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**Presenter: Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. James Conway**

**August 27, 2008**

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**DoD News Briefing with Gen. Conway from the Pentagon**

MODERATOR: Well, thank you for coming this morning. It's my pleasure to introduce a guy that doesn't need any introduction, really, but General James Conway, commandant of the Marine Corps, who is back to discuss with you some of the things that he's been seeing throughout the past several months.

Since he was last here he's not only been to Central Asia, but also to China and the Middle East, and has a good perspective on the operations out there and what he's seeing. He's going to kind of give you a brief overview and then he's going to take some of your questions.

So, General, thanks for coming by, and --

GEN. CONWAY: Okay. Folks, I did prepare just a rough opening statement, and I'll read it to you, and we'll be happy to take your questions.

Good morning, first of all, and thanks for the time - for the time of day that you're going to spend with us. It's been awhile since I've last had the opportunity to meet with you all, but I sincerely believe that it's important to keep the dialogue open with the media, especially those of you who cover the Armed Forces, as it's good for our Corps and good for the nation.

Earlier this month, sergeant major of the Marine Corps and I visited Marines serving in Spain, Afghanistan and Ghana, West Africa. Whether they were manning post one at the American embassy in Madrid, or manhandling the Taliban in Afghanistan, I was repeatedly impressed with the quality and professionalism the Marines showed as we continued our travels.

Some of those serving in Iraq still say there aren't a whole heck of a lot bad guys there left to fight. Driving conspicuously through the once mean streets of Falluja and Ramadi, our vehicles seemed to go largely unnoticed, as there was much construction and rebuilding taking place. The change in the Al Anbar province is real and perceptible. Anbar remains a dangerous place, but the ever-growing ability of Iraqi security forces continues to move us closer to seeing Iraqi control of the province, which, by the way, was once projected to be the last to turn for the better. Now we believe the province could turn over to Iraqi control in just a few days.

There is also change under way in Afghanistan. The Taliban are growing bolder in their tactics and clearly doing their best to exploit security gaps where they exist. American Marines there have taken the fight to an enemy that believes he can wait us out and exact revenge on members of communities who have cooperated with coalition forces.

Noncombatants will pay the price in Taliban retribution in any security vacuum in Afghanistan. The coalition will pay the price in lost gains and lost trust of the people there if that should happen.

Everyone seems to agree that additional forces are the ideal course of action for preventing a Taliban comeback, but just where they're going to come from is still up for discussion. In fact, I wouldn't expect anything definitive prior to General Petraeus and his opportunity to brief the president on Iraq.

Should our leadership determine that more U.S. forces are needed in the fight in Afghanistan, it's no secret that the Marine Corps would be proud to be part of that undertaking. However, in order to do more in Afghanistan, our Marines have got to see relief elsewhere.

With that, I'd be happy to take your questions. Bob, I think you're the first guy on deck.

Q Hey, General. Thanks. Given your description of the security situation in Anbar province and also your reference to being turned over to Iraqi control next week, does it look to you like security could continue to improve and it could be handled with fewer U.S. forces, including Marines?

GEN. CONWAY: My commander our there -- our commander out there, Major General John Kelly, believes exactly that. In fact, he's got statistics to validate that, Bob.

After we started to see the effect of the Sunnis working with us, we saw the removal of the Army brigade headquarters that had operated for a long time out of Ramadi. Six Army battalions associated with that left the province, ostensibly for good. We have also seen the equivalent of about an Iraqi division, brigades from the 1st and the 7th Iraqi Divisions, who have Marine MTTs out west and that we have, you know, brought along over time, be the very forces that were deployed elsewhere in the country to large effect. And those forces are still outside of the Anbar.

That being the case with regard to force structure, we have still seen attacks go to an all-time low. Even with all of those additional security forces leaving, attacks now average two or three a day in the entire province. So, yes, the answer to your question is that we do believe that security conditions are such that even with reduced force, that we can keep them at a very low ebb.

Q Do you think -- do you know whether General Kelly has in fact recommended specific change in this?

GEN. CONWAY: He is approaching his superiors. He and I talked about it while we were there. I think it should be readily evident that the force that we needed in the Anbar province in 2005, 2006 to fight the insurgency at its height is not the force that we need there now to do nation building and to try to bring the government and the Sunnis closer together.

Q There's two regimental combat teams there, I think. Is that --

GEN. CONWAY: That's correct, yes.

Q And you think, what, one would be sufficient?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, I think in time that there's going to have to be a natural draw-down. I'm what they call a Title X kind of guy, so those really aren't my determinations to make. But I do know that 25,000 Marines in a province, again, are probably in excess of the need, especially after Iraqi provincial control assumes responsibilities for security, because one of the things we did while we were there was meet with the leadership of that army and police apparatus and they're pretty confident that at least they can manage the internal security aspects of what has to take place now.

