

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB NEWSMAKER LUNCHEON WITH GENERAL JAMES CONWAY,
COMMANDANT
OF THE U.S. MARINE CORPS

TOPIC: THE FUTURE OF THE MARINE CORPS

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MR. ZREMSKI: Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press
Club. My name is Jerry Zremski, and I'm the Washington bureau chief
for the Buffalo News and president of the National Press Club.

I'd like to welcome club members and their guests who are here
today, along with our broadcast audience that's watching on C-SPAN.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards I'll ask
as many questions as time permits. Please hold your applause during
the speech so that we have as much time for questions as possible.
For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if you hear
applause during the speech, it is from the guests and members of the
general public who attend our luncheons, and not necessarily from the
working press. (Laughter.)

Now I'd like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to
stand briefly when their names are called.

From your right, Bob Madigan of WTOP Radio; Katherine Skiba of
the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, a member of the NPC Speakers
Committee, and the member who's responsible for the fact that Laura

Bush, our first lady, will be speaking to us next Wednesday; Peter Hickman, a freelance writer and editor and member of our Newsmakers Committee; Christian Lowe, managing editor of Military.com; Jonathan Karl of ABC News; Jeff Schogol of Stars and Stripes; Ron Harris of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Skipping over the podium, Melissa Charbonneau of CBN News and the vice chair of the National Press Club Speakers Committee. Skipping over our speaker for just one second, John Fales, known to us here at the Press Club as Sergeant Shaft, of the Washington Times, and the Speakers Committee member who organized today's luncheon; independent journalist --

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Off mike.) (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: -- independent journalist Mike (Gray ?); Tom Vanden Brook of USA Today; Tom Philpott of Military Update; Jane Watrel of NBC News; and Carlton Sherwood, Peabody Award-winning and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer. (Applause.)

Our speaker today is General James T. Conway, the 34th commandant of the United States Marine Corps. General Conway has won a breathtaking number of awards and medals in his 37-year military career, including the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, the Distinguished Service Medal, the Legion of Merit, the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal with Gold Stars in lieu of second and third awards, Navy Commendation Medal, Navy Achievement Medal and the Combat Action Ribbon.

See, I told you it was breathtaking.

Commissioned as an infantry officer in 1970, Conway quickly rose through the ranks to hold several important command assignments, including overseas postings in southwest Asia and Lebanon. He later served as senior aid to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and as president of the Marine Corps University at Quantico, Virginia.

Most recently, he commanded the first Marine Expeditionary Force during two combat tours in Iraq, which means that he has intimate first-hand knowledge about a war that's increasingly unpopular in Washington and across the nation. And while increasing numbers of lawmakers here in Washington are trying to find a way to end the war, Conway recently said he sees incremental progress in Iraq, where he sees the nation's credibility at stake.

As the war wages a half a world away, General Conway is here today to tell us about the future of the Marine Corps. Please join me in welcoming General James D. Conway, commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, to the National Press Club. (Applause, cheers.)

GEN. CONWAY: Well, good afternoon, ladies and gentleman, let me say at the outset it's great to be with you this afternoon, and thank you very much for the invitation and the opportunity. I'd also like to thank the National Press Club for what I think is a very gracious opportunity to bring a number of our wounded warriors aboard for the lunch today. We have a number of great young men over here. (Applause.)

You know I've been the commandant now for about, I guess, seven months. I will tell you it's a job that takes a little bit of getting used to. There's a great big beautiful house down in southeast at the barracks there that goes with it, and I'll admit to you that I've had some occasions over the last seven or eight months where I would have this cold streak shoot up my back, and I would say, I better get out of here before the commandant comes home. (Laughter.) But I've gotten accomplished, at least through the degree I'm comfortable, with the job now and there is less of that.

I don't come from an academy background like some of my predecessors. I went to a small school in Missouri that still sweats accreditation once every six or eight years -- (laughter) -- and similarly, I don't come from a long of military men like some of my predecessors. In fact, at about 10 years when I was a very proud

major, I went home to northeast Arkansas and my granny met me and she said, "Well, are you a sergeant yet?" (Laughter.) I said, "Well, no, Granny, I'm never going to be a sergeant." And she said, "Well, I hate it you're not going to make sergeant." (Laughter.) My Uncle Bob chimed in, he said, "Well, you know, if the Army's not going to promote you, they ought to let you out." (Laughter, applause.)

You know, I don't know where you go with that.

This is my same Uncle Bob who spent three days in the United States Army. (Laughter.) You hear him tell the story, on the first day at boot camp, they gave him a comb, and then in the afternoon they cut his hair off. (Laughter.) On the second day, they gave him a toothbrush, and that afternoon, the dentist pulled seven of his teeth. The third day, they gave him a jockstrap, and Uncle Bob went UA that night and he never did go back. (Laughter, applause.) So that's the extent of my military background.

Folks, it's a gross overstatement to say that I have speech for you today. What I have is a collection of talking points, if you will, things that are sort of in my in-basket, things that I've elected to talk with you about that are important to us as Marines that hopefully then might spawn questions for the second portion of the hour. And I consider that to be the most important session, because I want to know what's on your mind. So without any further ado, let me just jump into it.

And of course the first and I think most important topic ought to be Iraq and what's taking place there. I'll speak to our section out in the Al Anbar province and tell you that we are heartily encouraged by what we see. About nine months ago, the people, the Sunni tribes of Iraq came to our leadership and said, you know, the murder and intimidation on the part of the al Qaeda has got to stop. We have had it up to here. And we want to ask your assistance as we turn on these people and get rid of them from our province. Our commanders said, of course, and essentially that's what's been happening ever since.

