

General Eric M. Smith
Commandant, USMC

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Moderator: Good morning everybody and welcome to an incredibly special Defense Writers Group. General Eric M. Smith, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps. I love the cliché, someone who needs no introduction. That's certainly the Commandant.

The ground rules, as always, this is on the record. Please record for accuracy of quotes, but there's no rebroadcast of audio or video. I'll ask the first question per our protocol, but a dozen of you emailed me in advance and you're on the list for questions. If we get through those we'll go around the table for the hour.

Once again, Commandant, thank you so much for joining us, sir.

General Smith: Well thanks for having me. And thanks for what you do. Thanks for reporting. It's vital, it really is. I'm not just saying that. It is vital that you report and keep us honest.

Moderator: I love hearing that. Thank you, sir.

My opening question, General. In your Commandant's Planning Guidance you emphasize that the Amphibious Ready Group and Marine Expeditionary Unit-- it's the Marine Corps' premier force offering, of course. And your obligations to the combatant commanders are really serious and you promised them a 3.0 deployment -- one from the East Coast, one from the West, one from Japan. But the GAO said in December that poor material condition is really impacting and hindering Marine deployments and training.

Talk if you would, sir, about the importance of sustaining that 3.0, and how you'll get past poor material condition, kind of what that means in the real world, if you would, sir.

General Smith: The first is easy. The importance of a 3.0 ARG/MEU presence, one off the East Coast, one off the West Coast, and the 31st MEU out of Okinawa is that crises don't avail themselves to anyone's timeline. I've evacuated two embassies

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in my life. One in Monrovia, Liberia; and one in Freetown, Sierra Leone and they happen when they happen. They required evacuation and they required it immediately. When an ARG/MEU is not present, it puts Americans at risk. It puts the combatant commander at a disadvantage because he doesn't have a credible, capable combat force that's capable of spanning the ROMO -- the Range of Military Operations. From disaster relief, Tomodachi; to crisis response, again, non-combatant evacuation operations; to full-out combat operations as you've seen in the Red Sea against the Houthi threat.

So without having that ARG/MEU present, you don't have it. I mean you simply don't have it. It is a binary choice. You either have an ARG/MEU present or you don't. And the poor material readiness condition of our amphibs has hindered that, something that Admiral Franchetti and I are both committed to fixing. She's committed to an 80 percent A sub O, 80 percent readiness, but our current readiness is in the 40th percentile. So what that tells me is if we can't get the readiness rate up, then we need more amphibs. Right now we're mandated at 31 as a minimum -- key word minimum -- by law. A minimum of 31. Ten big decks and 21 LPDs.

Moderator: Thank you, sir.

The first question from the floor, Meredith Roaten of Janes.

DWG: Thanks for doing this.

I wanted to ask about a vehicle that was put on its first deployment last year, the ATV. It achieved some big milestones last year. Are you comfortable with the level of safety that that vehicle has right now? And what do you think is contributing the most [inaudible] vehicle upgrades, the new training [inaudible].

General Smith: I'm 100 percent comfortable with the vehicle. It's a good vehicle. It's a safe vehicle when it's operated within its parameters. If you operate the vehicle -- there's no vehicle that is inherently safe or unsafe. You have to operate it within its parameters. So when you operate it in 12 foot plunging surf as we have done in the case of California, then it's not going to perform. It's designed to perform in a certain sea state with certain mean wave heights and certain mean currents. I won't get into those in the unclassified

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world. But when you operate it outside of its parameters, then you have incidents. That's what we had out at Camp Pendleton.

But I'm completely comfortable with the craft. The technology is proven. We've got to get the readiness rates up and that's something that we're working with BAE on to get the struts and the shocks to not be corroded -- new word -- Texas A&M graduate --don't use that please. Corrosive resistant or use corroded. We have to improve the quality of those parts and that's part of our firm fixed price contract with BAE and they're working hard on that. I just met with the President of BAE, it's been a few months. But I'm going to go back to the plant and walk the line again and thank the individuals who build the vehicle because they do a good job.

DWG: And are operations in the surf zone permitted at all at this point?

General Smith: Yes. Yes, they are. They are permitted. We have to make sure that the crews are trained, that the embarked crews are trained, and we have a crawl/walk/run planning methodology that if you're going to get in the back of a vehicle and transit through the surf zone, either coming or going, coming from shore and going out to a ship or coming back from a ship to the shore, the crews in the back have to be trained. They have to go through a shallow water egress trainer, they have to go through swim qualifications. You know, you have to make sure the minimum safety parameters are met. You have to understand how to use a HEEDs bottle -- I forget the acronym, but a HEEDs bottle. Basically your small oxygen tank. Yave to make sure they understand how to use a kapok inflatable life preserver. And how to properly exit that craft should it roll in the surf.

