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# **CRISIS RESPONSE:**

Institutional Innovation in the  
United States Marine Corps

By Lieutenant Colonel Brian Bruggeman and Ben FitzGerald



Center for a  
New American  
Security

## About the Authors

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**Cover Image:** Lance Cpl. Chance Seckenger with 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit rides in a combat rubber raiding craft during launch and recovery drills from the well deck of the USS *Green Bay*, at sea on July 9, 2015.

**Image Credit:** Lance Cpl. Brian Bekkala/U.S. Marine Corps

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By Lieutenant Colonel Brian Bruggeman  
and Ben FitzGerald

## Introduction

In the summer of 2010, the United States Marine Corps was under severe pressure from the Pentagon's civilian leadership. Its significant contributions in Iraq and Afghanistan had led to concerns that the Marine Corps was becoming a "second land army." Worse, its attempts to return to the sea were perceived as a stubborn focus on amphibious assault that some civilian leaders believed to be outdated and unnecessary. The pressure culminated in August 2010 when then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates tasked Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus to review the structure of the Marine Corps. Five months later, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates canceled the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV), an amphibious assault vehicle once referred to as a "service-defining capability."

Five short years later, the U.S. Marine Corps is widely recognized as the United States' vital crisis-response force-in-readiness. It has restructured effectively to address this mission set, remain relevant beyond Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, and weather the storm of budget sequestration arguably better than any of the other services.

This report examines how the Marine Corps made this dramatic turnaround in such a short period of time.

### Redefined Purpose

Following an initial reluctance to accept the views of civilian leaders, Marine Corps leadership ultimately embraced the Secretary's review (initially as an act of self-preservation borne of the Marines Corps' historic paranoia of being "merged out of business"). During the review effort, senior Marines asked and answered hard questions about the purpose and nature of the Marine Corps. They undertook the painstaking analysis of force-structure reviews and budget cuts and questioned the service's capability needs. While those activities were necessary, they were not especially novel. Had they been conducted in isolation, these review processes may not have led to the positive outcomes the Marine Corps needed.

However, the Marine Corps also redefined its historic purpose within the operating context articulated by civilian policymakers. In this way, they deliberately provided decisionmakers with more effective military tools for implementing policy. Previously, the Marine Corps and other services established their own future-operating environment, relying on prior force-sizing constructs or narrow readings of history.<sup>2</sup> These processes supported the service's internal preferences while claiming alignment with policymakers' explicit or implied needs.

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Instead, the Marine Corps shifted its review to a force-sizing construct optimized for crisis response. This allowed the service to return to its amphibious roots without having to justify an existence based on large-scale amphibious assault – a mission central to Marines Corps history, culture, and thinking, but viewed with increasing skepticism across the rest of the Department of Defense.

This change in bureaucratic method and operational focus was the critical first step that enabled a period of institutional innovation, marking a significant departure for the Marine Corps. Subsequent innovations then linked this updated crisis-response purpose to rigorous analysis, a process endorsed by senior leaders. This created an agreed vision among senior Marine Corps leaders and established a clear message to explain and gain buy-in for these innovations.

Taken in sum, these interrelated elements provided the philosophical and analytic rigor to support the development of a compelling message from the Marine Corps to the civilian leadership in the Pentagon, White House, and Congress – ensuring civilian support. Support from civilian leaders

helped generate positive reviews in the media, creating a virtuous cycle that propelled the Marine Corps from perceived intransigent to innovator – moving it from a defensive crouch into the forward-leaning, aggressive posture it prefers.

### **Institutional Innovation**

While the initial impetus and process to innovate at the institutional level was forced upon the Marine Corps, the experience ultimately provided an opportunity. The Marine Corps' capability to innovate institutionally improved significantly during this period of internal reviews, with effective organizational responses to sequestration, budget uncertainty, and events such as the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi. The Marine Corps, while far from perfect and with much work still to do, is in a better position today than it was in 2010 in spite of the irresponsible Congressional actions associated with the Budget Control Act.

The Marine Corps' experience predates the Pentagon's current fixation on innovation – a term that has become dangerously fashionable in defense circles. The recent *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)* was replete with references to innovation. In one of his first major speeches as Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter focused on innovation and collaboration with Silicon Valley. And, most notably, Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work is leading the "Defense Innovation Initiative" aimed at reversing the decline in U.S. technology superiority. This high-level focus is warranted. But such widespread attention raises the risk that innovation will be misappropriated into meaninglessness and lose favor without the DoD undertaking the real innovation – institutional, technological, operational, or otherwise – it so desperately needs. The Marine Corps' recent experience of institutional innovation both within

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and outside standing DoD force-design processes serves as a practical example of what the Pentagon now desires. It provides useful lessons for subsets of the Marine Corps, other services, and the militaries of other western nations facing declining defense budgets.

## The Process of Institutional Innovation

The Marine Corps could have responded to Secretary Gates' review by hunkering down on its prior purpose and force-sizing constructs. Further, it could have completed the review with technical and historic justifications for the importance of amphibious operations conceived in the 20th century. Instead, the Marine Corps leaned into its task with creativity and seriousness of purpose. This response was due in part to the Marine Corps institutional paranoia of being shut down or integrated into another service. The legacy of post-World War II efforts to "unify the services" was particularly evident in the 2010 Marine Corps *Force Structure Review Group* (FSRG), with participants using Lieutenant General Victor Krulak's 1984 book, *First to Fight*, as a touchstone. The book chronicles Marine Corps efforts to save itself from closure during that period and others.