Q General, Afghanistan -- there's been, as you know, a big increase in use of U.S. air power there and there's been a commensurate increase in civilian casualties, with a bad one just a couple days ago, apparently. Is that a result of not having enough boots on the ground? In other words, is the command there compensating for having insufficient numbers of troops by increasing air power? And is that a risk? Are you worried about that? And do you see

that tailing off if you can get more troops in there?

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah, Dave, if the reports of the Afghan civilian casualties are accurate -- and sometimes that is a big "if" because I think we all understand the Taliban capabilities with regard to information operations -- but if that proves out, that will be truly an unfortunate incident. And we need to avoid that, certainly, at every cost.

But I don't necessarily tie the two together. You know, air power is the premiere asymmetric advantage that we hold over both the Taliban and, for that matter, the al Qaeda in Iraq. They have no light capability. And when we find that you're up against hardened people in a hardened type of compound, before we throw our Marines or soldiers against that, we're going to take advantage of our asymmetric advantage -- being, again, the ability to strike from the air.

You don't always know what's in that compound, unfortunately.

And sometimes we think there's been overt efforts on the part of the Taliban, in particular, to surround themselves with civilians so as to, at a minimum, reap an IO advantage if civilians are killed. But I think it is a tactic that has proven valuable to us in the past, in terms of saving lives, to reduce a compound through air strike if there's simply no other way.

There is an escalation of effort that goes against a building like that. I mean, my guys told me of an incident up near the lakes north of Haditha where they had people surrounded. They actually wanted to gain intelligence and sensitive site exploitation value from preserving the compound. So they went through a whole range of escalatory procedures to try to get these guys to throw away their weapons. They did not; they would not. After a time, they dropped a 250-pound bomb on them, as opposed to a thousand- or 2,000-pound bomb, which incapacitated or killed the people inside but saved the intelligence value.

So we've learned to operate inside our own systems to be as effective as we can. And so I think we'll continue to drop bombs. We will also continue at every effort to preserve civilian lives who unfortunately are a part of the battlefield.

Q General --

Q Just to follow up -- just one --

Q Go ahead. Go ahead.

Q Could you explain again why that environment and the enemy tactics make it so difficult at times to conduct clean air strikes?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, if you're familiar with the ground -- first of all, it's difficult terrain. And the compounds will house a number of buildings. Oftentimes, there is wall outside several structures -- by the way, wall will serve to contain blasts, and that's one of the mechanical aspects of it that make it -- make it dangerous for people that might be in the area. But it's the nature of you striking the compound. You want to strike the precise building that you're targeting, but sometimes there are other people there. And you don't know that, because you're not on the inside looking out.

Sometimes it's a conscious tactic of these people who meet to make sure there are civilians -- kids playing in the compound so that they're seen, and that complicates your targeting methodology. This is a dirty game being played but, again, we are as precise as we can. And it's not unusual at all to come off of a target and say, "I can't drop a bomb there. We'll be killing kids," if we know that they're in the area.

So it's just -- it's a tactic that's being used against us. It's the nature of the way construction takes place there. And the enemy is using all those things against us to try to counter this asymmetric advantage.

Q General, staying in Afghanistan, as you know, the 24th MEU and 2/7 Marines are coming back in November. Are you saying the only way you can backfill them is if you reduce Marines in Anbar?

GEN. CONWAY: Yes, sir.

Q Is it a good idea to backfill them?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, it's a good idea for somebody to backfill them, because as I talked about in the opening statement, Tom, you know, what we discovered in Iraq when I -- when I was the commander there is that if you move forces into an area and they start to create a level of security, generate a level of confidence and achieve a level of intelligence coming from the people, that's a very good and harmonious relationship. Those are basic tactics in a counterinsurgency environment.

If you move that battalion away and the bad guys of whatever ilk -- al Qaeda or Taliban -- come in, that's exactly what they will not broker. And those people will be made examples of.

We've seen families slaughtered. We've seen policemen rounded up and executed with shots to the back of the head in the soccer stadium, just to make the point. And so that's what we risk if we don't somehow take advantage of those gains and maintain the momentum in that area. And then when you come back and you say, "Well, we're back," the silence is resounding, because the people, again, have lost the level of confidence that the same thing can't be repeated over and over. So we just have to, I think, figure out a way to maintain the gains that we've achieved.

Q Are you recommending to Secretary Gates that they be backfilled with Marines?

