

# The U.S. Marine Corps POSTMORTEM



2019 ESSAY CONTEST



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2019 ESSAY CONTEST

presented by  
The Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Creativity  
Marine Corps University

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# Director's Foreword

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"It is 4 February, 2040 and the United States Congress passes a law that dissolves and forever abolishes the United States Marine Corps." At first glance, such a future might seem preposterous to today's Marine. The year 2040 is not that far off in the grand scheme of things, and today's Marine still has hard-fought battles, from Afghanistan's Helmand River valley to Iraq's heat-blasted deserts, fresh in their memory. Yet, of all America's military Services, the Marine Corps is perhaps most keenly aware that the future is not promised. Tough victories across the Pacific Ocean's vastness were very much fresh in the minds of most Americans following World War II, but the Corps had hardly returned home from those victories before it found itself fighting another battle for its very survival. As is so often the case, the Corps won that battle, but never forgot the lesson: the future is not promised.

Lieutenant General Victor "Brute" Krulak, the Krulak Center's namesake, had this truth in mind when he later wrote that the United States did not, strictly speaking, *need* a Marine Corps, but rather *wanted* one because the Corps always gave a good return on investment. Should that calculus ever change, the Marine Corps would lose its justification for having a defense budget split four ways instead of three. Such a future might seem unthinkable 20 years from now, but then it doubtless seemed unthinkable to the veterans of Iwo Jima and Okinawa too.

Thus, we posited the writing prompt for this contest. The best way to keep such a future from becoming reality is to identify the paths that could lead there, and change their courses before they become points of no return. And in this, the Corps is paradoxically fortunate in its long history of justifying why it should exist. For this history has also fostered an institutional culture of innovation and anticipation to the exigencies of the now, so that it remains relevant for the challenges of today and tomorrow. That this culture remains alive and well is evident from the hugely varied submissions we received in this contest. Officers and enlisted from myriad occupational specialties were unflinching in their visions of how the problematic today might become the unthinkable tomorrow. The entries make for sobering reading; a few will likely raise strong emotions. But the reader should temper those emotions with the understanding that the passion and insight demonstrated by these authors in identifying future problems is the same passion and insight these same Marines

apply every day to keep the Corps a ready, relevant and effective fighting force. It is the same passion and insight that, in the space of a short century, allowed the Corps to adapt itself from being the Navy's police and landing force to amphibious assault to an expeditionary force-in-readiness, fighting near-peers and terrorists with equal dexterity and lethality. It is the same passion and insight that has kept the nation wanting a Marine Corps.

It is the Krulak Center's privilege to present the following stories as part of the Corps' continued return on investment to the nation. We hope they challenge, inform, and spark discussion. And we are confident that, so long as the Marine Corps continues to count men and women like the authors here in its ranks, the year 2040 will find the Corps as innovative, lethal, and ready as ever.

Valerie Jackson  
Director





# ALPHAS

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*Major Timothy Heck, USMCR*

*A good choice*, he thought, as he adjusted the Sam Browne belt and checked himself one last time. He checked into units in Alphas. Why not check out of the Marine Corps in them too? Besides, unlike dress blues, every Marine looked similar in these. They were a great equalizer, a reminder that they were all Marines. He remembered checking into The Basic School in them, nearly 40 years ago. He did not get the memorandum. Everyone else was dressed in a suit. He smiled as he turned away and walked into the bedroom.

His wife adjusted his sleeves to cover the memorial bracelets he wore on both wrists. One for his TBS roommate, killed on some dusty street in ar-Ramadi, and one for their daughter, killed two years ago when a Chinese missile sank her ship. He sighed and was glad they cut into his wrists now, a reminder of a past that was no more. They embraced, tears in her eyes, and she let him go downstairs to see to their collective fate.

The Commandant's House was full of memories. They were his memories too. In the hallway, he stopped to look at his daughter's eighth-grade portrait. The one when she first got her braces off. All smiles at the Camp Lejeune school in North Carolina. Then her Navy boot camp photograph. Somewhere in between, she became a woman and not his little girl. Was it when they were at Joint Forces Staff College or MEF staff? It was hard to say, but the last photograph, of a smiling electronics technician third class on her ship's deck somewhere in the Pacific, showed the change was real. He touched her framed folded flag as he walked down the stairs.

At the bottom, he turned into the dining room. Here, he had discussed the South-east Asia Treaty Organization's amphibious task force with his counterparts from those vital countries on China's periphery. His long-ago predecessor had no doubt done the same with the original SEATO during the Cold War. But the United States had won the Cold War. It had not won the Chinese Pacific War.

SEATO was a great concept, he thought. The amphibious task force united Singapore, Vietnam, Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the United States in a common architecture and framework to balance the ever-growing strength of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy. What SEATO had not known, though, was that the war had been lost before the first shots were fired.

China. He thought about the 2010 Commandant's birthday message about the 1st Marine Division killing divisions of Chinese in the Korean hills. He had not thought about

China much before that. His lieutenancy had been spent patrolling Iraq and Afghanistan. He was at the ball in Beijing as an inspector on Marine security guard duty when he watched the video for the first time, surrounded by PLA generals. They did not blink an eye.

But, after company command in Afghanistan, he started reading more about China. MCU's Command and Staff College talked about the pivot to the Pacific and the Belt and Road Initiative. Obscure islands in the middle of the South China Sea were going to be the next major flashpoint, the professors said. But then Crimea happened, and it was back to focusing on the Russians. So, he did a staff ride in Norway and Poland while at the division. At that table, over a few beers and some barbecue, the commandant of the Philippine Marine Corps showed photographs of his time as a captain on the beached Sierra Madre, particularly the hostile Chinese Coast Guard cutters and fishing for his dinner when the supplies failed to arrive. The Indonesians and Malaysians showed similar images from their small island claims. They were a far cry from his tiny mountain forward operating base.

The bookshelf in the corner was half empty now, personal books packed up, those belonging to the Marine Corps were left for the movers to collect. Lying on its side, alone, forlorn, sat a history of China under colonial occupation. He flipped through it, waiting for his aide's knock on the door. Highlighted and underlined passages jumped out at him.

"Humiliation."

"Dependency."

"Subjugation."

The Chinese fired the first shots, as they had on Zhenbao Island against the Soviets. A Royal Malaysian Navy patrol plane was downed not far from Kota Kinabalu by a Chinese frigate. More shots were exchanged in the coming weeks as China and SEATO attempted to diplomatically resolve the incident. But it was apparent, in hindsight, that China was not interested in diplomatic solutions.

Two months later, as SEATO slowly prepared for war, the Chinese hit the satellites. Communications, GPS, and intelligence were all out of the picture. Then cruise missiles started flying. The fuel farms and weapons storage facilities at Iwakuni, Japan, were destroyed. The embarking points on Okinawa and Guam, too, trapping thousands of Marines on the island. Barracks and half the city of Naha were turned into rubble heaps with hundreds of Marines, and thousands of Japanese killed or injured.

SEATO struck back. The amphibious raid on Mischief Reef, off Spratly Island, succeeded. SEATO had accomplished its first mission. The antisatellite facilities and airfield were put out of action, penetrating the A2/AD bubble, giving SEATO a hope of stopping the PLA. But a MARSOC-led raid supported by a handful of SEATO commandos was just a bump in the road, a minor inconvenience to the PLA's war plan.

The first Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II attacks on the PLAN fleet seemed to be proof that the Marine Corps had wisely invested its money after all. An aircraft carrier and several support ships were sunk without losses. Then came the devastating second sortie. Every single F-35 crashed short of its target without a shot being fired. SOCOM teams in the area remarked that it looked like the sky was raining parachutes.

He later learned the Chinese had infiltrated the command and control network and hijacked the planes from the ground. All the focus on readiness metrics and which handgun to buy seemed trivial now. What was needed to fight the Chinese were precision

fires, electronic survivability, and cyber specialties. Despite lip service to the same, those capabilities never evolved in the Marine Corps past embryonic levels. A Marine and their rifle, after all, not a Marine and their laptop.

It was probably just coincidence that the USS *Boxer* was the first ship the U.S. Navy lost in the war. It had to be since the *Boxer* was not named after the rebellion but a long-ago British war prize. Nevertheless, when it went down, it all seemed like revenge. And, to him, it was personal because with it went his daughter.

And so the war went, Belt and Road had given China an opportunity to invest in and build the infrastructure of almost anyone SEATO could turn to. American strategic advantage had gone out the window when the Trans-Pacific Partnership was scrapped. The PLA launched ground attacks across Central and East Asia and unexpected commando assaults throughout the world. Most European nations who had humiliated and subjugated the Chinese two centuries prior stayed out of the fight when diplomats reminded them who held the digital cards to their infrastructure and economies.

The peace negotiations in Delhi, India, were hardly balanced. SEATO, led by the United States, asked for an armistice. With Chinese troops moving on Ipoh, Malaysia, conducting landings on mainland Japan, and with American presence all but wiped out in the Pacific in a few short weeks, it was apparent the war was going to be lost shortly. Australian forces held a thin line north of New Guinea but had few reserves. The Indonesians and Malaysians were massacred on the battlefield by precision fires and Chinese overmatch. The Chinese negotiators did not blink an eye.

The negotiations had a mournful air to them for the Americans. The American century had come to an end. Historians remarked that the armistice terms resembled those that ended World War I. The United States was decisively defeated on the battlefield and the government was humiliated at the negotiating table. But the lopsided bloodshed had stopped.

Subsequent conferences and treaties limited the size and scope of the American military. Overseas bases were shuttered and turned over to host nations. The American military was limited to a small standing army, air force, and coast guard. There was to be no amphibious or airborne capability. No special operations forces.

He stood in the living room and remembered watching the secretary of state sign the armistice documents on the now-dark video monitor. The obligatory congressional legislation quickly followed in February. It took 13 months of consolidated memorandum receipt reconciliations, demobilization, scrapping, and equipment transfers. Today was the day.

At the knock, he broke from his memories and those of this house. He opened the door. He sighed and followed his aide out into the light. Today, he was furling colors on the United States Marine Corps. To his left would stand the secretary of the Navy, who would receive them and retire them permanently. He would pivot, turn, and walk smartly away.

Alphas were a good choice.



# AN ISLAND

---

*Captain Brandon M. Wilsey, USMC*

Sam clicked through the channels for a few minutes to find C-SPAN2. By the time he landed on it, the House majority leader was wrapping up their remarks:

*For 264 years, the United States Marine Corps has served at the vanguard of our Republic. In every clime and place, from the Halls of Montezuma to the Caves of the East China Sea, they have kept their honor clean. They have embodied the warrior spirit and have never lost a battle. But, like the longbow gave way to the musket, and the bomber to the missile, even the mightiest weapons of war must evolve to face the grim realities of conflict. In these times of fiscal austerity and geopolitical upheaval, our nation cannot afford to indulge in a prestige corps that has no purpose on the modern battlefield. It is therefore with a heavy heart, yet enormous sense of gratitude, that on behalf of all Americans I say, job well done, Marines! You stand relieved. We have the watch.*

The bill passed with 429 “ayes.” Six former Marines were the only holdouts. The vote was symbolic regardless—the Marine Corps ceased to exist as a cohesive force hours after the Two Days War began.

It felt like a sad act of mercy to Sam—like putting down an infirm family dog. But even he had to admit, the timing seemed right. The fourth anniversary of the Two Days War passed weeks ago, and nobody remembers fourth anniversaries. There were no parades to march in, no monuments to dedicate, and few gravesites to commemorate. The country moved on with its new normal.

Sam thought back to where he was four years earlier—emerging from a dysentery infested cave to see daylight for the first time in weeks—30 pounds lighter than when he went in. It was not how he imagined his war, but so it goes; 7 January 2036, was a new day of infamy in American history.

Sam was not surprised when Bravo Company received its mission. Before the satellite feed cut out, CNN was running nonstop coverage of the crisis—a hypersonic missile sank the destroyer USS *Fitzgerald* in the Spratly Islands just hours earlier, and the U.S. Navy retaliated with Tomahawk missile strikes against the Chinese outpost that

launched the missile. Pundits and politicians were still arguing over who fired the first shot, but the situation was already spiraling out of control.

Sam's unit was afloat in the East China Sea, more than 1,000 miles from the epicenter of the crisis, on board the landing helicopter assault ship USS America. They were the sole unit within striking range of the disputed Senkaku Islands—at the tip of the spear.

Their mission was to conduct an air assault on Kodokuna-shima, a small and desolate island in the Senkakus. They needed to hold it long enough for follow-on forces to set up a HIMARS (high mobility artillery rocket system) position on the island. The Marine Corps' new antiship missile could then control the surrounding sea lanes and set the conditions for the Navy's advance. The HIMARS were embarked on a dock landing ship, which was conducting disaggregated operations hundreds of miles away. It would take them at least 12 hours to arrive.

The USS America's F-35s would strike suspected ballistic missile sites closer to mainland China, which threatened to terrorize Okinawa with missile strikes. Because the USS America had no well-deck, Bravo Company would conduct the assault without mechanized support. Sam was not worried—intel reported minimal resistance, and Bravo Company had rehearsed their mission a dozen times during workups.

Sam clicked the TV over to the History Channel. Another historian with a British accent was armchair quarterbacking the Two Day War:

*During war games, U.S. planners realized that if a maritime dispute erupted into a full-scale conflict, their forces would need to race to seize nearby islands, establish hardened positions to survive the initial Chinese missile onslaught, and be in a position to project offensive power into the Chinese mainland.*

*Planners realized that forward deployed units were vulnerable during the opening phases of a conflict, but reasoned that U.S. forces couldn't quickly get to checkmate without risking a few pawns. The risk seemed worthwhile. If advanced elements could establish a toehold long enough for the U.S. Pacific Fleet to aggregate, they could rip a seam in China's protective ring large enough for the entire fleet to flow through and strike the People's Liberation Army—or PLA—in their soft underbelly...*

Sam's mind drifted back to the island. Like all great plans, this one failed to survive first contact.

Bravo Company's Ospreys touched down on the island less than eight hours after the sinking of the USS Fitzgerald, just before sunset. The company secured the top of the island's small mountain ridge and dug in without a shot fired. To Sam's relief, it looked like they beat the PLA to the island.

Sam remembered how eerily peaceful the ridge felt. As the sun slipped beneath the horizon, the sky lit up with silent yellow steaks arcing east across the twilight sky. Sam could not see where they were headed, but thankfully they were not coming for him.

Around midnight, the silence slowly gave way to a dull buzz. Sam peered through his thermal goggles and spotted thousands of tiny black dots darting overhead like a swarm of mechanical locusts. Some sort of Chinese drone, no doubt. The swarm zoomed past

the Marines with resolute indifference, headed for some distant target. Sam keyed the satellite phone to call it in but was greeted with static on every channel.

Minutes later, Sam heard the abrupt belch of a CIWS (close-in weapon system) cannon. A hazy orange glow seeped over the horizon, briskly followed by a sickening thud. Sunrise exposed mounds of debris cluttering the shoreline and rolling in the surf. The singed markings on an empty life preserver revealed the origin of the wreckage—USS America.