DWG: Thank you.

Moderator: Next is Eric Schmitt, New York Times.

DWG: Thank you.

I wanted to ask you a little bit about yesterday's hearing on the Hill, if you watched any of it, in particular about Mr. Hegseth's clear focus on, if he's confirmed to be Defense Secretary of the Trump administration, to scale back DEI programs in the Defense Department. I wanted to ask you about

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any reaction you had to the hearing, but more specifically, do you think there are DEI programs that have been in place over the last few years that could be scaled back to improve readiness, combat effectiveness in the military and particularly in the Corps?

General Smith: I'll be candid. I didn't watch the hearings precisely because to me it doesn't matter. The SecDef is going to be the SecDef. He will be or she will be approved by the Senate, appointed by the President.

As far as DEI, the Marine Corps has not had DEI programs. We have a meritocracy-based system. You can be anything you want to be. If you're a Sophie Mundell you can be an artillery officer as long as you can sling a 95-pound shell and you meet the physical standards, you meet the academic rigorous standards, you can be anything you want. If you're Jasmin Moghbeli, you can be a Cobra pilot. If you're Nicole Mann you can be an F-18 pilot and a NASA astronaut. Both of those two ladies happen to be NASA astronauts.

We don't do DEI in the Marine Corps, we never have. We're a meritocracy-based organization. We always have been. If you want to apply for an MOS, strap on your pack, grab your rifle and make a run at it.

Moderator: Meghann Myers, Defense One.

DWG: I wanted to ask you a question about [A sub O], about some of the milestones you guys met last year, what's on tap for this year and what some of the challenges might be this year in meeting those scheduled milestones.

General Smith: I'll tell you, the challenges are going to be funding. With a continually delayed budget we're losing years on force design, so I'll use this as a segue and I'll come back to your question.

Whenever we have Continuing Resolutions we're capped at the previous year's spending numbers, and that doesn't get you ahead of the pacing threat of the PRC who is moving at a cyclic rate. So we're on track to meet force design. We are standing up MLRs, the Marine Littoral Regiments. We're constantly looking to determine how many of them we need, how many of them and where they'll be positioned. 4th MLR at Okinawa; 3rd MLR out of

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Hawaii. We're constantly looking at adjusting the MLRs and making sure that they are designed or that they're executing what we designed them to do which is to be low signature, highly mobile, aggregatable, long-range precision strike regimes that have the ability to sense, make sense and take action before action needs to be taken. So that's basically my answer to that.

DWG: What are some of the things that are, some of the goals for this year? And has anything slipped from last year because of funding?

General Smith: What I would say has slipped is our NMESIS, our Navy/Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System. We've got to build the magazine depth to be able to use that. Our littoral landing -- landing ship medium. That has slipped. We've got to get that built. We've got to get that put on contract. We've got to find the right solution to give ourselves littoral maneuverability, the littoral mobility within the First Island Chain.

And our TPS-80 G/ATOR radar is a success story. That thing has proven itself beyond its original capabilities. But now we have to make sure that that radar is ready, not tied down to any one theater. And I'll be candid. It's been a little bit tied down in the Korean theater because it's such a good ballistic missile defense system. We have to free it up to be able to operate throughout the First Island Chain.

Moderator: I love the names -- NMESIS, G/ATOR, it's like out of a Marvel movie.

General Smith: I'm telling you, we have somebody who thinks that through.

Moderator: I could that job for you, just let me know.

General Smith: You could.

Moderator: Anton LaGuardia of The Economist.

DWG: Thank you. I want to go back to Eric's question about Hegseth's testimony. One of the things he said was that all generals would be required, would be reassessed for their competence, lethality [phonetic], and willingness to obey

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orders. Does that give you a concern?

General Smith: No. I serve at the pleasure of the President. I can be dismissed at any time, so I serve at the pleasure of the President as do all officers. In fact that's at the end of your documents, that you'll obey all lawful orders from the President, and we all serve at the pleasure of the President. So there's no guarantee to work within the Marine Corps, within the military, and I'm not worried about it at all.

Moderator: Jeff Schogol, Task & Purpose.

DWG: On a slightly different subject, do you foresee any circumstances in the coming years in which Marines can grow beards?

General Smith: No. We have a waiver process now for pseudofolliculitis barbae. That's a medical waiver. It's not a fashion waiver. It's not a well I decided I wanted to. It's a medical waiver that's for pseudofolliculitis barbae.

DWG: Can I follow up? Why?

General Smith: Because we're Marines and we're different. The Marine Corps has a brand and we're making our recruiting mission, we've always made our recruiting mission, and what we don't want to do is tinker with the ethos of the Marine Corps. You joined us, we didn't join you. You knew that coming in. You signed up. We don't have beards and you knew that coming in. Not that I have anything wrong with your beard, sir.