After Secretary Gates forcefully directed the Marine Corps to start the initial structure review in 2011, the service exited the review process in 2014 reinvigorated, positioned for further institutional and operational innovation, and with fewer cuts than would otherwise likely have been the case. While arguably just an example of good senior-level management, the Marine Corps exhibited innovation and leadership during a period of fiscal upheaval, enabling it to preserve ownership of a mandated task and make its case for the future. In effect, the Marine Corps built trust and credibility by showing its civilian leadership that its on-going analysis was rigorous, responsive, and in the best interest of the nation.

In an era of strategic uncertainty and fiscal constraint, the Marine Corps and other services should study the process of institutional innovation undertaken by the service's leadership between 2010

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and 2014. This report describes the key elements and processes of the Marine Corps' institutional innovation. While the specifics of these innovations will remain unique to the service at a particular point in time, its underlying philosophy and approach offer valuable lessons in force design under external pressure.

The principal innovation from this period was a reframing of the Marine Corps' *raison d'être* based on an operating environment informed by and linked to detailed analysis, external studies, and the perspectives of the Pentagon's senior leadership.<sup>3</sup> Equally important, through the process of multiple internal reviews, the Marine Corps established a repeatable methodology that increased their overall credibility and established trusted relationships between service leadership and senior defense decisionmakers in the Pentagon. This process was comprised of four distinct but closely related elements: refocusing the Marine Corps' *raison d'être*, responding to civilian leadership and operational demand, reviewing force structure, and strategic communication.

## Refocusing the Service's *Raison d'être*: From Large-Scale Amphibious Assault to Crisis Response

The Marine Corps had traditionally structured its purpose and force design around amphibious combat operations, particularly large-scale amphibious assault. This philosophy was premised on the assumption that the nation might, on rare but critically-important occasions, have to enter forcibly hostile territory from the sea. A force optimized

for this high-end mission must be able to adapt to more permissive environments or missions, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, more effectively than attempting the reverse.

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The Marine Corps believed, based on lessons drawn from history and operational analysis, that large-scale amphibious operations, particularly for forcible entry, were the core of the military value they provided to the nation. Senior leaders in the Office of the Secretary of Defense disagreed, drawing on recent operations, future trends, and strategic analysis. They believed amphibious forcible-entry operations would be unlikely on a large scale in the future, arguing adversary anti-access, area-denial capabilities would render the environment non-survivable for Marine forces. They believed forcible entry could be achieved via other means such as air assault.

Informed by this increasingly public dispute, the Marine Corps created the FSRG in 2010 in its first major step to innovate and posture itself for the future. The group's main purpose was to develop force-structure options to reduce the Marine Corps from its wartime end strength of 202,000. But importantly, the FSRG first validated the service's fundamental reason for existing: its *raison d'être*.

The FSRG established the purpose of the Marine Corps as the nation's forward-deployed crisis-response force in readiness.<sup>4</sup> This mission focus was based on the Marine Corps' historic posture

and culture as a forward-deployed, agile, amphibious force combined with a desire to preserve the multipurpose capabilities of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) at various sizes, most notably the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). Importantly, the Marine Corps believed that while the United States might be unlikely to become involved in a lengthy ground conflict after Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, senior policymakers would still require military options as smaller, but strategically significant, contingencies arose. The FSRG assimilated into its methodology the guidance of its new commandant: The Marine Corps must be "a middleweight force ... light enough to get there quickly, but heavy enough to carry the day upon arrival, and capable of operating independent of local infrastructure."<sup>5</sup> As part of its primary mission, the FSRG also implemented force-structure changes, such as reducing end strength; moving, closing, and creating headquarters and units; and a variety of other detailed changes that matched its new mission focus with available resources.

The services were forced to plan for even greater budget cuts than anticipated following the failure of the congressional "super committee" to reach consensus on the budget cuts called for by the 2011 Budget Control Act. In response, the Marine Corps established the McKenzie Group three years after the FSRG adjourned. The McKenzie Group started by validating the work of the FSRG by reevaluating many of the detailed changes the FSRG had recommended. However, the McKenzie Group also retained and improved on the core innovation from the FSRG – establishing the Marine Corps' *raison d'être* as the nation's forward-deployed crisis force in readiness in an operating context valued by senior policymakers. The new group framed its force designs around three fundamental tasks that the Marine Corps must be able to accomplish: forward presence, crisis response, and participation in major combat operations when necessary.<sup>6</sup> By prefacing all force-design decisions with a philosophical review of and adherence to the Marine Corps' fundamental purpose, the service was able to proceed through a period of uncertainty with a consistent perspective of who it is and what it must do.





