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USMC237: Austerity, Adaptation, and Innovation

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This week marks the 237th birthday of the U.S. Marine Corps, an institution headquartered initially in Philadelphia's Tun Tavern. From this humble origin, one of the world's most fiercely competitive fighting forces has emerged. In peacetime and in war, the U.S. Marines have consistently demonstrated a rigid adherence to discipline, an exemplary record of devoted service and sacrifice, and an uncanny ability to learn, adapt and innovate. The Nation's security, and indeed the security of many others, owes much to this small armed force with a large historical record of success.

Ongoing budget actions and the looming threat of sequestration will sorely stretch a Corps of Marines that has been ridden hard the last ten years in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The Defense Department's strategic rebalancing to the Pacific will also further stretch the Marines as they strive to maintain U.S. treaty commitments to Allies in Japan and South Korea, while shifting to new bases and relationships in Guam, the Philippines, and Australia.

Fortunately, the Corps' engine for innovation has always cranked hardest immediately after a war. The Corps has historically generated new ideas and promoted adaptation in the development of tactics and revolutionary technologies when needed—including in the heat of battle. But their innovation gene stands out best during the all too brief interregnums between wars. Moreover, they never try to refight the last war, they don't look backwards and get complacent, they look further ahead. After World War I and its storied exploits at Belleau Wood, you might have expected the Marines to want to duplicate the U.S. Army. Instead, the Corps worked in Latin America, the Caribbean, Central and South America perfecting its Small Wars doctrine, while simultaneously beginning to lay the conceptual and experimental foundation for amphibious operations and close air support. After World War II, the Corps could have sat on its laurels for another 500 years after Iwo Jima, but instead it began seriously working on concepts of vertical envelopment to exploit the emergence of the helicopter. Innovation between wars has been complemented with improvisation in the face of cunning and cruel opponents in Korea, Vietnam, Al Anbar and Helmand Province. These have framed today's Marine Corps into a potent middle-weight fighting force prepared to respond promptly to foreign aggression, humanitarian disasters, or any number of crises around the globe.

IMPERATIVES FOR TODAY'S MARINE CORPS

As impressive and powerful as it is, this legacy of innovation will be severely challenged by the scale of the fiscal challenge looming before today's Defense Department. Fewer dollars are available to invest in tomorrow's Corps or

take care of today's Marines and their families. Fortunately, the current leader of the Corps, General James Amos, USMC is an effective fighter for resources but understands the difference between what the Marines would "like to have" and what they truly need. Given the Marines' history, there can be little doubt that some critical developments are in the works at Quantico, the Corps' center for innovation. A number of key imperatives should guide that emerging innovation.

People First. The Marines have always emphasized the human dimension of conflict, and stressed investing in attracting, training, inspiring, and retaining their best people. Preserving that tradition in the face of tight budgets and families stressed by demands for frequent deployments will be a leadership challenge. The Corps' leaders have worked hard to maintain force structure, augmented with family support/family readiness programs, to mitigate the strains of a decade of war. However, the Corps also faces daunting equipment maintenance and modernization demands. The tension between people and hardware will be acute, exacerbated by the rising costs of operating the world's most expensive helicopter (also fastest, and longest-ranged) and a revolutionary but similarly expensive F-35B fighter. Couple these with a requirement to replace the venerable amphibious tractor and multiple ground vehicles, and the Corps is hard-pressed to see after people first. But, past is prologue, and Marines *must* come first.