DWG: No offense taken.

General Smith: And when I retire, I'm going to grow one. When I retire, I'm going to try one out. But I will be retired, so I won't have to deal with a gas mask.

Moderator: Following on the theme of beards, Chris Gordon, Air & Space Forces Magazine.

DWG: Sir, as you highlighted, the Marines have your force design; the Air Force now has what it calls force design; the Army and the Navy also, future operating concepts. They're broadly calling for more disbursed operations.

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So we've now got multiple future concepts. The services are now calling them the same name, even if they're slightly different. So my question is, who is putting this all together so all these future concepts actually work together between services in practice.?

General Smith: The Chairman does, and the Joint Staff, to the Joint Warfighting Concept. The JWC is something that we all have to fit under. It's something that we all have to contribute to and all the Joint Chiefs talk obviously under the leadership and the direction of the Chairman, Chairman Brown. We are all seeing the same threats, we're all seeing the same threats from the PRC as a pacing threat. And we're all attempting to modernize to meet that threat. We're all doing it slightly different ways, but the theme is the same. That we have to have longer range, we have to have lower signature, we have to have more lethality, and we have to be more distributed and more disbursed.

DWG: Are you planning to exercise any of this with other services? You know, specifically focused on these concepts, so things will actually fit together and you're not just in the same general location, you know, all starting with the same goal. But it actually works.

General Smith: We do that through joint wargames. Those are run by the Joint Staff, run out of the Pentagon. So we do see how they all fit together, and we do that through the Combatant Commanders' Exercise Program. Each set of COCOMs has their own set of exercises that they run. Things like Balikatan in the Philippines bringing together the Army, the Navy, the Air Force and the Marine Corps. And at the end of that we do a hot wash and we scrub and see how did we fit together, where do we overlap, where do we maybe have a little bit too much, maybe not enough. Then we go back in the Tank and the Joint Chiefs meetings and discuss that. Obviously that's run through the Deputy Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Defense.

Moderator: Jack Detsch, Politico.

DWG: I'm curious, your predecessor talked about the maintenance on the F-35 being too expensive. I'm curious what you think and can we continue to afford it, is it jeopardizing the program going forward?

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General Smith: Well maintenance is too expensive, but what I would offer to you that I was told when I was a young lieutenant, that most of the maintenance we do is because of the maintenance we do. Meaning if you find there's a light out, one of your landing lights it out in the wing, so you go and you open up the wing and you replace the light. And you notice that some of the rivets might need to be replaced. They're good for another 500 hours, but you're already in there so you might as well go ahead and replace them. So you open up a new work order and you had 500 more hours before you had to do that. So I was taught by Chris McPhillips, who is my Deputy, call sign McFly -- an F-35 pilot when I was 3 MEF, most of the maintenance we do is because of the maintenance we do.

So I am concerned about the cost of maintenance of the F-35. I'm always concerned about its readiness rates. I'm always concerned about getting it back into the fight quickly. But I'm concerned about the next 50 hours, not the next 500 hours, if that makes any sense.

DWG: Got it.

Moderator: John Harper, Defense Scoop.

DWG: I wanted to ask you about generative AI. Last month the Deputy Commandant for Information put out some new guidance on that but things seem kind of preliminary for the Marine Corps, but DoD writ large.

From your perspective at this point, what potential use cases do you see for that technology for the Marine Corps? Is it more like back office stuff? Is it warfighting? And what concerns do you have about integrating that technology in the force and using it for your own purposes?

General Smith: I don't have any concerns about integrating it into the force, mostly because I'm not a digital -- I'm a digital immigrant. My Marines are digital natives. They grew up with an iPhone 14 in their hands. I grew up with a cord.

So the young Marines will figure out how to use that, and they're the ones that are telling us how to do it. They're completely comfortable with generative AI. With machine-to-machine learning. They're completely comfortable with using a pad and doing targeting off a pad and passing that targeting

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data ubiquitously across the force through a sensor cloud and then down to another user through geo satellites. They're completely comfortable with that.

So I don't have any concerns about that other than the security of our communications links because that is something that I know, I just spoke to General Hawk about, and I talked to the Marines at USCYBERCOM, most recently Will Williamson, that I have concerns about are our security layers. But you have to operate. You can't be so defensive that you can't use your systems. So that's the best I can do on that one.

