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The Marine Corps: America's Expeditionary Force in Readiness**

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Panelist, Session 3, "Meeting the Demand: Responding to Crisis and Applying Force"

FRANCIS J. "BING" WEST: –that General Flynn fled before I had a chance to get up here. Could I have the first slide, please, to show why he had to leave in such a rush? The Kuchis are the toughest tribe in Afghanistan, and last year they joined the Red Sox Nation. [Laughter]

May I have the next slide, please? But it didn't stop there. Then we went to the Durran line, and both Pakistan and Afghanistan have joined the Red Sox Nation. [Laughter]

So take that, General Flynn, wherever you are. [Applause] Thank you.

Listening to the Vice Chiefs, it was like listening to people who are going to give you advice about your finances. And fundamentally what I took away was, keep a balanced portfolio, which is the sensible thing to do. But now I'm here and I think I'd like to take us a little bit of a different way and say they're looking out at your balanced portfolio for the next 10 or 20 years, because that's their job. And where the knives really get out is when they all get to the table with the SECDEF and they try to divide who's going to get what.

I do have one great story for the three of you. For the four of you; you, too, Bob, you'll love this. This is from Bob Magnus. He used to be the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps. And one day I asked Bob, "I think you have really a shitty job. You have to go and do that all the time."

He said, "What are you talking about? I play," he said, "in the biggest poker game in the world." I said, "Tell me that again?"

He said, "Imagine," he said, "when I go in and we go into that big meeting where it's only the Vices, with the Secretary of Defense, generally there's \$2 or \$3 billion on that table that we're maneuvering for.

"You know, starting at 2:00 the night before, in the morning, "I wake up and I think the Vice Chief of the Air Force is liable to say this. And if I say this, then I'm going to leave an opening for the VCNO to say something. So I have to figure out who's going to say what when. And every one of us is trying to read the playing cards of the other one. And \$1 or \$2 billion will change hands before we walk out of that meeting the next morning."

I thought, wow, that's kind of an interesting way of looking at it. So you're looking at some of the best, most cultured and politest poker players you'll ever see. [Laughter] Because when they're sitting here, they're very nice to each other. When they get into that room, they're still angling.

But I'd like to indicate, if you look at it in financial terms, getting to 2020 is one thing, but you could have something happen equivalent to the 2008 recession in the nearer term that brings everyone's stocks down by 30%. And let me tell you, I saw that happen and I think we're right on the verge of that happening. And I'll explain why.

I was the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, Jim Schlesinger, a wonderful guy, in 1975, when Vietnam was falling. And we were already out of there. And he watched the Congress, and he was so angry and so upset by what the Congress was doing, because as the Congress's mood became more and more sour, they cut the budget more and more.

And he blurted out to the press – you might remember at the time – "These cuts are deep, savage and arbitrary." And they were. But the President decided to fire him for saying that.

And then when President Carter came in, and Vietnam did fall – and those were tough, tough times in the Pentagon – the entire mood of the United States went south. I mean, we didn't like ourselves very much for several years. And every single year, the Congress said "the hell with

that defense budget," and was cutting it by about 8% a year. The budget went down over 32% in six years, because there was a national depression to a very large extent about who we were as a country after Vietnam fell, even though our forces weren't there.

So you know what I'm telling you. And I'll just spell it out for you: Afghanistan is teetering. We said we have a mission of nation-building. If I have one message that I can get across to everyone in the United States military – take that mission, hammer it into the dirt, burn it, put six feet of dust on top of it and say, "Never again are we going to do that." And stop having it as your basic doctrine, because it is wrong, and it is beyond the capacity of the United States military. And we're beginning to see what's going to happen in Afghanistan.

You can take it to the bank that we are not going to have a modern democratic nation in Afghanistan as this war winds down. But that doesn't mean we have to lose. And therefore, I'm going to go with this into something that relates to budgets and what the United States Marine Corps, and hopefully the United States Army, might look at doing.

Let's understand how the stars are right now aligning over there, in the war that we're still fighting. If we're not still fighting that war in about 2015, it will have been because we lost. It won't be because we've won. I truly believe that nation-building can absolutely succeed if we're willing to put another trillion dollars in and 100,000 troops for the next ten years. All who believe we're going to do that, raise your hand. I didn't think so.

So we know we're getting out. We know the nation-building isn't going to work. And there are several reasons why it's not going to work. But first, there's that the United Nations and the United States of America, in 2002, wrote a constitution for Afghanistan that gave extraordinarily centralized powers to a person who does not have the capacity for leadership; namely, President Karzai. And so, he has great control, but all the synapses don't close, and he is not a trustworthy partner.