Returning F-35's circled overhead like vultures, searching for their nest. One by one, they acquiesced and settled their aircraft on the beaches of the island. The aviators saved their aircraft, but without runways, fuel, or ordinance, the jets were little more than \$100 million rust buckets.

Sam clicked the TV over to CNN. A reporter was interviewing General Ving Sing Ku, the supposed mastermind behind the Chinese war plan. General Ku spoke in perfect English:

*We realized early on that the Americans were arranging their forces across the Pacific like pawns on a chessboard, protecting their king while positioning themselves for a quick and lethal strike. But we do not prefer chess in China; we play Go. It is a more patient game—one that requires the player to build strength slowly over time, to gain incremental advantages, to disguise his true intentions, and then—only when the time is right, when it is too late for his opponent to react—to strike with overwhelming power.*

*That is what we did in the Two Days War. By the time the U.S. Navy committed to action, they were already surrounded in every domain. We had infected their computer networks, sabotaged their targeting systems, and infiltrated their communications. By rapidly sinking a handful of ships, we crushed the will of the American people. When our submersible drones hit the USS Kennedy, we sent over 4,000 sailors to the bottom of the South China Sea in a matter of minutes. We knew that with that kind of blow, the U.S. Navy could not afford to risk any more of its precious aircraft carriers. We were free to surround and suffocate the remaining forces in our kill zone.*

Sam's stomach still grumbled every time he remembered the "suffocation" phase. As the Marines settled in for their second night on the island, they knew the situation was dire. The HIMARS were probably at the bottom of the Pacific somewhere, and Bravo Company would have to repel the eventual PLA counterattack alone. Knowing they were hopelessly outgunned, the Marines crawled into the island's sprawling cave network to make their last stand.

Even back then, Sam recognized the irony—almost a hundred years before, his great-grandfathers fought to extract a different enemy out of these same caves. As the Marines retreated underground, Sam saw dozens of Chinese missile boats steaming eastward. Bravo Company hunkered down, waiting for the fight to come. It never did.

The Marines emerged from the caves four weeks later, depleted of all food and water, unable to continue on empty stomachs. As they approached a PLA search party, ready

to surrender, the Marines were greeted with smiles and waves. The fighting had ended weeks ago, a PLA officer explained. Cut off and surrounded, the island was of no value to Chinese forces—Bravo Company had been bypassed. The Marines hitched a ride home on a Chinese destroyer, having never fired a shot.

America didn't want a Marine Corps; America wanted to forget.

Sam clicked over to ESPN. The commentators still could not believe that Buffalo had won the Super Bowl. Some things, you never see coming.



3d  
Place

# THE DAY THE MARINE CORPS DIED

---

*Captain Eric S. Hovey, USMC*

*15 March 2040—House and Senate Armed Services Committees Joint Session Briefing on the REARM Act*

General Miller stared down at his worn copy of *First to Fight* and allowed his mind to wander: the scuff on the binding where it had fallen off his rack during a field day in The Basic School, the pages recently warped from the humidity in Djibouti. He thumbed to the introduction, an action he had taken many times over the years as he progressed through the ranks and looked to Brute for solace:

*The United States does not need a Marine Corps . . . it wants a Marine Corps.*

America had not needed a Marine Corps then, but they certainly did not want one now. And who could blame them? Decades of boundless faith and optimism from the American people had turned to scorn and anger after the combined Services failed spectacularly in their most recent fight in East Africa. The crisis began in 2038 after the newly elected Djibouti government had ordered all Western “imperialist colonizers” to vacate the country within a year. The warning signs were clear in hindsight: U.S./Chinese tensions about trans-Pacific trade routes had been mounting, and the ethnic Chinese diaspora that constituted roughly one-third of Djibouti’s populace had grown increasingly anti-West. No reasonable person in or out of uniform seriously anticipated this latest geopolitical power play escalating into armed conflict until the first shots were fired. And always first to fight, the Marines had been there—the first to fall.

The 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit (22d MEU), bristling with F-35s and the newest experimental variants of the MUX drone program, failed to even register the Chinese hypersonic antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs) fired from Sudan, before the USS *Essex* and the USS *Portland* were struck multiple times during their Red Sea transit. It did not matter that the MEU had been transiting to the Horn of Africa to participate in a routine non-combatant evacuation operation exercise; China’s ubiquitous network of Africa-based 5G web bloggers were quick to paint the narrative as a defensive action against a perceived U.S. invasion force. The invasion narrative was rapidly and positively received throughout the African-Chinese diaspora, as well as the larger Belt and Road news ecosystem. The



African Union released a statement of support for Chinese peacekeepers in Sudan who had repelled the U.S. "invasion fleet." NATO allies were sympathetic to the United States but, fearing a second exodus of sub-Saharan refugees flooding to their borders from a proxy conflict to their south, kowtowed to China nonetheless.

The American people wanted revenge, but there were no good options. The Air Force rattled off country after country that refused overflight privileges and, given persistent Chinese jamming, targeting ASCM sites was near impossible. The Army busied itself by adjusting force protection levels for its forward-deployed forces in CENTCOM and PACOM to prevent similar surprise attacks. The president balked at the Navy's conservative estimate of one or two carriers that would be destroyed to restore access to the Red Sea; follow-on ARG/MEUs were soundly rejected during mission analysis.

As it became increasingly clear that the United States had no good military options short of total war, public anger shifted inward. Why had we gone down without a fight? Even before the Reforming, Empowering, Aligning, and Reorganizing the Military Act had materialized, Miller knew what the Red Sea incident, as it came to be called, meant for the Marine Corps. The nation's military-industrial complex house-of-cards had collapsed, and world affairs were no longer dominated by America. Angry and impotent on the world stage, the American polity needed an outlet for their rage.

The other Services were quick to turn on the Marine Corps and, Miller reflected, he could hardly blame them. The Chief of Naval Operations lit the first torch when she testified before Congress that the Navy's counter-ASCM escort capability could be allocated to protecting either carrier strike groups or amphibious readiness groups from another Chinese attack, but not both. You did not need to be a nuclear engineer to know which the Navy pushed for. The Air Force was quick to highlight the costs of Marine Aviation programs like the F-35B and the MUX, and argued, convincingly, that basing these multimillion-dollar aircraft on easily targetable amphibious shipping was reckless. The Army was more muted but, when pressured, the Army Chief of Staff simply stated that the Army had pulled off the largest amphibious assault in history in June 1944 and could do so again if the nation called. Behind closed doors, all the Service chiefs were more conciliatory, of course, but faced with an immediate need to appease a frothing public, the Marine Corps needed to take the blame. The staff of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs created a prepared statement that framed the Marine Corps' dissolution in terms of cost savings and strengthening the joint force; Miller was given the dubious honor of delivering the message.

"Excuse me, general," his aide poked his head inside the Capitol Building anteroom, "It's time for your testimony."

Miller nodded and gave his uniform a once-over in the mirror before stepping out to give his final congressional update on the REARM Act's dismantling of the Marine Corps. The chorus of voices and reporters' questions swelled to a dull roar as he made his way to the dais. He did not hear the perfunctory remarks from committee session chairman, as his hands woodenly shuffled the speaking notes in front of him. The calmness of his expression masked deep sadness and anger about the enormity of the moment. How did we get here? A flash of red scrawl caught his eye:

*In life, there is often a roll call. . . . To be or to do? Which way will you go?*

The last “you” had been underlined several times and Miller paused for a fraction of a second as he comprehended John Boyd’s words. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs-approved speech fell from his hands; he knew what he needed to say:

“Today, 15 March 2040, marks the official death of the United States Marine Corps, but in reality it died a long time ago,” Miller began. A murmur rippled through the audience, as press corps members stared confusedly at their read-ahead transcripts and concerned members of Congress shot sideways glances at each other—the general had gone off script.

“I speak not only to confirm the end of this esteemed warfighting organization, but also to be a speaker for the dead, to candidly explain how we came to this day. A wise man once said what really matters are ‘people, ideas, things . . . in that order.’ The Marine Corps is dead because we, the Marines, the Congress, the polity, have worshiped things and ideas at the expense of our people.”

Miller stole a glance at the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, whose normally impassive face had gone ashen, and continued, “We failed our people when the long wars after 9/11 became more about combat tours for credibility than prosecuting winning campaigns. The thing that mattered was keeping the organization fed with widgets that had the right deployment checks-in-the-box, not clarity of purpose or faith in the mission that the people in the organization so desperately craved. The Marine Corps was not alone this complicity, but we should have been unafraid to speak truth to power—that we were not fighting to win these wars, but to justify our existence. Instead, we made paeans to ‘innovation and other things that brief well’ and went about business as usual.

We failed the mission when smart people warned about the ‘ACE that Ate the MAGTF,’ but we did not listen to them, because we were wedded to the flashy things, the F-35s, the MQ-9 Reapers, AI, etc. that we felt our organization needed to be relevant in the future. It didn’t matter if we knew that these aircraft cost too much, or that they would be appropriated by the Air Force for all but the most mundane of missions; we needed these things for organizational prestige, for the dollars that would go to congressional districts, for the simple institutional inertia that made it too risky to turn back procurement decisions. We had an opportunity in the 2020s to establish a clear vision for the relevance of naval infantry, but we squandered the opportunity. We did not establish a clear identity for our people; instead, we wagered that new tech and a can-do attitude would lead us to victory. We were wrong.”

Miller paused and surveyed the stunned members of Congress; you could hear a pin drop.

“We all failed the Marine Corps’ mission: its leaders for worrying so much about preserving the institution we forgot about the people that were its foundation, Congress for allowing bad military programs to go unquestioned as long as their districts got cash, and the American public who didn’t hold us accountable until it was too late. The soul was dead for a long time, but the body continued until today.”

“May God bless America and preserve her. For the Marines, this mission has ended.” Miller came to attention, nodded smartly, and walked out of the building. His career was over, but he had said what was right.



# COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

United States Senate  
Hearing to Receive Testimony from the War Department  
on the Proposed Reestablishment of the United States Marine Corps

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*Major Matthew Schultz, USMC*

*Thursday, 17 March 2050  
Washington, DC*

Senator Jim Janson (Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee):

[Sounds gavel]

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

We are gathered here today to receive testimony on the urgent need to reestablish the United States Marine Corps.

Throughout U.S. history, commands, departments, and Services have come and gone based on the nation's defense needs. Look no further than the merger of Space Command and Strategic Command in 2002 to buy back structure for Northern Command in the era of the Global War on Terrorism. As we all know, that decision was reversed by the roll out of a new and improved Space Command in 2019, alongside the Space Force, which has since grown into our largest sector of defense spending—the Department of Space. Likewise, our nation's Marines, whether they be the Continental Marines or the Corps that we grew up knowing, have experienced similar ebbs and flows in their illustrious history—the most recent event being the divestment of 2040.

While that divestiture decision was necessary to face the prospects of large-scale combat operations against the Democratic Union of Soviet Republics (DUSR) in a post-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) world, the context has since changed, and America wants her Marine Corps back.

I doubt that we would have furled the Corps' colors with the benefit of hindsight, but then again, global wars, existential threats, and shifting allegiances all have a tendency to drive significant change. I will now pass the floor to the secretary of war to provide his testimony on the dissolution of the U.S. Marine Corps and why now, perhaps more than ever, we need a naval expeditionary force-in-readiness to navigate a shattered global system in a dipolar world.

Over to you, Mr. Secretary. May I remind you that, in the interest of ensuring the in-

volvement of the entire committee this morning, you must keep your comments to less than five minutes. Thank you for your time and your distinguished service to this country, particularly as the final Commandant of the Marine Corps.

Honorable Tom Smith (Secretary, War Department):

[Clears throat]

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

As the chairman alluded to, it is clear, in retrospect, that we made a grave error in dissolving the Corps. We now face a shattered global system in a dipolar world. This problem was greatly exacerbated by the betrayal of one of our oldest and most trusted allies. Anyone who has ever studied history knows that empires are like dandelions—if you do not cut them at the roots, they are destined to grow again. We should not have expected the British Empire, after spending a little more than a century in dormancy, to be any different.

I will start by pointing to the four pivotal events that fomented the dissolution of the Marine Corps:

1. *The rapid and catastrophic success in the Sino-American War;*
2. *The establishment of a War Department to enable globally integrated, all-domain operations;*
3. *The rise of the DUSR as the successor of Vladimir Putin's Russia;*
4. *The restructuring of NATO's mutual defense obligations that resulted in a force management philosophy aimed at amassing a colossal active duty Army in exchange for the United Kingdom's assumption of the role as the executive agent for the global naval expeditionary force-in-readiness.*

So, I have been asked, on many occasions, as the last standing Commandant, to identify the tipping point that set the Corps on the path to divestment. In my opinion, it was the Sino-American War, which erupted into a global conflict overnight in 2026.

It was evident that the CCP was on course to bring the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) up-to-speed ahead of their goal of 2050 to coincide with its 100-year anniversary. This rapid mobilization, initiated early in the twenty-first century under Xi Jinping, was accelerated in 2020 when he recognized that growing unrest and internal instability threatened his indefinite rule in China. Once he amassed what he felt was sufficient seapower, he decided to take immediate action to divert the attention of his angry, disenfranchised populace. As a result, China pursued a strategy similar to Argentina in the 1980s—using the seizure of the Falkland Islands to calm domestic pressure under the guise of unification and the conquest of disputed territory.

The problem was that the CCP built its marine corps around the anachronistic conception of the amphibious assault, a paradigm forged during the Second World War, believing that the integration of unmanned platforms and autonomous systems provided a suitable hedge against modern risk. What China failed to foresee was the operational predictability of their autonomous and unmanned systems based off of stolen American proprietary technology laced with malicious code. This, when combined with our ultra-XXL signal intercepts, provided us with flawless geolocation pre-

dictability that fed unparalleled accuracy in developing massed targeting solutions.

As a result, when China opened the Sino-American War on 23 August 2026 with an amphibious assault on Taiwan, they lost more than 80 percent of their unmanned and manned surface, subsurface, and aerial PLAN capabilities within 72 hours. In mustering the largest assembly of amphibious vessels since the landing at Inchon, China had generated a rather simple target for Taiwanese antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) weapons, as well as American global strike capabilities, yielding the unfathomable destruction of what has been aptly labeled the “Desert Storm of the East.” This total destruction of a peer competitor’s maritime capabilities immediately brought the validity of the Marine Corps, and the Navy’s gator fleet, onto the chopping block. From that point, it became increasingly difficult to justify the projected return on investment of the Corps as we knew it. The United States quickly adopted a strategy to defeat China from the inside out.

During Operation Sherman, the United States, and its wide network of partners, acquired through the fallout of Belt and Road Initiative and the 7G conspiracy, commenced a digital and physical global blockade against China’s Merchant Marine Fleet, which had little protection in the absence of the PLAN.

