked about in the same breath, I get uncomfortable. It should be "Navy and Marine Corps." One day, again, it will be. But right now, we're simply doing what the Nation asks us to do. We're trying to keep current, and polish those Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard skills. My people get it, they buy into it, and as we see more dwell, 14 months at home between combat deployments, I

think we're going to be able to return to our naval and amphibious roots on an increasingly incremental basis.

JFQ: *The United States continues to live beyond its means economically. Military personnel spending has grown 69 percent over the last decade, and the Secretary of Defense has mandated over \$100 billion in cuts. Clearly, the outlook for Department of Defense resourcing over the long haul isn't bright. What changes in Marine Corps materiel and force structure do you anticipate?*

General Conway: People are expensive. Our manpower accounts constitute about 58 percent of our annual Marine Corps budget, and yet that's a conscious thing. One of my priorities when I became Commandant in 2006 was to grow the Corps, so we could get to a one-to-two deployment-to-dwell ratio. We were authorized and funded by Congress to do so, and we made it happen 2½ years ahead of what we forecasted. We're a very people-intensive organization. We know that 58 percent of our budget going toward people is a lot; it's more than any other Service. That said, we see it as a necessity, and will continue to maintain our personnel strength until this fight is over.

So I foresee a future where a 202,000-man and -woman Marine Corps in a time of peace is probably too large. We would be hard pressed to keep 202,000 Marines constructively engaged in peacetime, and it would continue to be expensive. I just don't think at that point in time the Nation's going to be able to afford it. So we're going to form a force structure review group that will convene in Quantico that will look at what the Marine Corps ought to look like post-Afghanistan. And I think we'll probably come down in tranches. We don't want to adversely impact those great young Americans who have become Marines and separate them from the Corps prematurely. We want to make sure that we can say this long war is effectively over before we downsize, because the enemy gets a vote. We can't choose to disengage if he's still choosing to fight. So I think we're going to come down in an iterative fashion. We will take a look around at the international environment, and then maybe come down more to the point where we can afford it, to the point where we have a hard, lean, compact Marine Corps that is serving the Nation. I hope by that point it is once again a Navy-Marine Corps team.

JFQ: *Since our discussion today involves roles and capabilities of the Marine Corps and the Marine Corps' contribution to the defense of our nation, can you broadly tell us your thoughts on emerging global threats and challenges? What does the future operating environment look like from your perspective, and how will the Marine Corps of 2025 address this?*

General Conway: That's a great question, and it's one that I asked myself shortly after I became Commandant. One of our priorities was to prepare the Marine Corps for operations in the future, and so we looked at what that period ought to be. We arrived at the time period of 2020 to 2025 as a kind of sweet spot. Beyond that, you're guessing, and short of that, you're not influencing some fairly expensive programs that have to be played out over time.

Our Strategic Vision Group told us essentially what I think the Secretary of Defense also believes, and that is that we're not going to see a major peer competitor, and we're not going to go to war against some nation of our same size and strength. There are going to be regional

conflicts. There are going to be areas where U.S. vital interests are involved. There are lots of titles you can hang on it, and we've chosen to call them hybrid conflicts. Nonstate actors, states that are in regional conflict, and access to potable water will be a factor out there somewhere. But for the most part, the future will be a continuation of what we're seeing today. So we're shaping the Marine Corps to meet those future challenges.

In discussions with the Secretary about the results from our Strategic Vision Group, we all also agreed that we've never predicted the future very well. We never end up fighting the fight that we're planning for. Something always pops up unexpectedly—surprise is the opportune phrase—and we can't afford to be surprised. So we need what we call a two-fisted Marine Corps: one that can engage in a hybrid conflict, and also one that can line up alongside a heavy Army outfit and fight and win. And by the way, we accomplish it all as the smallest of the Services. Extending into all these domains, we have a decisive advantage in the fact that 100 percent of our equipment procurement can be used either way. I believe that our nation needs fast, austere, and lethal expeditionary naval forces that can execute missions across the spectrum of conflict. The Navy–Marine Corps team is that key. So that's the aspect that I think we have to take care of with regard to our training.