The only way it might end up before 2015 is if he cuts some sort of deal with the Taliban that will cause everyone in this room to say, "Why did we fight for ten years for that?" But I give that an unlikely chance. We're just saddled with a man who is not a good leader.

The second problem is that regardless of what we say about our counterinsurgency and serving the people, et cetera, the Pashtun people, 13 million Pashtuns haven't come over to our side, unlike what happened with the Sunnis in Anbar and the rest of Iraq. And they have no intentions of coming over to our side because they want to see who's going to win the war first. And they know we're leaving and the Taliban are not leaving. So the notion that counterinsurgency is going to work, that dog isn't going to hunt.

Therefore, if you have a recognition that come this summer the President has promised he's going to start pulling us out, you have a question then: what stays behind? And here we go to something that stretches the services institutionally. General Vane and Under Secretary Work, General Dunford, when they look institutionally here from Washington and they look out, you can understand the frame of reference that wants you to keep your conventional units together.

You know where I'm going. I'm going the other way, because the model by which we got out of Iraq was that we had paired a US battalion with an Iraqi battalion. And when each of our battalion commanders said, "This Iraqi battalion is about ready to stand up," then we just shifted responsibility for that battlespace to the Iraqi battalion. That has never happened in Afghanistan, and it's too late for it to happen now.

In Afghanistan, we still have two separate chains of command. The Afghan chain of command is not under the American chain of command. So while they're in the same battlespace, the Afghan battalion commander and the US battalion commander work on a handshake, if they get along well; and if they don't get along well, they work on nothing. But there's no systematic way in which we're going to begin to extract our battalions and replace them with ANA battalions.

Therefore, my calculus is as follows: Nation-building isn't going to work. We're not going to walk out of there and have a democratic nation that is viable. But we're going to have to support it. And if we try too hard at too high a level, the Congress is really going to cut.

We probably have to give about \$12 billion a year for the next five to ten years, and maybe longer, to Afghanistan. Just hand them the money. And we have to try to bring that bill down, because the Congress is going to try to cut there.

But the other thing is, if we take our forces out, we know they're not strong enough to stand on their own two feet. And therefore, the issue becomes, is there a mission that is essential that isn't being covered? And the answer is yes; it's called the advisors.

The notion of an advisor corps is something I think would probably cause General Vane to twitch the minute I mention it, and cause General Dunford to twitch. But if you look at it now, our special operations forces with our operational detachments, Alpha special forces, who are wonderful at this mission, are overstretched because they're too much into the direct action; and therefore there aren't enough of them.

So when you look at how we're covering down on all the advisory effort over there, it's really a patchwork. I don't think that will be sustainable as we pull our forces out, unless we have something like the United States Marine Corps that is willing to say, It's a terrible mission to undertake. It stretches the conventional forces because it takes away many of the same officers and NCOs that you want in your battalions and puts them over there for a longer period of time. But it is the one advocacy that I would bring up in order to avoid a catastrophe.

The catastrophe would be if we end up do losing. I see that as a low probability in any event, maybe a 10% probability. But having watched what happened to us in 1975, after Vietnam fell, I don't want to see that repeated again. And so, I would try to shore that one up, even though it means a big tradeoff. I'm talking about 20,000 people that have to be advisors, not 5,000 people. So that's a big chunk of people.

I think that the Marine Corps has a relative advantage in trying to do this in that— well, Mac Owens knows, Colonel You[?] knows, Dick Fercoterin[?] and I think Al Blades is here. We have people who've worked as advisors for a long time, and the Marines, and all due respect to the Army, General, the Marines, after Vietnam, they promoted many of their general officers out of the advisor ranks. So we had, Art Boomer[?] was promoted, Tony Zinni was promoted, Ray Smith was promoted.

So it didn't become that if you were an advisor you were held back. And I see that identical thing has to play out in Afghanistan, but it's going to have to come out of the hide of the forces of the services who are looking beyond Afghanistan. But if we don't make that transition, I think we're in deep trouble.

And when I talk to the people over there, and I say, "You guys don't have a transition plan yet?," they say, "Well, look, Bing, you have to understand. We're still playing poker with the White House. We're going to try give up the least we possibly can. And if we have a transition plan, they'll use that as the starting point. So you can understand, politically, that we want to hold off as long as possible." And then they say, "You know, our institutions back in Washington aren't exactly wild about all these advisors that you'd have to give up out of the units."

But I'm here kind of as an outside force, the old guy having watched this circle once before, and my suggestion to both the Army and the Marine Corps, but particularly to the Marine Corps, is, they really are going to have to look very seriously at building up a core competency in advisors that we thought could be done by the special operations forces, but now we see they're overstretched and they can't do it.

Thank you. [Applause]