



# THE FIRST of BATTLES THE LONG WAR

By General James T. Conway, U.S. Marine Corps



U.S. ARMY (NATHAN HUTCHISON)

**ON THE ROAD** During an August visit, Marine Commandant General James Conway (front rank, second from left) and fellow Marines walk along a road in Afghanistan near a gate leading into Pakistan.

**The Commandant of the Marine Corps provides his perspective on Iraq, regional security, and the generational struggle against terrorism.**

**M**any in our country routinely characterize what is taking place in the Middle East as the “War in Iraq.” I would ask you to think of it in different terms. 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 Long War or generational struggle. Instead of the “War in Iraq,” it is more correctly termed the “Battle in Iraq” and the “Battle in Afghanistan.” Words and phrases are important in terms of how we understand critical decisions this nation will face and how we frame our thinking as we deal with them.

Our nation’s forces have been in Iraq more than four years now. No doubt mistakes have been made and opportunities lost, but progress continues at an incremental pace—slower progress than our countrymen might like—generally in line with historical norms, the nine to eleven years that we see when we study successful counterinsurgencies.

### The Three Legged Stool: Security, Economic Stability, and Governance

Marines are almost exclusively located in western Iraq in al Anbar Province—until recently invariably described as the “deadly” or “volatile” al Anbar. At one point, many believed that province would be the absolute last to achieve an acceptable level of stability and security. It is still a dangerous place, make no mistake—but the Marines, Soldiers, and Sailors assigned to the Marine Expeditionary Force have made tremendous gains.

We have faced two enemies in the country. One we call the ACF, or the Anti-Coalition Forces; the other the AIF, or the Anti-Iraqi Forces. The Anti-Coalition Forces were local tribesmen or former Iraqi Army personnel who believed we had become occupiers. Essentially Iraqi nationalists, they want a strong Iraqi government, the Coalition forces gone, and, ultimately, a better quality of life for their children.

The Anti-Iraqi Forces are different. They are principally al Qaeda, foreign fighters, and criminals. They do not want to see a strong Iraqi government. Their objective is to return to the caliphate and an antiquated, repressive legal code. They are not likely to ever reach agreement with a recognized authority and will simply have to be captured or killed. For roughly 36 months, the ACF and AIF allied together to oppose Coalition forces. For the past year, the Anti-Coalition Forces in al Anbar have joined with us to eliminate Anti-Iraqi Forces.

The reason for much of the progress in al Anbar is that during October 2006 the leading Sunni sheiks in the province finally had their fill of the murder and intimidation campaigns to which al Qaeda was subjecting them. Suddenly, themes the Marines had held constant for over two-and-a-half years began to resonate. The tribal leaders determined



U.S. MARINE CORPS (RICARDO BRANCHI)

**HOPE FOR ANBAR** Sheiks and Iraqi policemen in al Anbar Province celebrate at the conclusion of the “Hope of Anbar” conference, which issued a call for sheiks outside Iraq to return home. The ability of the Marines to find common ground with the sheiks in the province is a reason for optimism.

that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” and thus began a partnership that over the intervening months has all but cleared the hard-core terrorists from the region. Al Qaeda may counterattack, but it has lost the support of the populace, and when that happens, an insurgency cannot survive. We are hopeful that the so-called “Awakening Movement” of the tribes in al Anbar will continue to be a west-to-east phenomenon. Baghdad is admittedly different with the ethnic mix found in the city, but even there we have recently had some bonding against the al Qaeda influence.

The surge directed by President Bush came at an advantageous time to keep pressure on al Qaeda. Clearly, however, the surge of additional troops to Iraq has created an impact on available force flow that can only be judged as significant. 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. Based on our current deployment model, the troop levels associated with the surge cannot be sustained indefinitely. Based on the security situation on the ground, they may not have to be.

Economic progress must follow for us to fully capitalize on the security gains, and that is happening. Long ago, a professor told me that a sovereign nation needs five things to make it prosper: fresh water, arable land, an educable



population, an exportable product, and a seaport. Iraq has all of those things. In al Anbar, marketplaces in all of the major cities have opened, and a decentralized economy flourishes. International businesses have been watching the security situation closely in al Anbar; many now feel the time is right to act for those willing to accept some risk, but perhaps realize significant gains.

The final leg of the stool is the political one. At the national level, the political patchwork is problematic, and the government of Iraq has been repeatedly cautioned that it must make better use of the time Coalition forces have bought them. In al Anbar Province, things are slightly more encouraging. Reconciliation conferences, to include southern Shia tribes and northern Kurdish tribes, are taking place among tribal leadership, the clergy, and elected officials. Recently, a key sheikh in the province was killed by an improvised explosive device. While the attack may make subsequent attempts at reconciliation more difficult, it also shows the participants how much the al Qaeda forces fear the success of these efforts.