DWG: As you explore this technology, do you envision starting off just having the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab kind of play around with it? Do you want to just integrate it into some of your larger scale exercises? And do you anticipate there will need to be any force restructuring to integrate these technologies? Or is it more just sort of like when you get a new drone you don't necessarily need new units or --

General Smith: What you just said at the end is accurate. We're not going to reorganize based on AI. We are going to use the tools that are available, and we use the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab along with the Deputy Commandant for Information to make sure Jerry Carter, to make sure that what is out there is utilized by us.

What I don't want to do is I don't want to pay the S&T costs, I don't want to pay the R&D costs. I just want to take off-the-shelf technology and have my Marines use it because the off-the-shelf technology is better than anything that I can come up with. It's not a matter of the DoD having to lead this effort. It's a matter of being a fast follower.

Moderator: Brian Everstine, Aviation Week.

DWG: An MV-22 question. There have been some pretty stringent restrictions on the fleet passed down by NAVAIR. What has the operational impact been? You have MV-22s deployed right now while there are [inaudible] management type issues on their computer box, the diversion limitations. What is the long term operational impact of these restrictions?

General Smith: The real issue will be if we don't get all of the restrictions lifted -- right now we're able to operate the

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aircraft with the prop rotor gear boxes, checking it X number of hours. I think it's 400 hours, don't quote me on that.

DWG: Eight hundred.

General Smith: Eight hundred.

We have to make sure our pilots are safe to fly. We're able to operate out of Djibouti. We've got a waiver for that. We have to make sure that our pilots are safe to fly. You don't do that only through a simulator. The first time that you land on a pitching, rolling deck at night should not be the first time you land on a pitching rolling deck. Meaning you should do it on a flat sea, calm sea, calm deck. Then you do it with pitching and rolling. Then you drift into night. Then you drift into pitching and rolling at night.

So my concern is if we continue to have groundings, then we're not going to have ready pilots. And when the balloon goes up and we're called forward, those groundings are going to be lifted due to operational necessity. There's already a clause in there that operational necessity can waive that and we'd doing that in Djibouti and we're flying without incident in Djibouti. We've been flying without incident in Djibouti for quite some time.

The MV-22 is the safest airplane we fly. When you look at mishaps per 100,000 flight hours, the only thing that has a better safety record is a KC-130. Period, stop. So I'll fly in the aircraft tomorrow. In fact I'm about to fly in, and I think when I'm going overseas here pretty soon. So it's the safest airplane we fly.

DWG: On that point, I've seen statistics from the Naval Safety Center, but the V-22 broadly has the highest [inaudible] ABC and I think [inaudible] the past couple of years. Related to the [inaudible] issues.

Broadly, the Marine Corps seems to have a different approach across the program. The Air Force prompted the groundings over the past couple of years, whereas the Marine Corps kind of, I don't want say forced, but was kind of later in that process. What is the difference here? Why are you --

General Smith: Yeah, we --

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DWG: -- differently than the other operators?

General Smith: It's our primary workhorse. It is our aviation fleet. And we know that airplane better than anybody. We've got more flight hours flying that airplane than anybody. Our pilots are comfortable with it. I'm comfortable with it. And our experience with it, we've flown it in combat, we've flown it in Afghanistan, we flew it in Iraq. We have a lot of experience with that aircraft and we are 100 percent comfortable with that aircraft.

Moderator: I was in Djibouti once with Robin Williams on a USO Tour with the Chairman. Robin Williams said, Djibouti may not be the end of the world, but you can see it from here.

General Smith: Yep, Djibouti is at the end of the earth.

Moderator: Drew Lawrence, Military.com.

DWG: This is a question about logistics in the IndoPacific. 2027 is a big number on the calendar. I'm wondering if the Marine Corps had to use the -- and when I say logistics assets here I'm talking about strategic and operational ones. Things to move Marine supplies, equipment, to where they need to go for a kinetic fight.

If the Marine Corps had to use those logistics assets it has now in their current state for a conflict with China in 2027, would it be successful? If not, what's the solution? How do you get there in two years? And if so, how would these --

General Smith: We would be successful because I depend on the Navy to make those ships ready. And Admiral Franchetti and I, there's an Optimized Fleet Response Plan, OFRP; there's conditions under which ships can get made to go underway; and those conditions can be waived for combat. So I am convinced that when push comes to shove, ships will deploy, maintenance will be done, and we will have the logistics assets that we need. But it's incumbent upon us, this is something I've always said, to need less, to be able to 3D print and additive manufacture our parts forward. We've got some forward staging bases in the Philippines that we use. We've got the ability to procure contracting officers. There's no shortage of gas or food or water in the First Island Chain. It's just a matter of

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having somebody come with the right checkbook to buy things. It's just the spare parts. And that's going to come from additive manufacturing and 3D printing.