We have seen large numbers of Sunni tribesmen, at the encouragement of their sheikhs and their imams, come forward to join the Iraqi security forces, really more than we can train on a monthly

basis, or the Iraqi police and for the Iraqi military. We see that as a very positive thing. The metrics would show you that what they have said they have actually stood up to. We have seen a 60 percent reduction of attacks in the last six months or so. We've seen a 400 percent increase in terms of cache discoveries, and that's because there's a 150 percent increase in terms of the numbers of tips that we're getting from the local population, and those things are essential for you to be able to turn an insurgency. And oh, yes, our combat casualties are down 14, 15 percent, and we think it's going to get even better.

Now, that's not to say that Al Anbar isn't a dangerous place. It is. We have casualties there every day. But our Marines are heartily encouraged by what they see with regard to the stabilization and the security efforts that are taking place in the region.

The economics and the politics must follow. Right now the politics are primarily provincial. The economics -- we've got a number of international businessmen watching it closely. They realize that the early person who is willing to accept some risk will be better off than that person that waits for a perfect security environment. So we're encouraging that type of thing to do something about the unemployment rates that we see out that direction. So I would just say to you that it's a much better situation in Al Anbar at this point than we thought it would be when I was there last in late 2004.

As you might imagine, as a result of that, the morale of the Marines and the sailors assigned is really very high. They -- there was a recent incident with one of our battalions -- the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines going back into Ramadi the second time.

The first time there they lost about 15 Marines, another 150 plus who had been wounded. The battalion commander sensed he was losing a good portion of his NCO leadership, and so he spoke to those young men. And he said, "You know, the new men in the battalion could use your experience and your combat leadership." These folks debated it, but in the end, 200 NCOs decided to deploy yet again with the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. They're in Ramadi today, and they did so without promise of a single cent. So that's the types of great young Marines that we have out there. (Applause.) That's an indication, I think, of the morale that exists out in those battalions.

You probably have heard -- switching subjects -- you've probably heard some about the MRAP, the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected, vehicle. We're excited about it. We're convinced, based on having watched the vehicle perform out in the Al Anbar, that it saves lives. We started out with an initial requirement of about ultimately about 3,700 vehicles, about 90 percent of that intended to go into the theater. As we talked about it and sort of heightened the awareness on its success, we've seen the secretary of Defense and others fall in behind us in full support of the effort.

I will tell you, ladies and gentlemen, we have had tremendous support on the part of the Congress. They have allocated literally billions of dollars against the requirement. These are expensive

vehicles. And the support from those ladies and gentlemen have just been fantastic, and we're very, very appreciative of that indeed. (Applause.)

We are going to have by the end of this year, based on some procurement efforts that really set a whole new paradigm, at least a thousand vehicles into theater, perhaps more. We don't know that for sure because they're going to go where the need is greatest, and we accept that the need may not be as great based on things happening in the Al Anbar province, as they are in Baghdad or Diyala, and those vehicles need to go to soldiers. We'll live with that. But the fact is, it's going to be a tremendous vehicle. It's not the panacea, they can still be destroyed, but we have yet to have a Marine killed riding in an MRAP in the Al Anbar province.

Ladies and gentlemen, another great new capability is also going to go to the fight. It's called the MV-22 Osprey. It's been around for a long time. It has had a sort of a checkered past, admittedly, but at this point, I can tell you the aircraft has tens of thousands of safe flight hours. It is proving itself to the troops, it's

proving itself to the leadership. I've flown in it now three times, and I'll simply quote one of the young Marines from down in 1st Battalion, 8th Marines. "It's an e-ticket ride." You get in this thing, and it's up and out of the zone before you can say your name, and it's got the same kind of reverse landing effect, so it gets you to the fight very quickly.

It will go to the theater to a place called al Asad. It will replace our CH-46 Echo and our CH-53 Delta aircraft, and we're excited about it. We think it's going to be an entirely new dimension in terms of what we have previously called helicopter-borne tactics, and the speed, the survivability, the quietness of the aircraft is something that you really have to behold. So it's going to deploy. It's going to prove itself, we are fairly confident, in battle, but we'll know more certainly after its initial employment, again, in the fall of this year in Iraq.

You know, our country is in a tremendous debate right now in terms of what the future will bring. Will there be a drawdown in the near term? I think, either way you look at it, in time there will be a drawdown of our forces in Iraq. What we have to be thinking about now as senior military leaders is what will that regional security picture look like in the wake of that. I think there are several things that really need to be in place for there to be some semblance of regional security.

We would say that the government of Iraq has to be exercising a level of self-governance, capable of providing basic services to its people. I think that we have to accept -- the coalition forces have to accept that we destroyed in the Iraqi army and that we need to provide them a period of internal security, security against the regional neighbors, if you will, for the country to continue to grow and prosper. Iraq is going to be a very rich country one of these days.

Years ago, I had a professor tell me that for a country to be

successful, it needs basically five things. It needs fresh water supply; it needs arable land; it needs an educable population; it needs an exportable product and it needs a seaport. I would add probably you need an element of leadership there. But when a country has all of those things, and Iraq has all of those things in spades, then you've got the potential for a very rich country.

And so those things, I think, are attractive to their neighbors. And we need to make sure that the national integrity of Iraq is preserved for at least a time. We need to make sure that some of the things that we have seen Iran doing, the Hezbollah model if you will, is not exported into the region, that they understand that they have to be a good neighbor. They are certainly already the regional power but they need to understand that those types of things can't be tolerated and won't be tolerated by the remainder of the gulf states.

