

TRANSCRIPT

Defense Writers Group

A Project of the Center for Media & Security
New York and Washington, D.C.

General James T. Conway, United States Marine Corps

Commandant, US Marine Corps

January 23, 2009

THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT AND MAY CONTAIN ERRORS. USERS ARE ADVISED TO CONSULT THEIR OWN TAPES OR NOTES OF THE SESSION IF ABSOLUTE VERIFICATION OF WORDING IS NEEDED.

Q: Marines in Afghanistan--a big topic. The Chiefs had a meeting in the Tank last week about this and other factors. I know you can't really go into any detail about that but you can talk about sort of the process and where you stand on that right now, so why don't you take some time and do that.

A: Okay, I'll do that.

You're exactly right. It won't surprise anybody here to understand that the Chiefs have been meeting on this topic now for quite some time, anticipating the new and incoming administration and looking at what plans we ought to have in place to brief President Obama and his team.

You're also correct that that process is ongoing. I think it's fair to say that at this point decisions have not been made but with the speed in which we see other decisions being made, I think it's fair to say that it won't be long before we think we have a plan that we can then perhaps go into execution with.

Q: You said at the Surface Warfare Symposium last week that you thought by mid 2009 there would be a fairly large contingent of Marines in Afghanistan. So are you still thinking in terms of around 20,000?

A: We hope that the number is 20,000 or less. The reason I say that is that we have now for a long time been operating at essentially a one-to-one deployment to dwell. For

Marines that's seven months deployed and about seven months home. It's started to get better, honestly, with the growth and the new units that we've created starting to have an impact on these deployment-to-dwell features. But the beauty of 20,000 Marines or less is that that puts us at one-to-two--seven months deployed and 14 months home.

That's good for a number of reasons. The two primary ones being that it gives Marines more time with their families, those that are married. Those that are not might actually have an opportunity to meet someone. [Laughter]. And probably even more importantly from an institutional perspective, it gives us a chance to do some of the training we have just not been doing now for the last four or five years. I can cite that for you. But it's amphibious types of exercises, mountain training, cold weather training, and we used to do ten combined arms live fire maneuvers a year at a place called 29 Palms. We don't do any now. So those are some core competencies that we think the Corps offers to the nation that really do need to be enhanced, dusted off, and made whole again. We need time to be able to do that. That's what that will give us.

Q: Before we get into that, one more thing on Afghanistan. What's the assumption about the number of Marines in Iraq? If you're talking about somewhat under 20,000 in Afghanistan, does that zero out Marines in Iraq? What's the number there?

A: We have made clear to the Secretary--you don't draw red lines with your boss, but we have appealed to his sensibilities to say sir, anything that you put into Afghanistan must necessarily come as a reduction of Marine forces in Iraq. Frankly, my business there, and I just got back from a visit over Christmas with the Sergeant Major, convinced me that the time is right for Marines in general terms to leave Iraq. It's very much a nation building kind of environment that's taking place there right now. We don't do that as a core competency, but I will offer we're doing it fairly well at this point. But I view, and I've been saying it now for over a year, that where you have a nation building effort essentially taking place with certainty that there is no back sliding associated with that, and a building fight taking place in another locale, that's really where Marines need to be. That's what we offer the nation. That's why a young man or woman joins the Corps for all intents and purposes. We think that's where we need to be as an institution.

Q: When you said your boss, you're talking about Gates?

A: Secretary Gates.

Q: What does he do when you say that? Does he nod his head?

A: He nods his head. He accepts the best military advice and makes his decisions based on a whole assortment of input.

Q: General, it's been my sense in Afghanistan that the problem there has been not just

too few troops but the strategy seems to have been sort of ill conceived, poorly coordinated, inconsistent. I'm wondering if you could tell us your thoughts about what the right strategy ought to be. How to not just deploy extra numbers of troops, but how to deploy them, what they ought to be doing, and where?

A: That's a very large question, David. Let me say at the outset I'm what they call a Title 10 guy. General Franks had even another term for it,--[Laughter]--but my operational days are behind me.

But I can offer ideas and suggestions to General McKiernan. He and I were together in '03 and I have a high regard for him as a commander. I think he is going about setting the strategy right, frankly, if there were problems in the past.

I think there are elements that have to be addressed as a part of the strategy, so let me talk about that.

In the south in particular where I think Marines will be assigned if and when that decision is made, there's a serious drug problem and drug money fuels that insurgency. We think that's where large chunks of the resources come from for the Taliban, for the al-Qaida and so forth.

Nearby you have safe havens. I think when you've got those two elements, you've got the potential for a long term insurgency. So we've really got to take care of those things as a product of our strategy. And to date, although certain ISAF nations may have been given the task of dealing with the drugs, we've made appeals to other nations to eliminate safe havens, those things have simply not happened commensurate with what has been since probably what, mid 2003 or 2004? At least a slow increase in the number of troops.

So those things concern me about the strategy. I'd like to see, if and when again we do contribute additional troops, there is a direct means for getting after those things that really are the cuts, not the--

Q: What is the problem with the drug situation? US forces are not going after the drug lords and the drug labs. I asked Gates about that yesterday and he said well, they have the authority and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, but it's not happening. What needs to happen before your guys can start going after those drug--

A: My personal view is whatever US forces, or I'll say even ISAF forces do with regard to the drugs, it needs to be general support reinforcing to what the Afghan government is accomplishing. That's a national problem. That needs to have a national solution that involves education, alternative crops, an understanding on the part of both government and villagers and Afghan security forces as to how lengthy a process it's going to be, and I don't think any of that's taken place yet.

Q: So tactically they have to be removed.

A: I think they have to. Otherwise what you're creating is little insurgents that will one day remember that you took bread out of my mouth by making my daddy stop planting poppies.