I keep saying this like I'm a broken record, but we have to own the tech data rights to our own products. Right now Lockheed Martin owns tech data rights on the F-35. We have to own those so that I can 3D print and additive manufacture. Because most of the things that down an aircraft are small. They're small rivets. It's not a leading wing edge. It's not a fan blade in an F-35. It's a small rivet that goes bad, or it's a small electrical connector that goes bad. And I can 3D print and additive manufacture that, and I can do that forward so I don't need to cross the tyranny of distance of the Pacific.

DWG: You mentioned the 40 percentile with the amphibs, you know, talking about bringing solutions. Any other solutions in terms of that operational transportation of troops, equipment and supplies? Where's the Marine Corps need to get in the next couple of years?

General Smith: Well, where we need to get is we need to get our amphibs back up, so I'm not willing to let my foot off that gas. We have to get our amphibs up to 80 percent [A sub O]. The CNO and I are both committed to that, and it's just a matter of time. So rather than pursue a short term solution, I'm focused on allowing the CNO to spend her money and her maintenance dollars on fixing those amphibs because they're tried and true, a proven capability, and they are survivable because there are some classified programs that make the entire fleet more survivable than we get credit for.

Moderator: Nick Schiffrin, PBS Newshour.

DWG: One question going back to Hegseth, and then one about force design.

Per the early questions about Hegseth, I just wanted to now ask a different version of it. It appears as though from the outside there's only two visions, two versions of the military being described in public today, not just the Marines. You've got the Secretary, the Chairman, others, describing a military that has, as it's gotten more lethal has also gotten more inclusive. Has also become, to quote Hegseth yesterday, more unified and therefore more strong.

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You've got this vision from the incoming President and Hegseth now in which the validity has gone down, and all of the other efforts to talk about sexual assault, talk about BDI, diversity, let's just call it, how taken away from the military. And it does seem to be like two militaries that people are talking about. So I just wonder which of those versions of the military you think would actually happen.

General Smith: What I would say is the Marine Corps is a lethal fighting force. The Marine Corps hasn't changed our standards. We haven't and we won't. Won't lower our standards.

What I know is you can't recruit a hundred percent of your force from fifty percent of your population. The math just doesn't work. The propensity to serve is going down. It is going down. That's a fact. And that's an annual study, an annual survey that asks young people, would you consider the military as a career. That number is going down. Again, what I know is you can't get 100 percent of your force from 50 percent of the population. That math just doesn't work. So there you go.

DWG: It sounds like you're endorsing the idea that Hegseth said yesterday which is about standards for the Marines, it's about maintaining standards. But at the same time you do have to figure out how to reach out to people who wouldn't otherwise be interested, right?

General Smith: Right. Which has nothing to do with standards. You just have to reach out to people who hadn't previously considered the military. And you do that through explaining to them one, you appeal to their sense of country, their sense of duty, their sense of loyalty to their nation, their sense of adventure. And then obviously you've got to follow that up with pay and benefits. You have to be able to be paid on time, you have to be paid a wage that is commensurate with your skill set, because our Cyber warriors, for example, they can walk out the door and make three times what they make working for us. But they stay with us because of the adventure. They stay with us because of the commitment, because of the mission, because of the camaraderie. But there's a point when if they're unable to get housing, if they're unable to get health care, if they're unable to get living wage, then they're going to walk and go somewhere else. So I see it a little bit both.

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DWG: And then the force design question. You know, you and your predecessor have made very public criticism on force design. I'm thinking of Van Riper and Jack Sheehan among others. And you in your answer about logistics gave the same answer that we've been hearing which is reliance on the Navy in order for the [inaudible] by the end of First Island Chain. I just wonder, though, whether you think that that is a true answer to some of those critics that we've heard for two or three years now, saying that Marines are going to be left vulnerable and the reliance on the Navy answer is naïve. So I wonder if you really think you've engaged with that criticism from this very public three stars and four stars and the Secretary.

General Smith: It's unfortunate, there's only one Commandant at a time. I learned that from General Krulak who was very famous for saying there's only one Commandant at a time. And what I would say is, bring me a better solution. We are going to be in the First Island Chain. We are going to be dependent upon the Navy as we have always been dependent upon the Navy since our founding. Since we had Marines in the riggings of tall ships, we have been dependent on the Navy for our logistical supply, just as we were in World War II. Just as we were in Desert Shield and Desert Storm when we launched, or in Afghanistan when we launched the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, launched into Afghanistan during, I can't remember the name of the operation now. Task Force 58. Frank McKinzie and Jim Mattis running that.

