

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

--

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.