There for a while wheat prices were actually bringing home more than poppy. And saffron has been successful in some other areas in terms of alternative crops. So until the villagers that again are trying to feed their families understand this is illegal, you can and will be arrested in time if we become serious about it, but in the mean time here are some alternatives for you that are completely legal and will bring you almost as much.

And by the way, there's an infrastructure problem there, too. You've got to get that wheat to market. It can't sit out in the field rotting like we've seen happen unfortunately in some other nations where the infrastructure doesn't support to, again, complete the circuit. So there's a lot that has to be done, I think we all admit that. But we also I think realize that until it's accomplished, again, we've got one of the elements of a long term insurgency facing us.

Q: Can you talk about MRAPs at all? And the 2300 or so vehicles that the Marine Corps has a requirement for now, do you see those vehicles having a future in the Marine Corps? And can you talk at all about this new MRAP [inaudible] vehicles, and how many you see you will be needing in Afghanistan?

A: I can, Emily. We won't need all that we have purchased, I believe, and I would add quickly that we have tried to purchase at the lower end. We tried to go with Cat-1 vehicles because they're smaller, we think they have more off-road mobility, more utility perhaps with an expeditionary force, those types of things. That said, even there what we have purchased for our requirements in Iraq exceed what we think we will need as a part of our tables of equipment inside the Marine Corps.

Now we will have the MRAP, we think, as an engineer vehicle that will see use in the future, and also for our road clearance EOD teams. They now have a way to get to where they have to go that's protected and gives good mobility and that type of thing.

What we've found, though, is that the vehicle does not operate as well off-road as we would like. If you ride in one, it kind of creeps and groans when you start going on uneven terrain. There is an effort by the department, and principally driven by the Army, to come up with an Afghan variance of the MRAP.

We're a little more frugal than that. We're looking at okay, what is the problem with off-road use of our Cat-1s? Can we go to independent suspension instead of heavy axles and

accomplish the same thing? Again, posture ourselves well for the future. So that's our thrust right now.

The initial tests have been somewhat encouraging. When I was in Afghanistan I asked the commanders there, would you like to do the field testing? As opposed to us putting 5,000 miles on this newly designed vehicle somewhere in the American desert, would you be as comfortable using it here? The answer is yes. So we're looking at how rapidly we can prove the product before we do a massive overhaul of the numbers of vehicles we've got to get them to Afghanistan in good working order.

Q: Years down the road are MRAPs still going to be around in the Marine Corps? Are these going to be excess ones that you don't need, so you see those--

A: I think those that are excess will be parked on asphalt at a place called Barstow, which is one of our major warehousing facilities. They preserve very well in that environment. It's dry, it's hot. So those that are stored I think would go to Barstow.

The real answer to your question I believe is that as long as IEDs are a successful weapon on the battlefield there will be a need for MRAP type vehicles. That's what generated their construction in the first place. That's how they found their greatest use. The IED is a cheap, effective way to try to get after people. So until we find some mechanism that seeks out, isolates and destroys IEDs at range, we think that that armor protection for our troops will continue to be a part of the chain links and will be necessary.

Q: General, related to the IEDs. One of your biggest experiments as far as programs is the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle. It's been in long delays, over cost, et cetera. Now you've got another start of [inaudible], but the HASC, House Armed Services Subcommittee wants to put a V-hull on it so it's like an MRAP [inaudible] IEDs. How are you going to, do you think you can keep that program going? If they try to do the V-hull, doesn't that take away from your [inaudible]?

A: Otto, we think we can. We think there are a lot of folks operating on some old information vis-à-vis the EFV, the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle. I will never understand how it happened, but I will tell you when we did the reliability tests on those things three or so years ago that we used vehicles that were past their service life expectancy to do reliability tests and that's not smart. That doesn't start being smart. That provides predictable results and we've been living with them now ever since.

But the fact is if you look at reliability tests today, the vehicle for all intents and purposes is through the woods and into a clearing now in terms of its capacity.

Let's talk about the V-shaped bottom. I think for well intended reasons Chairman

Taylor, Congressman Bartlett, wanted us to examine a V-shaped hull before we went to full scale production on the vehicle. Our engineers sat down with them and really over a series of sessions I think convinced them that the vehicle cannot perform as required with a V-shaped bottom. It's not your daddy's bass boat, okay? It doesn't get up on plane with that kind of a bottom, so a flat bottom is necessary in that vehicle.

What we have also shown those gentlemen is that with add-on capability we reach almost the same layers and levels of protection for our troops aboard EFV as would be given to them by the V-shaped bottom and elevated structure.

So we're optimistic. Once people understand the facts. Once people understand that the United States Navy is not going closer than 25 miles to the shore, that they will appreciate the value of a vehicle that is really an armored personnel carrier that also planes at about 30 knots over open ocean. So we think that the program is absolutely necessary to what we do.

Q: Let me shift to a looming mission that returns you to going after pirates. Admiral Gortney last week said the rules of engagement will be liberalized fairly soon, and that sailors and marines will be put in harm's way doing arrests of Somali pirates.

What's the level of effort that you see from the Marines and I guess the Horn of Africa Task Force? And is there any role for the V-22 on this mission operating off the San Antonio?

A: Let me just go like this, Tony. To date we have received no taskings. We think that a counter-piracy operation is well within the capacity and the workup of any Marine Expeditionary Unit that goes to sea. I don't think the pirates would be a viable force on the ground if we chose to go into their camps. Certainly they can't stand up in pressed by the ships of the United States Navy and the aircraft associated with them.

V-22 would be a wonderful platform for those types of things. I think if you simply land in the face of those camps they're going to scatter to the mountains and you'll not see them again for a time. I think if you look at traditional heli-borne operations which puts blocking forces along major avenues, puts a force in behind these people before you start to address their camps, then you've done what you probably need to do.