GEN. CONWAY: I attended the session back some months ago when the determination was made to put Marines into Afghanistan. And we had resisted it up to that point, quite frankly, because of our one- to-one deployment to dwell with 25(,000), 26,000 Marines in Iraq and Marines in HOA and Marines in MEUs and FAST teams. I mean, it's taken a huge chunk out of our operational forces.

And I said, with all due respect, Mr. Secretary, you know, let me predict some things. The commanders will fall in love with the Marines, because they're going to do a great job. There will be requests for extension. There will be requests to replace them with other Marines.

We are staying now at surge. You know, the Army came home in roughly May. We are still at surge now through November. And I have said to the chairman and to the secretary, we can't continue to do that on the backs of our Marines and, as importantly, the families. If you want to have more Marines -- and I'm not against the idea at all -- I think you know that -- then we have to have a compensatory reduction, if you will, elsewhere in order to be able to source those troops.

Q (Off mike) -- happening here is a one-two punch. John Kelly reduces maybe a thousand or more Marines in Anbar, and the Marines head up in November to -- (off mike). Is that fair?

GEN. CONWAY: Yes. But John Kelly has no authority to reduce a thousand Marines. There would have to be

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Q (Off mike.)

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah. There would have to be determinations made well above his level and mine that that's the right thing to do, but, you know, we tend to believe that it is. We think that there is a way to backfill with some Marines if there's a commensurate decision to draw down in Iraq, and we tend to think that conditions are such there that that's plausible. That's a part of the discussion, certainly.

Q Can I follow up on the 2/7 Marines, who are undertaking a training mission that seems very vital in Afghanistan. Is the intent to replace them, and can you replace them without having to draw down in Anbar?

GEN. CONWAY: We cannot replace them without having to draw down elsewhere. That's sort of the red line that we posed when we said, okay, we're going to bite the bullet with regard to 2/4 MEU and 2/7 going in. And everybody at the meeting understood that, I believe. And that remains our position, and when asked, that's my response.

What happened with 2/7 -- and 2/4 MEU, for that matter -- was that it was sort of an impromptu decision. It came when there was concern about a spring offensive. There was concern on the part of the commanders in Afghanistan that the economy of force is not necessarily working as well as we would hope. There was a determination without opportunity to fully train to put those Marines into place. Now again, they've done a magnificent job, by every account and every commander that I've spoken to, to include British.

At this point, we are trying to lean into those types of short-term requirements as much as we can, to the extent that we're sending more units to mountain warfare training, for instance, than we have done in the past. We're changing our training a bit with regard to what takes place in Twentynine Palms, which is our major training facility, so that the forces then can go either way. If they wind up continuing their probable assignment to Iraq, they can certainly manage the functions there. Should they wind up being tasked to go to Afghanistan, they're simply more capable of performing duties there.

Q General, a while ago -- well, not too long ago, an Iraqi commander told us that he didn't want the Iraqis to assume provincial control of Anbar because he was afraid that the U.S. Marines would leave the province. Now you're saying that Anbar is expected to assume provincial Iraqi control in a few days. Can you say what's changed?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, the Iraqis still want us to stay. That was an interesting sort of discussion that I had with, again, their generals and the police chiefs in our discussion. I mentioned to you that we drove the mean streets of Fallujah and Ramadi. That was on the way to meet with the senior Iraqi leadership in the province.

And what they said was a bit of a dichotomy, I'll be the first to admit. They said, you know, we've got it, okay? We can handle all internal threats that now exist in the Anbar province. But we love your Marines and we want you to stay as long as you want to be here. And so, you know, our dialogue was very relaxed and we were even smiling. And we're saying, well, if our job is done, you know, we need to go home. And they said, oh, but we love you and you helped -- you know, you are our best friend and you help represent us to the government and those kinds of things.

So, obviously we can't have it both ways over time, but for now, we have achieved very good relationships with our host in Anbar, and I think we're welcome as long as the determination is that we stay.

Q And is the PIC scheduled for September 1st?

GEN. CONWAY: The PIC is scheduled soon, okay? I don't know that that's been publicly released, and I probably shouldn't do it again as a Title X kind of guy.

Gordon?

Q Sir, if you get the opportunity to not only backfill those Marines in Afghanistan but perhaps (fluff ?) it out more, based on your trip, what is it that you'd like to see them do or what is it do you think that they are going need to be doing that they're not doing now -- what you've got there now aren't doing? But also, what's the strategic win for the Marine Corps to be able to shift from the operations -- the nation-building kind of thing in Iraq to Afghanistan?

GEN. CONWAY: Okay. Okay. A couple of things, Gordon, with regard to what they need to be able to do -- 24 is operating in the -- (inaudible) -- river valley. Again, every indication is that they have effectively closed down that rat line; they have driven the bad guys elsewhere because they just don't want to tangle with the Marines. I mean, I won't quote you casualty counts, but they're hugely disproportionate and the Taliban really took a good bloodying at the hands of 24 MEU.

