

**Remarks by the
Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Conway
Congressional Marines Breakfast
Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.
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Senator (*Warner*), thank you very much for the introduction and for the time. Congressman Kline, distinguished guests, fellow Marines, thank you for being here this morning. I appreciate the turnout. People ask me how I'm doing; I've got to admit that every once in a while, I wake up in the Commandant's house and say, 'holy cow, I better get out of here.' (*Laughter*) But it's fun.

Now, on to more serious issues; Iraq is uppermost in all our minds, as well it should be. We've got some young Americans over there that are doing an absolutely fantastic job. Sergeant Major and I had the opportunity to visit over Christmas. I will just share with you all some of our observations, and then a couple areas of concern that perhaps you all can understand and maybe you can help us with.

We visited Al Asad, Hadithah, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Baghdad. It's quite a different place. Out west on the border there is a place called Al Qaim; it used to be the Wild, Wild West, and we put a lot of great Marine battalions through there. Third Battalion, Fourth Marines is there right now. They have paid in blood, sweat, and tears – the price to really bring that place around. It is now probably a model to what's happening in the rest of Iraq. They're working well with the Sunni tribes. The Sunni tribes are providing their young men to be policemen, and it is a much quieter place compared to what it used to be. There's a market that goes every other day. Eight to ten thousand people go to that marketplace with full confidence that they're going to be able to do so protected and live somewhat of a normal life.

The real surprise for us, I think, came at Ramadi. Ramadi is on everybody's list of armpit cities; again, great battalions that have gone through there for a long time. A couple of those commanders are here this morning. But Ramadi is remarkably different from what it used to be, even in terms of what we expected to see on this visit. There is an Army brigade commander there who works for the MEF (*Marine Expeditionary Force [Forward]*) commander in Fallujah, and he's got First Battalion, Sixth Marines working for him. He gave us a brief that showed, three months ago, sixteen tribes and out of those sixteen tribes, easily twelve were allied against him and were actively fighting. In the interim, between three months ago and Christmas time, those tribes had decided to take on the Al Qaeda of Iraq, because they were fed up with the indiscriminate killing of their sons and daughters and their tribal members. They went to the commander in Ramadi and asked, 'will you support us?' and we said, 'absolutely.' Now, they're openly warring against the Al Qaeda and they are winning. He showed us a chart that reflected those same sixteen tribes at Christmas time and easily twelve or thirteen were green on that spotlight chart and working with the Coalition Forces in and around Ramadi.

Now, you may remember now about five or six weeks ago, we lost a young female public affairs major. She was killed at the same time an Army captain was, who also worked public affairs for the brigade. He was an Iraqi speaker, had been adopted by one of the tribes. They were killed on tribal lands that the tribe bears responsibility for. Within three days after their death, the tribal sheikh called to the brigade commander and said, 'we have discovered that IED cell and they have been slaughtered.' That is their term, but that continues to take place and that's exactly what we want to see happen.

So, I guess my point is: as we send in potentially another MEU (*Marine Expeditionary Unit*) and two battalions as part of this plus up, my view, at least in Al Anbar, is that they are reinforcing success. Those great Marines out there and the Marines that have been there over time, I think have not yet turned the corner fully, but they have certainly started momentum headed in the right direction.

Now there's an issue out there, though, and I've had the conversation with a couple of congressmen that it's troubling me – and it should be troubling to us all. That is that our young Marines, evidenced in some quarters, are concerned about the nature of the ROE, the rules of engagement, and how they're being enforced. To the point where, these congressmen told me – they have had conversations with Marines in the hospital or in correspondence – to the point where Marines felt restricted in their ability to engage. They were concerned that they would be investigated, deemed a war criminal, and carted off to Fort Leavenworth – I am exaggerating for effect.

As we dug into it, that is essentially true to the degree that every escalation of force event – by that what we're talking about an incident where a Marine must engage an Iraqi and that Iraqi is killed or wounded – for every instance where there's injury, there must be an investigation based on guidance coming out of Baghdad. The good news in all of that, however, is at the point where I asked the question of (*Major*) General Zilmer (*Commanding General of I Marine Expeditionary Force [Forward]*), with 144 investigations completed, one Marine had been charged.

In every other instance, Marines had been investigated and cleared. That is as important a part of the investigation as anything else. The ROE have not changed since we crossed the berm in '03. It still says, 'if you feel threatened, you are compelled to engage.' What we've got to do is make sure that the troops understand what is in the ROE; what the expectation is of them. That even though there might or might not be an investigation, the intent from the investigation is to get to the facts – and that 143 out of 144 cases have tended to clear the Marine.