You don't hear the V-22 coming nearly like you do a conventional helicopter. It can fly higher, it can fly deeper, it can fly faster. So the speed and the shock and the surprise of an attack on those camps would be very much facilitated by--

Q: One follow-up on the Osprey. Apparently it's proven itself somewhat in Iraq.

A: We've very proud of it, yes.

Q: What's the future in terms of missions? Afghanistan, possibly?

A: Let me be honest and say that our venerable old CH-46s have really started to come up against their match in Afghanistan. Elevated terrain, temperature highs, those types of things. When I visited there in August we were carrying five or six combat loaded Marines in the CH-46s. So it's high time that we bring aboard the Osprey.

We've got a program right now that puts the fourth deployed squadron aboard ship. I think we'll probably continue with that because there are many lessons learned that we have to generate from our time aboard ship with the aircraft, but I really think if we see the numbers of Marines that we suspect in Afghanistan before the end of the year you'll also see at least one Osprey squadron there as well.

Q: General, we got a new Commander-in-Chief this week and all the Marines did too. As the youngest service, are your marines excited by this new President in the sense that he's somewhat historic? But given his pledge to overturn Don't Ask/Don't Tell, do they have any concerns about that? Can you just give us a sense of how your marines are feeling?

A: Well I can tell you of those that I've talked to, they're caught up like the rest of us with the excitement of the event. It's my first time in the city to watch a transition like this. It is fascinating. I think there's a sense of optimism and encouragement with any changeover. You can relate to a Marine Corps change of command and say you've got a new boss. What's he going to say? What's he going to do? How's he going to react to certain things? So we'll take it a step at a time.

On the Don't Ask/Don't Tell thing, I don't think marines--They trust us to do what's right in those instances and I don't think it's much on their minds at this point. If it comes we will take it aboard and again give best military advice in terms of how we think we ought to approach it.

Q: It was a big issue 16 years ago and really hurt President Clinton. Do you think it will be such a big issue today?

A: From what I have seen, it will be a big deal. But from what I have seen the Obama administration has done a very good job with its homework, looking at how previous administrations have snapped in, and they seem to be consciously avoiding some of those potential pitfalls. So I think we need to give them credit for that.

Q: General, you were talking before about in general terms [inaudible] leave Iraq. For months we've been hearing that gains are significant, but fragile, could be reversed. But for all those months the gains have helped. In your conversations with General Odierno

and your conversations with the rest of the Chiefs, how [inaudible] a withdrawal would now be viable given that those gains have held for as long as they've held?

A: Well, the concerns, if you listen to General Odierno and to a lesser extent General Patraeus, are now with the elections. We think we have helped the Iraqi government and security forces shape what will be a very successful series of provincial and national elections, but it's also a country that's new to democracy. Whereas we accept the results of an election and have a peaceful turnover of authority just like we've seen over the last week, we're hopeful that they will sort of get that, too. And hopeful is the stage we're in right now.

The concern on the part of General Odierno in particular is there could be violence in the wake of an election, that we could lose some of the gains that we have made. Not everybody shares that view. My commanders in Anbar who deal with the Sunni population say well, they're going through a somewhat natural process. Which of the Sunni political parties are going to be the lead for the Sunni vote? The Sunnis understand that they must get to the polls and be counted as a viable minority in the country, and that they're mature enough to understand that violence in the wake of that isn't going to accomplish anything. It could be counter-productive.

So you've got different perspectives on the importance of the election and the potential for the elections as a flash point, but I respect General Odierno's concerns. I agree with him. The tremendous success that we've had in Iraq is really something that must be maintained and protected. It's just at what risk are you willing to, again, assure those gains and go forward potentially to do something else?

A: If the provincial elections come off without violence, if they elect [inaudible] without violence, would that then clear the way for a wide withdrawal this year?

A: I think that would be a good indicator, perhaps, of what might happen in a national election. For those that think that the elections are not as dangerous as others might think, if they turn out that way that would be a point in their favor.

Q: The QDR designer standard is supposed to form the basis for the first all-Obama budget in 2011. Going into the QDR negotiations, what's going to be your agenda? What's going to be the main parts in your agenda?

A: That's a really good question, Dave, and a lot of it's going to depend on what are the terms of reference for the QDR? Those are being, I think it's fair to say at this point talked through. They're going to be shaped, of course, by the guidance that the President and the administration give to the department, but they'll also be shaped at least in part by what the senior department leadership thinks should be discussed.

The Secretary gave us guidance at the last Defense Senior Leaders Conference to be prepared to come to the next one with those thoughts in mind to help shape those terms of reference for the QDR. So I think it's probably best to say at this point that it's a program under development.

Q: I understand, but surely you've got some big agenda items, things you want to make sure are in the QDR. Could you give us some insight to what that is?

A: It won't surprise you to hear that we're pretty comfortable with where we are right now. In an era of what will probably be decreasing budgets, it may be more a matter of making the case for who you are and what you think is required to sustain what we've got as opposed to any new additions. I think that's where our thought process is.

Q: I thought Electronic Fires, for example, was going to be very important for you, replacing the EA-6B, at some point getting those really tied into the radio battalions. That's going to be an important thing in Afghanistan at least on the SIGINT side of things. So do you want more?

A: See, I would say we've got a program that does that in the Joint Strike Fighter.

Q: So what do you want to see--But surely you're not talking about the vertical lift version of it being the ESW-5.

A: I don't want to get into classified discussion here, but the Joint Strike Fighter will offer tremendous capacity for us in the electronic warfare environment.

Q: I can make up the rest. [Laughter].