## The Global War with al Qaeda

In the wake of the reports to the President and Congress from U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and Army General David Petraeus, the nation must take an objective look at where we are in this struggle. Whether or not we want to admit it, the fight in Iraq has evolved into a struggle between us and al Qaeda—the core element

of the religious extremist movement and the people we must defeat in this Long War. We should not overestimate our progress or underestimate the momentum the enemy would gain if we were to conduct an uncurbed withdrawal of forces. Many options are available, and we need to be pragmatic in terms of what is best for this nation—both in the near term and in the context of the Long War.

As our country undertakes 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 intercepted it, and he has arrogantly placed it on his Web sites.

The enemy knows, just as we should, that whoever wins these first battles in Iraq and Afghanistan gains incredible momentum. The loser faces a vastly different and much more daunting set of circumstances. Our enemies have said from the outset that we Americans are weak of spirit and will lose our will to win if the fighting gets tough. They have looked at our other withdrawals—from Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia—and have gained confidence that they can cause a similar scenario to occur soon.

Their strategy has five phases. The first phase calls for jihad, or holy war—for all the brothers to rise up and slaughter the infidels. 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 rank-and-file fighters. The second phase calls for the elimination of all Western influence from the old caliphate—read “the Middle East.” I believe that is the phase we are in now. During the third phase, the terrorist jihadi plan to turn on and destroy what they call the “apostate governments” of the Middle East, those that have partnered with the “infidels” and thwarted al Qaeda's efforts. 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 forces. He intends to do that through control of the Middle East oil supply. 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 will extend the caliphate to encompass the globe, wherein every nation adopts his laws and his religion.

Within these phases, the enemy threatens 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.

There have been unrest and extremist movements in the past. But notably, when there were violent jihads, relative peace was 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



U.S. MARINE CORPS (ROE F. SEIGLE)

**FLAGS FOR LITTLE FRIENDS** Marine First Lieutenant Scott Perry, a 25-year-old platoon commander from Peoria, Illinois, hands out Iraqi national flags to children during a June 2006 humanitarian mission in the city of Barwana, in al Anbar Province. Marines say such humanitarian operations are a reason local residents are beginning to trust them.

partner nations, positively influence events in the region and help shape the environment for success.

We must continue to focus like a laser on extremism but also extend the helping hand to other nations, particularly Muslim nations who seek it. But the response should not, unless absolutely necessary, always be a military one.

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 MV-22 Osprey, but they would be eager to have a fire team of Americans from Agriculture, Justice, Customs and Border Protection, and Drug Enforcement to help them get their institutions right and achieve 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.

## Regional Security

When we do draw down our military forces in Iraq, we must develop a regional strategy that protects Iraq so it can sufficiently rebuild its armed forces to defend national sovereignty, and yet we need to limit the footprint of our forces inside the country. The drawdown of our forces in Iraq is inevitable and, eventually, necessary to be able to reset our Corps, train more broadly for other contingencies, and prepare ourselves for the next engagements with extremists.

The keys to a success in Iraq are developing the rudimentary elements of self-governance sufficient to protect citizens of the country, hold the nation together, and provide basic services to the people. The keys to a successful regional strategy will be to posture moderates for success to

regain control of the Muslim religion, prevent wider outbreaks of sectarian violence amongst nations, and balance the increasingly aggressive Iranian activities in the Middle East.

Notwithstanding possible development of nuclear weapons, Iran is already the recognized power in the region among Persian 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. It has a significant coalition presence on both its eastern and western borders and an entire fleet of Coalition combat ships in Gulf waters. The Iranian response thus far has been covert—that is to say, deniable support for both the insurgents in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. It is exporting the successful Hezbollah model in an attempt to prolong both conflicts in order to avoid greater focus on Iran. To date, the strategy has been only 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 almost

one-third 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, and Iranian-sponsored and surrogate terrorist organizations associated with virtually every Middle Eastern nation, to name the most serious.

## Our Marines Give Us the Advantage

Everything we read about 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 increasingly capable of succeeding in a counterinsurgency environment. 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.

I recently named the book, *First to Fight*, by retired Marine Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, as the “Commandant’s Selection”—a must-read from our official reading list. In the book, General Krulak says that there will always be a Marine Corps because America loves our Marines. That is, unless one of two things were to happen—the first 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. Let me assure you—neither of those two things is going to happen on our watch. ✪

General Conway was sworn in as the 34th Commandant of the Marine Corps on 13 November 2006.