This blockade stifled China, depriving its massive population of the material, energy, and commerce needed to sustain the world’s largest service-based economy and GDP. China collapsed within three months under the immense pressure of a humanitarian catastrophe wherein its authoritarian system gave way to human instinct and internal revolt.

Until then, the idea of global integration had existed on paper since the publication of the *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations 2020*, but the United States had never succeeded in actually implementing it. The Sino-American War demonstrated the ramifications of conflict that spanned across the rigid boundaries of its antiquated organization of global operations into geographic combatant commands. Thus, America recognized it needed a general staff to synchronize and direct globally integrated, all-domain operations.

While the establishment of the War Department empowered the U.S. defense apparatus to centralize operations and effects across the globe, it also wielded the same power that General Alexander A. Vandegrift, as the 18th Commandant of the Marine Corps, had warned of in his “no bended knee” speech in the time leading up to the ratification of the National Security Act of 1947. With the establishment of the War Department in 2030, the stage was set for the centralized direction of all defense-related resources under one all-powerful entity. By 2035, the debate about the Marine Corps raged at a fever pitch as the organization scrambled to innovate its way out of another tight spot. Critics, conversely, pointed to the abysmal performance of the PLAN in the abortive invasion of Taiwan as evidence that the amphibious assault, in the context of modern warfare, was useless. It was the Gallipoli syndrome made anew.

During the next five years, the emergence of the DUSR spurred a number of key issues for the War Department in its effort to deter the republic without setting off a cascade of events that would lead to thermonuclear war. The ratification of the International No-First-Use Treaty in 2036, and the subsequent global conventional arms race, pushed defense spending to new heights and contributed to a massive reorganization to achieve conventional mass at the greatest value. As a result, Congress, under pressure from the

War Department, dissolved the Corps, transferring its ground combat capabilities to the U.S. Army to form the I Expeditionary Corps. The Marine Corps' aviation and aviation ground support capabilities, on the other hand, were transferred to the U.S. Air Force to establish the 3d Expeditionary Air Force.

The dissolution of the Corps also opened funding streams to pursue a number of expensive combat system programs that rivaled the F-35 program in inefficiency, including the M-3U unmanned battle tank, the M-779 self-propelled howitzer, and AH-45(X) Kansa. To hedge against risk in the realm of amphibious warfare, the United States turned to the United Kingdom to take on responsibilities as the global naval expeditionary force-in-readiness, bolstering the Royal Navy's expeditionary fleet through foreign military sales of the U.S. Navy's gator fleet at pennies on the dollar.

The decision to outsource our amphibious requirements to the United Kingdom, a neo-imperial time bomb, proved to be a watershed moment in the global balance of power. Within a year, the United Kingdom ratified its nonaggression pact with the DUSR—the first step in the rise of the Pan-Eurasian Union and a presage of terrible things to come.



# FIVE YEARS AFTER

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*First Lieutenant Walker D. Mills, USMC*

Suddenly, he was at the top. His heart pounded with the rhythm of a man trying to get back in shape, and he tried to control his breathing, more out of shame than discipline. It had taken him more than 40 minutes from his apartment in downtown San Francisco to climb up to Twin Peaks in Yosemite National Park. Only the expansive view of the bay, the city, and the Pacific made it worth it. He squinted at the western horizon. He could see nothing there, just the faded edge of the ocean where it merged with the dark horizon. He chided himself for thinking he would see it but kept looking.

The Chinese aircraft carrier. It had been all over the news; they said it would probably pass by San Francisco sometime in the early morning. They said if the weather was good, you might be able to see it off the coast. The Chinese called it a “freedom of navigation exercise,” a reference to the days when the U.S. Navy transited the South China Sea and the Strait of Taiwan. But that seemed forever ago, before the war. Now, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) that transited within sight of the coast—only it was the West Coast of the United States.

Outwardly, he looked like every other runner in the foggy San Francisco morning. His hair had grown long. He had a short beard and a slight gut. Long gone was the mottled green fabric faded by the jungle sun. Gone were his dog tags and deep tan. But, he still carried reminders of his time.

He had the scars from that patrol in Afghanistan. He had the Chinese missile fragments the doctors decided to leave in his thigh. They said they might work themselves to the surface over time. Or they might not.

He had the tattoos. An Eagle, Globe, and Anchor. A platoon motto. A battalion emblem. The names of close friends on his shoulder blade. One killed in the Philippines. Another killed in Somalia. And John 15:13 along his ribs, as a reminder to himself.

He had the military implant at the base of his skull. Supposedly, it let higher headquarters track his location and the corpsmen could watch his vitals in real time. He had been out for almost five years, but he had not found the time to have it removed. Always too busy, he told himself. The Marine Corps made them standard issue right after he was commissioned.

And, he had the memories. He remembered his time as a lieutenant on Okinawa. He had never felt so useless. When he arrived with his battalion for their scheduled de-

ployment, the commanding general had given them a pep talk about how they were the first line of defense, that it would be up to them to hold the line. They had become part of the famed 3d Marine Division's "Caltrop Nation." Later, he learned that caltrops were medieval spikes employed to break cavalry charges; perhaps the general should have spent more time studying twenty-first century reconnaissance strike complexes instead of medieval booby traps. When the war began, the Marines had been nothing more than targets for soaking up Chinese missiles and casualties taking up space in overcrowded Japanese hospitals. They spent days waiting, stuck in the barracks waiting for a missile strike, while the Navy fought the war on the seas and in the skies.

Sometimes when he was feeling funny, he would tell the story of how the war started: the first salvo of missiles in the dark. He was on duty in his chucks. But the story was not always told the same way. Sometimes, he called regiment to let them know the war had started; other times, regiment called him first. It was not important.

Mostly what he remembered was the feeling of uselessness. Cleaning up the rubble. Moving out of the barracks into the training areas. Waiting. Hiking to North Island. Digging fighting holes in the beach at Okuma. Waiting. The eerie quiet of the empty resort on the beach. Futility. No artillery, no air, no information.

As suddenly as it began, it was over. One of the locals drove up and told them about the cease-fire. But battalion did not hear about it from regiment for a few more hours—a final reminder that they were only an afterthought in the Pacific War. The politicians called it a political settlement, but it felt more like a concession. The bases in Japan and Korea were shuttered. The 7th Fleet moved to Hawaii. The president issued a formal apology.

He remembered embarking in Naha for the journey back to the United States. The Chinese were disembarking at the same time. As the new guarantors of Japanese security, the Chinese would occupy the same bases the Marines had just left. But there seemed to be only a handful of infantrymen among them. But they brought battery after battery of missiles—big and small—on trucks and trailers with other machines that must have been radar and communications. They seemed confused that the Marines had garrisoned the island with so many riflemen and so few of anyone else.

There was also the reckoning back home, especially for the Corps. With no beaches to storm, the Corps had found itself woefully unprepared for conflict in the Pacific. The new jets worked, but there were too few of them. Most of the helicopters were destroyed on the ground. And if they had not been, where were they going to carry Marines? To China?

The Corps held inquiries, the Navy held inquiries, the secretary of Defense held inquiries, but it was in front of Congress that the fate of the Marine Corps was sealed. "General, what did the Marines do during the Pacific War?" The Commandant hesitated before answering. Perhaps he paused to think or clear his throat, but his hesitation said it all. He had no convincing answer. The Marine Corps had sat on the sidelines of the Pacific War because it lacked the equipment, training, or doctrine to fight the "short, sharp war" for sea control that the Chinese launched. The Navy fought well but was critically unsupported from the landward side. The Navy housed the amphibians to use as light carriers and distributed them around the theater per their new distributed concept. It would have taken the whole Pacific Fleet to support a Marine amphibious landing, a reckless concentration of force against a PLAN that had almost double the ships and submarines of



the U.S. Navy. The Air Force fought hard, too, but they had no bases to launch their planes from in the first island chain. Guam quickly became the world's largest jet parking lot.

Before the war, the Corps had doubled down on the motto "Every Marine a Rifleman." They dramatically increased the combat potential of the individual Marine and launched initiatives to increase the lethality of the infantry squad. They toyed with the number of Marines and buried the squads with high-tech gear. But for all of their well-intentioned innovation, they were still caught unprepared. They were wrong in their most base assumptions about the future of warfare. They had failed to understand the nature of the threat they were facing. There were no beaches to storm. No jungle hamlets to clear. No Fallujahs and no Tarawas.

The Marines had achieved record levels of readiness and surpassed all the Commandant's goals for maintenance, training, and doctor's appointments in the months before the war. By the metrics briefed up in daily meetings, the force was more prepared than ever before. Printers were even running out of green ink in some command posts. But all of those preparations meant nothing. When the nation was least ready, the Marines were even less ready. There were no reported cases of dental readiness impacting Marine operations, and the hundreds of thousands of hours of MarineNet training proved completely useless.

Less than 100 years after Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal declared the flag raising on Mount Suribachi meant a Marine Corps for another 500 years, the Corps was deactivated. Critics argued for years about whether it was because the Corps lacked a relevant mission or if it was because the Corps was unable to carry out the mission of "seizure or defense of advanced naval bases." But it was gone.

A pair of sonic booms interrupted his thoughts. The runner could see a pair of Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning IIs racing out to sea, the Bay Area Combat Air Patrol probably. En route to intercept something Chinese. Probably unmanned. They did not use pilots much for that kind of stuff anymore.

He turned away from the sea. The sun was rising above the hill across the bay. San Francisco was waking up to a rosy-fingered dawn. He could see the new Joint Army/Navy facility coming to life on Treasure Island. The Department of Defense was standing up the new Army Amphibious Command. He wondered if they would try to recruit him to finish his 20 years.



# FINAL EXAM FOR ARMY EXPEDITIONARY WARFARE OPERATIONS

Reflections on the Dissolution of the Marine Corps as a Service

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*Major S. D. Cooney, USMC*  
20 March 2042

The path to the Marine Corps' dissolution was not direct, but rather a series of events that lead to the Service's declining relevance. Like Kodak at the turn of the twentieth century or Google in the late 2020s, the Marine Corps was unable to translate its operational excellence in the previous era to into the next era. Of the factors that contributed to the outcome, three are particularly prominent: first, changes in the global political environment reduced demand for general purpose forces; second, the decline of the Navy's amphibious fleet meant that the Marine Corps was less capable of responding to global crises; and third, the Army's successful adaption in the 2020s and 2030s filled the Marine Corps traditional niche of being the nation's force in readiness.

## **A Shifting Geopolitical Environment**

Few could have predicted how much the geopolitical environment would have changed in the 2020s and 2030s and the degree to which this would lower demand for conventional forces. The standout events through the period are the rapprochement between the United States and China and the collapse of Russian power on the world stage. Credit for the former should primarily go to Paul Ryan's administration and China's Lee, particularly for their successful handling of North Korea's collapse and Korean reunification in 2029. Unlike his predecessor President Xi, Lee understood that Chinese stability required global stability. Similarly, President Ryan understood that the antagonistic approach the Donald Trump and Cory Booker administrations took to China was not in the United States' national interest. One by one, the security issues in the Asia-Pacific were resolved and the demand signal for U.S. forces in the Asia Pacific, particularly naval forces, was significantly reduced. China's masterful use of economic and diplomatic power, underpinned by its military and security forces, displaced U.S. power in the Western Pacific.

The collapse of the petroleum-based economies, which accelerated as the adoption of electric vehicles and hydrogen fuel cells in the late 2020s decimated markets for oil, was

particularly stark for Russia. Russia's failure to diversify its economy from oil in the 2010s and 2020s never took hold, and the collapse of the oil industry caused the state to fail. As with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, cooler heads ultimately prevailed during the Russian collapse of 2032, but not until the U.S. Army's global mobility brigades played a critical role in tipping the brief civil war against reactionaries who tried to seize nuclear weapons in Murmansk and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. After 20 years of tension, European stability returned, and another potential peer competitor disappeared from the scene.

The immediate implications of changes in the geopolitical environment were not clear, but by the end of the 2030s, the shift toward fewer conventional military forces was much more pronounced. With China underwriting security in an aging, but slow growing Asia-Pacific, U.S. attentions primarily focused on managing humanitarian disasters in West Africa and state collapse in the Middle East.

## **Continued Decay in Amphibious Shipping**

Although the Marine Corps' desire to see itself as independent from the Navy is well documented, the decay in this relationship badly hurt both Services. Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Navy has struggled to escape from its stovepiped structure and effectively balance its requirements across its broad scope of commitments. Cost overruns in the SSBN(X) ballistic missile submarine and Ford-class carriers in the 2020s ate into funds that would have paid for the LX(R)-class amphibious warfare ship. By 2031, the amphibious fleet dipped to fewer than 30 vessels, many of which suffered from poor operational readiness because they were at the very end of their service life.

The lack of amphibious shipping became a serious limitation in the two major military operations on the last 20 years: the collapse of North Korea in 2029 and the West African uprising of 2034. In the former, Marine ground forces were able to quickly move by air from Guam, Hawaii, and California, but were unable to take large portions of their heavy equipment or logistics footprint. While the Marines played an important role as the peninsula reserve, apart from the 31st MEU, they could not get to the fight quickly enough to make a difference. The South Korean Army, the 2d and 101st Divisions, and most importantly, the Chinese People's Liberation Army quickly secured Pyongyang in the wake of the army led coup. There was no time to link up with the maritime prepositioned equipment, and in the two weeks it took to get amphibious shipping from San Diego, the need for amphibious forces was over.

The situation in Africa five years later was similar; the 82d Airborne Division was able to get to Lagos within 36 hours of the collapse of the Nigerian government and serve as the spearhead for coalition forces. The 24th MEU, which arrived at D+12, and the elements of 2d MEB that arrived by air were able to make significant contributions to the JTF; however, in the 25 days it took to embark and offload the rest of 2d MEB, the Army had already stabilized the situation. While more numerous or capable amphibious forces might not have fundamentally altered the Marines ability to get to the fight, the Joint force came to appreciate the Army's power projection capabilities and saw less utility in the naval service's ability to respond to crises.

## **Army's Successful Adaptations**

While much was made of the impact that artificial intelligence would play on the battle-

field, few would appreciate the impact 3D printing and improved battery power would have on military forces or how dramatically the U.S. Army's investments in the 2020s would improve their ability to project power. The ability to 3D print materials combined with reduced need for moving large quantities of fuel meant that the logistical advantages of sea-based forces were diminished. Forces could move by air, rely on the local grid to provide most of their energy, and 3D print many of the supplies they required. The Army, seeing the potential advantages of new technologies, piloted the global mobility brigade in the mid-2020s and deployed them at scale in 2030.

The Marine Corps was not quick to follow the Army's adaptations, largely because of an already overdrawn investment account. Having just fielded the last F-35B squadron and amphibious combat vehicles battalion, by the late 2020s, the Marines Corps needed to catch up on other investments. The investments required to recapitalize the logistics combat element to the new standard was not politically feasible. Although II MEF made the upgrade in 2036, by that time the Army had already modified 12 brigades into the global mobility structure.