Q: General, if I can go back to the new Commander-in-Chief for a minute. There was some apprehension that [inaudible] about Barack Obama coming in as the President [inaudible] member of the Senate. Do you think he's moved [inaudible]? What do you think the attitude is right now?

A: Well, we--

Q: I know [inaudible].

A: We had our what we call Visions Group. We have a group of folks at Quantico who are very bright marines--I hope that's not an oxymoron--that we asked to take a look at that for us, and we asked them to examine the last ten presidencies and give us a feel for what could happen here with, arguably, the most liberal member of the Senate becoming our President.

What they said is that invariably a President will rally his base during the campaigning season in order to get elected, but almost equally invariably he rules from the center. He is the Commander-in-Chief. He is the President of all the people to include those who may have different ideologies. And that he rules from the center. It may be too early to say this, but a lot of what we see I think in this early administration points toward that kind of effort. I think we're encouraged by that.

Q: From the standpoint of the military though, what do you see that tells you that? From what you care about.

A: He has in his Cabinet a soldier, a sailor and a marine. And so we start with that. I find that pretty encouraging. I think some of his choices--Secretary Gates staying on. I don't know today if he's a Republican or a Democrat, and that's probably a good thing. But the fact is, he's effective at what he does. So those kinds of choices I think give us as military people a certain air of comfort at this point in terms of how we may see this new President lead.

Q: General, earlier this week General Chiarelli talked about redeployment rates in the Army and [inaudible] go up and I was wondering how it looks for the Marines.

A: You're talking about deployment to dwell?

Q: Not deployment to dwell. He was talking about the number of soldiers available to go back back and forth. That people are stressed with the loads they're carrying, they're getting a lot of musculoskeletal problems, and PTSD. It's preventing them from being able to--

A: We have some of that, of course. I almost wish I had a chart I could show you folks. It's an eye popping chart that talks about the average age of the services. The other three services percolate along and there's a little bit of a rise at age 19, 20, 21, and then it goes down as you get older and more ancient. For the Marine Corps it's a peak at about 20, 21, 22 years of age. Far distant from the other services. In some ways, it's in many more ways a blessing than it is a curse. We have a tremendous turnover which requires our training functions be in constant motion and preparing these young men and women for service for the nation, but it keeps us young, it keeps us resilient. It keeps down the numbers of deployed marines, really, when you look at that turnover and the fact that we don't have nearly as large a career force as do the other services. Even on a comparative basis we don't have as many.

So some of the things that might otherwise trouble the other ground service just don't have as much application with us. We look at the factors each month that talk about the resiliency of the force, and really they're pretty good. They're better than I thought they would be at this point in time with this virtual one-to-one deployment to dwell. So we've

got to look after the families of those that are married. A lot of those people are in the career force. But we also have some cultural differences, I think, with the Army that also help. Not least of which is that after about three or four years in what we call the operating forces we're going to send you to a B billet. That means you're recruiting or you're at a headquarters or on an instructor's staff somewhere taking a break from the war. Then you come back three years after that, you're a little bit refreshed. You're ready to go and strap it on again. You don't find that as much in the Army. Do the math. If a person says I'm in 3rd ID and I've deployed three times, that means he's been in those operating forces six or seven or eight years. So those are just some differences between the services that we think sort of point towards this resiliency that I've talked about in the Marines.

That seven month deployment is also very very helpful. Our families, our marines, our sailors, all like that a lot. Although there have been some ruminations about maybe that changing for Afghanistan, we've pushed back with a stiff arm saying no sir, we like it just like it is, and I think when you see it you'll like it as well.

Q: General, you talked about how the increase of forces to Afghanistan from Iraq requires some different equipment, some different things. If that's to happen this year then the money has to come from the next supplemental bill which Congress will pick up this spring. I'm just wondering if I can ask you what are your top priorities for procurement in that supplemental? What do you need from Congress in the short term to make that new Afghanistan mission work?

A: Not a lot. The things that we have learned, the things that we have put to use in Iraq have general application in Afghanistan. We are going to have to lighten our load some, and I was just down at Quantico yesterday looking at a new family of protective vests and plates and some of those types of things. We think we're on the verge of being able to give our marines a helmet that will stop 7-6-2 which will be incredibly valuable to us. So there are some of those things that are of a leading edge kind of thing of personal and protective equipment that I think we're going to have to take a look at.

We are in constant status of degradation, replacement, replenishment, renewal of our vehicles and that's not going to change. But that's been somewhat a constant build really since we got into Iraq in this very static environment.

So if you were to ask me to chart it, I don't see a spike really, except for what it would cost for shipment and transportation and those types of things into a land-locked country a thousand miles from the closest seaport. I don't see a large spike in terms of a movement to Afghanistan. More a sustainment on those things that we have needed for Iraq.

Q: So airlift? You're saying you need more--

A: TRANSCOM will do that. There are also of course some land routes. I visited Pakistan while I was over there, talked to General Kyanni about the security of some of those. You may have read in the last day or two, Dave Patraeus thinks he's got authority for even more, a greater volume of supplies coming across the northern route, so there will be some cost to get a larger force into Afghanistan, but it's not cost that is unanticipated, I'll put it like that.

Q: General McKiernan has asked for 30,000 more troops which not only doubles the number of US troops in Afghanistan but also twice as many troops in terms of NATO forces. Your marines have complained that they feel restricted in some ways that some of the ISAF [inaudible] down south. Do you think the additional troops is an opportunity for the US to perhaps not [be under] ISAF as much, or do you [inaudible] still go after the narco-Taliban while under ISAF?

A: The last point first. I think we can go under ISAF rules and do more with drugs if that's our mission. Again, consistent with what we've talked about earlier under an Afghan lead, Nancy.