But it's only -- it's only one sector. You know, it's kind of interesting, the Green Zone in Iraq means one thing. The "green zone" in Afghanistan means something exactly the opposite, because that's where the bad guys are. And these "green zones" are around river valleys where populations occur, crops are grown, drugs are produced and that type of thing, and that's where you find the bad guys. There are lots of "green zones" that at this point we don't have the force structure to get to in the Helmand province and in RC South.

More Marines, more coalition forces will allow us to go to those places and force the bad guys into the mountains. If you look at how Algeria defeated its insurgency, that was their method; that was their tactic, was to drive these guys into the mountains. And you know what? Sooner or later, they get hungry. They start to starve to death. And they're much more willing to listen to terms.

So that's a potential for us, there. There's not a lot of things that grow on those rocky mountainsides in Afghanistan.

With regard to the second part of your question, I wouldn't say that it's a strategic win, necessarily, for the Marine Corps. I would say that our requirement right now in Iraq is much more about nation- building than it is fighting. And quite frankly, young Marines join our corps to go fight for their country.

Now, they're serving an absolute purpose in Iraq. They are -- they are doing a very good job of this nation- building business, but it's our view that if there is a stiffer fight going someplace else in a much more expeditionary environment where the Marine Air-Ground Task Force really seems to have a true and enduring value, then that's where we need to be.

Q General, on the -- your Title X responsibilities here in force levels, I remember you recounting this a few months ago, when it was announced that the 24th MEU and the 2/7 were going there. And you raised this issue of stress on the force, that you could do it through October but you're really pushing it after that. We're getting extended now to November. Now -- it sounds like, though, that you are happy to see the draw-down in Anbar move to a build-up in southern Afghanistan as opposed to an increase in dwell time or something along those lines.

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah, well --

Q Can you talk about why your concerns about dwell time and stress on the force have not continued over the last few months?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, it has continued. And we talk with the families and our promise to our families and our Marines is to try to do something about it. Our object is one to two. It's the same as the Army objective. That gives us seven months deployed and 14 months home. And in fact, my standing pretty firm on that red line recognizes that we've got to turn that worm somehow to get headed back the other direction. So that remains a paramount concern.

But I do think this: I think that a battalion of Marines in Afghanistan count for more than a battalion of Marines in Iraq, if you will, just in terms of the impact that they can have. So I think in the end if we see a draw-down and eventually a complete removal of Marines in Iraq -- we've got 25,000, 26,000 Marines there -- we can do with a lesser number of Marines in Afghanistan, I believe at this point, and have the same effect. So that we can -- if we could get to a magic number of about 15,000 Marines deployed worldwide, anywhere, we're at one to two. So that's the thought process, is it's --

Q You're not talking about a one for one, sent from Iraq to Afghanistan.

GEN. CONWAY: No, not --

Q You're talking about a draw-down in Anbar but perhaps not equal uptake in Afghanistan.

GEN. CONWAY: Both. Maybe initially a one-for-one just in order to be able to make sure we don't do more than we're capable of. But in the end, it would not be a complete transfer, I don't believe. I don't know that we need that kind of force structure in Afghanistan, but, you know, time will determine that.

Q General, are further tour extensions for the forces already in Afghanistan completely off the table, or is that something you would consider if you need to sustain the gains that have occurred?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, you know, the secretary has said that he wants those units home by the end of November, and I think we're on a timeline that will do that. That, to me, is fair. The one extension has already been, you

know, presented to the families before it was made public. They're okay with it.

We're doing seven months. The Army is doing 12. But you know, what that has the potential to do is shorten that dwell time that they're home, depending upon, again, future requirements. So I think if you look at it historically, we have seen an extension as more the norm. And that's what we would like to see in this case.

That said, I do want to see -- if there are Marines that go in behind these two units, I want to see them protected and have the same kinds of capabilities that the Marines on deck have now. So I would not rule out that a very small segment of one unit or another might be asked to stay on if we can't provide it otherwise for a short period of time.

Now, there may be some bridging requirement, but we would certainly want to minimize it. And I'm not even sure that it would happen.