We think that partnership and alliances with those gulf states will reduce some of the uncertainty, the uneasiness that they experience right now. They are not willing to accommodate to Iran but neither are they willing to challenge. So we need to make sure that that relative peace in the area is maintained. And we need to try to make sure that this whole thing, this whole idea of Islamic extremism, is somehow overcome, as it has been in the past when extremists have arisen, by the moderates in the religion. We need to prosper the moderates so that they can gain control and again bring a level of peace and stability to that region of the world and really the whole of the world, I would offer.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have established, since I've been the commandant, what we call the Wounded Warrior Regiment. Quite frankly what it does is bring a level of organization to a process that has been ongoing now since really the start of the war. And we're feeling pretty good about that. I would say that at the major bases and installations that the treatment is really very good. It's when we start to see our wounded go to convalescent leave, go out into the hinterlands where they don't have a Marine in the chain, if you will; they don't have the company gunny they can turn to as sometimes we see problems start to emerge.

This regimental headquarters will be in Quantico, Virginia, is in Quantico, Virginia, was stood up in April. We have battalion headquarters on both coasts -- one at Pendleton, one at Camp Lejeune. And their sole function is tracking and making sure that our great

young Marines are provided for, that their needs are understood. If they need to talk to someone, they talk to someone who either is a subject matter expert or can bring in a subject matter expert to get those questions answered. (Applause.)

We're very pleased with what we're seeing. Quite frankly the generosity, the largess of this country is eye-watering. And I could cite you a dozen instances.

The one that comes immediately to mind was just before the Super Bowl. I got an envelope that contained 50 tickets to the game in Miami from the owner of the Cleveland Browns. And that gentleman said, you know, if you'll see to it that as many of the wounded have a

chance to get to the game as possible, I would really appreciate your doing that.

And we did. We had 44 Marines with six people from the I&I down there pushing wheelchairs get a Miami-Dade police escort to and from the game with sirens blaring. They were announced at the game and they just had a wonderful day.

I think a couple of Marines over here are nodding. I'll bet a couple of you guys went to the game, all right, oorah. (Cheers, applause.)

But that's typical of the generosity, again, and the largess that's out there. And what this regiment intends to do is marshal that, direct it and take care of these men and women in some cases for as long as they need it, even after they take off their uniform. That's our objective.

We are going to get 27,000 additional Marines. If you're an operator, that is great news. If you're a recruiter, you're saying, how the hell am I going to do that? (Laughter.)

Well, we have -- what we have said is that we think we can grow 5,000 Marines a year over a five-year period to the point where by about 2012, we will have a force of 202,000 Marines. We want to do so -- we are doing so -- without changing our standards. Today, the DOD standard for high school graduates is 90 percent. The Marine Corps standard is 95 percent. We have just through the toughest months of the year recruited 96 percent high school graduates out there, and that's a marvelous thing.

We think that -- people have approached me and said, you know, maybe you need to change your standards. You'll open up the envelope and be able to talk to more people. We have said that a Marine expects for that person on his left and right flank to be every bit as good as he is, and they believe they are something special. And we need to keep those special standards in place to make sure that the quality stays high. (Applause.)

So I attribute that to some great young recruiters out there that are really working hard. And in fact, we're going to put even more on the street so that we can continue this growth pattern over the next five years. But it's also, I think, due to the fact that there are some great young Americans out there who have it in their hearts that they want to be Marines and go forward and do whatever is necessary in defense of their country. So it is working well at this point, and we're very pleased.

I've had a series of really good meetings with my staff and with the Navy staff and with the chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Mullen, to come to grips with what our requirements are for amphibious shipping and for this concept that we call maritime prepositioning force of the future.

There was some uncertainty up front as to whether or not we needed a number of ships that we were saying that we needed, and frankly

Admiral Mullen and I agreed that we would never surprise each other but in fact, taking it the other way, that we would come to grips with what the requirement really was. He offered an admiral to meet with my folks at Quantico to analyze that; they did so, and have come away now with the idea that we in fact need 34 amphibious ships to be able to conduct a two-brigade forceable entry capability, which is required for us in the nation's directives.

We have said we can accept some risk in that. And, Admiral, if you give us 30 combat ships, then we can put our people ashore. Right now the long-range shipbuilding plan calls for only 30 ships, and my concern is if you look at about an 85 percent availability rate, we need 33 or 34 ships at any one time to make sure we've got those 30 available.

I think the next generation of that shipbuilding plan is going to take that into consideration. I'm anxious to see what the results of all this comes to look like in time, but we're in lockstep with the Navy with regard to what the requirement is now and I think in large measure to what's going to have to be out there on the horizon.

The same is true with MPF Future. That is essentially a Maritime Prepositioning capability that allows us to build a sea base and then operate from there. Historically, when we would go ashore, we would need a port and an airfield enabled to be able to allow for follow-on forces. If we don't have to have that, if we can establish that at sea through connecting ships up and interconnecting other smaller ships that ferry us to and from the beach, then that's a tremendous capability, an asymmetric capability that no other nation has. And we're at the process right now -- in the process of, again, coming together with the Navy to determine what those numbers need to look like and, again, how soon we can bring that capability on line.

Switching subjects rapidly -- I hope you're staying with me, folks. I apologize for sort of the staccato approach here. But our Corps has seen a number of incidents in the news. That's sort of atypical for us. We don't like it. It's much more comfortable to sit back and watch the other services kind of rotisserie, you know, with various events. (Laughter.) But we're there now, and we're feeling the heat.