## Conclusion

The Service's fate was sealed in the preambles to the *2040 Department of Defense Review*. With the DOD budget under pressure as Social Security and Medicare spending continued to rise, the Marine Corps came under increasing scrutiny. Defense intellectuals were quick to highlight that eliminating the Marine Corps as a separate Service would save a minimum of 20,000 billets from the Marine Corps' headquarters and supporting establishment without making cuts to operational forces. A more detailed analysis made the argument even more compelling, retiring the bulk of its the amphibious force would save the Navy billions and further efficiencies could be found by making significant cuts to the Marine Aircraft Wing. Having recently been upgraded to global mobility standards, Marine ground and logistics forces were quickly integrated into the Army structure.

How did this happen to such a storied military force? Despite the series of *Marine Corps Gazette* articles and television interviews arguing the contrary, the joint force still valued Marines and tactical Marine units. The issue was never the combat skills or capability of Marines, but the ability of the Marine Corps to get to the fight. The underlying cause was really the inability of the Marine Corps to evolve as an institution in the wake of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. The balance of power between the ground, air, and logistics constituencies made change difficult; each community focused on investments in their stovepipe and lost focus on the MAGTF. Rather than focus on making significant changes to the force, which would have involved making difficult strategic choices and upsetting the political balance, the Marine Corps dedicated itself to "staying busy" and keeping the operational tempo high to support theater requirements. By the 2020s and 2030s, there were no force innovations akin to the advent of the SPMAGTFs years earlier. This lack of innovative thinking or space limited the Service's ability rethink its role in the wider defense establishment. Fortunately, the Marines have integrated well into the other Services, as 18th Global Mobility Corps leadership was quick to highlight last month during a recent visit to the 2d Marine Infantry Division's headquarters in Fort Lejeune, North Carolina.

# OUR OWN BEST FRIEND, OUR OWN WORST ENEMY

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*Captain J. M. Holmes, USMC*

In the end, we did it to ourselves. After more than 260 years, our beloved Corps is headed for the scrap heap, its assets and personnel dispersed to the awaiting vultures of the other Services. Despite nearly three centuries undefeated on the battlefield, we find ourselves struck down in the halls of Congress, undone by the very people we had sworn to protect and defend. Like most of us, I felt betrayed, stabbed in the back. How could the pen pushers and bean counters in the Capitol possibly understand what it means to be a Marine, or how important the Marine Corps is? What gang of incompetents at Headquarters Marine Corps failed to advocate for us so greatly? Who could have done this greatest of injustices to us? Well, it turns out we are our own “no better friend, no worse enemy.”

The root cause of the demise of the Marine Corps seems to be, of all things, a too-great fascination with innovation in the hopes of compensating for personnel and budget shortfalls. The Corps is notorious for its dogged refusal to change, going at least as far back as the leaders who thought that forming Marine battalions for shore-based operations robbed from the traditional mission of ship-based guards. Conversely, adaptability is a quality Marines hold dear. Our desire to change and innovate is one of our greatest strengths, but left unchecked and unguided it can become a serious liability. And to be clear: this certainly is not a matter of changing culture. “This generation,” “the softening of America,” or the “reign of social justice warriors” are not to blame as dozens of think pieces that have been penned, or will be in the coming days, have suggested.

Tracing it back, nearly 40 years ago, our nation found itself embroiled in two major conflicts as part of a larger Global War on Terrorism. With the best of intentions, the Marine Corps spent two decades adjusting to these missions by making itself as similar to the Army as possible in terms of manning, equipment, and operations. As major combat operations in those two conflicts drew to a close, the Marine Corps retained the requisite formations and tactics well into the 2020s. Rather than an expeditionary strike force, we Marines found ourselves part of a second-rate land army while bemoaning the money, personnel, and equipment shortfalls that separated us from the Army. When it came time for accounting in the 2030s, and faced with our ever-dwindling budget (the incredible shrinking budget has been reality for the Marine Corps at least as long as eagles, globes,

and anchors), is it any wonder that the taxpayers decided to cancel the junior varsity team?

As part of the “new normal” following our emergence from two long desert wars, the Marine Corps found itself reverting to steady state, deterrence operations. We were (and remain) postured for a new Cold War, attempting to show strength everywhere without actually being strong anywhere. In reality, Marines are assigned to ad hoc formations, broken apart from the Marines they have trained and lived with, reassembled with relative strangers in time for a month or so of training if they are very lucky, and spread from South America to the Far East and back. All Services have seen reductions as the possibility of major combat operations, the elusive dragon all military planners chase, continues to decline in our oh-so-safe world but bites from the budget and personnel always hit the Marine Corps the hardest due to its already diminutive size. “Do more with less” has been a Marine Corps adage since Captain Samuel Nicholas and his boys landed in the Bahamas, but as more becomes more and less becomes less, the strain is unendurable and eventually something has to give. Marines grit their teeth and make things work, but hope, dreams, and motivation will only carry us so far, and that limit seems to have been 8 February 2040.

For the Marines, the only way out of the grinding cycle of workup and deployment, deployments that increasingly see them standing garrison duty in far-flung parts of the world just long enough for their skills to atrophy, has been the shiny light that is Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC). MARSOC was created in response to the American public’s love affair with special forces and the desire to get some of those sweet Special Operations Command (SOCOM) dollars. The old Raider Battalions were shut down because it was determined to be wasteful to have a specialized cadre within an already specialized organization. Now, MARSOC has set themselves apart as the elite of the elite. The chance to be a Marine outside of the Marine Corps. As their budget continues to grow, and the conventional forces’ budgets shrink, their ability to support missions becomes even more preeminent. Given the option of doing exciting training, having interesting deployments, and operating on a SOCOM budget, is it any surprise that our best and brightest have flocked to MARSOC at the expense of the rest of the Corps?

The Marine Corps has never had problems filling its ranks. The prestige and the mystique of the Marine Corps, as well as its reputation as the world’s finest fighting force, has been enough of a draw for generations of young men and women. However, retention has been a problem since at least the days of Vietnam, nearly 100 years prior, and has been in free fall since the early 2020s. In 2018, then-Commandant General Robert B. Neller identified retention statistics falling to an all-time low as more than 60 percent of the Marine Corps had four years or less of service. The succeeding two decades saw little change as the percentage of first-term Marines continued to increase even as the overall size of the Marine Corps decreased. This attrition hit the middle ranks especially hard, these would-be careerists who have always formed the unsung, unappreciated heart of Marine Corps planning and operations. A vicious cancer has seized field-grade, chief warrant officer and SNCO ranks as the best qualified seek greener pastures while the selfish, the political, and those marking time until retirement remain.

As the midpoint of the century approaches, Marines, with the best of intentions,

have sought new tactics, techniques, and procedures to deal with the ever-changing world. Marines of every generation have attempted to carve out a niche for themselves that sets them apart from the other Services. The 2020s and 2030s saw a surge of innovation, albeit without an end goal. They sought new capabilities and technologies that went far beyond what the Marine Corps had previously seen as possible or perhaps had seen as their responsibility. Each of these programs received money and personnel for development and experimentation. Each one also came with its own proprietary technology suite that, of course, was not compatible with anything we already had or (even more of a pipe dream) with each other. While innovating new capabilities is good, funding and personnel in the Marine Corps is a zero-sum game. Adding to one robs from the other. Meanwhile, those in traditional billets, units, and communities found themselves in short supply, undermanned, underfunded, and far over-employed. It was only when we hit the manning crises at the end of the last decade, far too late to change anything, that headquarters realized there was a problem. The requirements did not change; they never do.

The Corps always existed to operate in all domains of warfare. As more domains continued to be added, the Marine Corps pursued capabilities to operate in them without adding any new structure or funding. The few(er) and proud Marines found themselves pulled in too many directions with too little to show for it. Every year when the DOD budget is reviewed, lawmakers ask the question, "What have you done for me lately?" Increasingly, during the last few years, the Marine Corps has had statistics and figures that only served to show we did what the other Services do, but not as well.

In the end, we did it to ourselves. It is somewhat poetic that the only thing that could defeat the Marine Corps was the Marine Corps. It is a shame that Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal's emphatic words just 95 years ago were off by a factor of five when he declared there would be a Marine Corps for the next 500 years. Perhaps it is not surprising. The public never needed the Marine Corps, but until recently they always wanted it. Now, the general public has joined the crowd that has asked since the eighteenth century, "Why do we need you?" For the first time, the Marine Corps did not have an answer, and so we pass into history. We may all die as Marines, but the Marine Corps dies with us.

# LOSS OF ROOTS LEAD TO DEATH OF A BRANCH

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*Captain Michael J. Spinello, USMC*

*Special release: 3 April 2040–2243*

WASHINGTON, DC—Tonight, at 2035, President Joseph Kennedy signed into law House Bill H. R. 2319 after it passed in the 126th Congress following heated debates in both the House and Senate. H. R. 2319, known as the Defense Simplification Bill or Branch Pruning Act by the media, abolished and dissolved the U.S. Marine Corps. Founded in 1775, the Marine Corps was 264 years old. All personnel and assets will be transferred and divided among the other three Services. This marks the end of an era of warfighters and comes on the heels of multiple missteps in planning and concepts during the last two decades. This paradigm shift had been in the making since the 2025 establishment of Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force–Crisis Response–South America (SPMAGTF-CR-SA). This SPMAGTF set a precedent for the Marine Corps, and they were called to set up more around the globe. The tipping point for the Marine Corps came with the defeat of the 31st MEU in the East China Sea. These two main events led to Congress no longer seeing a need for the Marine Corps as an individual branch, when the same mission could be done by the Army, Navy, and Air Force. This cut also saves the taxpayers 4 percent (roughly \$50 billion) of total defense spending.

The decision to set up the SPMAGTF-CR-SA came after the invasion of Venezuela to defeat the dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro in the early 2020s. This operation was an overall success and considered a victory for the United States, particularly the Marine Corps. Due to success in the past with their SPMAGTF in Africa and Southwest Asia, the Department of Defense asked General Justin J. Buckle, the Commandant of the Marine Corps at the time, to set up a SPMAGTF in South America to allow for rapid response in the Southern Command. This led to further demands from Congress and the president to set up similar SPMAGTFs in East Asia and Northern Europe. The European MAGTF was set up in western Lithuania with support from NATO, while the Asian MAGTF was met with intense scrutiny from China and North Korea, finally settling in Okinawa, Japan, despite its location being impractical for a rapid response to mainland Asia without MEU support.



Contrary to their original founding warriors, the Marine Corps slowly evolved into a land-based force operating almost totally from these SPMAGTF bases. Originally designed in 2011 to allow the MEUs to stay at sea, the SPMAGTF locations became the primary bases for the Marine Corps at the beginning of the 2030s. These bases, initially conceived to be temporary, formed into permanent bases with a revolving door of units filling the billets on Unit Deployment Programs (UDP). The MEU usage declined significantly through the 2030s; enough to continue budgets cuts to acquire more amphibious ships that started in 2020, cutting the already dwindling fleet.<sup>1</sup> With fewer amphibious ships and more units on land at the SPMAGTFs throughout the globe, MEU training and usage went by the wayside. This led to the failure in the East China Sea.

The 2036 invasion and annexation of Taiwan by the People's Republic of China led to a division in the ranks of the Joint Chiefs. Congress and the president both wanted action, the Marine Commandant, General Brad Amcis, assured them the SPMAGTF located in Okinawa, with help from the 31st MEU, were ready and able to be the initial force to respond to the Chinese actions in Taiwan. Due to the structure of the SPMAGTF, the Marine Corps was a "combined arms" unit internally but not externally with the other Joint branches, making a quick operation hard to coordinate. With assurance from the Marine Commandant, the Marine Corps was tasked with the initial push into Taiwan with SPMAGTF Okinawa and the 31st MEU, despite their lack of training for this type of amphibious landing. Their lack of training as a MEU became fully evident with the first wave of aerial attacks being largely unsuccessful due to GPS denial in the area, making their precision-guided munitions largely ineffective. The amphibious wave was also affected by the GPS denial, having largely relied on it for navigation for decades and no training without it in the last few years. Coupled with the GPS denial, long-range weapons on the shoreline denied the MEU any access to the shoreline and made them prime targets for the Chinese. Since the Chinese operate via BeiDou, their satellite-based navigation, their systems and weapons were still able to operate in the environment.<sup>2</sup> The 31st MEU was almost completely destroyed and left to limp back to Okinawa having not completed a single landing. This led to many questions being posed by Congress and the American people for the need for the Marine Corps as a separate branch. They make up the smallest portion of the budget, which many argued could be cut and given to the Navy to revamp their amphibious vessels for the Army to use.

We know the answer to that question formed after the failed attempt to complete an amphibious landing without having trained for it in two decades. Just at the beginning of this century, the Marines were a beloved staple of America's warrior culture. They embodied everything we felt defined the warrior spirit, but they evolved. They became just another branch of the military, not unlike the Army with their land bases, incompatible with the Air Force due to their lack of integration of their own aviation assets, and irrelevant

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<sup>1</sup> Paul McLeary, "Two LPD Amphibious Ships Cut from 2020 Budget Plan," *Breaking Defense*, 1 March 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Merryl Azriel, "US Department of Defense Reports on China's Space Capabilities," *Space Safety Magazine*, 27 May 2013; and "China's Beidou GPS-substitute Opens to Public in Asia," *BBC News*, 27 December 2012.

to the Navy due to their lack of coordination and new amphibious ships. They became just another uniform to the American people. With the caveat that "hindsight is 20/20," it is this reporter's opinion that this situation could have been avoided 20 years ago. With the amphibious mindset, training could have been tailored to work jointly with the other branches, while also preparing for an imminent loss of GPS usage in a war with a peer or near-peer nation. Finally, and frankly, the Marine Corps is an amphibious force, with its origins on Revolutionary War ships. Through World War II and Korea, the Marine Corps made its name as the first on shore from the sea with help from their Navy servicemembers. Keeping that as the forefront mission of the Marine Corps would have ensured their success and relevancy for decades, if not centuries, to come.

# DEGRADATION TRIFECTA

## Losing Krulak's Principles

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*Captain Matthew S. Hanks, USMC*

In 1984, Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak wrote that the Marine Corps exists because of what the “grassroots of our country believes we are and believes we can do.”<sup>1</sup> He further claimed that there are three principles the American people must believe: first, that the Marine Corps will be the most ready when the Nation is least ready; second, that the Marine Corps will decisively win in battle—always; and third, that the Marine Corps creates better citizens.<sup>2</sup> As if foreshadowed, it was the failure to maintain the principles outlined by Krulak that led to the abolishment of the Marine Corps. This path began in the early 2000s and escalated to a point of no return that obligated the 126th Congress to act on behalf of the people rightfully.