So we are dependent upon the Navy. But it's not an us versus them. It's us and them. It's us and the Navy. The Navy is fully committed. Admiral Franchetti and I, again, we've locked shields. We are fully committed to ensuring that the Marine Corps has the logistical resources that it needs to be able to fight in the First Island Chain, but we have to do some of that ourselves. We have to use, again, prepositioning stocks, additive manufacturing and 3D printing because if you have a ship like the Atlantic Conveyor that goes to the bottom or the General Belgrano that goes to the bottom in the Falklands War, all that material goes with it so you can't put everything onto amphib, you can't put everything onto a resupply ship. You've got to do a little bit of creative thinking, and that's what we're trying to do. That's what force design was all about, was creative thinking about the way forward, about the next war, not fighting the last war. Because the next war with the PRC is not

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going to be, if it goes there, is not going to be like any war we've fought before. It won't be.

Moderator: Josh Keating.

DWG: One of the things we've been hearing from the incoming President and his team who spoke to members of Congress, designating Mexican drug cartels as terrorist organizations [inaudible] using Special Forces or air power to combat them. I won't ask you to comment on the policy, but given your experience in counterinsurgency I wonder if you've thought about what the particular challenges of fighting an adversary like that or an environment like that might be.

General Smith: What I would say is, you know, my time in Venezuela, I was doing a little bit of counter-drug and it is very, very difficult to pinpoint who your adversary is. The narcotraffickers are very, very good at hiding themselves. They hide in plain sight. They're using mules. There's a saying that if you're a drug smuggler you can send 30 carloads of drugs to the southern border of the United States, to Texas where I'm from, you only have to get one across and that makes it worth your while, even if you lose the other 49, if you send 50, you lose 49, one still makes your profit margin.

What I would say is the posse comitatus law is extant, prevents us from dealing with law enforcement, prevents us from enforcing civil laws. But it is an existential threat I think to America, the drugs that are coming in. And so we provide services in kind on the border. We provide surveillance. We can provide basic manpower. We can provide Humvees and those kind of things. But I won't speculate as to what we'll be tasked to do with regard to the drugs that are coming in from the southern border, but it is a real crisis for America.

DWG: Hi, thank you for doing this. I'm [Savelle] with USA Today.

I wanted to ask you about extremism. In the [inaudible] there was a report that about a third of the [inaudible] military personnel who were at January 6th at the insurrection were part of the Marines. And I think in that report also they said that some of those Marines were reinstated to their positions afterwards. I'm wondering how you're monitoring that. Have there been any additional research or database set up to track

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that at all with how you responded?

General Smith: Any Marines who were in violation of federal law, we put them up for prosecution and the courts will do what they do. But once an individual is cleared, as is the case for some of those Marines at January 6th, then they're cleared. So I don't think we have an extremism problem within the Marine Corps any more than any other service does.

Do we have some individuals who are not Marines, they're masquerading as Marines? Meaning the billet, the title never really took hold. They really didn't ever get the brand on their chest, so to speak. Yeah, we have those, and we look to get rid of them because extremism is not in keeping with our core values of honor, courage and commitment.

DWG: Malorie Shelbourne with USNI News.

I want to ask a question about amphibians. On the big decks and the LPDs, so given the [losses] on the Richard and just the general state for amphib readiness, are you going to state for the state of amphib readiness, are you going to have a MEU that's ready to go out this spring for exercises like Balikatan and the other exercises planned out in IndoPacom?

General Smith: We're going to try. We're working hard to get a three-ship ARG out the door on time. If we don't get a three-ship ARG, we'll get a two-ship ARG. If we don't get a two-ship ARG, well it will be an amphibious task force, we'll get a one-ship amphibious task force to be rejoined later by the other two ships. So we're committed to a three-ship Amphibious Ready Group. We are. Whether we're going to get it or not depends on the maintenance cycle.

DWG: So an amphibious task force, how would you describe that? Like for a single [inaudible] ship?

General Smith: Right. What we're going to do is we're going to provide the combatant commander what we can. What they demand is an ARG/MEU. A three ship Amphibious Ready Group. One big deck, two LPDs. That's the requirement and that's what's demanded by the COCOMs. When I can't produce that because of the material readiness of those ships, then I provide what I can and that really means what the Navy can provide. That's a ship that's gone through its preparatory period, its underway period,

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its training period, and then its certification period. Because what you don't do is you don't go -- you build the ship, you do your underway drills, you do your man overboard drills, you do your casualty drills, you do your brag line steering drills for the Navy. And then you put the Marines aboard. Then you run through the ARG/MEU, the Amphibious Ready Group/Marine Expeditionary Unit taskings. NEOs, raids, strike. You build that force and you integrate and that [PMNT], that blue-green integration period is vital. You can't speed your way through that. You have to get Marines on the ship, they've got to understand where their berthing area is, where their abandon ship drill is, whether their station is, and they have to execute their missions, they have to rehearse their missions. So it's really a matter of getting a ship ready to go and then attaching Marines to the ship and letting those Marines run through their paces before you deploy it. Because what you don't want to do is be exercising on the way to your campaigning grounds, so to speak.