But the command and control thing has been a little bit problematic since the beginning and having visited with Dave over Christmas I know he continues to work that. He's looking for cleaner solutions to the problem.

There's an old Russian toast that says may all your enemies be coalitions. So coalitions are both good and bad. It's great that we have as many flags in the circle as we do. We wouldn't change that a bit. But it does run into complications then with various national caveats, the various national feelings, I think points on how command and control ought to be executed.

So all of that now is up to General McKiernan to solve and make clean and make effective, more importantly, with regard to the troops in the field. He's working it on a routine basis. You may see some changes with the addition of more American forces in there, but it would be too early to say that for sure.

Q:--some of the solutions that the general is considering? And when can we expect [inaudible]? Is it something you would expect [inaudible] by the time [inaudible]?

A: It just depends. It's sensitive in terms of its negotiation with the other countries. They would represent changes to the way we do business. Not dramatic changes. More in some cases realignments. But I probably ought to best leave that to him to talk about those, and I wouldn't want to say too much as he's undergoing these rather sensitive negotiations with other nations.

Q: [Inaudible] what redeployment in Iraq is going to look like [inaudible]? Is the bulk of it really necessarily going to go through Kuwait? Also you always talk about having one foot on the dock. What's the current assessment of how many need to come out of Iraq before we can--

A: Well, Gordon, our approach as we've gone about the discussion has been to say that when we begin the movement of Marines from Iraq to Afghanistan, and let me explain that. I'm not talking about moving Marines directly from Iraq to Afghanistan. What we're talking about is ending the tour of Marines in Iraq and their replacements would go to Afghanistan. But as we go about that, we are vulnerable with regard to our ability to provide what we call enablers. I call it combat support, combat service support, and it's to both places. Those are the units that have been traditionally stressed. And now to ask them to be equally available in both places is only going to further stress those communities.

So we're asking that that period of transition be as convinced as it possibly can. And also that when the door slams on Marines in Iraq, that all Marines be on the other side of the door. We don't want to leave and have our training teams and our border transition teams and other Marines involved with Iraq at that point because, once again, it's not what we do; and secondly, we need those Marines elsewhere. The exception to that would probably be training or advisory teams with the Iraqi Marine Corps down at Um Qasar. So that's our thought process.

We need to understand the impact that it will have on us during that transition so we need to make that transition as condensed as possible. And we want all Marines out lest we feel a compelling responsibility to leave them with logistics support, fire support, mobility and all those things, which then talks to a larger force there and we'd be comfortable leaving behind.

Q: Kuwait?

A: We don't think it has to be Kuwait. We have been experimenting with, negotiating with Jordanians for use of the port of Acaba. It's great that they've opened up Al Assad now to commercial traffic. We think we can fly troops right out of Al Assad without having to make the transit down through Kuwait or even over to Jordan. So we think that we can help the people, the Army Logistics Commands who would manage that by other alternative means other than just funneling everything down through Kuwait.

Q: General, can you give us a sense as to what your thinking is at the moment on how to deal with the Pakistan aspect of the Afghanistan problem? What are you sensing in terms of the direction the Obama administration might want to go?

A: Let me answer the second part again first because I think it's probably the shorter

answer, Dmitri.

I think we will need to stress with the Obama administration that you must have parallel progress really in Pakistan commensurate with what we have in Afghanistan. Otherwise it's like squeezing a balloon. We can be wonderfully successful in Afghanistan and simply have delayed the problem because people would flush across the border into Pakistan, safe haven, we can't touch them. Then when we say okay, we're done here, and we start pulling out, they come back. That would be a very bad scenario, but in some ways that's what's happened now if you track the whole Afghanistan thing over the years.

So there must be I think parallel efforts and success levels really on both sides of the border so that there's uniform effort and there are no seams. There is no gap there really between or amongst the people involved.

So when we talk about Afghanistan with the new President we will talk in terms of Afghanistan/Pakistan, because it is whole fabric.

I had the opportunity to visit with General Kyanni for the first time really over Christmas in Pakistan. He is an impressive individual. He understands his position in the leadership in Pakistan. He is very cognizant of what the attackers attempted to do in Mumbai in terms of elevating, escalating really the potential for conflict between India and Pakistan. He told me, I don't think he'd mind me telling you, he is accepting some risk by not over-reacting to what has been perceived as an Indian threat on his eastern border.

I wasn't sure, although he convinced me while I was there, that Pakistan had put quality troops up on the western border to combat what they see the al-Qaida and the Taliban in those Pakistani mountains. He's shown me by unit designation where Pakistan has done that and will continue to do it because they increasingly I think sense the threat. So I was pretty encouraged by the visit, both with regard to the quality of the leadership that I met, but also with regard to their thinking and their thought process in terms of how to go about combating this problem.

Q: Is he expecting a different shift from the Obama administration? What are his concerns?

A: We didn't talk about that, honestly. They watch every closely, of course, what our leadership has to say so it is very logical to say that he's going to be watching it very closely. But we specifically didn't talk about that aspect of things.

Q: Sir, I think I'll ask for an outlook on the Osprey both with the 22nd MEU and then the ship to shore type scenarios they would be involved with. And also if it had a role

with the 2nd MEF should it deploy to Afghanistan.

A: We think that the Osprey is the aircraft of our times. We're going to learn some things when it goes aboard ship, just like we learned some things about its viability in the desert. We tested it for lengthy periods of time in the American western desert. It got to Iraq and a little part called the slip ring wore out at a much faster rate than we thought it would because of the Iraqi dust and dirt and things that we found in the environment there.

So I suspect just like that when we get it into a salt sea kind of environment we're going to learn some things about the maintenance and the requirements of the aircraft there as well. But if you look at an aircraft that can cruise at 2.5 times the speed of our current helicopters, cruises at 13,000 feet, gets into and out of the zone like a rocket ship, it's made for a place like Afghanistan. The speed, the quietness, all those things that go with the aircraft.