U.S. Marine Corps, Sergeant Joseph R. Chenelly

*In 2001, a Marine with the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit leads a column of Marines to a security position after seizing a Taliban forward operating base in southern Afghanistan.*

Moving emphasis from large-scale, deliberate, amphibious assault to crisis response as a core analytic underpinning for force planning was both incredibly significant and contentious within the institutional Marine Corps. Indeed, some within the Marine Corps and many retired Marines remain deeply concerned that this shift introduces unacceptable risk. They worried the Marine Corps would be asked to undertake an amphibious assault in the future without adequate capability or training, as they were in the Battle of Inchon during the Korean War.<sup>7</sup> But the use of history as justification for future end strength and capability requests was no longer sustainable for the Marine Corps. Some considered the cancelation of the EFV – a platform optimized for amphibious assault and previously deemed “essential to the Marine Corps mission”<sup>8</sup> by then-Commandant General James Conway – a repudiation of the Marine Corps’ concept of future warfighting as much as a critique of the costs and capability of the vehicle itself.

These changes led to the September 2011 formation of the Amphibious Capabilities Working Group (ACWG), led by then-Brigadier General Daniel

O’Donohue and his deputies, then-Colonel Mike Groen and Colonel Christopher Naler. The ACWG’s mission was to establish how the Marine Corps would undertake amphibious assault in operations beyond Iraq and Afghanistan. The ACWG found that amphibious assault comprised a range of actions, not just the iconic large-scale assaults at the heart of the disagreement between the Marine Corps and others.<sup>9</sup> By redefining the concepts underpinning amphibious assault, the ACWG provided the intellectual basis for legitimately describing the Marine Corps as a crisis-response force and for developing a range of force-sizing options. The ACWG ultimately became a permanent organization called the Ellis Group that led the development of the Marine Corps’ capstone concept: *Expeditionary Force 21*.<sup>10</sup>

The resulting change in philosophy and approach did not run counter to the history or traditions of the Marine Corps, nor should it have. However, the changes did move the Marine Corps’ historical reference point from Iwo Jima to Task Force 58, in which two MEUs (special-operations capable) and their associated amphibious-ready groups from the

## Timeline of Events

●  
August 12, 2010

### **Defense Secretary Gates' "San Francisco Speech"**

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, in a speech delivered at the Marines Memorial Hotel in downtown San Francisco, charges the Marine Corps to review its force structure and to determine what an expeditionary force in readiness should look like in the 21st century. Secretary Gates acknowledges the Marine Corps has been functioning largely as a second land army in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also emphasizes the Marines must preserve their maritime soul going forward.

●  
August-December 2010

### **The Force Structure Review Group (FSRG)**

A group of over 65 field grade officers from around the Marine Corps led by Brigadier General Daniel O'Donohue convenes in Quantico, Virginia, to develop force-structuring options to answer Secretary Gates' call just a few weeks earlier. The FSRG ultimately recommends a Marine Corps reduced from its wartime end strength of 202,000 active-duty Marines to 186,800.

●  
August 2011

### **Amphibious Capabilities Working Group**

An ad hoc group also led by BGen O'Donohue is formed to assess how the Marine Corps would undertake amphibious planning following the cessation of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The group later transitions into the Ellis Group, a standing organization within Combat Development & Integration.

●  
September 2011

### **The Budget Control Act**

A congressional joint select committee on deficit reduction, or "super committee," is formed to identify \$1.2 trillion in spending cuts to the federal budget over the next 10 years in an effort to raise the debt ceiling in the short-term and devise a plan for deficit reduction. If the committee is unsuccessful, defense budgets among other areas of discretionary spending will become subject to automatic, across-the-board cuts – known as "sequestration."

●  
January 2012

### **Defense Strategic Guidance**

Acknowledging that fiscal conditions had changed and aiming to set priorities that reflect a "rebalance to the Asia-Pacific," the DOD releases the Defense Strategic Guidance, which led to planned end strength for the Marine Corps to be adjusted down to 182,100.





March 2013

#### **Sequestration**

The failure of the super committee triggers automatic, across-the-board cuts across the federal budget. Defense spending outlays including funds for overseas contingency operations suffer over \$42 billion (7.9 percent) in cuts from the previous year's defense budget. Future budgets must grow only at the approximate rate of inflation of 2.1 percent, as forecast by the Congressional Budget Office.

March 2013

#### **The McKenzie Group**

A group of 23 staff civilians, contractors, and field-grade officers formally known as the Force Structure Working Group led by Major General Frank McKenzie, design a force in the face of sequestration. (It later becomes widely known within the Marine Corps as the "McKenzie Group"). The McKenzie Group studies options and risks associated with various force levels all the way down to 150,000 active duty Marines. Ultimately, the McKenzie Group structures a force with an end-strength of 174,000 Marines that could adequately provide forward presence and crisis response.

April 2013

#### **Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR)**

Conceived in the wake of the 2012 Benghazi attacks, SPMAGTF-CR provides a rapid response capability with primary focus on the AFRICOM area of responsibility. SPMAGTF-CR is now operational at its base in Moron, Spain.

April 2013

#### **Strategic Choices and Management Review (SCMR)**

The SCMR, informed by the recent work undertaken by the McKenzie Group, continues to examine and prepare for the near- and mid-term impacts of sequestration on defense spending.

March 2014

#### **The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Is Released**

The QDR calls for a Marine Corps end strength of 182,100 active duty Marines, remaining consistent with the direction provided by the *2012 Defense Strategic Guidance*.

September 2014

#### **Second SPMAGTF-CR Becomes Operational**

A second SPMAGTF-CR becomes operational, this time in the CENTCOM area of responsibility.