JFQ: *Considering this uncertain future, what is the Marine Corps' role in implementing our national security policy? What unique capabilities does the Marine Corps bring to the table?*

General Conway: That's an important question, and it relates to your last one as well. We've got to synergize. We cannot, in my mind, have duplication of effort across the joint force. I think it is incumbent on each Service to take a look at where we fit in to the whole patchwork effort of the Department of Defense. From the Marine Corps perspective, it is not being a second land Army unless the situation absolutely dictates that. We are most comfortable deploying as an expeditionary force afloat. In a peacetime environment, we do forward projection—that means forward presence; that means theater security engagement; that means having Marines in ships at sea to do various exercises and train host nation forces—those kinds of things. We thrive in a role where we are defending the Nation's vital interests. And we can get more kinetic than that. Our Marines have proven time and again how well they can fight. We see that our expeditionary character, which we define as being fast, austere, and lethal, is something that nobody can match. Look at what has recently happened in Afghanistan—the President makes a decision to provide 30,000 additional forces, and within 24 hours, the lead elements of 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, are on their way. After Christmas, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, is on its way. And those Marines and Sailors lived in the dirt. They didn't live in well-established contracted facilities. They lived in their two-man tents, they ate previously prepared rations, and they were as lethal as they needed to be to get the job done.

So fast, lethal, and austere is what we offer, and to that you can add what we call joint operational access. If the need should come for us to actually force the will of the United States on another nation, we are the lead forces best able to accomplish that mission. We're going to require a lot of help. We're going to need the Army and the Air Force, and certainly we'll partner with the Navy in executing from the very get-go. But the fact is, I think in some ways our nation is looking at the last couple of fights where we've had a country that allowed us to move in, build a force structure, build the iron mountain, attack across their borders—there aren't many

places in the world that will let you do that. Our country will always need the ability to overcome antiaccess challenges and obstacles that impede us from entering foreign soil. We will lead that effort. And I think that's a very important aspect of what the Marine Corps needs to be in the future.

JFQ: *How has the Marine Corps strategy evolved from amphibious operations to support the current concept of joint assured access? Many think of the Marine Corps as solely an amphibious force based on World War II imagery, but the reality is that the Corps is a much more flexible force across the spectrum of conflict.*

General Conway: You highlight something that we're concerned about, and that is, when people think of Marines, they think of that recent wonderful series called *The Pacific* that was on television—people think of Marines as storming a beach, huge casualty percentages, courage and audacity and perseverance, and raising the flag over an enemy position. That's not the way we would conduct a joint operation today to assure access. It won't be a broad-based 0800 assault against a defended beach. We are smarter than that. So we somehow need to make people aware that if we were to conduct a joint assured access operation today, it would be very different than World War II and it would be very joint. The Marines would certainly be in the lead, but we would be relying on our joint brothers and sisters, and probably even other nations in a combined effort because I think our country tends to like coalitions. We have a powerful Marine Air-Ground Task Force concept, and our brothers in the air represent the real killing power associated with that MAGTF. But at the same time, we will also look at how we might integrate into Air Force capacity and into Navy aviation arms that come from the carriers. We've proven that we can fight very effectively alongside and integrated with the Army. In Iraq, for instance, in Ramadi, we had a Marine battalion that operated under an Army brigade that operated under a Marine Expeditionary Force that reported to an Army three-star in Baghdad. So we know how to do that, and we've proven that we can do it very effectively. We just need to make sure that there's general agreement in terms of how it would be done in the doctrine that lays that out. We also need to exercise it so that if we ever are called forward to make it work, we can. I have every confidence that we can.