And you know what I'm talking about, of course. And I shouldn't joke, but the incidences in Habbaniya, in Haditha, the incidents that occurred in Afghanistan with our 1st Special Operations Unit into there and the new one that's coming up, based on some things we're hearing from NCIS, about another incident that may have happened during Fallujah I -- well, I have to tell you, those things are right where they need to be -- they're either under investigation or they're at trial, and I won't talk about that, because I'm in that chain of command.

What I will tell you, as the commandant now, is that we have got to be concerned with the sheer number of incidents that are there. And we've got to ask ourselves, are our Corps values -- honor, courage and commitment -- you know, that disciplined force that goes in and gives our country great confidence that the Marines are ashore -- are

we suffering (with that ?) somehow now? Are we somehow skipping a step? Are we trying to cut something short and having it come back and impact us? Those are those kinds of questions that I've asked my people, and those are the kinds of things that we're working on.

And we're making adjustments even before we decide what's happened completely with regard to our values training. I think the hours are generally there. We've just go to revitalize it. We've got to make sure the right people are teaching, and we've got to make sure that people understand, it is important not only in terms of how you conduct yourself on a battlefield but also, that's how you win a counterinsurgency. You don't abuse the population, you don't violate the ROE, you do the right kinds of things and win over that population and get those tips and turn them against the insurgents.

So those are things that we're emphasizing across the whole frontage of efforts. Starting at boot camp, we're going all the way through the command environment that's established by the battalion commander. So those things are under way, and we feel fairly confident that we're going to re-establish ourselves and get past these series of incidents.

One of the things that I established as a priority, of about seven, as I became the commandant was that we've got to be able to understand what the future requirements are and what that Marine Corps of the future needs to look like in order to be able to be effective. We said, what's the environment? What's going to be the involvement of the United States in that environment? What's going to be the role of the U.S. military in support of United States efforts, and what's then the role of the Marine Corps as a part of the DOD? And we've got people taking a close look at that, and the first thing we've asked them to do is to identify the environment.

And now -- this is a partial; this is sort of an (interim ?), but I'll offer to you what they've offered to me. First of all, we believe in 2020, 2025, and I think to go beyond that is too much crystal-balling; to go short of that, we can't influence programs. So we think that's just about the sweet spot out there if you're going to do some Futures work. But we think there will be Islamic extremism still with us in 2020, 2025. It will still be a factor.

We think that weapons of mass destruction will be even more prevalent at that point in time than they are now, and that our homeland will be potentially subject to an attack on even a greater percentage than we see today.

We think by that time that other forms of energy will not yet be mature and that oil will still be important; especially, of course, to the industrial nations of the world, and even increasingly to the developing nations of the world, against pretty much a set supply. But what's interesting about their work is that they've said water at that point in time will start to become just about as important as oil. The world's population during the last century grew 300 percent. The demand for water in that same period grew 600 percent. And I don't need to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, nations must have water, must have fresh water. So we see that as a real driving feature out there in the next few decades.

Demographics are important. My people have told me that literally the world as we know it now is going to change. If you look at the birth rates of the industrial nations, they are not a net positive, necessarily, and yet if you look at the developing nations, you've got a huge bulge, and immigration is a major issue in a number of European countries, in particular, and others as well. So I would say that that's a fair statement. That as we know and have grown up with our perceptions of the world, it is simply going to change in the next couple of decades.

The last thing they tell me is that American power -- business, technology, military -- will still be leading in 2020, 2025, but not nearly on as large a scale as you see it today. That our importance in the world, our ability to be a leading edge in so many of these types of things will have diminished in comparison to the others, and we're going to have to look at what that means to us as a nation and in terms of how we deal with the issues that come as a result of that.

We think that there is plenty of work out there in the future for the Navy/Marine Corps team and, I would add, interestingly, the Coast Guard. We have started to come together with a maritime strategy to look at how we play in that world of the future, and I'll talk with you just briefly about that strategy.

First of all, we think that there's a lot of water in that map of the arc of instability, so there's a lot of opportunity for employment. It doesn't have to be ashore; in fact, it may be preferable if it's not ashore, which highlights the importance of sea basing. We think that we're going to have to have a clear and present defense of the homeland to make sure that these potentials for attacks are indeed deterred. We see the need to partner with other nations and their navies. The thousand-ship navy is a concept that's been

talked about by the CNO in order to be able to keep open the sea lines of communication and expand influence to attempt to counter what still may be Islamic extremism at that point.

We see small groups of Marines embarked aboardship having tremendous impact on the continent of Africa and other locations. Right now we have larger units going out. But the idea that a combatant commander could say, "I need a company of engineers and a squad of Marines to secure them," that kind of package could be literally ordered up and deployed for a period of time if that's what he truly needs. So we look at that as being innovative and very welcome. And I'll mention sea basing again as sort of the center core of this whole thought process for what we have out in the future.

And lastly, if we indeed have to have the ability to conduct an amphibious assault, if we have to put two regiments across a shore somewhere, hopefully augmented by the fairly limited forcible entry capability of the United States Army, we will retain that kind of a capability. And I think, again, that it's required and we certainly owe that to the nation.

Ladies and gentlemen, that's the list. I ran through it pretty quickly, but that just means it saves us time for discussion and Q&A.

I would say something to the Marines in the audience present here today. I owe you an explanation. About 10 years ago, a group of us got together and we sat around a table, mainly old guys with silver hair, and we said, "You know, we're a little concerned that this up-and-coming generation has what it takes. They're spending a lot of time on the joystick. You know, some of them are a little overweight and not as much outside -- not as much organized athletics as maybe, you know, our generation did. We weren't sure that they would be good Marines or good soldiers.