Navy, rapidly aggregated under the command of then-Brigadier General James Mattis as part of initial operations in Afghanistan in 2001.<sup>11</sup> This change moved the force-planning focus from amphibious assault to expeditionary forward presence and crisis response, establishing the intellectual posture that would drive effective force design, subsequent reforms, and operational innovations.

## Responding to Civilian Leadership and Operational Demand: Providing Options

Updating the fundamental purpose of the Marine Corps and deliberately applying that lens to associated force-structure analysis was central to the success of the Marine Corps turnaround. However, this step, while vital, would have been insufficient if taken in isolation. The Marine Corps' ability to identify strategic and operational demand signals that resonated beyond the service was critical to the success of both the FSRG and the McKenzie Group. This ability closely linked the service to the FSRG's and McKenzie Group's analysis and findings. It allowed the service to move beyond theoretical debates on the likelihood of a future conflict requiring a major amphibious assault and focus on describing capabilities that provide senior civilian and military leaders with better options to address the short-term, real-world challenges they face, thereby winning support.

Positioning the Marine Corps as a forward-deployed crisis-response force firmly established it as a critical asset across the range of missions emphasized by both Pentagon leadership and the White House. The *2012 Defense Strategic Guidance* prioritized several missions aligning the Marine Corps' purpose with the nation's most pressing needs. This included conducting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, stability, and counterinsurgency operations, and providing a stabilizing presence abroad.<sup>12</sup> Service and DoD leadership witnessed the Marine Corps integrate within Operation Odyssey Dawn in 2011, where Marines provided sea-based contingency forces off the coast of Libya and ultimately led tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel mission as part

of the multinational operation.<sup>13</sup> The Marine Corps capabilities were effectively framed in terms of providing "a ready and capable force, even as [the DoD] reduce[s] ... overall capacity,"<sup>14</sup> to the national command authority.

The Marine Corps addressed the operational needs of combatant commanders, the primary users of the services' capabilities and a key reference point for establishing demand signals. The service focused its efforts to provide more effectively the geographic combatant commands with capabilities that met their crisis-response needs. Demand for the MEU, the Marine Corps' primary method for forward presence and crisis response, had never decreased while it engaged in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, gaps in presence brought on by deployments to those operations and availability problems with the Navy's amphibious shipping had limited supply. Further, the Marine Corps lacked the ability to link the value of MEUs with their core mission to effectively argue for necessary end strength and platforms.

In 2010, Marines of the 15th MEU and ships from the Navy's *Peleliu* Amphibious Readiness Group proved the value of MEU capabilities for crisis response. They simultaneously ran humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations in Pakistan; conducted counterpiracy operations by wresting back control of the *Magellan Star* from Somali pirates in the Gulf of Aden; and provided close-air support in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> Establishing the case for allocating end strength and ships with the MEU capability was, and remains, difficult. But aligning shipping capacity with today's operational demands reinforces the Marine Corps' relevance as an amphibious force. It also allows for the maintenance of capabilities used in a variety of missions including, hypothetically, amphibious assault.

The Marine Corps also recognized that an operational gap existed between its intent to provide the nation's "middleweight force" and how it provided component support to the joint force when it came to crisis response. In 2011, based on the findings of the FSRG, the Marine Corps began the force planning to create three new headquarters to command

U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sergeant Erik Cardenas



*In 2013, U.S. Marines with Battalion Landing Team 1/4 (BLT), 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit post security while an MV-22 Osprey takes off during an embassy reinforcement exercise at Arta Range.*

such a force, known as the Marine Expeditionary Brigades (MEB). Today, there are three regionally-oriented MEB headquarters – one on each coast and one in the Far East. The MEB headquarters are relatively small, flexible, and agile at the humanitarian assistance and crisis response range of military operations. In addition to the three MEB headquarters, the Marine Corps stood up a forward command element in Bahrain, capable of becoming an MEB command element to achieve U.S. Central Command objectives.<sup>16</sup> These joint task force-capable headquarters ensure that the Marine Corps maintain persistent links to the combatant commands to understand better their needs. They also position the Marine Corps to supply capabilities that meet those needs.

Perhaps the most high profile example of responding to operational demand is the establishment of the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response (SP-MAGTF-CR). Hastened by the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, the Marine Corps established SP-MAGTF-CR-Africa to better respond to crises on the continent of Africa. Just over seven months

after the Benghazi attacks, the Marine Corps fielded SP-MAGTF-CR-Africa based out of Moron, Spain. During this same time, planning began for another SP-MAGTF to support similar requirements in the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility, which became operational in September 2014. In the U.S. Africa Command area of responsibility, it did not take long to employ this new capability. In 2014 alone, SP-MAGTF-CR-Africa responded to the Ebola crisis in Liberia and conducted non-combatant evacuation operations in South Sudan and Tripoli, Lebanon.

Changing the Marine Corps' stated focus from large-scale amphibious assault to crisis response enabled it to establish immediate value in the eyes of senior leaders in Washington. Demonstrating this value lent further credibility to the Marine Corps' argument for end-strength based on a crisis-response mission focus. Further, the Marine Corps aligned its forces with the needs of the combatant commands and cement ongoing relationships, through permanent headquarters, ensuring an ongoing understanding of and response to operational demand.