### **Better Citizens**

Throughout its existence, the Marine Corps faced many ethical breaches that deteriorated Krulak's principle of returning Marines to society as better citizens, but managed to maintain a favorable place in hearts and minds of the American people. However, the Marine Corps struggled to combat this deterioration in the Information Age.<sup>3</sup> The Marines United scandal in 2017 involved both active duty and former Marines who preyed on their fellow female Marines with revenge pornography, an undeniable example of how the

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<sup>1</sup> LtGen Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984), XIV.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased in Krulak, *First to Fight*, XV.

<sup>3</sup> LtGen Michael G. Dana describes how “we are ill-prepared for the next war. I say that because we are not fully adapting to the changing character of 21st century warfare. We are rapidly moving from industrial era-warfare to information-era warfare, which is making legacy bureaucratic processes and military organizations obsolete.” He further describes the “new-old domain of perception,” where “space and cyber operations hold the potential to have more of an impact on future war than the bombs and bullets in wars pasts. Similarly, the weaponization of social media . . . speaks to the ‘war of perception’ amongst friends and foes alike.” It is important to note that adversary and neutral actors can generate significant effects through the use of information in a nonkinetic manner. Mike Dana, “Future War: Not Back to the Future” *War on the Rocks* (blog), 6 March 2019.

Marine Corps failed to return some back to society as good citizens.<sup>4</sup> The death of Private Raheel Siddiqui at Parris Island, South Carolina, in 2016 led civilians to publicly question how the Marine Corps makes Marines.<sup>5</sup> Then in 2019, a video displaying the poor living conditions of Marine's spouses and their families ultimately led to congressional involvement and undesirable attention for the Corps.<sup>6</sup>

The Marine Corps would suffer some form of scandal every year between 2019 and the Indo-Pacific conflict in 2030. Each time the Marine Corps showed up in the media, the institutional response would be similar: an incident would go viral, and the Marine Corps would lose control of the narrative. In an effort to appease civilian officials, the Marine Corps would institute an immediate response in the form of a white letter, page 11 entry, additional administrative training, or mandatory stand down.<sup>7</sup> These efforts tended to quell the fire, and slowly, public attention would drift toward something else. This "scandal response cycle" provided quick fixes for symptoms of a problem that desperately needed long-term solutions; however, the Marine Corps possessed an ethical culture that did not meet its promise to the American people.

Interestingly, the Marine Corps maintained high ethical standards, as every incident involved only a small number of individuals. However, the combination of adversary information campaigns and profiteering journalists looking for controversy led the civilian populace to believe a false narrative. Moreover, as new scandals arose, the past scandals resurfaced, which created a cumulative effect that drastically degraded the image of the Marine Corps. A devastating blow came in the aftermath of the September 2028 *Time* magazine article "Hazing, Rape, Murder, and Cover-Ups: The Inside Story of the United States Marine Corps." The people rightfully asked, "How can I trust this organization with my sons and daughters?"<sup>8</sup> The degradation of ethical standards in the eyes of the public, influenced mostly by adversary information operations, had direct consequences on recruiting. By 2030, the Marine Corps simply could not fill its quotas without substantial waivers in its standards. With Krulak's third and most important principle collapsing, it would take a major victory on the battlefield to restore the Marine Corps' image to the American people, but would the institution be ready?

## Readiness

The institutional willingness to be ready for everything, over time, destroyed Marine Corps readiness. Between 2016 and 2030, global force management (GFM) directed the continued presence of crisis response units in the form of Amphibious Ready Groups (ARG)/MEUs and SPMAGTFs, while at the same time operation plan requirements necessitated training for major combat operations. The Marine Corps had too many tasks with too

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew de Grandpe and Jeff Schogol, "A Nude Photo Scandal Has Shaken the Entire Marine Corps," *Marine Corps Times*, 5 March 2017.

<sup>5</sup> *The New York Times* published an article comparing Krulak's words with the events that led to Pvt Raheel Siddiqui's death at Parris Island in 2016. Janet Reitman, "How the Death of a Muslim Recruit Revealed a Culture of Brutality in the Marines," *New York Times Magazine*, 6 July 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Nelson, "Special Report: U.S. Marine Families Battle Mice, Mold, and Landlords," Reuters, 1 November 2018.

<sup>7</sup> The term page 11 refers to an administrative remarks page in the service record.

<sup>8</sup> This is a fictional article and event.

little time and resources to complete them. The Service and its personnel became operationally exhausted by being ready for everything, instead of anything. The inevitable result was a false sense of readiness where, on paper, units were ready across the spectrum of tasks. In reality, units could meet only the minimum requirements.

This problem of operational tempo proved too large a burden to maintain personnel, equipment, and training standards. Moreover, the Marine Corps displayed an unwillingness to institutionally adapt to future conditions if those conditions threatened traditional practices of organization and force deployment. In the early 2020s, a group of junior officers raised red flags and gained traction when they challenged the *Marine Corps Gazette* article titled “The End of the ARG/MEU and SPMAGTF.”<sup>9</sup> Their thesis was quite simple and unfortunately quite prescient: the Marine Corps is operating on an unsustainable operational model. They argued that the Marine Corps should task-organize crisis response units based on the likely mission set and the likely crisis to occur in the given geographic area, rather than a general-purpose task-organized force. These officers believed that specialized, geographically tailored MAGTFs embodied the true purpose of the concept, which is to task-organize specific capabilities from each of the components that collectively achieve mission success in the most effective and efficient manner. At the same time, their proposal also met global force management requirements and reduced the overall costs associated with maintained readiness throughout the Marine Corps. Unfortunately, they met stiff resistance from senior Marine officers, and the ARG/MEUs and SPMAGTFs continued as they have since the early 2000s.

For many years, there was no climactic battle for the Marine Corps to fight. But, by the time the Indo-Pacific conflict started in 2030, the effects of adversary whole-of-government approaches and nonkinetic pacing wars in the twenty-first century had a clear outcome: the Marine Corps lost a war of exhaustion before firing a shot. The strenuous operation tempo degraded the force’s readiness for major combat operations, and Krulak’s first principle crumbled at first contact.

## Winning

The Indo-Pacific conflict (2030–33) appeared, at first glance, to be the Marine Corps’ justification for existence. The Corps had specifically prepared for a naval campaign against a near-peer adversary. This conflict would test their expeditionary advanced based operations and littoral operations in a contested environment concepts. But in its major combat operations debut, 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade’s onboard naval ships from Expeditionary Strike Group 7 met the enemy in the Battle of Halmahera Sea with catastrophic results. The adversary launched a barrage of land-based hypersonic and surface-to-surface antiship cruise missiles and sank five amphibious ships and three surface combatants full of Marines and sailors preparing to conduct expeditionary operations.<sup>10</sup>

The rift between the Navy and Marine Corps widened dramatically after the Battle

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<sup>9</sup> This is a fictional article, however, a study sponsored by CNA conducted in 2015 offers a similar thesis. Jonathan D. Geithner, *The ARG/MEU: Is It Still Relevant?* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Ryan Hilger wrote a fantastic article highlighting the challenges the Navy faces with missiles in future conflict and further argues that the Navy is “woefully unprepared.” Ryan Hilger, “Red Sky in Morning: Naval Combat at the Dawn of Hypersonics,” *War on the Rocks* (blog), 29 February 2019.

of Halmahera Sea as both Services blamed the other for the disaster. The Navy believed that the Marine Corps focused too much on land-based objectives, allocated too many aviation sorties to land-based targets, and ignored the naval threats. The Marine Corps, conversely, blamed the Navy for failing to modernize, train, and equip its amphibious fleet to a level necessary for twenty-first century major combat operations. The adversary exploited the battle with an extremely effective information campaign, which further inflamed inter-Service rivalry and markedly decreased popular support for the conflict. Most Americans believed the battle to be a significant defeat for the Navy and Marine Corps, and citizens protested similar military actions that followed quite vehemently. The effect was devastating: PACOM benched the Marine Corps, with the exception of the F-35B, for the remainder of the war.

It took only one defeat at sea to remove the Marine Corps from the battlefield, and it is still hard to determine which Service, Navy or Marines, is most responsible. Many argue that the Marine Corps failed to integrate with the Navy to fight within a single naval battle construct and that defense of the amphibious task force was not a sufficient allocation of resources for effective power projection and sea control.<sup>11</sup> The Services never found a solution to merge the MAGTF with composite warfare construct, and continued to insist that their way of warfare was the best and only way they could effectively fight. Despite the controversy, it is certain that the Marine Corps suffered a catastrophe that established a confluence of synonymous images: burning ships, drowning servicemembers, and the United States Marines. From that point, the American people would never believe that the Marine Corps could decisively win another battle, and Krulak's second principle was lost.

## Legacy

There was no single stroke that led to the abolishment of the Marine Corps. Instead, a series of events slowly attributed to the failure of the three principles Krulak said the Marine Corps must uphold to exist. The legacy of the Corps is not a shield but a shadow of the past. Its existence depends not on the past, but on the present and future. Should the Corps fail, or even appear to fail, to provide our value to the American people outlined by General Krulak, the abolishment of the Marine Corps is simply a matter of time.

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<sup>11</sup> Capt A. T. Mahan, *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1911), 132.

# TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

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*Captain Jessica DeMaria, USMC*

I was commissioned as second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps in August 2011, and after almost 20 years of service, I am pending service redesignation into another branch of Service. This is, of course, a result of the decision made on 8 February 2040 in which the U.S. Congress passed a law that abolished and dissolved the Marine Corps in which all personnel and assets merged into the Army, Navy, and the Air Force. Although my story is not unique, my perspective may be. Due to my military occupational specialty (MOS) as a manpower officer, I was part of an effort to develop an exit survey for Marines separating from the Corps.

In 2016, Congress authorized the new Blended Retirement System (BRS), which replaced the traditional 20-year retirement system, in which servicemembers would have to serve a minimum of 20 years to earn a pension. Now, U.S. servicemembers who joined after 2016 would have a 401(k), and regardless of how long they serve, they can walk away with money. No longer would servicemembers feel obligated to “stick it out;” they could walk away with experience, money, and enough time to embark on new careers. From there, I believe the perfect storm developed. Much like a hurricane, I could feel the weather changing and could see the storm picking up speed; however, instead of fortifying for the storm, the Marine Corps was distracted, failing to prepare for the storm, and ceased to be the few and the proud.

Aviation in the Marine Corps continued to struggle with readiness and efficiency. Flight hours hit a historic low in 2020, and our pilots became overburdened with collateral duties and received fewer and fewer flight hours. Although we retained pilots through various programs, the Marine Corps was unable to retain our best. When surveyed, the BRS continued to be noted as a consideration for those departing from the Marine Corps. Marine Corps pilots have an eight-year requirement to serve after receiving their wings, which places them as young majors at the completion of their obligation. However, as aviation mishaps continued to become even more frequent, many aviators reevaluated their goals and career aspirations. Aviation incentives were used, but it could not retain the top 30 percent, our future commanders and our future leadership. Comments included: “The pressure to continue to do more with less didn’t stop. Fly with less hours, fly with less capable aircraft, and all while being evaluated as another MOS.” Others pointed to the Marine Corps fitness report writing, the metric by which we evaluate Marines. Fitness

reports did not actually require pilots to identify as pilots. Instead, it asked as pilots to identify as their collateral billet (S-1 personnel officer, S-6 communications officer, and maintenance officer). A point to consider, pilots were not being evaluated on what their military had just invested millions of dollars into; they were evaluated on how well they picked up their ground job.

Another interesting phenomenon took place; many qualified pilots were not taking photographs and were not completing their required professional military education. When it came time to be screened for promotion to major, they were not being selected. They were exceptional officers; many completed difficult milestones but were passed twice for major. They silently separated, walking away with separation pay, flight qualifications, a guaranteed job with the airlines, acceptance into competitive schools, or interviewing for other competitive positions. The deputy commandant of Marine Aviation was made aware of the results, but again, the competition with the airlines, coupled with the demands of being in the military, could not prevent the most talented from separating. Many found that the Reserves were too demanding. Why fly in the Marine Corps Reserves when you can fly for the Air National Guard?

Other patterns began to emerge through the exit survey system, specifically regarding the retention of females. The Marine Corps' recruiting effort brought in NCAA Division I athletes, ivy league graduates, and women with competitive work history—all who came to the Marine Corps to lead Marines but were getting out at a rapid rate and in critical MOSs. When the exit survey asked them what the causal factors were in the decision to get out, many responded with the inability to balance their personal and professional lives. Those that were dual servicemembers found that balancing two careers was costing them their marriages. Others wanted to have a family, and the BRS allowed them the opportunity to walk away as a college graduate with work experience and a 401(K).

Others noted that the general officers, although female, did not represent them. I found that interesting. How could a female not represent you? After seeing this comment mentioned five times in the exit survey, I decided to ask the female company grade officers who answered the survey. Their response: How many of them have families? How many female generals have been married to the same person, have children with that person, and had children at the company grade level? The answer was zero. Women who valued family found that they had more in common with female general officers than the female general officers. After having children, time away from their families became less tolerable. Coupled with the evolving physical requirements, the top 30 percent were leaving. Incentives were used, but they could not compete with companies such as Boeing that offered six-months maternity leave.

The exit survey continued to be analyzed and investigated, and points regarding family hardship continued to come up. Marines cited the inability for spouses to pursue educational and career goals in the three years they spent at a duty station. Many left simply so their spouses could have stability in the workplace. The Corps' best and brightest were married to even better and brighter; however, we did not capitalize on their experiences, education, or work history. Spouses who require clientele (real estate, lawyers, cosmetologist) found it difficult to continue reestablish themselves every few years. I recommended a manpower model that would allow for four or five-year orders, with the option to move earlier if required, but no one wanted to hear it. The consensus seemed



to agree that if they didn't like it, they could leave. And leave they did. Had we pursued support for spouses, maybe we would have a happier force. Is happiness important to a fighting force? I would argue, yes, it is. The old saying that if the Marine Corps wanted you to have a family, they would have issued you one falls on deaf ears. With rising rates of veteran suicide, the human need for social support is evident. When spouses are not valued, they influence a servicemember's decision to stay in.

I think back to the Dolly Parton Movie, *9 to 5*, in which Parton and two female colleagues kidnap their sexist, bigoted, egotistical boss and make major improvements in their workplace. They created a flexible work schedule, onsite child daycare, alcoholic support groups, and recognized employees for their hard work. Unfortunately, it is too late to be innovative and make changes, because now the Marine Corps will cease to be a fighting force. And this long email, well, I'm not even going to bother to send, because there is no exit survey and no one to send it to.

Sincerely,  
Captain de Maria

# HOW WE LOST THE MARINE CORPS

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*First Sergeant Jose Cabrera, USMC*

Empires rise. History has shown this. They rise, they thrive, they reach incredible, unfathomable heights, and then they fall. The Persian, Greek, Roman, and British empires all rose to prominence, conquered a vast part of the known world, stood as a beacon of mankind's accomplishments then met abrupt, often violent ends. The United States of America is considered a union of 50 free, self-governed states that comprise a constitutional republic. They function independently, but together, under a capitalist system of economics, but the impact of their union functions much like that of an empire. The American people were not handed their freedom, their system of government, or their vast economic success. No single generation earned these things in perpetuity for the rest. Each had to be ready to lay down their lives in their preservation. And the American people, whose accomplishments shone as a beacon for the rest of humanity, chose the United States Marine Corps to stand most for and be most ready to defend their values.