DWG: For LSM, that's [inaudible] a couple of times over the years, but now it's on pause while they figure out how to deal with the block one and the non-developmental vessel.

Do you already have Marine littoral regiments that are stood up now? What are you doing now from their [inaudible] mobility for this regiment?

General Smith: Well, what we're using is we're using our LCUs. We're using most of the LCUs to mimic what a littoral vessel will look like. We're using some contracted vessels. The LSV, which is something we're trying to put on contract. Something out of the Gulf Coast shipyards that's already made, that's close enough to start experimenting with. So we're trying to do that. It's not an easy problem. Not to put rose petals on this. This is a wicked, hard problem because we're trying to find the knee in the curve between affordability and utility. I don't want something that's affordable that I can't use, that doesn't have the proper beach gradient. And that's the biggest driver is the beach gradient.

But when you reduce the requirement, which we did, on the beach gradient, there's still plenty of shoreline you can get ashore on. You don't have to have a one-to-forty. When you change that requirement and make it less shallow drafted, you open up the possibility that you can use something that's commercial,

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off-the-shelf. Something out of Bollinger, something out of the Gulf Coast shipyards.

Moderator: Nancy Youssef of Wall Street Journal.

DWG: I wanted to follow up on something you said earlier, and then ask another question on a different topic.

You mentioned that there's [inaudible] readiness and commitment. I'm wondering after seeing some of those [inaudible] political divides that we're seeing in the country within the Marine Corps, and if so, how you're addressing it.

General Smith: I'm not. We're Marines. We serve at the pleasure of the President. We execute all lawful orders from the Commander in Chief. So I'm not seeing any divisions or any -- Marines just want to be Marines. They signed up because they want to go and they want to put a bayonet in the enemy's heart. That's why they signed up. That's what we train them to do, that's what we teach them to do. They're not interested in politics. The average Marine, they just want to join, they want to serve, most of them are going to go home after four years. That's just the way it is. They're going to take their skill and they're going to use the GI Bill and they're going to go on and be great nuclear physicists or whatever they're going to be. So I'm really not seeing an issue.

DWG: Then General Berger was working on sort of having a lily pad essentially in places like Guam to have Marines in place. I was just wondering if you could give us an update in terms of what's happening specifically in Guam? Are you building out any bases there, do you have a timeline when you'll have Marines based there?

General Smith: We have an agreement with the government of Japan that in the first half of the 2020s, meaning by January of 2026 we will have moved the first Marines off of Okinawa back to Guam. So we built Guam, we're building out the bases at Guam. We've been working with Congress. Unfortunately, the Army is also trying to go to Guam, so there's only so much space on Guam. And frankly, Guam puts us going the wrong way. Guam puts us on the other side of the International Date Line, but it puts us along way from the crisis theater, from the priority theater. So we're committed to coming down to about 10,000 on Okinawa and getting ourselves to Guam, but Guam is a challenge. Apra Harbor

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still has to be refurbished, it has to be redone to allow for big decks to get in there. So I'm not sure that that is in the beat strategic interest of America, to be honest with you.

But it is a treaty obligation we have with Japan, which we're going to comply with, unless and until it changes. And frankly, I think China continues to advocate for changing it. That's obviously a domestic issue for the Japanese government to decide, but what I do know is every time you give China a foot they take a mile. They only understand one thing, which is a credible deterrent force. And that credible deterrent force has to be present to win, which to me means being in the First Island Chain.

DWG: [Nick Wilson] from Inside Defense.

You mentioned the lens that you [inaudible]. Can you tell us about what the near term future of that program is, given that the 2025 [inaudible] has been pushed down the road again, and the Secretary of the Navy has mentioned reinvestment of capabilities.

Are you concerned about losing capability for that platform [inaudible] at all?

General Smith: I'm always concerned about losing key capabilities because any time you reduce your requirements, you reduce your requirements. The requirements were well thought out. It's beach gradient, it's carrying capacity, it's duration, it's sea state worthiness. So we did a pretty in-depth study to determine what we needed, but it came back as unaffordable. So we had to go reassess. Everything's a tradeoff. It's a matter of duration, capacity, and sea worthiness, and sea worthiness obviously is the number one requirement because you don't want to be out at sea and have a catastrophic mishap. But it has to be able to beach itself on a number of fronts. It's got to be able to carry enough to matter. It's got to be able to carry a NMESIS battery. It's got to be able to carry a TPS-80 radar. It's got to be able to house Marines for X number of days afloat. It's got to be able to be seaworthy. So I am concerned.