JFQ: *What does the Navy–Marine Corps team need to make assuring littoral access a reality in terms of numbers of amphibious ships and other capabilities? How does MPF [maritime prepositioning force] support this? What is the future of MPF, and is seabasing still accomplishable?*

General Conway: First of all, we need the right number of amphibious ships. We just recently completed the Quadrennial Defense Review, and we found that the day-to-day operational need of the combatant commanders is, interestingly enough, about the same as we would need for two brigades to work their way ashore—about 38 ships. We have an agreement—the former Secretary of the Navy, the current CNO [Chief of Naval Operations], and myself—that 38 ships is the established operational requirement. We realize that in the fiscal environment that we're in that 38 might not be possible at all times, but we've set a baseline, a floor, if you will, of 33 ships. Thirty-eight ships is the requirement, but with 33 ships, we think we could still generally get it done. Now there's a risk associated with it, but that is what we agreed upon.

In terms of the MPF, there's a little bit of a misconception out there about what the MPF represents to us and to the Navy and the Nation. Some people see it just as a floating warehouse and that's a terrible misconception. MPF was built from the very beginning—and I was there as a young major—to give this nation the ability to rapidly reinforce—10,000 Marines in 10 days—with forward-based equipment. Most of that is the heavy equipment that we would need to get to a fight using fast sealift ships and arguably the entire air arm of Transportation Command for the offload. The fact is we think that MPF is something that the Nation continues to need and that our partners and allies continue to depend upon. MPF represents our ability as expeditionary naval forces to put three brigades and three squadrons ashore or to rapidly reinforce with one to three of those brigades if another nation should need it. MPF also constitutes the reserve capacity for any joint operational access requirement that might be out there. So we just need to make sure there's a better understanding of what MPF truly represents.

Now, the seabasing concept allows us to get away somewhat from the whole thought process that you've got to have the port and the airfield because seabasing gives you that kind of capability at sea. The old program of record is no more, but quite frankly, the Navy and Marine Corps realize that we need something in its place. It may be less elegant and a little less expensive, but the Navy's in the process of building those types of ships, and we're in the process of exercising the interchangeable nature of the vessels, the ability to offload and transfer the equipment and put it on the connectors, and get it ashore. But I think it's also important from a tactical or operational perspective that an amphibious operation—any operation—previously had been pretty predictable to the degree that the first thing you had to do to allow for the follow-on force was seize a port and an airfield. The old amphibious task force objectives were always the port and airfield. Now, if a commander doesn't have to have that for several days, he can land in lots of other places, his tactics are not nearly as predictable, and he can operate from that seabase much more effectively than we've ever had the capacity to do before. So we continue to stress the need for that kind of capability. The joint force gets it and, I think, supports it. In fact, we've had conferences where even the international community says, "Wow, that is impressive, that is really forward thinking. Will these ships match up with ours? Can we also take advantage of this joint and combined seabase?" And we think the answer is increasingly going to be yes.

JFQ: *Is the current number of amphibious ships meeting the demand signals coming from the combatant commanders? Are we as a nation accepting too much risk by having too little amphibious lift capability?*

General Conway: Today, we could not muster 33 ships. If you look at the availability, there's a maintenance issue out there. So there is some risk. We continue to meet with our brothers in the Navy on how we could avoid that, through builds of new ships, and through decommissioning of old ships when their life cycles are fully completed. I think there is an element of risk. When we talk to the COCOMs [combatant commands], they would like more. With the war going in Central Command, they accept that that's the theater that's going to get most of the resources right now. But they're cautioning us increasingly about losing traction in some of these places where we've done pretty well in the past, certainly before 9/11. So I think that virtually every situation that we play out from an operational perspective needs more amphibious ships, and the day-to-day routines of the COCOMs out there tell us that they certainly would like to see us as a full-up round so they can have what they need for the engagement and the exercising and those

things that the amphib give us. The amphib is without question the most utilitarian ship in the fleet. I've heard CNO say that, and I certainly agree.