Time has proven that we could not have been more wrong. I will tell you, having watched these kids in combat, their courage is unbelievable. Their sense of self-sacrifice, their sense of team play is just where you want it to be. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a great generation, and our Marine Corps, indeed our country is going to be in great shape as these young men and women reach levels of maturity in the years to come.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay, we have a lot of questions; a handful about the future of the Marine Corps and a lot about Iraq. So why don't we start with this. If you could just go into a little bit more detail about the issue of recruiting, how it's looking right now and how things may have to change as you try to expand the Marine Corps.

GEN. CONWAY: Okay. As a culture, the Marine Corps doesn't put a lot of money towards bonuses for people who come in. We'd much rather save that money and put it against proven performance after a Marine

has served a tour of duty and they're about to make another important decision in life. So you'll see that our entry bonuses are pretty low, our retention bonuses are really pretty high. And we think that keeps us the quality force.

Our recruiters have told me, you know, others out there may be offering as much as a college education, \$40,000, but if you give me that dress blue uniform, we'll compete with that, because of the kinds of people, again, that we're looking for out there.

Ours is almost exclusively -- as you can imagine, based on the figures I gave you -- a high school market. I mentioned the toughest months of the year are February, March, April and May because you're that far away from a high school graduation period. But again, we have done quite well during that period, made our quotas every month. June and July, with the graduation of the high schools, allows us the opportunity to start looking at the rising juniors for the next year. So we are encouraged by what we see and we have every belief that it's going to continue.

MR. ZREMSKI: One guest says: I'm impressed to see female Marines with us today. Tell us about their recent achievements, especially in Iraq. And also, how does a woman succeed in such a male culture?

GEN. CONWAY: Skipper, you want to talk? (Laughter.) Let me

start off by saying that we haven't changed a thing about the way we do business. Our women at boot camp go to a -- same location, but a separate boot camp. Same kinds of requirements, but they have female leadership. We have not changed that. We don't intend to change that. We think it works beautifully for us.

Women still not -- are not participating in combat arms MOSs. Certain MOSs are restricted to females. But let me tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that's 360-degree war taking place in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we've had lots of women in close contact with the enemy even in their non-combat MOSs, and they have by and large done quite well. And we're very pleased with it and we continue to put them into the units and send them forward with the expectation they'll do a great job.

I'll give you one little anecdote. I know you got a dozen questions there. But we lost three Marines, three female Marines in Fallujah here, I guess, in '05 who were helping us to search females -- Iraqi females as they entered our entry control points. A suicide bomber hit their truck on the way home that night. Three were killed and a number were horribly burned.

The next day the G-3 of the organization, a colonel named Chase (sp), had a young lady knock on his door. She said, "Sir, can I speak to you?" And he said, "I'm kind of busy right now. Can you please come back?" And he said -- she said, "We would like to say something to you," which caught his attention. He stepped outside his office, and there were 10 women Marines there who said, "Sir, we know that's an important function, and we're volunteering to go do it." (Applause.) Yeah.

MR. ZREMSKI: Excuse me.

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah, please. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: (Laughs.) You once commanded an anti-tank unit. However, the Marines haven't confronted many tanks lately. Is the Corps fully capable of fighting a different kind of enemy these days?

GEN. CONWAY: That's a great question. And it's one of my concerns. It's one of the reasons that we wanted to grow the force some 27,000 additional Marines. Right now our deployment ratios, I think everybody knows, is that we're deployed for seven months; ideally we're home for about seven months, but that doesn't apply to all of our units. We are, in that seven months that we're home, training hard to go back to a counterinsurgency environment. What you're missing, then, is the traditional training -- combined arms, live fire maneuver, amphibious operations, jungle and mountain training -- that has made us what we are in terms of a flexible, agile and employable force really across the spectrum of warfare.

So we're not doing that yet to the degree that I think we must. I think we have seen some of our core capabilities suffer as a result of just not having enough time and being so focused on what's taking place in Iraq. If we can get that deployment, with the additional troops, to something more akin to one-to-two, 14 months home -- one,

it's better for the families, but secondly, we can do some of that additional training that will make us better.

MR. ZREMSKI: Given your extensive background involving the Middle East, what can you tell us about the enemy that U.S. forces are facing in Iraq?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, I would offer, folks, that the most dangerous enemy we have there right now is the al Qaeda of Iraq. If you look to what's taking place in the country -- I don't subscribe to civil war, but there certainly is sectarian violence. And that sectarian violence is being stoked by the al Qaeda of Iraq. It's a tactic. They think that it continues the chaos, it keeps us tied down. And it's literally choking the government from being able to bring the country together, in some instances.

There's another enemy out there, though, and it's the one that's recently come over. We used to call them the ACF, the anti-coalition forces. These people just didn't like us, you know. These people had come to the determination, "You're not a liberator, you're an occupier now."

And whereas they might pull their AK out of the closet and fire it at an American patrol coming through the area, these same people would go out and cheer an Iraqi patrol because they want to see an Iraqi government, they want to see Iraq come to be the rich country it has the potential for. These are the same people that have decided they need to now partner with us -- "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" -- and do away with these other people who have no lasting contributions to their government.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you see other countries playing a role in the armed resistance in Iraq, and if so, what countries, and how do you discourage that?

GEN. CONWAY: Thanks, Jerry.

I would not say other countries. We have other extremists coming from other nations, and they're from the nations in the area. I won't name them, but you have a pretty good picture of some of the border countries. We find -- we capture or kill foreign fighters, we go through the pockets, and we can pretty much tell, you know, where they've come from. So you have the extremists. We consider that they're these foreign fighters. If you hear about a suicide explosion, it's probably a foreign fighter from another country. Iraqis aren't prone to do that, although there have been a few instances. And it's the extremists that we need to be concerned about for our future not only in Iraq, but elsewhere.