Our biggest challenge right now is to stop thinking as a Marine Corps about the Osprey as a helicopter. It's not just a helicopter. And so we've challenged our people in Iraq. Think about new and different uses of an airplane that can be that fast and that effective and let's go to the next horizon here.

You may not know, we're putting a belly gun on the aircraft. We've partnered with Special Operations Command to drop a belly gun, a Gatling, if you will, out the bottom. It gives it suppressive fire capability and self escort capability. They've got to be ready for the time we see Osprey in Afghanistan. So there's continual product enhancement over what is already a very effective aircraft.

Q: Let's tie up some loose ends on the Afghan issue.

Is it a possibility there would be more than 20,000 Marines there? And is there a possibility that there would still be Marines in Iraq when you send them to Afghanistan?

A: Pam, I would say I hope not in both cases. Now as the old J3, who used to talk about X force structure for the next six to eight months and only see that increase in Iraq, I am a little concerned. I hope that Dave McKiernan is right with regard to what he senses as the need. We see some rumblings in the open press about European nations taking a fresh look and I think we're encouraged perhaps by some of that.

We know that we're in the process of building the Afghan security forces as rapidly as that scenario will bear. So all those things I hope point toward a figure of 20,000 Marines or less, which again allows us to get after another of our priorities in terms of reestablishing our core competencies.

As I answered down the table I think with Gordon, I would not like to see anything like a significant residual of Marines in Iraq because that just stresses a force that is already stressed to a degree that is small and doesn't have the volume of "enablers" that maybe the other services have.

Q: Has your first Chiefs meeting been set up with Obama yet?

A: Sometime next week, we think.

Q: Two thousand Marines were sent to [inaudible] recently.

A: To?

Q: Mosul. The Mosul region.

A: Yes.

Q: So what's their mission exactly there, and do you expect more Marines to be redeployed to that region? And more generally, since you emphasized the fact that you feel like the Marine's mission is pretty much over in Iraq, what is the timeframe that you have in mind to get all the Marines out of Iraq? And does that correspond to the 16 month timetable that the Obama administration is thinking about?

A: The extension of our zone of action from Anbar Province up into what we call TAO Tripoli, task force area Tripoli, has with it the mission to shut down rat lines coming from Syria into those northern cities--Talafar, Mosul, into the [inaudible] Province. We, in conjunction with the Iraq security forces, have fairly effectively shut them down through Anbar which used to be the main lines down along the Euphrates River.

So we have been sent north in an effort to do that same type of thing in conjunction with the border stations and those types of things. And every evidence from the commanders in Baghdad, both General Austin and General Odierno, is that our troops once again have been wildly successful. That they think that it's almost dired up, at least based on what they're seeing in Mosul in terms of numbers of attacks and those types of things.

In fact the mission was supposed to be over the middle of this month. It's been extended now for a period of time to ensure that we continue to provide the kind of success to the northern provinces where I think the remnants of al-Qaida are probably today.

Our logisticians are the short pole in that tent in terms of being able to get us out of Iraq. We can move the combat troops in a very short period of time. What remains is the logistical footprint that has been established over a number of years that support the troops, and certainly that was one of the questions I asked when I was there over

Christmas.

We've been cheating a little bit to the degree that our commander has assessed that I needed this number of troops and equipment to fight actively in four, five and six. The requirement is now much diminished so I don't need as much equipment. So we have been steadily removing equipment from theater on a not as needed basis and we've been fairly successful doing that.

So the timeline we think today is down to six or eight months that it would take to get the rest of our equipment out of Iraq. Again, somewhat dependent upon the ability of Transportation Command to move it. Somewhat dependent upon the availability of these other main supply routes, perhaps through Jordan, to evacuate the equipment. Those types of things. But we think we have over time diminished the requirement that once stood at about a year.

Q: Do you think the countdown has started?

A: No, because the table has not been slapped. We can fudge a little bit, but we dare not push that lever too far lest we be guilty of violating our orders.

Q: General, I'd like to ask you a little bit about [inaudible] Province where the Marines were last year. And just your sense of [inaudible] back there, to what extent are you going to have to reclear the area?

A: Well, we think we'll go down into the south because we do have a history there. It matches our current helicopter capability. The Army has been pretty successful up in the east. The problem right now is in the south in Afghanistan, so we think that's where our people will go.

I think there could be a need for some reestablishment, but I want to credit the Brits and the Canadians and the Afghans who have been operating in the region for holding significantly to what 2-4 MEU and 2-7 accomplished. 3rd Battalion, 8th Marines is now in behind 2-7 with almost the same zone of action. So we don't think we've lost much there. There has been some I think change of instruction. There is more concern about the Ring Road and the security of that Ring Road than perhaps when 2-7 was there, so 3-8 is in the process of securing that. I think from that basic secure line of communications there will be a natural expansion outward then into other areas where we simply haven't gone. The border with Pakistan down in Helmand Province is wide open. We just haven't taken overtures to maybe secure some of the rat lines there like we've worked necessarily in Iraq. So there's lots of work to be done if and when we do get back there, but again I don't want to say that's because the NATO nations haven't been hard at it. They have. And we need to build on the success they've had as they roll in behind 2-4 MEU when they left.

Q: [Inaudible]. Obviously [inaudible] supply line through places like Russia. Do you have concerns about more supplies moving through Russia [inaudible]?

A: Yes, the supply lines are more fragile than I'm comfortable with. That's more driven by the fact that Afghanistan is a landlocked country than it is anything else. We don't have that port to pull up to and start off-loading huge numbers of ships and a shorter line, maybe, where the troops are like we've seen in Iraq or back in the Gulf War and in Saudi Arabia.