## Force Structure and Concepts: Doing the Math

Despite the importance of higher-order considerations of mission and relevance, the FSRG and McKenzie Group were, at heart, force-structure review exercises tasked with enacting end-strength reductions. The Marine Corps had not undertaken a formal force-structure review since 1991.<sup>17</sup> As such, the force was a mix of structures and missions from the largely peaceful 1990s combined with rapid growth and organization for land-combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prior to the FSRG, the Marine Corps had an end-strength of 202,000, and a significant percentage of enlisted Marines had never been aboard a ship.

The result of the 2010 FSRG was a force design and structure driven by strategy and informed by the reality of future declining budgets. (The word “sequester” had yet to enter the defense budgeting lexicon in 2010.) The FSRG defined the optimal size of the Marine Corps’ active component to be 186,800. The FSRG reached this number by cutting infantry and artillery battalions along with reducing the number of aviation squadrons from 70 to 61. The FSRG also called for increasing Marine Corps Special Operations Command by more than 1,000 Marines and reorganized Marine Corps Logistics Groups to make them more responsive to the ground combat element. Lastly, the FSRG introduced the concept of regionally-focused MEB command elements to respond better to the needs of the combatant commanders – a move later emulated by the U.S. Army’s establishment of regionally-aligned brigades.<sup>18</sup>

The McKenzie Group continued the institutional innovation of the FSRG but went further, creatively analyzing and presenting force-structure options to senior leaders. One of the McKenzie Group’s guiding principles was to define the service’s limits, establishing the ways in which force structure and end strength fundamentally change the overall capability of the force. This principle was coupled with another – “reversibility” – to enable adaptability in force design. The McKenzie Group went through the rigorous process of determining the actual upper and lower limits of a Marine Corps

that was affordable under anticipated fiscal conditions, but could also deliver on its *raison d’être*. To this end, the McKenzie Group assessed early in its study that a Marine Corps at or below 150,000 was “incompatible with the roles, missions, and statutory demands on the Marine Corps.”<sup>19</sup> The upper limit of 182,000 considered by the McKenzie Group had already been set by the Marine Corps’ response to the *Defense Strategic Guidance* in 2012. Once the McKenzie Group had taken the important first step of defining and proving its lower limit, it then proceeded to design the force from the bottom up.

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It did so through a “deliberately designed systems approach to force design [by adding back] capacity in carefully considered and prioritized increments”<sup>20</sup> starting at the 150,000 force. This approach avoided a more linear, “à la carte” approach to force design – an approach that would likely result in imbalances between ground, aviation, logistics, and training elements – and not maximize the holistic capabilities of the entire Marine Corps air-ground task force as the force grew in size.<sup>21</sup> This concept, known as “reversibility,” established an outline for force growth between 150,000 and 182,000, which preserved “wholeness of the force while reducing risk and maintaining balance.”<sup>22</sup>

The McKenzie Group tested its force designs against three broad, essential mission sets: forward presence, crisis response, and major combat operations.<sup>23</sup> By proceeding with reversibility in mind, the McKenzie Group stretched the size of the force until they reached a point where the fundamental character of the force and its ability to accomplish the primary mission sets changed. By identifying these seams, the McKenzie Group

ultimately designed three distinct forces at varying end-strengths and capability – 150,000; 165,000; and 174,000 – each with its own character and capability of accomplishing the three essential mission sets. These three distinct end strengths were not just differently sized forces; they represented fundamentally different forces of unique character in terms of how they would organize, train, equip, and employ themselves.<sup>24</sup> By showing the end strength and risk calculi of different force options against an agreed crisis-response *raison d'être* the Marine Corps simultaneously strengthened their arguments and gained credibility with civilian decisionmakers.

The McKenzie Group also adjusted the variable of deploy-to-dwell time for its units from 1-to-3 (the FSRG solution with 186,800 active-duty Marines) to 1-to-2 (the 182,100 model in response to the 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance*) in order to deliver on the Marine Corps roles and missions while working within an acceptable end-strength budget. By making known the significance of these variables and their net effects on readiness, the Marine Corps achieved the objectives of civilian leadership while obliging them to make an informed decision based on clearly articulated risk.

At the end of the McKenzie review, the Marine Corps had developed a contingency plan that included several force-structure options depending on just how low budgets would go under the mechanism of sequestration. The highest end strength the McKenzie Group proffered was 174,000 (though just 12 months later, the 2014 *QDR* stated that the Marine Corps should continue to plan for an end strength of 182,100 by fiscal year 2017). More importantly, the McKenzie review provided the Marine Corps with an analytic basis from which to make effective end strength arguments, whether that be reversing cuts, growing end strength if tasked with new missions, or reducing structure appropriately if directed to make further cuts. The value of this capability was proven when the Marines successfully argued for 1,000 additional structure spaces when tasked to increase security at U.S. embassies worldwide in 2013 rather than having to reassign those billets from existing forces.<sup>25</sup>

The value of this analytic method, started by the FSRG and perfected by the McKenzie Group, cannot be overstated. Completing multiple force-planning processes required the Marine Corps to develop a clear list of priorities with respect to “buying back” capability and capacity. Should the demand for more force structure in the Marine Corps increase due to major conflict, or if further budget pressure forces even more structure cuts, the sheet music for such expansion and contraction scenarios already exists out of the McKenzie Group’s work.

