

Remarks of
Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Conway
Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation (MCSF) Gala
Fort Lauderdale, Florida
Saturday, February 17, 2007

Thanks a lot for this awesome introduction. My mother would be delighted with it, my mother in-law would still be skeptical. Well folks, it's great to be with you here in the Fort Lauderdale area. It's my first time here, and we really have had a wonderful time since we arrived last night. Today, we played a round of golf over at Western Hills Country Club thanks to Bob and some other folks that are here tonight. I played with a great bunch of guys except they were a little irreverent after the day was over. We were on fifteen, and they had seen the quality of my golf. We were about 175 yards out and I said, 'John do you think I could make it to the green with my five-iron?' He said, 'Oh, yes sir...Eventually!' *[Laughter]* But we had a great round of golf, and it is great to be with you from Washington DC. They've got about 27 degrees in weather, ice and snow on the ground there.

But it's also started to get political up and around Washington; the elections are only 20 months out. We're already getting bombarded with polls and such. But, I've got to tell you; I think politics really are everywhere, even in our Marine Corps. There is a story that goes back to World War II where a young PFC had just been reassigned to his first unit on Guadalcanal. There had been some serious fighting in defense of the airfield there. Well, the platoon sergeant noticed that he was kind of dragging around the area, and so he approached the young man said, 'Well, what's the problem?' The PFC said, 'Well, platoon sergeant, it's like this, I'm in the midst of some real heroes here, these people have seen a lot combat. They have done a lot of great things for their country, and I haven't done anything.' So the platoon sergeant said, 'Okay I got it. Here is what we're going to do. There's a listening post that goes out every night, and I want you to go out there. If you insult their Emperor, sometimes these guys get a little bit excited and you might get a shot.' So the young Marine is like 'got it.' So, the next morning the patrol is coming in through the wire, and the platoon sergeant said, 'well how did it go?' And he said, 'well it went just like you said it would. We were out there, and we saw the Japanese out there moving around in the bush.' I yelled out, 'Tojo sucks canal water!' 'So, what happened?' He said, 'This big Japanese soldier jumped out from behind a rock and he yelled out, 'Roosevelt eats camel dung.' And the platoon sergeant said, 'Ah! Did you shoot him? Did you drop him?' The PFC paused and said, 'No platoon sergeant, I didn't. I couldn't bring myself to shoot a fellow Republican!'

[Laughter]

Folks, I'm not going to talk awfully long tonight, I don't want to stand between you and the opportunity to spend your money. But, Ron did ask me to give you just a little bit on the state of the Marine Corps. First of all, your Marine Corps makes Marines, wins battles, and breeds quality citizens *[Applause]* – and we are doing all three of these

things. These great men and women in uniform that you see standing around here tonight, I think are indicative of that. If you look at the metrics, they are also strong. Our recruiting is doing superbly; we are making our mission regardless of the requirement virtually every month. You may or may not know it, but the DoD standard for high school graduates is 90%, Marine Corps standards are at 95%, and we are recruiting at 96%. Those are the great young Americans who want to join us and help defend the country. On the other end of the scale, we are authorized by DoD standards to bring in 4% of what we call 'CAT IVs' (*Mental Group Category Four*); the Marine Corps accepts only one percent and we take these great young men and women and turn them into Marines and let them do great things for their country.

If you question morale, all you need to do is go to a unit that is either about to deploy, that is in Iraq or Afghanistan, or has just come home. Morale is somewhere in the overhead, it is incredible; because they are doing what they joined the Marine Corps to do. They're traveling, they're defending their Nation in a time of crisis, and they are doing it with their comrades. Years ago, Winston Churchill said, 'in essence that one of the most exhilarating experiences in life is to be shot at and missed.' So, your Marines are getting a lot of that kind of excitement.

In terms of retention, we keep those Marines that we want. We recruit about 38,400 per year, and we discharge almost an equal number. Of those, more than we could keep would like to stay, so we are going to have to be very selective. Therefore, our NCOs (*noncommissioned officers*), our staff NCOs, and our senior people are highly chosen and very much up for the task.

These are just great young Americans. I got to tell you though; there was a point in time when we weren't so sure. There was a point in time when some of us guys — some of the old timers — looked at them and said, 'you know, maybe not enough PT (*physical training*), a lot of time with a little joystick in front of a TV, not enough outdoor activity.' We really didn't know if they'd make good soldiers or Marines. Well, ladies and gentlemen, let me tell you right now, we were wrong — we could not have been more wrong. I have seen these young men, and women in some cases, in combat; their raw courage, their sense of self sacrifice, their team play is just unbelievable. It will literally bring tears to your eyes to see these young people at work. I would offer to you, I think that our Nation, certainly our Marine Corps, is in great shape for a long time to come as these young people continue to reach positions of responsibility.

[Applause]

The fact that you folks are here tonight, I think represents the fact that you support your Services; that is a grand and glorious thing. That was not always the case; I think our country has matured greatly since Vietnam. When, if you disagreed with the policy, sometimes you held the troops accountable. I think our country today doesn't do that. Today, our country is able to make their own determination about whether or not they agree about what is going on, but either way, they support the troops. That's very meaningful.

[Applause]

Let me just close by saying; you see it everywhere, this Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund that started up, takes care of our wounded Marines and their families. They have an operating budget of about six million dollars a year based purely on contributions from our great fellow American citizens. They hand out lots and lots of money, but they keep that operating budget about where it is because the money that the contributions that continue to come in. About three weeks ago, I got 50 tickets to the Super Bowl from the Cleveland Browns owner. He said please give these to your deserving Marines — wounded if they can make it. They came down, and they enjoyed the Super Bowl. Let me tell you something else that happened, the Cleveland Browns is a great organization, but so is the Miami Dade Police Department. These young Marines got a police escort from where they stayed to the stadium, and they enjoyed that almost as much as they did the game.

[Laughter]

Well, the last organization I want to mention, certainly not least in our hearts is your Scholarship Foundation. It is marvelous what it does; honoring Marines by taking care of their children, by educating their children; that is truly a noble goal in itself. The numbers are truly impressive, over two million dollars this year, 977 students in fifty states. You can't say enough about that no matter what you support. Ladies and gentlemen, God bless you for who you are, what you do, and God bless America, thank you.

[Applause]