Q What did your commanders tell you about their impressions on whether the -- you know, the instability in the Pakistan government? What impact is that having on operations, your forces, in terms of stemming the flow from the sanctuaries in the FATA and also command and control or coordination with the Pakistan military? Are those -- is that suffering because of the instability in the Pak government?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, my commanders, because of where they're focused, are not much in contact with Pakistan counterparts, first of all, Jim. But I think we believe -- I think the Pakistanis believe based on what you see with regard to their recent military maneuvers into the FATA that there are people there that represent a danger to Pakistan and to coalition forces in Afghanistan. That's long been an ungoverned area. I think we're all concerned that if it's not managed -- it must be managed by the Pakistanis -- it's on their side of the border -- if it's not managed that you could see attacks against other parts of Pakistan and certainly attacks into Afghanistan -- training and staging and recruiting all taking place up in there -- and all those things are dangerous really to both nations, not to mention the fact that there could be planning taking place up there for strikes elsewhere in western Europe or even the United States. So I think it is a real threat, one that the president or prime ministers of both nations realize and one now that happily Pakistan is taking some steps to remove.

Q (Off mike) -- did you -- did your trip up heighten your concern, you know, just from what you heard from a large perspective from a number of leaders? Did you walk away from the region saying oh, geez, this has gotten worse than --

GEN. CONWAY: I don't think more so. I mean, I think we've always appreciated that it's difficult. We had a dinner recently with the British ChoD in town and we talked about the strategic aspects of things and we came to an agreement -- Pakistan is a hard nut to crack and it's probably not one that we, coalition forces, are going to be able to solve.

It's going to require involvement on the part of the Pakistanis to settle the problem that's taking place on their sovereign soil. I don't know, to get at the essence of your question though, that I had a level of concern that was enhanced because we've always been concerned that drug production and the money associated with that in close proximity to safe haven are two major elements of a long-term insurgency and both those things need to be solved.

Q And after your visit how do you assess the current strength and ability threat from both the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and then ultimately how many Marines do you think you would like to put into Afghanistan?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, the threat is growing. I mean, if you simply chart year to year since about 2004 -- I mean, I think there was once a time when we thought that it was diminishing and weren't ready to put a bow on it but it was looking pretty good in Afghanistan. Well, that's changed over time and since about 2004 if you simply plot the attacks the threat is increasing, the numbers of attacks are increasing, the casualties are obviously increasing for the coalition forces associated with that. I wouldn't want to put a number on the number of Marines in Afghanistan. We will provide the Marines necessary to win this fight, hopefully sooner than later. We would want to see those Marines employed as an Air-Ground Task Force, given their own sector of ground and able to execute the counter insurgency methods and tactics that we found successful in Iraq.

Q And how is it that the threat from the Taliban and al Qaeda has managed to grow? What factors are involved?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, I don't know that for sure because I don't understand completely the internal workings of their organization. We do see more foreign fighters now though, I think, coming to Pakistan and operating in Afghanistan than we're seeing in Iraq, so that's one difference that I think you can point to. It may be that -- I say may be because no intelligence agency would say this -- but it may be that there's been a refocus. I think the al Qaeda knows that they have blown the movement in Iraq through a number of missteps over time, and even the central leadership was warning (ANZ?) about with regard to Muslim casualties and so forth. He tended to ignore that and I think that the al Qaeda by what you see taking place with regard to the Sunnis turning against them and so forth has paid a price for all of that.

So I simply think that there are less -- and I would add, by the way, the efforts of our great soldiers, sailors, and Marines taking down these people any time and every time that they can find them to include our Special Ops guys. But I think that the influence and the presence and the numbers of al Qaeda in Iraq are very much diminished and they had to go somewhere, and my guess is -- my belief is that they probably have gone to that safe haven in the FATA.

Q (Back in Iraq, sir ?) --

GEN. CONWAY: Yes, ma'am.

Q -- Can you speak to the Maliki government's movement against the Sons of Iraq, arresting some of their leadership -- some of their membership? You're talking about drawing down Marines in Anbar just at a time that some of the members of the Sons of Iraq are talking about picking up their weapons again and turning against both Iraqis and coalition forces.

GEN. CONWAY: I made it a point to speak specifically on that issue with the Iraqi leadership in the Anbar and I was happy to hear that they are much less concerned about it than appears to be the notoriety that it's receiving elsewhere. They have only several thousand, 4,000 or 5,000, of the Sons of Iraq that are operating in the Anbar Province and they're fairly comfortable that they're going to be absorbed either into civilian employment or into the military police security framework. So that tells me that the larger problem, because the numbers are much greater than that, is elsewhere in the country.

But it is a little bit disconcerting and I do think that the Maliki government needs to ensure that they understand that we could be returning to some dark times if there isn't a better integration of these people that have seen the light, turned against the al Qaeda, and assisted us in the process. So we're hopeful. I know that the commanders in the theater are continuing to make that point at every venue. General Kelly in particular is concerned that -- he would say to you he doesn't see an insurgency in Iraq at this point. His biggest concern is trying to make sure that the Shi'a-dominated government gives proper consideration for the Sunni needs and the Sunni integration into the entirety of the effort. If that's done successfully then I think it's going to have a very positive outcome. If it's not, there could be trouble and we're certainly leery of that. (Inaudible.)