The Marine Corps now has a current, detailed understanding of their force and the end strength associated with specific missions. The ability to model the force internally is critical for analysis and development of creative force-sizing options and simultaneously provides the basis for credible and transparent conversations with external stakeholders and leaders. Marine Corps decisionmakers must remain mindful that this is a perishable capability. If not updated regularly, the data and process will lose relevance, and the Marine Corps runs the risk of losing detailed institutional knowledge about its force and the methods employed by the McKenzie Group.

## Strategic Communication: Getting the Message Right

The prior divergence of opinion between the Marine Corps and others regarding the military utility and vision for it had created a perception challenge that went beyond the specific merits of one force sizing construct over another. The Marine Corps had been branded simultaneously as filling a mission too similar to the Army while pursuing an outdated and unnecessary vision of amphibious operations. These perceptions added unhelpful focus and pressure on top of the real institutional and fiscal issues the Marine Corps needed to address, increasing distrust and potentially stifling innovation.

The FSRG and the McKenzie Group processes and analysis developed strong concepts and recommendations that allowed Marine Corps leadership to argue among themselves – behind closed



doors – make decisions, get on the same page, and develop a consistent mission and end strength message for the outside world. While consistent messaging is more easily achievable in a smaller force, after the work of the FSRG and McKenzie Group communication from senior Marine Corps leaders has been striking when compared to other services. Establishing an effective message to support rigorous analysis and institutional innovation significantly contributed to addressing the Marine Corps' real and perceived public-affairs and relational challenges and enabled its rapid turnaround.

The FSRG contextualized the future operating environment and the Marine Corps' purpose and nature within it in a manner congruent with the broader national security establishment. In many ways, since it formed the basis for the Marine Corps messaging, the clear context the FSRG provided to both service-level and senior civilian decisionmakers was of greater benefit to the Marine Corps than defining an optimal size for the force or a detailed unit-by-unit listing of what that optimal force would look like.

In addition to fulfilling its explicit mission, the FSRG established an analytic baseline for future analysis. The McKenzie Group worked from this same theme in 2013. And in his 2015 *Force Posture Statement* before the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, Commandant of the Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford maintained that the preferred size of the Marine Corps is 186,800 – the exact number set forth by the FSRG in 2010.<sup>26</sup>

Most importantly, the work of the FSRG and McKenzie Group allowed the Marine Corps to shift their messaging into high gear – something the service pursued methodically based on an analysis of key opinionmakers both inside and outside of the Pentagon. Particularly in the case of the force-sizing options presented by the McKenzie Group in a time of extreme fiscal pressure, the messaging to civilian decisionmakers synchronized the service's reason for existence, its role in the future joint force, and unemotional risk assessments of the various force sizes. This ultimately resulted in a clear presentation of choices for senior DoD leaders

as well as Congress for budgeting and other, key decision points, such as the 2014 *QDR* using well-defined and practical terms that senior decisionmakers understood and valued. This clear and reasoned analysis was then ably amplified by the Marine Corps' traditional skill of using highly credible officers as spokespersons inside the Beltway and highlighting the work of forward-deployed Marines in ways that supported the concept of the Marine Corps as a crisis-response force.

In this way, the Marine Corps was able to link its innovative analytic work with effective bureaucratic agility to successfully sell its vision and force-structure arguments. The message was only effective because of the quality of the process. Had the Marine Corps unsuccessfully promoted its efforts, it may have continued to face the same perception challenges. Successful messaging and communication was a core component of the Marine Corps' institutional innovation and rapid turnaround. As a result, the Marine Corps was able to successfully address its formal tasking while allowing the critical gaze of the Pentagon, White House, Congress, and the media to move on to other services and issues.

This outcome stems from the Marine Corps presenting clear options to its civilian leadership, with well-defined articulation of risks, which further solidified a healthy civil-military relationship.



U.S. Marine Corps

*While deployed to Southwest Asia in 2015, Marines with India Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force—Crisis Response—Central Command, conduct fast rope training from an MV-22 Osprey.*

### ENABLING FURTHER INNOVATION

Shifting the focus of the Marine Corps' raison d'être created a context and impetus for follow-up innovation that is already yielding practical results and new capabilities. Interestingly, these various efforts have not been implemented as part of any particular innovation initiative but are flowing naturally from extant organizations executing on previously assigned tasks within an improved strategic context. Some of these innovations are breathing new life into pre-existing investments, such as the MV-22 Osprey. Other innovations seek to address gaps and risks the Marine Corps faces in fulfilling its newly articulated purpose.

About seven months after the 2012 Benghazi attacks, the Marine Corps fielded Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force for Crisis Response in Africa (SPMAGTF-CR-AF). During this same time, planning began for another SP-MAGTF to support similar requirements in the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility (SPMAGTF-CR-CENT), which became operational in September 2014. Acknowledging the ongoing paucity of shipping to support traditional amphibious operations, these units were novel because they provided a degree of crisis-response capability utilizing the reach of the MV-22 Osprey. They also represented an unfortunate departure from seabasing via Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) – the Marine Corps' preferred method of providing forward presence and crisis response. Most recently, this capability has led to the decision to experiment with placing elements of the SPMAGTF-CR-AF on board British, Spanish, French, and Dutch amphibious shipping.<sup>27</sup> Not only are SPMAGTFs being rolled out in new locations (U.S. Southern Command is next), but they are forcing new innovations at the tactical level such as Persistent Close Air Support (PCAS). The PCAS program is sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Program Agency and focuses on technologies to enable shared real-time situational awareness between air and ground sensors, shooters, and terminal air controllers.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond the SP-MAGTF, the Marine Corps is actively developing concepts for distributed operations using the short take-off and vertical landing (STOVL) capabilities of the F-35B, especially in an anti-access, area-denial environment. The Marine Corps is in active pursuit of true “digital interoperability” referring to the

seamless integration of systems and exchange of data across all domains and networks throughout Marine, naval, joint, and coalition forces in degraded or denied environments. Such “interoperability” enables forces to share rapidly accurate information, provides greater situational awareness to commanders and decision-makers, accelerates the kill chain, and enhances survivability.