JFQ: *How is the fight going for the Marine Corps in Afghanistan, and what successes and challenges spring to mind?*

General Conway: Your question is very timely because I just had a conversation yesterday with our field commander, Major General Rich Mills. You know, it's a close fight. The Sergeant Major and I and our wives just visited Bethesda [National Naval Medical Center] yesterday and awarded 10 Purple Hearts, and it comes back to you every week when we go up there and see those great young people. I sense that in Afghanistan today, we're about where we were in Iraq in 2005. A counterinsurgency fight, by its very nature, just requires persistence and adaptability and day-to-day engagement in a way that would make an impatient person go nuts. But a person who understands how that type of fight is conducted realizes that he has to look at it in fairly large tranches of time: Where are we now compared to where we were 6 months ago? Where do we hope to be in the next 6 months? It can't be 6 days, or even 6 weeks. You've got to view progress gradually, and you've got to keep the metrics out there that evaluate how the population is seeing it. They're your real target; how do they see this fight going? You've got to keep pressure on the enemy, and that's something that Rich Mills reiterated yesterday.

Previously, in the Marja area, for instance, the Taliban retained the initiative. Okay, that changed in February. They're still trying to work their way back in, but they like to fight us for a couple of days, and then go rest, recuperate, refit, and come back. We don't let them do that now. Where they go to try to find safe haven, we're there. We're patrolling, we're overflying, we're looking to disrupt even while they're in their rest areas. And that's having a positive effect. They're getting tired, because they're not used to this kind of fight. They are used to fighting in the spring and summer and fall and then going back and trying to recover during the winter. The numbers of forces that we've got now are allowing us to stay after them on a more sustained basis. So it's slow and it's hard, but the motivation of the troops is just sky-high—Rich said yesterday that he's got 600 Marines out there now who want to reenlist and take advantage of the reenlistment bonus in theater. My biggest problem as Commandant is that I've got another 150,000 Marines who want to get to the fight. And that's a good problem to have, by the way. But in any event, it is another counterinsurgency fight that we have to win because we don't want to see the enemy in Afghanistan or across the border be able to do what they did to us in 2001.

Challenges remain. There's a serious drug issue in the south, we're trying to make sure that the people in the area understand that they cannot grow drugs; it feeds the Taliban, it's illicit even by their own national government's determination, and there's got to be another way. We're part of that effort, but we should not drive that effort because it needs to be the host nation determinations and laws and enforcement, in the final analysis. We're happy that the Pakistanis are doing more. We're going to go there in August, and I'm going to see General [Ashfaq Parvez] Kayani [Pakistan Army Chief of Staff] and just say thanks to him before he leaves office for the efforts that they have put in to help us on the other side of the border. It's steady and it's increasing. We hope that one day they'll be able to get down into the south, in Baluchistan, where they have not been in the past, because that's the enemy that we're facing. The Quetta

Shura and the people across the border in the south are the ones calling the shots, we think, in Helmand Province and the other areas.

The other challenge, I think, is that we really do need to see a government out there that the people will respect. It needs to expand its influence, it needs to be perceived as less corrupt, it needs to be providing services to the people behind our clearing and holding capacity to bring this all together. So we're trying to create synergy out there, and of course Dave Petraeus and Jim Mattis get all that, and so we're hopeful that they continue to pound that drum.

JFQ: *Can you share with our joint leadership what your thoughts are on the evolution of U.S. Marine Forces Special Operations Command [MARSOC] and the Marine Corps' integration with U.S. Special Operations Command? What lies ahead in this relationship?*

General Conway: It was directed by Secretary [Donald] Rumsfeld in his time when he was Secretary of Defense; it was one of those things that he saw as transformational for the Marine Corps, and so we signed on. We have assigned some of our absolute finest Marines to MARSOC, about 2,500 to date, and they're doing great things. I mean, there were some initial stutter steps in Afghanistan, but I'll tell you now, they're there in strength. I won't cite the exact numbers because they're doing some pretty heady stuff; but in any event, they're there on a standing requirement, and they are making a difference. We support them to the absolute best of our ability, even if their requirements expand beyond what Marines in MARSOC are able to satisfy.