Q Yeah. General, Secretary Gates said a number of months ago that during his watch there would be no wholesale shift of Marines from Iraq to Afghanistan. His watch ends in January. Would you like to see Marines take over the mission in Afghanistan next year and what are the chances of that?

GEN. CONWAY: Uh-huh. Zero chances of the Marines taking over the mission in Afghanistan. You know, when I first approached the secretary on that issue some -- well, it's almost a year ago now, that was never the intent. You know, we -- this is a joint effort in its entirety and I assured General Casey when there were rumors to that effect that we absolutely must have Army theater logistic support. We enjoy our association with Army Special Operations teams. Army MEDEVAC capability has done a marvelous job for us since the beginning -- since 2003 and forward, and so we wouldn't change any of that.

What we would see -- what we would hope for is a clean, crisp command structure that doesn't impede us taking the fight to the enemy, and I would say though I guess somewhat to your point if we are the preponderance of force in an area where there's a one or a two or three-star commander we should vie for that command opportunity --

that the Marine Corps would want to provide the four-star commander in ISAF. You know, we have two four-stars in the Marine Corps and I don't have a job for the guy once he, you know, once he left out there. So it's not something that we were vying for or even interested in at the time nor are we interested in it now necessarily. I just want to see the corps applied to its best use, whatever the nation might need.

Q But just as follow-up -- what you just laid out, are you making a push for that now because we're only about four months in -- ahead of a new administration?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, no. I mean, we continue to say that there is a window of opportunity here that the commander in Afghanistan is appealing to our military leadership for additional forces, and that when those additional forces are sent it looks a lot like a Marine mission. I would add, though, sort of, I think, putting the secretary's comments in perspective, when you throw the lever to decide to put more forces into a place like Afghanistan it is three or four months before it actually happens, okay -- four or five months maybe is not overstating the case -- because you've got to move equipment in. You've got to get your troops trained and ready to do those things to a degree. So there is a delay in sort of the flash to bang effect here that must be realized and in part I think that was maybe what the secretary was thinking as well.

Q A lot has been made of the -- (inaudible) -- of command there in Afghanistan. What's your assessment talking to your guys about how much to a degree it hinders that operation? Is it -- (inaudible) -- or is it fundamental to the problems we've seen there?

GEN. CONWAY: It's neither. It's learning the system and coming to grips with how a NATO-coalition force operates where you have several people essentially on the same ground. There is a -- an RC South commander who is a Canadian two-star. There are Afghan forces who operate in the area and the commander would say, I don't remember ceding this terrain over to anybody. You've got special forces that sort of, you know, don't have an assigned area and are operating throughout the region and that includes in some cases our own Special Forces. So you got to be careful in an environment like that that you don't have blue on blue and that some of these bombs we've talked about don't wind up impacting, you know, your own forces.

So there's a right way and a wrong way to go about. Mainly, it comes into calling for support and our people have learned that over time. It enhances things again when you have the Marine Air-Ground Task Force at work and you have bona fide air controllers who are pilots who are recognized by all authorities up and down what might be a veto chain. So our people are comfortable with it. It is a little more difficult to assimilate than you might be in a pure environment but it's workable and we're making it function. In the back there, sir.

Q General, General McKiernan said about a month ago that he did not have the authority to target drug -- opium trafficking operations in Afghanistan except in the context of going after -- targeting Taliban forces. Would additional forces in Afghanistan have a great impact -- have much of an impact without that kind of authority?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, I think that's a problem as I intimated earlier that has to be solved. My personal belief, and I think General McKiernan would agree with this, is that it should be solved through Afghan means. To have Western or coalition forces, let's say, coming in and taking aboard that issue has the potential to create enemy and that's certainly not what we want to do. A government program that takes advantage of alternative crops and causes its people to understand that there's a law that must be followed -- those types of things I think are much better coming out of the Karzai government.

So I think there is constant pressure on the part of the military to make the government aware of the fact that these are moneys that are coming out that are helping to resource the Taliban and the bad guys and it needs to be halted. But again, I think even General McKiernan would agree that it needs to be an Afghan solution. Not that we can't help, but it needs to be Afghan driven.

Q If I could just follow up on that specifically, does the government actually have the capacity to do any of that?

GEN. CONWAY: I think so. Increasingly, you know, the report from our guys is that the Afghans are fighters

and that certainly applies to the young men that are making up the Afghan battalions and divisions and corps. So I think when a program is developed by the Afghan government that their forces in conjunction with the coalition assistance as required can manage the problem. Sooner is probably better than later would be the message that we ought to send. Yes, ma'am?