DWG: Is the plan now to just sort of [inaudible] at some point in the near future from industry, and try to get a more affordable proposal?

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General Smith: Yes.

Moderator: Last question, Mike.

DWG: Yes, sir. I'm Mike Glenn with the Washington Times. I'm also an Aggie dad, so Gig'em.

General Smith: I'm a house divided. My daughter went to UT and my son went to A&M. They're both still on my phone plan.

DWG: Good to hear.

A couple of years ago housing was a major topic that everyone was talking about. There was [inaudible] saying that the problem is privatization. It should go back to being under the direct operational control of the base commander.

First of all, do you think that's ever going to happen or is privatization the way of the future? And what's the status now of base housing? Have you seen improvements or --

General Smith: Yeah. I have seen improvements. We've put a lot of money into base housing. A lot of money. So the mold issues have largely been dealt with. But what I would say is we don't want to go back to managing our own housing. It's not cost-effective. It takes Marines out of the fight to be part of our base housing.

When I was a lieutenant, you walked into base housing, it was all Marines. It was a platoon of Marines who was managing the base housing. Then you had more Marines who were doing base maintenance. I don't want that. I need every Marine in the fight. I can find people to do housing maintenance, and I can find people to run the housing department, but I can't find people to deploy. So those who will deploy, those who are Marines, I don't want them in base housing. It's a service. I just want to treat it like a service. If a family gets X dollars per BAH, basic allowance for housing, and they're not getting what they paid for, then they wouldn't pay that out in the civilian world. They'd take the renter or the landlord to court and they'd win. Well, we have the same with our tenant bill of rights. You're not meeting it, I'm not paying you. I'm not going to give you my monthly BAH for this house because it doesn't meet standards. There's mold, water doesn't work, it's

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not hot water, the AC is out. So I don't want to go back to managing my own housing.

It's going to be a long process to get there. We're probably going to go through multiple companies to get there. But I don't want to be in the business of managing my own housing.

Moderator: General, before I invite you for closing comments I want to thank all the reporters for coming today. A great conversation. Most of all, to you and your staff, I mean what we live for is engagement between the military and the media for the strengthening of our democracy, and you being here today, sir, furthers that.

Now the floor is yours.

General Smith: What I would offer to you is, the biggest thing for me as the Commandant is the welfare of my Marines. It's mission accomplishment and welfare of the Marines. It's not an either/or, it's a both. You have to be able to accomplish the mission and you have to be able to take care of your Marines. So when I was a lieutenant, we practiced a thing called water conservation where they gave you two canteens and they said drink them slow. This is all you get for the day. That was dumb. I mean that led to rhabdomyolysis, and we got smarter over time, and we started practicing monitored hydration where you drink what you need.

It's not an either/or. It is caring for the Marines but we always have to realize that as Marines we have a mission. Our mission is the defense of America. Our mission is carried out overseas. Our mission is carried out aboard Amphibious Ready Groups.

Our forward deployed nature is what makes us unique among the services. We're the Swiss Army knife. We're not the chain mail fist -- there's a saying, and I may have said this before, that if America sends her Army, they're going to change your zip code. We're just going to change your attitude if you send the Marines. They're there to change your attitude. You don't want them to send the Army because that's going to change your zip code.

We have to have that medium range capability, that medium weight capability, the medium fighter, kind of the street brawler. We

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have to have that. We're not a prize fighter, we're just a street brawler. And that's what we have to be to provide that capability to America to deter our adversaries and to reassure our allies and partners, because sometimes it's enough just to have a Marine battalion participate in Balikatan or in Cope North or in Pitch Black that reassures our allies and partners across the Pacific. The Georgia Training Teams for years reassured our Georgian allies. Sometimes it's just a matter of us being the middleweight fighter. Sometimes we don't necessarily grab the headlines, if you will, we're not a nuclear ballistic missile submarine. But you don't want to have to use a nuclear ballistic missile submarine. You'd rather use a Marine Expeditionary Unit to change somebody's attitude before you have to change their zip code.

So as a service chief I am concerned about our mobility. That's my number one concern is our mobility. And we have to have a minimum of 31 amphibs. Again, I key in on the word minimum and that's 80 percent readiness. And we're far from 80 percent readiness, even though the CNO and I are working hard, and she's working very hard to get the amphib readiness up. But every time you have a gap, you as an American citizen, a gap in an ARG/MEU off the coast of Africa, you have to consider is now the time to take the safari to Kenya? Is now the time that I want to go into West Africa? America should not have to pick and choose what windows its citizens travel. It should be able to evacuate its citizens from war torn countries 24x7x365. And that's what we do as Marines.

Moderator: General, great discussion, sir. Thank you so much.

General Smith: Thank you.

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