They are more tenuous, but I think that's why General Patraeus and others have been doing some good spade work to try to make sure that they are viable and they will support a larger force on the ground.

Q: Are you concerned about using Russia more for those supply lines?

A: No, not at this point. No one has throw up a yellow flag. In fact I think that they're pretty pleased with the successful negotiations they've had with the Russians and the Stans in terms of keeping that line viable.

Q: General Chiarelli mentioned earlier this week in similar strains on the Army to [inaudible] the enablers--

A: I'm sorry, who was that?

Q: General Chiarelli, the Vice Chief.

A: Okay.

Q: Similar strains on the force including the enablers. And also said any increase in forces in Afghanistan would have to be commensurate with the decrease in forces in Iraq. Is there any tension right now between the Army and the Marine Corps about who's going to get out of Iraq first, and--

A: No, if anything it's probably the opposite Meghan. Our battalions all essentially have the same DNA. One battalion looks like another battalion. That's why we've been able to leave gear behind in Iraq and have battalions fall in on that equipment and be functional the first day. The Army units are simply different. A Stryker is different from a heavy brigade which is different from a light brigade which is different from an airborne brigade.

If you then apply that to the types of forces necessary in Afghanistan then really we start to fill some voids that the Army would have a tough time fielding without impacting

dwell or putting the wrong kind of unit in the wrong kind of place.

We are probably closer to the Army than we have been since Vietnam. I can't speak to Vietnam, I wasn't there. But I do know that the interaction in the field, I was part of that, and in the building, is really very good. I consider George Casey a friend and a close confidant. I know at the one star and two star level they work out solutions that come to us and there's no [moss]. It's a good solution, it integrates to the capabilities of the force, and we go on.

A sustainment force, if it's decided there will be one in Iraq, will almost exclusively be Army, but that is much more commensurate with the Army mission; it's commensurate with what we see around the globe where there are sustainment forces by and large, and certainly we support that one hundred percent.

So no, I think it's fair to say there's a good bit of harmony. When issues do come up, and there are always going to be issues, I think they're attacked in esprit de camaraderie and what's best for the nation and that's all we can ask.

Q: General, sorry to ask from behind your back.

A: That's all right.

Q: Do you think that the Joint Chiefs can, and do you think they will play a more robust role in advising President Obama on the way ahead in [inaudible] Afghanistan but also Iraq?

A: Well, we're a pretty adaptive organization. I think we can do whatever the President wants to do in terms of how he frames his best military advice. I can say, Julian, at the outset I'm very comfortable and pleased with the sequence that we see taking place in the current discussion. It started with Iraq. There will be discussions on Afghanistan with the right commanders. And I think before the President makes a decision he will want to meet with the JCS so we're very comfortable with that.

The President Bush administration took some direct feeds from commanders in the field and there was a responsiveness to those needs. Another technique, if you go back to World War II, is that we tell the commanders how much time and how much force they have to get the job done. They do the best they can within that given period of time. When you're fighting a two front war, that's another methodology.

Which one this administration decides to work with, or is there a third or fourth I guess remains to be seen, but again, I think the JCS is comfortable in the role that we will provide best military advice however and whenever is appropriate.

Q: His statement this week made it sound like he was going to turn to the Joint Chiefs and talk about ideas for the way ahead in Afghanistan. Are you as a body ready to provide some new ideas that he might not have heard?

A: Yes, we are. I'm comparing it to--He will hear some of the same things, perhaps, that we presented to the last administration about how we see strategic implications in the region, but it will be new to President Obama.

Secretary Gates has done a wonderful job bringing the President to the Tank. I think in his time, which just about matches mine as commandant, there have been four separate sessions with President Bush. Now within the first two weeks of his administration, potentially, a meeting with President Obama in the Tank. Those I think are very worthwhile for both the President and the JCS so that we understand each other in terms of best military advice from our perspective, in terms of presidential advice from his perspective, that we then take aboard and work with as we go about our daily duties.

Q: General, I wanted to ask you, going back to Pakistan. Yesterday the House Armed Services Committee described Pakistan as everything that's wrong in the Middle East, and that's a sentiment shared by some members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Taking a big picture look at Pakistan, what do you think about that assessment?

A: That sounds pretty harsh. [Laughter]. The Pakistanis have some issues, no question about it. It's my personal opinion only, the intelligence agencies will not say this. But it's my personal opinion that Pakistan is the focus of effort on the part of the al-Qaida. That Pakistan is the first place that you potentially have the convergence of terrorists and nuclear weapons. And the Pakistanis are keenly aware of that. They've got areas where they traditionally have not gone with military or security forces that unfortunately now I think some terrorist organizations have turned into safe havens. But they're aware of that. I think we're much better to consider them an ally in need than a basket case that somehow should be pitied or, God forbid, written off.

I think at least from a military perspective we're going to be much more prone to want to work with them to again make these parallel advances that we talked about to rid ourselves collectively of the problems. In the process we ought to choose our criticisms carefully, I guess.

Q: Joint Strike Fighter, the most expensive weapons program in the world. What are your concerns about the STOVAL version in terms of the engine? There's been engine issues. The program office says they're fixed, they think they're fixed, but [inaudible] the Marines. This is the whole reason the whole program exists, obviously. What's your concern level on--

A: I would correct one thing at the last you said there, Tony. There are a number of nations that are interested in the STOVAL along with us.

Q: The Spanish, the Italians--

A: Yeah. So they're equally observing the progress.

We had an engine malfunction six months or so ago.

Q: There were two within six months.