It has put us back into a quandary where we're once again trying to fix [reconnaissance]. A lot of these guys were reconnaissance Marines, the old 0321s, and pulling off some of the cream of the crop into the MARSOC organization has caused us to suffer some shortfalls in regard to our own force reconnaissance guys and even battalion reconnaissance guys because they now have an avenue where they can go. So we're back into trying to see what that means for us for our own operational requirements. We're trying to make sure that the internal MARSOC methods give us a high-quality Marine who is able to get the job done. The attrition rates are a little higher than I'm comfortable with as they go through their introductory programs, but we've got some generals and some very senior staff NCOs who are sorting that out. We'll get through it—it's a temporary blip on the screen. But in the end, I think their proven value is such that they're going to be around for a long time.

Now, one thing that has happened that we're going to need to resolve post-Afghanistan is that they've gotten away from the ships. In the past when MARSOC was assigned to the ships, it was an incredible enhancement to the MEU [Marine Expeditionary Unit]. It allowed them to do some things in the special operations realm that your traditional trigger-pullers aren't trained to do. It gave the MARSOC mobility, it gave them an automatic base for support, and we think that's really the best employment in the future. But that will require those folks to also acknowledge that belief and allow us to work up with them and see them out on the MEUs doing that brand of special operations missions that the ARG/MEUs [Amphibious Ready Group/Marine Expeditionary Units] could encounter.

JFQ: *What significant challenges do you envision the 35th Commandant having to contend with?*

General Conway: I think the biggest thing that the next Commandant is going to face is probably going to be this whole thought process of how do we transition at the end of Afghanistan, and will there be conditions during his 4 years as Commandant where he's both trying to fight the war, and fiscal conditions at the same time that dictate that he has to make hard choices. I could see where those things could occur simultaneously as opposed to sequentially, and that would be hard. My priority has been, and I'm sure it's going to be his too, that we win this fight and that we support our Marines at the point of the spear, and take care of our families. We do look at the Marine Corps of the future, and try to lay in those things, the people and equipment, that we're going to need to be viable downrange. I won't say that was easy, but where we were well resourced, we were able to generally do those things. If those resources diminish, it's going to be tough for him. There may be some very difficult decisions out there in terms of tradeoffs that he may have to make, and that the Corps writ large may have to make. So that is my biggest concern for his commandancy. He's going to continue to have great young Marines, great young Americans who want to be Marines, and great Marines who will train them and integrate them and make them into a viable force. Some things are just constant as a part of our culture, but the external factors, not least of which are resources, I think will dominate his time.

JFQ: *If you could ask yourself one question that you wish someone would ask you that you'd like to answer, what would it be?*

General Conway: The one question that you haven't asked that I would have you ask is how the Marines are doing. The answer is, incredible. They really are. You know, one of our assistant commandants who retired years ago was asked, after 6 months or so out, "Do you miss the Marine Corps?" And his response was, "No. I miss the Marines." And that's an easy answer for us to understand because it's such an incredible motivation every day to be around these great young men and women. And they come from all parts of the country, and all religious beliefs, and all colors and backgrounds, and they simply want to be Marines. It's less than 1 percent of the country that wears a uniform, and many less than that that wear our uniform. But these people are so inspired, and so inspiring, that it's just great to be around them. You would think that with the deployment-to-dwell challenges, the consistency of being gone from their families for the ones who are married and even the ones who are not, the possibility that they could get shot up, or even killed, would somehow weigh on them. Just the opposite is true—the morale is sky-high. Retention and recruitment is off the page. You know, we go out to Bethesda to try to motivate these kids, and just the opposite takes place: they motivate us. They've been dealt a heavy blow; they're there because they're seriously injured, and yet their outlook is, "Hey, Sir, it's what I signed on for, and I'm proud to have been a part of that, and by the way, I've still got a trigger finger, can you get me back in play?" And that's just incredible. **JFQ/SWJ**

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