There came a point in American history when the very poignant question of whether U.S. Marines were necessary came about. The argument hit on how the other three branches of Service were specialized forces that could each cover the three domains of war at the time: land, air, and sea. The Marines were a redundancy. The answer was clear. The Marines were not needed. And they would have been disbanded but for one thing: the American people wanted the Marines. They wanted to believe that there existed an institution that embodied the American fighting spirit, and stood with honor and courage, committed and always ready to answer the nation's call. Americans looked at their "devil dogs" with pride, more so than the other branches, because Marines never failed. They were the United States' 911 force. But it was too good to last.

The storied institution was allowed to become a social experiment to appease the political climate of the 2000s. It began subtly, almost invisibly, with a turn toward more sensitivity when dealing with social issues. Senior leaders identified a certain weakness in the incoming generation, a sense of entitlement, and so they sought to fundamentally transform the recruiting effort via Marine Corps Recruiting Command's approach to replenishing the force and the warrior-sustainment of junior Marines at TECOM. They were overturned by general officers acting in accordance with civilian policies. As a result, senior leaders became more and more powerless to correct Marines and saw their own values no longer aligning with the Marine Corps. They lost heart, surrendered, and left

their Service. With no passionate leaders left to defend their traditions, America's Marines were fundamentally transformed into something that no longer resembled the tenacity, discipline, courage, initiative, and strength of character that had been the cornerstone of their history. The United States Marines were no longer the legendary spartan warriors the world had come to know and revere. Congress convened in 2032, and according to the will of the American people, dissolved the United States Marine Corps in short order.

The world was changed at the turn of the millennium by the Information Age. The internet provided people with a way to communicate and share their ideas and opinions instantly, often to the detriment of society. Misinformation and misguided, ignorant opinions were rampant. The United States was more divided than at any other point in their history with the exception of the Civil War. The Marines, mirroring their society, also were divided. Principles like the First Amendment were weaponized. Freedom of speech quickly became freedom from speech, and differing opinions were silenced. It became difficult for leaders to lead when subordinates could easily claim racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice against them. Freedom of religion became freedom from religion, and enough protests about invocations with Christian words brought an end to religious blessings during ceremonies. The quest for equality became muddied and replaced by a pursuit for sameness. Rather than celebrate the differences between men and women, they were claimed as sexist. Women's uniforms were altered to be the same as their male counterparts, and the physical fitness standards were changed to be the same as well. Female Marines struggled to meet the standards, and attrition grew by 40 percent at recruit depots, Officer Candidates School, and other entry-level training schools among females. But males suffered too.

With attrition rates reaching critical levels, several senior leaders, generals, field-grade officers, sergeants major, and master gunnery sergeants petitioned Marine Corps Recruiting Command to change the recruiting effort. Commercials were suggested showing Marines actually suffering in training, with an emphasis on combat and patriotism, but were quickly denied as "too harsh" for viewing. It was strongly suggested across the Service that the Marines shift to a "drop on request" training method so that only the truly dedicated could continue, but this was also denied. So the generalized recruiting tactics remained, and the same caliber of recruits kept coming. Training and Education Command was also petitioned by the same group of senior leaders to offer something more substantial in the way of transformation sustainment. It was suggested that Marines awaiting training across the Corps could be reorganized and directed to a sustainment company within their local commands that focused on core values, history, customs and courtesies, and warfighting. The easy and lazy answers of manpower and logistics were used to rebuff that effort as well.

The mainstream media played their part in misguiding the people, leading them to believe that "America was never great." From a young age, children were taught to feel shame for the history of the United States, and these children soon grew to military age. But rather than enlist for a sense of patriotism or service, or to earn money for college, they did so to collect a paycheck. A paycheck they were willing to work only half-heartedly for, with no regard to the high standards of their predecessors.

Leaders across the Corps sought to bring the Marines' pride in their service and adherence to high standards back, but the newest generation rebelled. Every correction

became policy or political discussion, as the young men and women who comprised the junior ranks had been taught to question things for the whole of their lives. More and more leaders became reluctant to make corrections, and slowly, gradually all standards slipped. Haircuts grew more eccentric and blatantly outside of the order but were disregarded. Body composition was not enforced due to an unwillingness to make hard decisions. The Marine Corps had become something that senior leaders no longer recognized as the Service to which they had devoted their lives. And so, a great number of them decided to retire or exit at the end of their contract in search of something more meaningful or lucrative.

No invocations during ceremonies. An inability to speak the truth for fear of reprisal. An unwillingness to recruit only those highly qualified and truly dedicated. An unwillingness to do everything that could be done to sustain the warrior transformation in the entry-level development. An untested, entitled, new generation that had been taught not to believe in the values of their nation. A disheartened, disillusioned leadership.

By the year 2032, the Marine Corps was no longer a revered organization. Misconduct surged to never before seen levels and covered a wide spectrum. Sexual assaults, sexual harassment, assaults, thefts, hazing, and unauthorized absences all became more prevalent. Marines no longer acted like Marines. Without enforcement of body composition and grooming standards, Marines no longer even looked like Marines. They had become the same as every other branch of Service. They were sloppy, undisciplined, foul-mouthed, and more concerned with being popular than being Marines. They were ill-prepared to continue the legacy they inherited.

Congress convened, and according to the will of the American people, who no longer believed in their Marines, disbanded the Corps. Each MOS was absorbed according to the logical succession of the Service to which they most closely related.

Empires rise and empires fall for different reasons, amid different circumstances. But complacency always played a role. At the turn of the millennium, the American people were fat, lazy, weak-minded, soft-tongued, undisciplined, and comfortable. Political correctness was allowed to run rampant, and slowly changed the perception of the nation. Marine leaders were ill-prepared and ill-equipped to face the onslaught the changing world would have on their service. The champions of American ideals—honor, courage, hard work, sacrifice, service and patriotism—were anything but before the Marine Corps finally lost a battle. The battle for its standards, its history, its traditions, its very soul.

"The Star-Spangled Banner," written by Francis Scott Key in a poem originally titled "The Defense of Fort McHenry," is the only national anthem in the world—in the history of the world—that ends in a question. And that question is the responsibility of every generation of Americans to answer. We have lost our Marines. How much longer until we lose more?

# IN FINE FIDELIS

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*Captain Anthony E. Maticotta, USMC*

From the Halls of Montezuma to the halls of Congress, the Marine Corps fought its last fight today and lost. Despite numerous heavy-hitting proponents, the vote to abolish and dissolve the Marine Corps came as no surprise given the recent history of the Corps.

In 2020, in the wake of the unsuccessful United Nations summit in which he was directed to disarm, Kim Jong-Un finally made his first earnest attempt to employ nuclear ordnance against the United States when he unsuccessfully deployed a to strike Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, with a nuclear intercontinental ballistic missile. In a routine attempt to prove their operational relevancy, the Marine Corps immediately retasked the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit with relocating to the Korean Peninsula and executing a ship-to-objective maneuver to establish a beachhead for follow on operations. Despite their proximity and familiarity with the environment, the Marines were ill-equipped to operate without their accustomed air superiority. The Corps' aging fleet of aircraft, with its insufficient aviation survivability equipment, sustained massive casualties at the hands of the integrated air defense systems that had been emplaced in preparation for such an assault. The inability of Marine air to gain and maintain local air superiority forced the MEU to attempt ship-to-shore movement under heavy fire from both the shore and the sky. This resulted in high casualties not only among the Corps' landing force, but multiple supporting naval surface vessels were targeted and sunk. Once ashore, despite the heroism that is characteristic of the Corps in war time, the situation only further deteriorated. Inability to effectively establish digital interoperability with the arriving joint forces hindered the Marines' command and control node's ability to receive and execute missions in theater. As a result, they were rapidly replaced by the more robustly equipped Army and Air Force units sourced for the operation. Despite the noble messaging attempts made by the communication strategy Marines, the public appeal of victory was dominated by soldiers marching on Pyongyang and similar high-profile Army victories. It was this campaign that reignited the historic debate in Congress as to whether, with all the money already apportioned to the Corps, the additional funding required to restore and refit the Marines would not be better spent elsewhere. This concern was echoed by high-ranking leaders in the Navy, traditionally a proponent of a separate Service, who held the Marine Corps accountable for the steep naval losses.

The embarrassment on the Korean Peninsula was just the beginning of a rapidly deteriorating situation for the Marines. In the wake of the campaign, multiple films depicting the “real Marine Corps” were released. Reminiscent of *Combat Obscura*, these movies painted a less than flattering picture of Marine Corps life, both at home and abroad. Highlighting the hazing, misogyny, and bureaucratic quagmire of a peacetime Marine Corps, these docudramas not only began to turn public admiration into widespread criticism for what was perceived to be a dated culture but were believed to have contributed to the diminishing recruitment numbers of the last decade. A spike in sexual assaults, domestic violence, and alcohol-related incidences, not uncommon immediately following a large-scale conflict, further exasperated the public in the postwar years. By far the most inflammatory incident was the mysterious death of the first transgender infantry Marine in 2025. Considered to be a cultural triumph by its proponents, the Marine’s death, veiled in secrecy and believed to be covered up by senior leaders, sparked bipartisan outrage nationwide. This confluence of scandals finally reached a tipping point in the summer of 2027, when an unprecedented assemblage of discontented citizens protested in front of the national Capitol Building in Washington, DC. The American public’s admiration and support had been a deterrent for the dissolution of the Marine Corps for centuries, helping the Corps survive multiple presidents, secretaries of defense, and legislators. Emboldened by the apparent waning of that support, the idea of absorbing the Marine Corps and its assets into the other military branches began to be widely socialized in the armed forces committees of both the House and Senate.

The rumblings of dissolution or absorption could not have come at a worse time for the Corps as the Great Recession of 2030 suddenly struck the nation. After a pricey attempt by the Federal Reserve to integrate a new cryptocurrency into the national economy catalyzed large-scale data losses, outlooks on all major indexes plummeted along with their component securities. With outcries of excessive government expenditures, specifically peacetime military spending, rising, a radical piece of legislation was introduced: the President’s Own Act of 2031. That bill effectively emasculated the Marine Corps as a warfighting institution by stripping it of all functional combatant capabilities and rendering it the American version of the Vatican’s Swiss Guard. In an attempt to quell the public outcry that would arise from total dissolution of the Corps, the bill identified high-profile units, such as the Silent Drill Platoon, the Marine Corps Band, HMX-1, and a newly formed White House and Embassy Guard unit to remain operational, while all other combat-capable assets and personnel transitioned to their appropriately assigned alternate Service components. Aviation assets were divided by functional area with strategic lift and strike assets transferring to the Air Force, while the preponderance of rotary-wing aviation was sent to the Navy, with the exception of the light attack community; their new home was the Army. All ship-to-shore connectors were absorbed by the Navy’s amphibious fleet and the remaining ground combat element and combat service support assets were assigned to the Army.

With the public face of the Marine Corps intact, there was very little media attention when the addendum to the President’s Own Act that quietly reorganized the remaining high-profile Marine Corps units to be under the Navy’s administrative control was signed into law on 8 February 2040. An unnamed source at the Pentagon asserted that “the

Marines attempted to evolve too late and once that crack formed in the armor, the other Services were more than happy to exploit that weakness. Fewer mouths equal more food for everyone." Also, in response following the ratification of the bill, the last standing Commandant was quoted as saying, "We lost our heart at Wonsan, then we lost our way."

# INTEGRITY AND THE FALL OF THE GREATEST BRANCH OF THE U.S. ARMED FORCES

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*Captain Andrew R. Smith, USMC*

In 1957, the Commandant of the Marine Corps asked General Victor H. Krulak why America needs a Marine Corps. In his reply, General Krulak asserted that America's desire for a Marine Corps rested on three things Americans believe about the Marine Corps: Marines are ready at once to respond to any threat; Marines are always successful when called on to deal with threats; and that "our Corps is downright good for the manhood of our country; that the Marines are masters of a form of unyielding alchemy which converts disoriented youths into proud, self-reliant stable citizens—citizens into whose hands the nation's affairs may be safely entrusted." In this reply, General Krulak goes on to say, "Congressmen . . . are doing exactly what they believe the people want them to do; no more, and certainly no less. . . . Should the people ever lose that conviction—as a result of our failure to meet their high—almost spiritual—standards, the Marine Corps will then quickly disappear."<sup>1</sup> General Krulak knew that integrity was the cornerstone of ethics that the institution needed to build on to be successful in war and that an ethical fall off would lead to its defeat in combat and eventually cause its end.

General Krulak was right. On 8 February 2040, the U.S. Congress passed a law that dissolved the United States Marine Corps and its personnel and assets merged into the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Most Americans have long anticipated this action due to an extensive lack of integrity portrayed by a growing number of its highest-ranking officers. The Marine Corps has long promised to uphold its core values of honor, courage, and commitment, while valuing integrity as a basic leadership principle.

Many upheld this integrity throughout the history of the Corps, but there had also always been a culture promoting silence surrounding a lack of it. While this lack of integrity is not limited to the Marine Corps, they were the loudest and proudest in upholding integrity and should, therefore, have strived to set that example from the top down. Unfortunately, the top ranks were the first source of the problem because they, for better or worse, set the standard for the entire force.



Decades ago, it was easier for general officers to hide minor integrity violations and provide cover for their subordinates. Fortunately for the public, that is no longer an easy feat to accomplish. The increased use of social media platforms and the ease of worldwide communication have allowed facts that used to be limited to a specific command or region to come to the attention of the general American populace. Before the advent of the internet, there was no credible source to disseminate such facts outside of the chain of command that could hold serious violators accountable and impact change. In today's world, even a private first class stationed in remote areas of the world still has access to the common American masses through social media and popular blogs. Internet embarrassments to the Corps proliferated in the second decade of the twenty-first century. At this time, Marine Corps general and field grade officers were soliciting and accepting gifts from employees who received less pay and treating subordinates as servants, disparaging claims of sexual harassment/assault, creating a hostile work environment, and engaging in prostitution.<sup>2</sup> From that time to today in 2040, the Marine Corps suffered from a drastic loss of ethical direction most likely due to so many high ranking and highly respected leaders following these poor examples.

Putting the major infractions of integrity aside, the institution's integrity continued to suffer a death by a thousand cuts in the form of little white lies told by a growing number of junior officers and senior enlisted. These often came in the form of filing unnecessary exemptions to mandatory military training, such as shooting on the rifle and pistol qualification ranges and filing unsupported medical waivers for physical and combat fitness tests. In addition, there was a wide range of annual training requirements such as suicide prevention and drug, alcohol, and tobacco use that were simply not completed but documentation reporting that it was had been created and filed. Legitimately meeting these requirements that were imposed by the Headquarters Marine Corps elements became extremely difficult and at times impossible to accomplish at the ground level where combat training must take priority. Combined with a zero-defect standard to remain competitive in a careerist environment, many junior officers felt they had no choice but to lie and compromise a small amount of their integrity at a time.

Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras conducted a significant amount of research and found that it was "literally impossible" for officers to meet all the requirements imposed on them, but that it is also unacceptable for them to fail to accomplish their assigned missions.<sup>3</sup> This culture of impossible tasking that cannot fail further eroded the already lacking integrity impacting the Marine Corps at all levels of command and shook the very foundational principles that set it apart in the first place.

At the tactical level, junior enlisted Marines failed to report accurate observations of enemy activities because of the amount of time and effort involved in submitting reports

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Vanden Brook, "Marine Corps General Fired for Calling Sexual Harassment Claims 'Fake News,'" *USA Today*, 16 April 2018; Zachary Cohen and Barbara Starr, "Marine Corps General Treated Aide Like a 'Servant,' IG Report Found," *CNN*, 6 July 2018; and Hope Hodge Seck, "70 Percent of Marine Commander Firings This Year Due to Bias, Disrespect," *Military.com*, 13 September 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015).

to their leaders. During the course of an operation, these little oversights caused larger deceptions that gave more credit to the U.S. forces' tactical successes and distorted the outcome of the engagements. At the operational level, these dozens of reports by junior officers resulted in massive misconceptions and ultimately a loss of trust for all subordinate leaders. Due to this loss of trust, operational commanders centralized command and control (C2) through even more bureaucratic processes to correct the reporting inaccuracies. However, since these inaccuracies were originally caused by the impossibility of the tasks, the increased C2 burden only made it that much more impossible to accomplish. With that, the reports became even more unreliable than they were before and resulted in an increase to the speed at which the deceptive reports were being conveyed.

This environment had disastrous effects in World War III with the Russian dictator during the latter part of the fourth decade of the twenty-first century. During this time, the Marine Corps was assigned as the primary operational force in the war due to their ability to survive and fight in the cold weather environments. To accomplish this mission, the Marine Corps increased their end strength to meet the needs of this mission. The drastic increase in the populace combined with an already failing ethical culture further exacerbated the bureaucratic C2 reporting issues and ultimately led to the failure of the mission and a temporary defeat for the American armed forces. With a defeated Marine Corps and a bruised American ego, the Army, Navy, and Air Force fought to recover from the setback and ultimately achieved a victory. Unfortunately for the Marines, they learned too little, too late, and the loss of confidence from the American people was too great for them to recover. As General Krulak predicted in his 1957 reply to the CMC, "the people [lost] that conviction . . . [and] the Marine Corps . . . then quickly disappear[ed]."<sup>4</sup>

Integrity in the Marine Corps and the other Services means an uprightness of character and soundness of moral principles that cannot be corrupted or surrendered. Effective and lasting leadership demands this level of integrity. The American people expect and deserve nothing less than complete honesty and integrity from every branch of their armed forces.

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<sup>4</sup> Krulak, *First to Fight*.

# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

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*Captain Ryan Shannon, USMC*

"Know what? I don't believe you deserve an opinion on that subject." The two graduate students seated near me at the bar stopped talking and shot me a startled glance. "Look," I said, immediately regretting my interjection, "I'm not eavesdropping, but you two are so loud it's hard to ignore. I am a—well I was a Marine, and your reasoning's erroneous."

Recovering quickly, one student replied, "It's simple—a betrayal of public trust. America had Marines because it wanted Marines. We believed Marines were the best; Marines would always win. But you didn't see the war coming. You had no idea how to fight. So when the war started, you crumbled and we lost. That's why Congress got rid of you."

The other jumped in, attempting to ease the sudden tension. "Hey, we're all friends here. How about I buy a round, and you tell us what you think."

I sighed and resigned myself to the interaction I had initiated. "Fine." To their credit, both remained quiet while I collected my thoughts.

"People think we didn't see it coming, but we did." I started, thinking back to 2020. "As a junior officer during what we now call the 'interwar period,' I was a general's aide. Gave me a unique opportunity to be a fly on the wall in high-level meetings, while also seeing ground truth—"

"So what?" interrupted the first student.

"We didn't lose on those islands," I replied. "We lost in the interwar period."

They looked skeptically at each other.

"Winning is more about what you do before the battle than during it. It's about the manning, equipping, training. Getting everyone on the same page, focusing on warfighting, thinking about how the next fight is going to happen. The interwar period was mostly training, only a few SOF actions going on. But that's where we lost."

I took a sip of beer before continuing. "And that's the tragedy. We had our eyes wide open, and we saw it coming. We read books like *7 Deadly Scenarios*, *Disinformation*, and *Ghost Fleet*. We debated if Marines should be part of the 'contact layer' or the 'blunt layer.' We discussed man-machine teaming and additive manufacturing. It seemed like every training exercise during that period had—or claimed to have—some groundbreaking proof-of-concept or experimental employment model. People cared. We didn't have a vision problem. We had a problem turning vision into action."

I felt my agitation growing but continued. In a way, this was cathartic. "You can't man-

date a four-vehicle forward command post but simultaneously demand your command post have six capability sets that each take two or three vehicles to support. You can't say we need to go 'back to the basics' but scoff when someone tries to brief off a map and acetate paper. You can't claim you want units to experiment with drones but keep range control rules so highly restrictive it makes realistic tactical use of drones impossible. You can't preach, deliberately plan, and approve communication windows during an exercise to reduce electronic signature and then at the first sign of friction or during the first call for fire demand units get on the net to confirm position reports, now goddamnit, even though they're two hours outside of their next window with their radios off like you ordered. You can't say you want innovation and new technology and then demand Marines use only programs of record. You can't demand new ways to synthesize information for a commander but keep the same staff structure as Napoleon. You can't claim you are willing to accept that the learning process involves making mistakes but then fire people when a unit makes a tactical blunder during a Service-level exercise." I snorted at the absurdity, "The only time I tried to innovate was as a captain when I dared to try a night infiltration instead of sequencing fires during a daylight attack. All I got for it was the possibility of being relieved. And PowerPoint—good Lord—I can only imagine what a Lean Six Sigma analyst would have said about the military's use of PowerPoint."<sup>1</sup>

I saw I had been too specific and was not connecting with these civilians. "I'm saying Marines had the right ideas, but there was a disconnect in comprehending the actual work, risk, or discomfort those ideas entailed. We couldn't sort out what would actually work, so we couldn't adjust our institutional framework to make real change. It's like saying you really want a graduate degree but refuse to take the GMAT or saying you want to lose weight but not addressing your poor diet. Marines couldn't connect our ideas with the ramifications and impacts those ideas had on operations, the practicalities at the tactical level. It wasn't malicious or lazy—we just didn't make the mental leap to connect those things."

"Seems obvious to you," the first student retorted.

"Well it is now," I said. "Things are simpler in retrospect."

"Why, then?" the second asked.

"You could argue a lot of things," I began, "Personally though, I think it was because headquarters units didn't train. Staffs never saw how their big ideas worked in reality. Sure they said the right things, but many of them never really got out there to see the practicalities of these concepts during real-life large-scale exercises. Even the best command post exercise simulations can't replicate reality. Staffs didn't comprehend the secondary and tertiary effects of command relationships or battlespace assignments that seem obvious once experienced in the field. Well-meaning staffs would push down coordination or enabler units, which they should have retained. Thinking they had empowered subordinates, staffs actually burdened subordinates, stymied the full potential of enabling units, and left irreconcilable gaps in coordination and planning. Outside the MEUs, I don't think we ever truly trained as units much higher than a battalion level. Honestly, I think

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<sup>1</sup> Lean Six Sigma relies on a collaborative team effort to improve performance by systematically removing waste and reducing variation.

some commanders were afraid that, if they did large exercises, they would fail. It's safer to act as critic and evaluator to your subordinates than to open yourself up to criticism or even failure by training yourself. It seemed like everyone's higher ups saw no potential for them to be part of combat. They all said they were 'just here to battle-track and facilitate training for the troops.' Hell, I remember battalion-level staffs and even company-level officers joking that 'if I'm getting shot at, a lot of things have gone wrong.' Well, command posts were the first things engaged when the shooting started. Hard to miss a giant tent setting up for six hours and the 35 vehicles needed to move all that stuff they had. Or the massive electronic signature they emitted but didn't really respect. Training, real training, would have allowed leaders to see how their big ideas get hung up on the reality of conflicting policies, real-life considerations, and just normal friction.

"We tried to fix it, but I don't think we fully committed. Commanders said they didn't want to make Marines training aids. Or maybe subordinates weren't mature enough to accept that sometimes you are a training aid and if you maximize the portions of training you can control, that's okay. I wish we had committed though, because staffs need to learn too. Rather than enable subordinates by maximizing their time, nontraining headquarters units made schisms. It created training and nontraining populations with differences in abilities and priorities. Before the war, this resulted in junior officers pretentiously convinced they were the only ones who actually cared about warfighting and senior officers convinced their priorities were being ignored. When the war started, it was far worse. We had lance corporals who were experts at individual skills getting killed by drones after spending 12 hours in a stationary amphibious assault vehicle because some staff couldn't get its act together. We should have done more big exercises with big units, at least larger than battalions. We should have faced the Army in force-on-force exercises at the National Training Center. We should have made staffs use the Marine Corps Planning Process without PowerPoint or connectivity in the field, the same way we made company-level officers do OSMEAC and METT-T from memory.<sup>2</sup> We should have set up better mechanisms for unfiltered feedback. We should have changed our T/Os and manning to support the outcomes of exercises. We knew that doctrine was not enough. Doctrine needed to be validated with experiences at all levels, and we didn't do it. It would have been hard, expensive, and potentially embarrassing, but it would have been worth it. And that would have translated to better success during the war. Hell, maybe we would have won.

"Overall, I guess it's not a surprise the Marines got folded up. We put up a hell of a fight but, in the end, we lost, and people need someone to blame. Maybe . . ." I trailed off, checking to see how my companions were taking all this.

One of the students was eyeing the drink menu, the other furtively checking their phone. After a moment, they noticed I wasn't speaking. I finished my beer and, without another word, walked out.

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<sup>2</sup> The term *OSMEAC* refers to the five-paragraph order used by the Marine Corps, which stands for orientation, situation, mission, execution, administration/logistics, and command/signal. The term *METT-T* refers to a mnemonic used by the military to help commanders remember and prioritize what to analyze during the planning phase of any operation: mission, enemy, terrain, troops available, and time.

# THE MARINE CORPS POSTMORTEM

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*Captain Andrew C. Sides, USMC*

On 8 February 2040, the U.S. Congress passed a law that abolished and dissolved the United States Marine Corps, and its personnel and assets merged into the Army, Navy, and Air Force. This move came as no surprise after the drastic reductions in Marine Corps personnel and funding in the preceding years. On 20 April 2040, I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) was deactivated following the dissolution of II MEF in 2038 and III MEF in 2037. "This is a bittersweet day," remarked General Jeffrey Steinmeister, the 43d and final Commandant of the Marine Corps, at the press conference preceding the I MEF deactivation ceremony aboard Camp Pendleton, California.

"Tomorrow, the last of my Marines will don new uniforms and call themselves sailors, soldiers, and airmen. While I know that the Marines I am sending into our sister Services will no doubt bolster those ranks with toughness, experience, and character, I cannot help but lament the ending of an era and the intangible Marine Corps spirit that will fade into distant memory." He paused emotionally to find just the right words before continuing, "On the surface, joint operations and inter-Service cooperation are simplified by this action, but it comes at the cost of extinguishing America's most dominant and resilient fighting force. I should have found a way to make us a unique, indispensable piece of this fine nation's defense." He rubbed his chin resignedly and muttered, "Actually, it's just a bitter day." General Steinmeister declined the offer to command the newly-formed United States Naval Conventional Warfare Command (USNCWC) and retired without ceremony or fanfare as a United States Marine on 20 April 2040.

"What were we thinking as we expended excessive time and money to develop the expeditionary fighting vehicle and the amphibious combat vehicle? What twenty-first-century scenario were we picturing in which we would say, 'That seems like an enemy we would attack in a manner where we would inevitably get into firefights storming their littorals amphibiously and their beaches on foot?'," incredulously lamented a former Marine Corps general officer currently serving in the USNCWC. "No defended beachhead in the modern era would be an enemy's critical vulnerability; there are other locations and other means to strike with maximum effect on the enemy and minimal casualties for us. We wrote the book on maneuver warfare, but in trying to keep our uniqueness and viability in just one archaic manner, we ended up developing new equipment that was only consistent with the old attrition-warfare style that cost us so many lives in Korea and

the Second World War. Why didn't we do a better job of pouring resources into technology and training for the fights of today and tomorrow?"

Major General Michael D. Allen, former commander of the United State Marine Corps Training and Education Command (TECOM) considered the demise of the Marine Corps from a personnel recruitment and development perspective:

*We kept the EGA, the yellow footprints, and the Marines' Hymn, but we lost our way when our traditions and standards changed in other regards—recruiting trended toward treating poolees and candidates of specific races and genders as more desirable than other prospects who had better measurables but lacked minority characteristics. We dealt in blood and death as an occupation, so why did we buckle to political correctness instead of recruiting only the best potential warfighters and leaders with a blind eye to everything else?*

*Isolated recruit training incidents and cadre mistakes were punished harshly in the 2010s as the War on Terrorism slowed, and the Mothers of America condemned us for the slightest misstep in our methods of making Marines. Everyone from the drill instructors to the series commanders to the depot commanders feared the dreaded H-word (hazing) and became hesitant about being hard on recruits and doing their jobs effectively. That hesitancy produced Marines less disciplined, less tough, less committed, and less able to cope with uncertainty and discomfort than ever before.*

*PT standards were tinkered with to increase the difficulty of achieving perfect scores on the high end, but the passing marks were still embarrassingly easy to meet on the low end. Marines who were too weak or fat to do three pull-ups could get by with some push-ups, a three-mile jog, and a handful of crunches. Not much different from the Army's standards.*

*Junior Marines from this weakened paradigm developed into the NCOs and SNCOs that are today nearly indistinguishable from their peers in the other branches. Being indistinguishable might have ruined us. We needed to be stronger and more resilient than other service-members. We needed to be BETTER.*

*I'm rambling now and I cannot pinpoint a solitary reason my beloved Corps is dead. But it died a death of a thousand cuts, many of which I bore witness to while recruiting and making Marines.*

"I think we ended up behind the power curve when we limited our investments in truly light infantry and in military advising," commented Colonel Charles M. Dotson, former commander of the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group (MCSCG). "We should have seen after the War on Terrorism that America didn't need another occupational force that did the same thing 'Big Army' already could. And reinventing ourselves as a newer, shinier version of the old Corps that landed on beaches to face the meat grinder throughout the Pacific in the Second World War did not make sense either." He sighed with exasperation and then continued, "Look, I don't know exactly the right answer, but

I think we missed two opportunities to create niches and stay relevant. First, a lesson learned from 1st Reconnaissance Battalion during the 2003 Iraq invasion shows the value in the being a light, fast force that could provide dominant shock troops to pave the way for slower, heavier follow-on occupational forces. First Recon didn't really even train for that particular mission, but they figured it out as they went and were successful in the end. I think we should have shaped more of our force to be smaller, faster, and more lethal to fit the 'tip of the spear' role better than anyone else could. Lighter vehicles, less gear weighing down our grunts on the ground, more investment in HIMARS for better organic indirect fire support . . ." he trailed off wistfully. "But listen," he pleaded as he snapped back into focus with renewed vigor, "the second missed opportunity was in security cooperation. Once the American people grew tired of expending blood and money to fight everyone else's battles, the way forward in keeping our footholds around the globe was as military advisors leveraging the 'by, with, and through' strategy. That is where the Marine Corps needed to go all-in. The well-intended Regional, Cultural, and Language Familiarization Program (RCLF) lacked purpose in how it randomly assigned regions to Marines and never gained traction to become a training priority. At MCSCG, we did a pretty good job of turning regular Marines into entry-level military advisors, but there wasn't a long-term vision to build upon our basic successes." He sat back again and tossed his hands up, the exasperation returning. "The Marine advisors we produced received a secondary MOS and then generally returned to conventional warfare billets in the fleet after completing a single seven-month advisor tour. We crawled and sort of walked, but we never ran. We should have stood up sizable, permanent advisor teams with a primary MOS and clear career path that would collectively eclipse the smaller Army Special Forces as the best full-time, integrated advisors with legitimate regional specialties and familiarization. I know that both approaches are easier said than done, but I think they would have kept us relevant more than the stagnant Special Purpose MAGTFs and underutilized MEUs of the late 2010s did."