Q Hi. On MRAP vehicles -- there's been an urgent request from CENTCOM for more of those vehicles that are lighter and more maneuverable, and last year you reduced the number of these vehicles the Marine Corps was receiving because concerns about the size and maneuverability. Would you support more of these vehicles, especially considering what you said about Afghanistan? And also there was criticism for about how an urgent request for MRAPs was handled and I know there's been some changes there. Can you talk about how these urgent requests are being handled now -- (inaudible) -- concern to people on the Hill?

GEN. CONWAY: Yes. The -- you're talking about MRAP vehicles exclusively, yeah. We took an allocation of MRAP vehicles into Afghanistan when we first put forces in there in strength commensurate with what they felt their needs were and it was roughly 40 vehicles or so. We've seen a few more than that requested for use with the road clearance teams and that type of thing. So we're -- the numbers are such that we're easily able to satisfy our requirements both in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

The problems, though, that we started to see emerge with the vehicle when we decided to reduce our buy are only exacerbated in an Afghan-terrain situation because the Afghan roads are sloped in some cases unlike roads here in the United States or elsewhere might be. There's a lot of mountain trails and switchbacks and those types of things and the vehicle is still too heavy for -- in a lot of cases for suspension and axle systems. Now, we've taken that back to the manufacturers. They're working on it. Unfortunately, the problem (is more weight ?) to be able to fix some of these things. You just need a heavier type of chassis in order for these vehicles to stay up.

It would also, though, because it is a top-heavy vehicle just based on the way it's built -- it has a high center of gravity -- we're also seeing more rollovers in Afghanistan, again, due to the terrain than we have seen in Iraq. So we've got to look at where it can be used and where we probably shouldn't look at working it in order to, I think, achieve max efficiency from the vehicle. You know, we were accused I still think falsely by some people on the Hill with ignoring an early request for MRAP vehicles. We tossed that to the DOD IG and I think they're within days or weeks of coming out with a report. They've been doing a lot of interviewing and that type of thing to understand what the threat was, what the thinking was, what our true needs were with regard to the threat at the time and how the underbelly explosions then tended to perpetuate later on. I think the IG is going to have some fairly positive things to say about our urgent needs process.

Q (Off mike) -- on that report -- (inaudible) -- draft version?

GEN. CONWAY: You know, it's funny you'd ask. I just got back from a trip and I asked my folks where it is. We think that it's coming out shortly. I've not been briefed on it yet. It's just some, you know, some excerpts are starting to slip out a little bit. We think that it's nearing completion.

Q General, getting back to Anbar, you said you can reduce troops -- Marines there and still maintain security and I'm wondering what the Baghdad Command had to say about this. Did you raise it with General Petraeus? Did he seem supportive or is he holding his cards pretty close to his vest on -- (inaudible)?

GEN. CONWAY: I think more the latter than the former. You know, there's -- in some ways 25,000 Marines in the Anbar Province for a number of years is a Linus blanket, okay? You know, that pretty much says to you the Anbar Province is simply not going to be a problem. But General Petraeus is moving to a different job here interestingly in a few weeks and it'll be -- they say where you stand depends on where you sit, and so I'll be interested to have that conversation with him later on when he's responsible for both places with the realization that, again, Marines on the ground in the south have proven they can do a very good job -- (inaudible).

Q When you -- (inaudible) -- with Baghdad was there a lot of -- (inaudible) -- around the table? Did they say, we'll take it under advisement? Can you give us a sense of what was said?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, yeah. Of course, we all know that the next assessment is pending and I don't think anybody wants to stray too far from, you know, where we are right now based upon most recent determinations with regard to the last assessment. So I think when -- and it's more than just General Petraeus. You got General Odierno who's going to be involved. You've got General Dempsey who is acting at CENTCOM. So there's a line -- and General Austin and I had a very good breakfast and we talked about it as well. So you've got a lot of commanders there in the chain who will be heard from before the assessment comes in. But I don't see anything happening really before the assessment and, again, interestingly that'll be a Petraeus assessment on Iraq but just shortly after that he's going to assume a different role. And so how much of his thinking about that different role will crank into, you know, what he's saying right now about Iraq only David Petraeus knows. Okay.

Q (Inaudible.)

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah. Yeah.

Q Time for maybe one or two more.

GEN. CONWAY: Okay. Let me get someone who hasn't asked a question.

Q General, a bit more -- a bit broader view on the MRAP issue. I mean, you've also got problems with EFV. You've got questions about how to move forward on JLTV. How is the corps going to address this basic question of what you're going to ride in?