MR. ZREMSKI: You recently said that the war in Iraq is not a civil war. Could you just explain why you think that?

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah, well first of all, if you check the charts -- and I do every morning -- the violence is on a declining scale. And it's not yet zero, by any means, but it has gotten less really ever since the surge after the Samarra bombing at the mosque there.

There is sectarian violence. But if you talk to Iraqis, they would say, "Hey, my wife's a Sunni, my father-in-law, you know, is a Sunni." Or their father-in-law might even be a Shi'a, you know, I mean they're just that intermarried. And Saddam demanded one thing, that was that whatever you are, whatever sect you are, that's second, you're an Iraqi first. And I think we need to be able to capitalize on that.

I just don't think that the level of violence -- or what we see, for instance, in the primary institutions, particularly the army, have been such that we have seen what we would say classifies as a civil war. The violence is there, it's, again, stoked, and it's driven, I think, by the terrorists. But I don't think it nearly comes to the level of a civil war.

MR. ZREMSKI: What consequences would you expect from an early troop pull-out in Iraq? And what about the predictions of massive casualties, if there were a quick pull-out?

GEN. CONWAY: Okay. My first concern with a pull-out that is not linked to a level of success on the part of the coalition forces in Iraq is that is going to be perceived as a win by the al Qaeda.

You know, how we got there, what conditions, you know, we found or didn't find, how many mistakes, how many opportunities have been made or lost over time, that's all open to discussion. The fact of the matter is today our forces are engaged with al Qaeda forces in Iraq. If we pull out and are perceived to be pulling out without having achieved a measure of success, they win. And if they're perceived to have won, you're going to see resources, recruitment, momentum all those things that are gained by the winning side make it that much tougher.

My belief is that both Iraq and Afghanistan represent the first battles of a long war. You can't look at it simply in isolation. So if you lose the first battles of the long war, the war gets tougher. If you win the first battles, you've got momentum on your side, and guess what, the war is shorter.

So that's my first concern.

Will there be massive casualties? I don't know. I wouldn't want to predict that. I would be concerned about it certainly, because if then al Qaeda is left to continue the chaos and creating the consternation between sects, that could be a motivation to further destabilize and enable themselves to take over the resources of the nation.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you think al Qaeda in Iraq is the same as the al Qaeda that attacked us on 9/11?

GEN. CONWAY: They are not the same people, okay, it is the same organization. And I got to be careful trying to remember what's on the read board and what I can talk about openly here. But the fact is the al Qaeda senior leadership is still out there, at least number one

and number two are. Number three is probably the shortest-lived job, you know, in the world anymore. (Laughter.) But anyway, the senior leadership is out there. It is a decentralized organization. There are connections between the senior leadership in Iraq and the senior leadership of the al Qaeda larger network. Their motivations are the same, their resources are interchangeable. Some of the fighters are interchangeable. It's a very mobile kind of an enemy. So I think there are some very distinct ties.

MR. ZREMSKI: Is the al Qaeda that's really thought to be based in Pakistan right now, does it have operational control over al Qaeda in Iraq?

GEN. CONWAY: What we have seen is an evolving character of the al Qaeda compared to what it was when it attacked us in -- again, in 2001, compared to what it is now.

It is more cellularized, it is more decentralized. It is not necessarily, you know, conducting operations in Iraq based on a chain of command and a set of op orders, but the themes are the same and the understanding of what it takes in terms of winning in the Middle East and driving our forces out, I think, is commonly held by all the al Qaeda networks.

MR. ZREMSKI: How important is the will of the American people to the current fight, and what should they know about it?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, I think it's critically important. I mean, it's a democracy; that's how we make decisions, that's how we govern. And it's critically important, I think, that the American people understand what the risks are, what the costs are, compare the costs to what we potentially lose, what we potentially gain over time.

But let me take a moment, I think there's also understanding what the enemy's strategy is and how that could impact us for the long term. You know, we've intercepted it, but he's also been so bold as to put it on his websites, and it's basically involving about five phases. The first phase has already happened. He said, "Declare jihad." That means all the brothers rise up and you go kill infidels. Well, that's only been partially successful because there's probably a couple thousand hardcore al Qaeda and probably tens of thousands of fighters, but you know, the majority of the religion is still very modern.

The second phase is to exercise all Western presence out of what they call the old caliphate, re: the Middle East. I think that's the phase we're in now, and he's working hard to do that. And you can argue that, you know, based on the discussion we're having in our country, he may be more on plan than we are.

The third phase -- and this is where it gets troubling, I think -- is that once we are gone he would turn to what he calls those apostate governments -- and you can, again, pretty much visualize who they are in the Gulf states and the Middle East -- and he would look to take them down. He would look to destroy them. At the same time, he's looking to seize control of the Middle East oil supply either by destruction of the refineries or, if he can capture them in tact, by

controlling the prices. And if you think gas is high now, you know, feature \$200 or \$300 a barrel with that 30 percent flow coming out of the Gulf ports.

At that time he is continuing to strike, he's trying to generate terrorist attacks in the West and in our country. He knows he can't defeat us in a fight -- fair fight on the battlefield, but he thinks he can bring our economy to its knees, and he can defeat our country through its inability to deploy forces to react to the situation I'm describing.

The next phase is that when he's powerful enough, he destroys Israel, wipes it off the map the nation that it is. Again, all the time he's launching these attacks -- terrorist attacks, if you will, throughout the world. And he says his plan is a 100-year plan and a 100 years from now we will all be subject to his laws and his religion because he thinks that's the kind of momentum that he can gain from this bringing Western nations and other nations that would resist him to heel.