The other thing that's important, and let me stress this from the beginning, is that you'll be judged based on what you knew at the time. Not what we discover in the vehicle, or not what comes back to be factual two or three days later. It's what stimulus did you have at the time when you decided to shoot. Our Marines are sufficiently trained and understand the ROE, that I'm comfortable that the vast, vast majority of these things, ninety-nine percent-plus, are going to be found to be well within the confines of the rules of engagement.

Folks, I think everybody in this room is aware that the President has approved, pending the confirmation by the Congress, that the Marine Corps will gain 27,000 additional Marines over a period of about the next five years. If you're an operator, that's great news. If you're a recruiter, that's terrible news – (*Laughter*) – because your job description just got tougher. That said, we think we can do it. We talked to our people, we were in dialogue with the Chairman (*of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*) and the Secretary (*of Defense*) before it was announced. We think it's within the realm of the possible for us to do that – and not diminish our quality. That's an important caveat, I think, to put against it because that's our position going in.

Now, I'll tell you, and I'm not asking you all to make decisions for us, we're going to have to face it. There is a body of folks coming at me saying, well sir, 'if we're going to do that, we've got to go from ninety-five percent high school graduates, which is the Marine Corps standard. (The DOD standard is ninety). We've got to go from our ninety-five, actually recruiting ninety-six, back to ninety.' That opens up a whole other group of people.

Also, we recruit one percent CAT IV Alphas (*Mental Group Category Four Alpha*). I didn't understand this language three months ago. I'm getting quite conversant with it today. We recruit one percent CAT IV Alpha people into the Marine Corps. The CAT IV Alpha profile is normally an individual who's a high school graduate, but goes to, say, an inner city school and isn't able to pass the ASVAB (*Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery*) based upon the opportunities they've had, or is a person who has English as a second language. In most cases, the recruiter can look this guy in the eye and say, 'he would be a good Marine; I just can't get him in because he can't pass that test.'

So, again, people are coming to me saying, 'you know, we really need to take 2 percent.' That would open up another group of people that we might be able to bring in. But at this point, we're not going to do any of that. We're simply going to see if we can't assist the recruiter through other means; additional advertising monies, perhaps, more recruiters onto the streets as appropriate. We are giving them some flexibility on how they manage regions and stations. It is our firm goal, at this point, not to adjust our standards in order to be able to come up with those 5,000 additional Marines each year, and we'll continue along those lines.

The last thing I would mention to you all is to prime the pump for a discussion and hopefully a good Q&A with the time we have left: We have put out in ALMAR (*All Marine*) message recently through the entire Corps saying that we believe that every Marine should be afforded the opportunity to get into the fight.

As we were looking at our numbers and being able to justify additional end strength, the inevitable questions arose. One of them was how many people have not yet been to Iraq or Afghanistan over the last four and half years now? The answer surprised me a little bit. The manpower people said of our strength, of 175,000 or so, about 66,000

have not been to one of those two places, have not been to a combat zone. They quickly added, about half of that is scheduled to go; about half of the victor units are in some form or fashion are under orders that will allow them a chance to get to the fight.

That still leaves thirty to thirty-five thousand Marines that haven't been there, some of them career Marines. Now, it is my firm belief that it is to our institutional advantage that every Marine have that opportunity. Not only have the opportunity, but be encouraged to get into the fight, to sharpen your skills, gain the experience, achieve the credibility, and in ten years from now, it will give us a Corps of just unimaginable proportions. So that's our effort; that is our thrust.

Now, once again, the manpower people will say, 'well, the MOS balance isn't right or this person is the only person that can do that drain-plug thing.' I said, 'time out, time out, okay? Change your thinking. Instead of saying why the person can't go, tell me how you're going to make it happen.' I believe that when a young man or woman joins our Corps after 9/11, they do so with the intent to fight for their country. There's a lot of fight out there, and we need to give them that opportunity.

I also believe, frankly, on the individual level, if a Marine doesn't do that, he or she, in a few years, is going to be essentially non-competitive. I'm not going to precept the boards and it's not something that you'll find in writing but quite frankly, when there's one slot left and there's four people vying for it; they all have equal qualities except two of the four have been to the fight and the other two have not, I think the list just got trimmed in half. Because that's who we are; that's what we do. So, it's out there.

I spoke with (*Lieutenant*) General Coleman yesterday, our manpower boss, to see how we're going to manage it, what are the metrics going to be. He has the database that shows for every major command what percentage of people has not been. Quite frankly, the commanders also have that, and we have the expectation that those numbers are simply going to be on the southeast trend line as we go about the effort to try to get our folks into Iraq. So, those are the contemporary issues. I would, again, just toss out at you for your consideration and digest any questions or comments anybody would have at this point.

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