Additional experimentation is taking place within each Marine Corps expeditionary force to further investigate how best to command, operate, and sustain a highly distributed force – a reality of a forward-deployed crisis-response posture. The Marine Corps has started to experiment with concepts like an integrated headquarters of both Navy and Marine Corps personnel, as well as with non-traditional platforms in an amphibious environment. These experiments took place at exercises such as Bold Alligator on the East Coast and Dawn Blitz on the West Coast. Even at the Infantry Officer Course for aspiring infantry lieutenants, experiments utilizing unmanned aerial systems to provide improved situational awareness during long-range raids have become commonplace – normalizing the concept of experimentation among the service’s youngest members.<sup>29</sup>



U.S. Marine Corps

*Marines with Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Crisis Response take cover from debris blasted by an MV-22B Osprey after being dropped off July 29, 2013, before a bilateral live-fire training event with the Spanish army at the Principe Training Camp in Spain. The Marines and sailors of SP-MAGTF Crisis Response provide a limited-defense crisis response capability in support of U.S. and partnership security interests within their area of responsibility and also participate in training events with regional partners.*

## Innovation is Not a Panacea

While the Marine Corps' recent institutional innovation has been highly beneficial, it has not been perfect or solved all Marine Corps challenges, and the positive gains have not yet been locked in for the future. The changes proposed over the last five years are still being implemented, and some major risks have yet to be mitigated. At the same time, long-standing issues requiring innovation have yet to receive similar focus or be aligned with the thinking outlined by the FSRG and McKenzie Group.

### Risks Remain

It is unfortunate that the Marine Corps had to go to such lengths to effectively reset their purpose and end strength in the first place. Theoretically, the planning, programming, budgeting, and execution process, including the *National Military Strategy*, *Defense Planning Guidance*, and *QDR*, along with additional other standing institutional processes and analyses, provide a basis for all services to establish their missions and end strengths on an ongoing basis. The FSRG and McKenzie Group were informed by and designed to inform these formal processes. However, the fact that the Marine Corps had to establish special review groups to align their mission and end strength with higher order guidance implies that it lacks effective processes to respond to the Office of the Secretary of Defense on a regular, procedural basis and means that ongoing risks remain for the Marine Corps.

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**Failure to fully implement the concepts will mean that the FSRG, McKenzie Group, and associated concept development were more marketing efforts than meaningful reform initiatives.**

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The FSRG and McKenzie Group were designed to address high-level issues and depended on access to and support from the commandant and assistant commandant to be effective. General Amos, with significant input from Generals Dunford and

Paxton, provided the top-level leadership, management, and focus necessary for these groups to accomplish their missions and ultimately lead the Marine Corps through a fiscally and operationally tumultuous time. With the wrong senior leaders in place, future force-structure reviews or institutional innovation efforts could easily fail or be crushed under the weight of bureaucracy. Or, future leaders could easily reject the methods and analyses of the FSRG and McKenzie Group.

The Marine Corps must ensure it retains the ability to undertake similar institutional innovation in the future. With strategic and fiscal uncertainty becoming the new normal, especially for ground forces, the Marine Corps will almost certainly need to undertake similar analysis again in the near term. It had been 19 years since the Marine Corps' last major force-structure review, and the composition of the FSRG reflected the urgency of the task. The FSRG, while effective, was inefficient, requiring significant staffing and liaising between the FSRG and an executive steering committee comprised of practically every three-star general in the Marine Corps. By the time the McKenzie Group was formed it had 23 members and a relatively direct line to the commandant. The Marine Corps should not have to relearn these lessons in 19 years; instead, it should task a headquarters element to retain that procedural knowledge, test its end strength calculus regularly, and maintain trusted relationships outside of the Marine Corps to understand demand signals and provide compelling capability options.

### New Risks

The Marine Corps designed the FSRG and McKenzie Group to undertake top-down analysis, with the primary audience being civilian policymakers in Washington. While necessary to achieve their missions, this approach meant that subsequent innovation triggered by the two groups has yet to be fully implemented across the force. The service has yet to develop fundamental aspects of command and control and logistics to enable the kinds of operational aggregation and disaggregation assumed by Marine Corps leadership.



U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sergeant Mike Meares



*In Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, U.S. Marines with the Assault Amphibious Vehicle Platoon, Combat Assault Company, 3rd Marine Regiment make their way to amphibious assault ship USS Essex (LHD 2) during Rim of the Pacific 2012 exercise.*

Failure to mitigate these risks could compromise the operational efficacy of the force. Failure to fully implement the concepts will mean that the FSRG, McKenzie Group, and associated concept development were more marketing efforts than meaningful reform initiatives.