By the way, if you listen -- pardon me -- if you listen closely, I mentioned at least two vital national objectives in that enemy strategy, things that are important to us, and my concern is, if we prematurely move, we're going to be going back. There's a couple of things that our country will simply not stand for, and I tend to think that it's better to get it done the first time than have to go back. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Retired Marine Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper was recently quoted in BusinessWeek as saying that the Pentagon must put more focus on urban guerrilla fighting. The direct quote was, "We don't understand insurgencies and we don't know how to counter them." Do you agree?

GEN. CONWAY: I partially agree. I think that we need to spend more time doing it. You know, and that was directed to all the services, really, by what's called a Quadrennial Defense Review of this last year. It told us to look at -- stay balanced, but provide more focus towards this counterinsurgency-type of environment, and we're doing that.

I think no insurgency is the same as the one before or the dozens that you read about. But they all have very similar characteristics, and we know what those characteristics are and we know how to go about taking them down. I will say in this instance we have found that this murder and intimidation campaign that is being used by the al Qaeda is so severe -- more severe than what we've seen in the past that it's really made this one difficult to get through that and to convince the people that you can make them safe, they can work with you and not have their throats cut that night.

MR. ZREMSKI: What are the biggest mistakes that the U.S. has made in Iraq?

(Soft laughter.)

GEN. CONWAY: I'm not going to spend a lot of time on that

question. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: You've got 13 minutes.

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah. The one thing that I would simply say -- my mistake is that I didn't push harder to keep the Iraqi army intact and brought back as a force that could have helped us both with regard to the forces necessary to control the country; the army was also the most respected institution in the country, in spite of some of the things that they had done under Saddam. I'm just fairly confident that we could have identified the people with the blood on their hands, used that very respected institution to a great advantage in the country at a very critical time.

MR. ZREMSKI: You've called the MRAPs your number one unfulfilled warfighting requirement. By some reports, the vehicles could have saved the lives of up to 700 U.S. troops hit by roadside bombs. Why has it taken so long for the Pentagon to get MRAPs pushed through to the troops in Iraq?

GEN. CONWAY: Okay. I'm glad you asked that question, because I think that some of our 20/20 hindsight suffers from a little bit of blurriness on the facts of the matter at the time. That comment has hinged on an Urgent Need Statement that was processed by a former deputy commander of mine, a great officer named Major General Denny Hejlik. In February of 2005 -- and what's been alleged is that, you know, had we acted on it then, we would have saved those numbers of lives and the MRAP would be fully functional and in the theater.

In fact -- and I've got a letter here from Denny Hejlik that some of you have already; others can have it if you'd like to take a look -- in fact, what Denny Hejlik was asking for in that Urgent Need Statement was that kind of a capability, not that family of vehicles -- he wanted a vehicle that gave him an ambush- and mine-protected kind of capability. If you look at the threat that we were facing in Iraq in 2005, it was essentially an IED striking the sides of our vehicles. We had gone through various evolutions of armor, but the one that we had arrived at up until that point was what we called the MAK 2 Kit, which gave us pretty good protection against side armor. It was a bolt-on, though, and it didn't protect the wheel wells, it did not protect the underneath.

The Army had a number of these up-armored Humvees, 1114s -- it gave you -- it was welded seams all around, it gave you better underbody protection, and we thought that that was probably a pretty good vehicle. And that was what Denny was asking for, in fact, when he processed that Urgent Need Statement.

In 2005, through the month of September of that year, we had 10, a total of 10 -- that's about one a month -- underbody attacks. Now, about September, I think in reaction to us bringing on more of these up-armored Humvees, we started to see more underbody attacks. It was an average of about 10 a month for the remaining months of '05. In January of '06, it was 16, and by the end of that year, it was 120.

The other thing is that when Denny Hejlik submitted his UNS, his

Urgent Need Statement, in February of that year, there were three or four MRAPs available to him to even look at in Al Anbar, and we were having pretty serious maintenance issues with them.

A lot of them weren't running because the parts resupply was not yet right.

So it took us time to get additional vehicles in. It took us time to observe the effects of the vehicle against the underbody attacks, in particular, to make the determination that with -- whatever it was -- 200 or 300 attacks and nobody killed this isn't necessarily just an engineer vehicle or just an EOD vehicle, it's not necessarily just a niche vehicle, it can save lives. And the Marine Corps has pressed hard, has been the leading agent, I think, in trying to get those vehicles into theater to help our young kids accomplish the mission and come home safe.

MR. ZREMSKI: How will the Marine Corps ensure that Marines are not an increased risk for traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress syndrome through their multiple deployments?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, there's a number of ways.

One -- you know, the TBI is separate from the PTSD, and you help with the TBI with vehicles like MRAP, you know, vehicles that have suspension seats and that are heavy and can sustain blasts and that type of thing.

With regard to the PTSD, we are doing a lot. I mean, if you're a young Marine going on deployment these days, you will undergo four screenings for PTSD before and after you deploy. We are working with the leadership to say, hey, there should be no stigma here associated with the fact that a person has got PTSD. In fact, a Marine suffering from PTSD has normally been pretty close to the fight, okay, and we need to honor those people and help them out as much as we can. My guidance says that if we've got an injury of the brain, that's as important as an injury of an extremity, and we got to get this person right and get them back in battery and do what we can for them.