A: The good news is that we collected all the parts and pieces, have done the forensics and we know exactly what caused the problem. There have been some very successful engine tests since. We think we lost probably a month, maybe 45 days before we actually have vertical flight. We're encouraged by the program.

The Marine Corps hasn't bought a pointy-nosed attack aircraft in 11 years now, so we anxiously await the arrival of the aircraft and we're optimistic about the testing and what we've seen to date.

At this point we think that an all STOVAL fleet makes a great deal of sense. That said, we have an agreement in place with the United States Navy that one, we are wed to tactical air integration aboard the carriers and in conjunction with naval forces; and when that first squadron is fully capable we're going to put it aboard ship, we're going to put it on a routine deployment, we're going to fly it off the carrier, and if we're still at war attack targets, see how it does, and we will then make determinations about the tail end of the buy. Do we need to stay with an all STOVAL fleet? Does it make more sense to have some variant of CBs that give the MEF Commander and maybe the Naval Force Commander more flexibility? All that remains to be seen. But as we look at going into Afghanistan there are some very short runways there where the Harrier is going to be the only airplane that could possibly operate in those fields. We think that STOVAL is a very viable capacity to have in your kit back.

Q: So you don't think you will have a distinct EF-35 variant? Because you're going to have a lot of problems with real estate, power, if you want to do the things with the F-35.

A: David, that is a national function. We have contributed to it with our aircraft, the EA-6Bs and those that we have. There is a good bit of discussion taking place right now between Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps to a much lesser degree, in terms of what that platform needs to look like.

Is it necessarily manned? Is the resident capability of the 35 sufficient with some

expansion in order to be able to serve that function?

So it's not yet decided. There's no question about the need. The question is, what platform is going to serve that purpose for us.

Q: So it doesn't necessarily have to be F-35.

A: No.

Q: you're looking more broadly than that.

A: I think as a US military we're looking more broadly at what fills the role.

Q: Are you thinking about giving up the EA role at some point?

A: As a Marine Corps we need the capacity. It doesn't have to have USMC on the side. At this point we are providing for a capacity for that in the future, but again, much remains in terms of decisionmaking, in terms of how many, to what end, and how do we fulfill both the national role and the tactical role that the services have to have. At this point we're providing for capacity on down range, but it is not whole cloth to the extent that it would satisfy all those requirements.

Q: Yes, sir, you talked about how you've begun pulling equipment out of Iraq. Can you give us an estimate as to how much, what shares,--

A: You're going to get us in trouble now if we talk about this too much. I'm kidding.

Q: Good.

A: I'm kidding. We have, for instance, now five battalions on deck in Iraq. At one point we had eight battalions on deck in Iraq. So you start with three battalion kits that are not necessary. The logistics, the aviation to support eight battalions is not the same as it is to support five battalions. Soon to be less than that. Soon to be perhaps as few as three battalions. So a problem has been that in every case people do not have an appreciation for what we call flash to bang. From the moment a decision is made to put boots on ground in Afghanistan, before those boots are there. So we've had necessarily to lean forward with regard to evacuating some of this equipment in order to be able to get across some of these supply lines and get some of this stuff into place.

So it's been somewhat on the margins. It has not in any way decremented the mission that the remaining Marines there have, but--

Q: Can you give a number? Ten percent, twenty percent?

A: I can't. I can't give you that for sure.

I can tell you that I got an email from General Kelly yesterday that they opened the ConEx box of gas masks and they found a gas mask with the name Conway on it and the name Savage. He was my aid. [Laughter]. I turned that gas mask in in 2003. So that's some of what we're discovering.

Q: A quick question and an easy on.

I think the last time you were here about a year ago you were DCUs. The question is about whether you guys are wearing more utilities or the uniform you have on or whether there's been any kind of change.

A: I can tell you I did not wear utilities to this event because it is not our policy to do so. We think that that's a combat or a field uniform. Marines are strictly not allowed to wear them in any environment off a base or compound unless the duties require it. At the marathon, for instance, I gave special permission for Marines to be on the streets in utilities to support--

Q: Is that in the Pentagon?

A: We wear them in the Pentagon. The Pentagon is considered a military compound.

Q: Okay.

A: But we take pride in the fact that we dress up for occasions as opposed to dressing down, and we continue to do that.

Q: Thanks

Q: What is there about the Navy shipbuilding program that most concerns you?

Q: I said quick one, Pat. [Laughter].

A: Well, numbers of--

Q:--we haven't talked about the way you get to the fight.

A: Numbers of amphibs. You knew that was coming. But there's a new Navy shipbuilding program out there that I don't think has been made public yet so I won't talk about it but let me say it gives me cause for optimism on the issue of amphibs.

So if we get past that, then I am concerned about the nature of the MPF, or the Maritime Prepositioned Fleet, and what that's going to look like as it relates to our capability for sea basing. Sea basing is a tremendously powerful concept, whether the nation's at war or whether we're doing a tsunami relief kind of effort. This MPF is transitioning from simply storing of brigade sets at sea to the capability to mate ships at sea and create ports and airfields. That's tremendously powerful and would be a great flexible tool in the nation's kit bag. We want to see that, again, come together as rapidly as we can.

Q: You mean that would be separate from the assault amphibious fleet as--

A: Well, let me say it differently. Historically when a commander has gone ashore to conduct forcible entry operations or maybe punish another nation, he knows that he's in a race for time. He has got to get to that port and airfield before the bad guy masses and kicks him off the beach or off their soil.

You now don't have to do that because your port and your airfield is at sea. So you can operate for days before you have to have that larger port and it creates much more, I think, of a dilemma on the part of the enemy commander in terms of what is your purpose, what is your intent? In the past that's been broadly known. Today that sea base out there and the port that it represents as well as the airfield, gives us a much cleaner kind of opportunity.

Q: We're out of time.

END TEXT