On the readiness front, since the Marine Corps decided to build a force based on the McKenzie Group's recommended deploy-to-dwell model ratio of 1-to-2, the service has biased itself toward forward presence in exchange for readiness for full-spectrum operations. Readiness for full-spectrum operations would require an acceptable level of readiness for all possible missions, regardless of where a particular unit may be in their deploy-to-dwell cycle: deployed or training at home. The current challenge of equipment readiness further exacerbates challenges in maintaining readiness for full-spectrum. Given the high utilization rates of equipment in Iraq and Afghanistan, today training suffers as this equipment goes through the reset process necessary for future use.<sup>30</sup>

This new force model can also negatively impact a unit's collective training. While there is time on the calendar for a unit to train between deployments, most units are not completely stabilized with full complements of personnel until later stages of their dwell cycle.<sup>31</sup> The result is a force that is proficient, ready, and present only for its most anticipated missions on a predetermined schedule. This result is obviously incongruent with the Marine Corps ethos of being "ready to fight tonight" in any clime and place. For a force spread thin by design under normal operational circumstances, this reality requires innovation in how the service trains and manages its personnel.

### **Long-Standing Challenges**

The FSRG and McKenzie Group focused on innovation associated with the purpose of the Marine Corps and its force structure. While critical, these are not the only challenges the Marine Corps must address, as is evident when considering ongoing issues with platform capacity and capability modernization.



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**It remains to be seen whether the work to recast the service represents the vanguard of effective thinking on force design or was merely a positive aberration based on favorable circumstances inside the Marine Corps between 2010 and 2014.**

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The Marine Corps continues to deal with an insufficient number of amphibious ships that are ready to sail and adequately provide an enduring and expeditionary presence to the geographic combatant commanders. Lack of shipping capacity has been well documented and, given the need to provide an adequate forward presence and crisis-response capability from the sea,<sup>32</sup> is forcing even more operational innovation to take place between the Navy and the Marine Corps. With this gap of ready amphibious shipping keeping the Marine Corps off the sea combined with a planned increase in the number of SP-MAGTFs, the service runs the risk of being viewed as another land army or competing with Special Operations Command.

Another long-standing challenge remains: The Marine Corps is still in search of its ship-to-shore personnel carrier of the future – just as it was in 2010 with the EFV. Since the cancelation of the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle program in late 2010, the Marine Corps has modified its approach and incrementally revised its requirements for a replacement to its aging fleet of Amphibious Assault Vehicles (AAVs).

The latest program, the Amphibious Combat Vehicle (ACV), contains various decision points to both modernize the aging AAV fleet while simultaneously developing a follow-on vehicle. Modern combat vehicles have befuddled the Marine Corps for years, pitting the service's expeditionary culture of being able to deploy its ground power ashore rapidly against the affordability and physics of building an amphibious vehicle that can attain high water speeds and remain survivable once engaged in combat on land. The Marine Corps must get the Amphibious Combat Vehicle right since any replacement to the AAV will be costly.

In sum, while the institutional innovation undertaken by the Marine Corps enabled a significant turnaround, these efforts do not solve all the Corps' challenges, have not been fully implemented, may not be repeatable in the future, and arguably should not have been necessary in the first place. The Marine Corps must, therefore, continue to implement the institutional innovation of recent years while learning lessons to apply to other areas of force design and maintaining a standing capability to undertake similar initiatives in the future.

## Conclusion

The work of the FSRG and the McKenzie group, enabled and supported by senior leaders in the Marine Corps, was central to the service's institutional innovation. Using multiple tools in a cohesive process that oriented the Marines to widely recognized needs, the service executed a rapid turnaround in how the Office of the Secretary of Defense and peers viewed it. In addition to important immediate benefits for end strength and funding, the Marine Corps developed a repeatable method with the potential to help guide it through an extended period of strategic and fiscal uncertainty.

At the same time, it remains to be seen whether the work to recast the service represents the vanguard of effective thinking on force design or was merely a positive aberration based on favorable circumstances inside the Marine Corps between 2010 and 2014. Much of the risk and unfinished business remaining for the Marine Corps is part and parcel of the day-to-day work required to manage an effective military service. But the nature of the U.S. domestic political environment combined with a dynamic global threat environment means that previous management processes might be insufficient in the coming years.

All U.S. military services and the militaries of many U.S. allies will continue to face institutional uncertainty in the coming years as a result of a rapidly changing security environment and downward fiscal pressure. Those institutions able to prudently adapt their focus, missions, and force structure will be best placed to contribute to the nation's security

and remain true to their historical legacies. Those that hold literally to narrow, convenient interpretations of historic missions, concepts, or force structure will face intractable bureaucratic fights, running the risk of irrelevance or ceding decisions about cuts to policymakers less expert in force design.

Concomitantly, ongoing fiscal pressure and operational needs continue to force DoD and the services to find creative solutions to structural challenges, driving demand for new sources of innovation, as evidenced by DoD's outreach to Silicon Valley. On the surface, these efforts are intended to address technological needs. But they also show a deeper desire to capture the ineffable qualities that make Silicon Valley innovation appear so effortless and fruitful from the outside.

The DoD and the services should pursue vigorously this quest for new sources of innovation. However, they should also proceed thoughtfully or run the risk of wasting effort, implementing inappropriate concepts, and potentially overlooking innovation from within.

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