Interestingly, I just got back from a swing talking to the families, both down in Carolina and also out in California. Our families are pretty comfortable with the screening and the effort now to identify the troops. What we're starting to see -- our families are very proud, but they're also a little tired. What we're starting to see in the families is a concern for the children, and in some cases a concern for the spouse -- not that they have PTSD, but that they need some of the same counseling in order to help them stay straight as well.

MR. ZREMSKI: You were recently quoted as saying the following: "There's a level of negativism in our press today that our young troops find a bit concerting. I've talked to very few troops who have back from theater who haven't had to go through about a two-week transition of saying, 'That's not what I saw taking place, but that's what the country's being shown every day'." What story should we be telling that we're not telling?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, what I ask for when I talk to editors is simply balance, okay. Now I'll be the first to say, there's nobody over at national airport, you know, reporting safe landings, okay. I know that doesn't make news. But if you look at the preponderance of the stories, I think, they -- the preponderance will tend to tell a negative tale, and there are a lot of good things happening that these people have seen and these people have seen on deployments that deserve being told as well.

I think that the fourth estate owes our nation an accurate picture so that we can make national decisions. That's their responsibility; it's not an option. And I just think that, you know, when the balance tends to be negative, that's the take-away that our people have over time, and I would simply ask for, you know, some of the positive, as well as the negative, being shown so that our countrymen, our great democracy can make the right kinds of decisions. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Any particular positive stories we should be doing that we're not doing?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, as a MEU commander, we had hospitals opening, we had schools opening, we had rebuilds of facilities. It's tough to get people out of Baghdad, and I understand, you know, there's some risk associated with that. Sometimes it might be simpler to have a stringer go out and bring a story back to you, but I -- there's all kinds of positive things happening, and it's not just where we have troops. I mean, there's 14 provinces in Iraq that are living somewhat of a normal lifestyle. I would defy you to point to many stories that you see about that on a routine basis in any event.

MR. ZREMSKI: You were also quoted as saying, "It is truly a tool in the kit bag of the terrorist to have this repetitive battle damage assessment broadcast on a 24-hour basis." But doesn't that damage news and shouldn't people hear about it?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, I -- yes, yes. People need to hear I would go back and say balanced reporting of what's happening in the entirety of Iraq and, I would also add, Afghanistan. But if you understand the nature of a terrorist, he is extremely reliant on the media. Once again, we've intercepted, you know, directions from these people, saying, "Make sure you've got at least one major bombing a day in Baghdad." It's got to be -- you know, ideally, there's a certain time for it because it certainly makes the news cycle. So a terrorist

relies on what? Exposure. And what he's doing, although it may be some in scale, it has to appear large in terms of its strategic impact, and these people know how to use the media and the strategic information in order to be able to get at you.

You know, back when we were seeing people had their heads cut off, I felt very certainly that the poor guy at his feet is the victim, but you're the real victim because he's trying to horrify you. He's trying to show you, you know, what happens if you send people into this country and what the outcome can be. And I think, you know, it's a human reaction, I accept that. But I think that terrorists are

very adept at using the media, and I would hope that the media would have an appreciation for that. One day, I think, we've got to understand better how to employ information operations, strategic communications ourselves to attempt to counter some of these things that are probably going to wind up being reported.

MR. ZREMSKI: We're almost out of time, but before I ask our last question, I have a couple of important announcements to take care of.

First of all, let me remind our audience of our future speakers. On Monday, the 23rd, Mel Karmazin, the CEO and director of Sirius Satellite Radio, will be here to discuss the proposed merger of Sirius and XM Satellite Radio. On next Wednesday, July 25th, First Lady Laura Bush will be here. That luncheon will begin an hour earlier than usual promptly at 11:30 a.m. And next Friday, the 27th, Mike Johanns, the secretary of the Department of the Agriculture, will be here to discuss the farm bill.

Secondly, we have a lot of traditions here at the National Press Club such as the presentation of our plaque.

GEN. CONWAY: Hey, that's nice.

MR. ZREMSKI: Yes.

GEN. CONWAY: Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: And the coveted National Press Club mug.

GEN. CONWAY: (Laughs.) Thank you very much.

MR. ZREMSKI: Sure.

And lastly, just wanted to ask, if you were talking to high school seniors, what would you want to tell them about Marine Corps service, boys or girls?

GEN. CONWAY: First of all, I'd tell them stay in school, okay, and your time will come, perhaps. I was just out yesterday, in fact, talking to the National Naval Officers Association, and what we find is that when people join our Corps, they tend to like it, maybe even like it more than they thought they ought. They tend to stay more

often than, you know, we anticipate or than they might even anticipate. The numbers of married Marines has much increased over what it used to be, and I think it exceeds the national rate. The numbers of families staying together exceed the national average. So it's not a bad lifestyle.

There certainly are some fairly spartan conditions that, as a Marine in particular, you're going to have to learn to live with. But that's sort of who we are and that's what we do.

But I would certainly defer to those young Marines in the audience here. But I would also tell them that after they have served, whatever they do, whether they decide to stay or go, that

their citizenship is paid in full, and that they are the warrior class. They have served their nation valiantly. The nation is thankful for their service, and wherever they go they should go in with their head held high because they were once Marines. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: I'd like to thank you all for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members Joann Booze, Pat Nelson and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also thanks to the National Press Club's library for its research. The video archive of today's luncheon is provided by the National Press Club Broadcast Operations Center. Press Club members can also access free transcripts of our luncheons at our website, www.press.org. Non-members can purchase transcripts, audio and videotapes by calling 1-888-343-1940.

One last note: Our general manager of 15 years, John Bloom is retiring and moving on. He's actually leaving. This is really his last full-time day. And I just wanted to have a full round of applause for John Bloom. (Applause.)

Thank you very much. We're adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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