Don't Define the Corps by its Size. Over the last generation, the Corps has tended to measure its value to our nation within the Pentagon and on the Hill by its overall end strength. Before 9/11, the Corps had dropped down to only 175,000 Marines. In order to maintain its forward presence, preserve a robust deployment tempo, and provide the necessary training for overseas missions, the Corps grew to over 202,000 Marines. Some analysts, including myself, were originally skeptical of the Marine's need to grow so large and so fast, and feared the attendant resource costs to recruit, train, and equip new battalions for the global war on terrorism—a war that overemphasized large-scale invasions. I did not support the subsequent surge in Iraq for that reason, nor did I anticipate the Nation's shift to Afghanistan. Thus, the Marine end-strength increase was undoubtedly necessary and, consequently, the leadership was more farsighted. However, now the Marines face sharp budget cuts and are carefully scaling down, yet drawing a line at 186,000 Marines. Such a size would preserve its enhanced Marine Expeditionary Forces, and retain the new capabilities needed to be effective in this century, including Marine contributions to Special Operations Command. The Corps has an excellent strategic and operational rationale for retaining this force level, but the success ultimately is predicated upon its devotion to readiness and its expeditionary ethos, not a fixed size.

Regain and Preserve Maritime Character. Traditionally, the Marines are part of the Department of the Navy and rely upon the close relationship with the U.S. Navy to maximize strategic mobility and operational maneuver from amphibious shipping and aircraft carriers (where the Marines contribute fighter squadrons). This sea-based mobility is a great advantage to policy makers and our regional Joint commanders. Operating in international waters, our amphibious task forces within Navy expeditionary strike groups generate the freedom of maneuver and freedom of action that policymakers need in crisis situations. Having a potent power projection force at sea expands the clock, affording precious time to craft diplomatic solutions (with an unmistakable hint of steel within the Ambassador's or Combatant Commander's velvet glove). Many mistakenly think the Corps has lost its mastery of naval power projection, but that is simply not so. Nevertheless, a generation of young Marines (and many Sailors too) have served extensively on land in two wars, and must exercise their skills to ensure excellence in the complex ballet of amphibious warfare. U.S. Navy support for adequate shipping, aviation support, landing craft, and mine clearing is also needed. The Corps' maritime character is not just part of its ethos or heritage; it is a versatile asset and a conventional deterrent against aggression. Littoral power projection capabilities enable the U.S. joint force to push open the door of access to our interests ashore. This ability to "go where the nation is not invited" fundamentally underwrites the deterrent value of the joint force, and provides our elected leaders with options that complement our diplomatic and economic instruments of power.

Institutionalize a Decade of War. As noted earlier, the Marines have made numerous adaptations to their educational programs: in social and cultural intelligence gathering, in pre-deployment training, in publishing their first counterinsurgency doctrine since 1976, and in their organization. In particular, the incorporation of Marines into Special Operations, the expansion of civil affairs units, and the development of law enforcement battalions rate high marks. However, with a severe retrenchment looming and a lower end-strength likely, there will be a temptation to jettison the latest units and fall back into the Marine Corps' more traditional missions, like forcible entry from the sea. The last decade of war was not an aberration, but continued evidence of trends in conflict since the dissolution of the Soviet empire. Furthermore, the last decade has been a live laboratory for many adversaries, and it is quite evident from the opening months of Operation Enduring Freedom, and the long contest in Iraq, that

the U.S. military will devastate any opponent stupid enough to array itself for a set-piece conventional battle. Thus, the Marines need to get back to sea and hone their craft at operating in the littorals and refine power projection acumen with their Navy counterparts. All this said, the need to fight in urban slums, protect populations intimidated by menacing thugs and extremists, or dominate well-armed aggressors has not gone away.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!

The Corps' past fame and future prospects are wholly due to its role as an enormously flexible instrument of U.S. foreign policy. In peacetime, in crisis, and in war, Presidents have learned that "calling in the Marines" is synonymous with success across the conflict spectrum. So it should be for another generation. Whether training in the desert at Twentynine Palms, CA, floating at sea on an amphibious ship in the Pacific Ocean, or deployed in over 160 countries today, the Marines are guarding America's interests and will be prepared in short notice to do whatever its leaders ask of it. For its past glorious history, its devoted recent service in Helmand and Al Anbar, and for its future contributions, all Americans should be proud and grateful and wish their Marines all the best on this special anniversary.

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