GEN. CONWAY: Okay. That -- it's a great question and it's real. Let me just offer parts and pieces to give you a full answer. We have already determined to move some MRAPs into what we call our tables of equipment. You know, in the past our engineers have ridden to war in the back of a dump truck. We owe them something better than that and we think that the small versions of the MRAPs -- the Cat 1s -- are a good vehicle for that. Similarly, our EOD and rock clearance teams will need X number of those vehicles in the hundreds, not the thousands, in order to be able to, again, man them up as TE.

The Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle -- the EFV -- actually seems to be making some good progress. I mean, it was having some issues earlier but we think those issues are substantially resolved. We've gotten some good reports in recent weeks and months on the progress of EFV. Long way from, you know, from production at this point but we're encouraged by what the program manager and even the folks on the third deck are saying about the future now of the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle. But we still have a shortfall in terms of a mounted capability for our Marines with regard to the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle or making up the shortfall really in the EFV. You know, we needed a little over 1,000 to be able to provide everybody a conveyance in the same vehicle. That buy was essentially cut in half so there's a need out there for what my guys at Quantico are calling an MPC -- a Marine Personnel Carrier. And so we're going to try to sort out just what that vehicle needs to look like.

What we've decided is that we want to certainly mate with the Army on any program for the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle but I think it's fair to say both services are still waiting for that technological breakthrough that's going to give us the amount of soldier and Marine protection in a vehicle that is lighter than what's on the market right now. So we -- you know, we continue to wait. I just interestingly had a discussion this morning with some guys out of New York who are trying to build us a helmet that'll stop 7.62 and they're doing some great things with regard to trying to, you know, give us the same helmet at the same weight with more protection but they say, you know, there is just not an apparent technological breakthrough in ceramics or in carbon fiber that's going to give us that lightweight technology that gives equal protection.

So we continue to look at best options than where we are right now. But it is something that we visit. Because there are so many elements to it we visit frequently to see where do we want the Marine Corps to be in 2020 with its vehicle complement based on what we think the threat will be at that point. Okay. Is there anybody else that hasn't had a chance? All right.

Q Just to change to Georgia briefly, a number of the trainers in there before the conflict were Marine Corps.

Have you heard at all from them in terms of their knowledge ahead of the conflict there? Were they surprised on the moves by the Georgians and the Russians? And can you also talk a little bit about what exactly happened with the five Humvees that were then taken?

GEN. CONWAY: I can answer the second part better than I can answer the first. I've been in contact, of course, indirectly through our component commander in (YUCOM ?) on those Marines and the relative safety at the time of the attacks and so forth. I've not asked the question of him as to whether or not they were surprised by what took place so I just wouldn't know how to answer that part of it. I read somewhere with regard to the Humvees that they had satellite communication equipment on board, which really struck me as unusual because we don't normally ship our vehicles in that configuration. So I did go back to Major General Cornell Wilson and ask that question.

He just responded yesterday and said that there were a total of five Humvees that were apparently taken by the Russians -- four that were conventional, one that was an up-armored Humvee -- but that none of those had anything like secret satellite communications -- in fact, no radios at all. They had radio mounts only, and that's -- that makes much more sense because that's traditionally how we ship. So I think we're going to send the Russians a bill and tell them, you know, either pay up or give us back our vehicles, guys. You know, that's not the way we do business.

Q Was there any clarification on how they were taken? Were they put into an area that wasn't secured at all by Georgians or --

GEN. CONWAY: They were at port is as much as I can say. I don't know if they were actually aboard a ship or if they were off at that point on pier side but they were at the port there.

Q One quick clarification.

GEN. CONWAY: Last question.

Q You had said it's plausible to backfill the 24th MEU. Are you saying it's likely that there will be troop reductions in Anbar and a corresponding backfill in Afghanistan?

GEN. CONWAY: I don't know that I said it was plausible to fill -- backfill 24 MEU. The -- in fact, I would say it's implausible to put a MEU in there at this point with like capability unless the commander of CENTCOM decided to employ his operational reserve, okay. It takes a while to get a MEU over there, it takes a while to train a MEU, and at this point there's absolutely nothing planned for that and so the timelines just don't match up to back out 24 MEU. Two 7, I would say it's plausible, okay.

Q (Off mike) -- are you saying it's likely to expect troop reductions in Anbar -- (inaudible)?

GEN. CONWAY: I will continue to say the same thing to the secretary of defense that I've said before and that is, sir, if you choose to put Marines in behind 27 I must ask you for troop reductions elsewhere, and the only elsewhere at this point that I see available is in Iraq, okay.

Q Well, thanks again, General, for -- (inaudible) -- your time. Thank you, General.

GEN. CONWAY: Thanks, guys. Good seeing you again.

Q Thank you.

GEN. CONWAY: Thank you for what you do.

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