One is left to wonder what might have been had the Marine Corps found a way to show the U.S. Congress and the American people that a Marine Corps was something they truly needed and not merely wanted.



# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

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*Gunnery Sergeant Casey G. Casucci, USMC*

The United States Congress abolished and dissolved the United States Marine Corps on 8 February 2040, and transitioned its manpower and equipment across the other branches of the Department of Defense. This legislation ended the 264-year life of America's most prestigious fighting force, and brought Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak's nightmare from his chronicle, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the United States Marine Corps* (1984), to a crushing reality. The rationale that led to the abolition and dissolution of the Marine Corps derived from three major institutional flaws: a stagnant recruiting policy that refused to change with the times, the failure to keep pace in a Defense Department shift to cyberwarfare, and a lack of necessity for involvement in counterinsurgency operations.

When young women and men who dream of becoming Marines reach their junior or senior years in high school, they often reach out to their local Marine Corps recruiter to pursue the coveted Eagle, Globe, and Anchor. As patriotic youth, the Marine Corps needed these individuals to ensure the future of the organization. However, some of these teenagers have been unable to join after getting their first tattoos. As of 2017, more teenagers under the age of 18, with parental consent, had gotten tattoos than ever before in American history.<sup>1</sup> Simply put, as American culture promotes tattoos and piercings through musical artists and the proliferation of YouTube celebrities and Instagram influencers, young people are going to follow their examples. In 2019, rather than conforming to a new social norm by relaxing the tattoo standards in the Marine Corps, the organization remained obstinate in its idea of how a Marine should look.

Meanwhile, the Army, Navy, and Air Force changed their tattoo standards to conform with new social trends to keep recruiting operations on track, and they routinely achieved recruiting objectives.<sup>2</sup> As of 2040, the Marine Corps did not change its tattoo policies in a way that would accommodate new generations of young men and women, which resulted in a catastrophic level of recruiting failures over time. As Congress saw it, the organization itself was ignoring its own survival, which aided in their decision to dissolve the Corps. Tattoos are not the only recruiting issue related to Congress's decision; finding individuals with needed skills is also a critical issue. The Marine Corps' solution to this problem, as you will see in the following paragraph, was to hire civilian professionals as Marine leaders without developing them as basic Marine officers first.

In 2018, the Marine Corps introduced a concept that would contribute to its own

demise: the direct-commission program for cyberwarfare officers.<sup>3</sup> The cyberwarfare officers who were commissioned based on civilian credentials without attending Officer Candidates School failed because, although they were experts in their fields, they could not comprehend mission tasks and purposes and were not developing subordinates. These shortfalls resulted from the officers' lack of fundamental training that would have been gained from Officer Candidates School and The Basic School. Further, the Marine Corps ignored that cyberwarfare specialists were difficult to retain on the enlisted side due to civilian job opportunities. Resultantly, in the years leading up to the abolition, the Marine Corps saw floods of direct-commissioned majors and lieutenant colonels exiting the Marine Corps instead of the corporals and sergeants of the earlier years. This exodus prevented lockstep changes of command and the fluid changeover of duties to qualified replacements. The Army, Navy, and Air Force also used this form of commission for cyber officers; however, they already had a niche in this field and knew how to properly manage it and incentivize it for retention. As a result, the other military branches dominated the cyber battlefield, and the Marine Corps was excluded from these campaigns, indicating an obsolete presence noticeable to the American people represented by Congress. In 2040, the absence of necessity in the Marine Corps' role was not only demonstrated on the cyber battlefield, but also in the domain of irregular warfare.

Irregular warfare has existed in national strategy since the Revolutionary War, when American rebels abandoned tradition by using guerrilla tactics to ambush British regiments in the fight for American independence. Later, military members who specialized in irregular warfare and counterinsurgency developed into elite groups including the Navy SEALs, the Army Green Berets, and the Marine Raiders. However, in 2040, Congress realized that the former two were capable of accomplishing the nation's special operations missions without the existence of the Marine Raiders. Since the nature of these missions is typically secret in terms of security classification, evidence of this claim can best be supported by analyzing data surrounding friendly and enemy casualties to develop a conclusion. The fact is, that the SEALs and Green Berets, separately have a disproportionately larger number of members killed in action than the Marine Raiders, with 24 green berets killed in action compared to the 7 Raiders between 2016 and 2018.<sup>4</sup> The Raiders include casualties from training mishaps in this number; the Green Beret's do not. The SEALs report 17 killed in action during that period but have only released the identities of two.<sup>5</sup>

Further, the SEALs and Green Berets incur a much larger number of enemy casualties in each mission. In one instance, a single Army special operations unit killed or captured 1,900 insurgents in a single deployment, resulting in multiple valor awards.<sup>6</sup> Any researchable Marine Raider or Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command article pales in comparison to this feat. Unless the conclusion is drawn that the Raiders are

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<sup>3</sup> Butch Bracknell, "Who Says Cyber Warriors Need to Wear a Uniform?," Modern War Institute, 23 March 2018.

<sup>4</sup> "Memorial Wall," Green Beret Foundation; and "Fallen Heroes," Marine Raider Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> "Our Fallen Heroes," Navy Seals Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Todd South, "Single Ranger Battalion Deployment Leads to 1,900 Terrorists Killed or Captured, Several Valor Awards," *Army Times*, 13 March 2019.

better at staying alive than the other two entities, a conclusion can be logically drawn that Raiders either deploy less often than the other two, go on less dangerous missions and see less combat, operate in less important missions, or all three. It can be inferred from the data that the Raiders are, at least, utilized less than the SEALs or Green Berets, which could make them seem less necessary. Congress undoubtedly reviewed this data and determined that, instead of funding a special operations unit that does less work and has fewer personnel, dissolve it and provide extra funding to the Army and the Navy special operations units for more manpower and equipment and allow them to cover the entire American Joint Special Operations Command mission.

In conclusion, as General Krulak expressed in *First to Fight*, America does not need a Marine Corps, it wants a Marine Corps.<sup>7</sup> The reason America wants a Marine Corps is because they believed that the Marine Corps could be relied on to win. This dogma carried the Marine Corps through the passage of time, as Americans enjoy winning as a cultural cornerstone—until 2040. When American daughters and sons are being told that they cannot enlist in the United States Marine Corps because of their modern wrist or neck tattoos, they are going to join another Service, and their family is now an Army or Navy family. When the operational and strategic branches decided that the Marine Corps was not equipped to fight on the cyber battlefield, they favored the Army, Navy, and Air Force. When Special Operations Command stopped giving missions to the Marine Raiders in favor of the Army Green Beret and Navy SEAL teams due to more flexible counterinsurgency capabilities resulting from more manpower, special operations missions became Army and Navy missions. In 2040, for these reasons, Americans no longer thought they needed a Marine Corps, and subsequently stopped wanting one. Congress, ostensibly the voice of their constituents as representatives, did not decide to dissolve the Marine Corps. America did, and the Marine Corps did.

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<sup>7</sup> Krulak, *First to Fight*.

# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

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*Captain Kristin Holman, USMC*

Underneath a pile of designer shoe boxes sits a dirty, dry rotting cardboard box that has been stuffed into the back corner of my closet. Why I have carried this box with me all of these years still makes me wonder, but I have come to realize that I have been holding on to much more than its actual contents, which are nothing more than a relic of my times. As one of the last of its kind, I remember placing it on my head for the first time. It sat there proudly for my commissioning day, and I felt set apart. Not because I was a woman, but because I was a United States Marine in a sea of choker whites, commissioning from the U.S. Naval Academy. I had chosen the better part, one that would surely lead me through my most trying times, but only to be reborn on the other side like a phoenix. It was through this new camaraderie, and the proud traditions from our very roots, that made me hold my head (and also my bucket cover) high.

Unfortunately, my female cover was given an expiration date, and I angrily grumbled against the adoption of the unisex cover, and shortly thereafter a new uniform entirely. When it was all said and done, I felt as though a bit of my personality had been taken away. It was not until my beloved Corps was given its expiration date that I felt my identity being stripped away. Ironically, the reasons for obsolescence: first, my female uniform; and last, the Marine Corps.

For something to become obsolete, it must be replaced by something better, something that more effectively completes a task; the obsolete object is deemed "old" because it fails to serve its original purpose the way it once did. During my time as a Marine, I began to see the evolution of our global strategy, and I saw warfighting shift further from close physical combat to greater distances and nonphysical domains such as cyberspace.

Expeditionary warfare had been the Marine Corps' token capability, but in 2013, the Navy and Marine Corps invited Joint leaders to their annual expeditionary warfare conference. Discussions amounted to two main topics: American Joint forces needed to "refocus on rapid response to crises around the world" and that "no single service can handle the expeditionary warfare challenge on its own."<sup>1</sup> Leaders surmised that each of their

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<sup>1</sup> Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "Marines, Navy Reach Out to Army, Air Force for Expeditionary Warfare," *Breaking Defense*, 30 October 2013.

Services was capable of nonconsecutive pieces of a large-scale expeditionary operation, and none of the forces could accomplish it without Joint support. For example, the Army had the capability to deploy a paratrooper force anywhere in the world within 24 hours, but not without the lift capability from the Air Force.<sup>2</sup> Also, the Marine Corps had the doctrinal capability to sustain an expeditionary operation from its Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) aboard Navy vessels, but only for 15 days; increased sustainment would be facilitated through the Army's robust logistics capacity.<sup>3</sup> The Marine Corps was able to execute its tasks to support an expeditionary mission, but there were no roles that the Marine Corps could support any other Joint Service in their operations. It was a force capable of working independently. Therefore, the Joint Services got in the habit of working with each other, but not with the Marine Corps. And, the Marine Corps continued to work alone. By 2030, due to the Marine Corps' lack of joint integration, the sister Services' unwillingness to include the Marine Corps in their operations led to a lobbying effort against the Marine Corps in Congress, with opponents labeling the Corps as an "obsolete force."

Another reason for the Marine Corps' demise was due to its own actions. *Expeditionary Force 21* (EF 21) overextended the Marine Corps and rendered its operational forces too weak in regard to readiness and tactical proficiency. In 2014, the Commandant of the Marine Corps General James F. Amos signed off on the new strategy, EF 21, to advance the functionality, capabilities, and lethality of the Marine Corps. Among many improvements, the publication marked one-third of the Marine Corps' operating force to be forward deployed at any given time with the purpose to "sustain an increased and enduring presence around the globe."<sup>4</sup> With a third of the operating forces deployed, resources were expended to remain at that heightened posture, while the other, larger forces could deploy the same amount as the Marine Corps without expending as many resources due to the incomparable sizes.

I personally realized this first-hand while I was in my first fleet tour. I remember checking into the Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 165's (VMM-165) "White Knights" at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego and was taken under the wing of a captain who had just accepted orders to a nonflying billet. He told me that he had been in the squadron for eight years and had never left the cockpit, even with one MEU deployment and two SPMAGTF deployments. This fleet existence was normal, especially coming out of Afghanistan, but especially after EF 21, there would be no end. After my first deployment, the monitor denied movers' requests for a B-billet and any hope of a break. Instead, he offered extensions within current units or a PCS to another fleet squadron. This kept operations high and continued to posture the operating forces in accordance with EF 21, but it wore out personnel and equipment. As the small wars wound down, people opted out of continued service, seeking time with their families as the wars wound down.

Our small Service advertised a prodigious capacity for war and tried to match its output to the desired capacity. However, one domain was weaker than the others, and due to

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<sup>2</sup> Freedberg, "Marines, Navy Reach Out to Army, Air Force for Expeditionary Warfare."

<sup>3</sup> Freedberg, "Marines, Navy Reach Out to Army, Air Force for Expeditionary Warfare."

<sup>4</sup> *Expeditionary Force 21 Forward and Ready: Now and in the Future* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2014), 27.

its present-day significance, it continued to show the Marine Corps' obsolescence. Information was included as a new warfighting function, and the Marine Corps had no way of catching up to the other Services. Beyond intelligence, information warfare exists in the cyber domain, and the Marine Corps had largely postured and equipped themselves, to include recruiting, for physical combat. After all, "every Marine is a rifleman." Unfortunately, strong field combat skills do not amount to much when the war you are fighting takes place in front of a keyboard, as most wars do these days.<sup>5</sup> Uniformed members from the total Marine force who were able to code and hack were not found in the required quantities to ensure that the Marine Corps Cyberspace Command could function proficiently, and the other Services, predominately the Air Force, became the sole capability provider.

On 8 February 2040, the U.S. Congress passed a law that abolished and dissolved the Marine Corps, and its personnel and assets merged into the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Due to its tactical obsolescence and rising perceptions of incompetence by the American public, it lost credibility. With other Services capable of assuming warfighting capabilities that the Marine Corps once fought, the Joint Services quickly filled the void. Times changed, we failed to change with them, and the Marine Corps was dissolved.

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<sup>5</sup> Maj Nick Brunetti-Lihach, "Cyber War Requires Cyber Marines," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 144, no. 11 (November 2018).

# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

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*Captain David Kerby, USMC*

*Is there a chance that such a thing might happen? I think there is. I think that we ourselves can shake those convictions and the accompanying faith which really sustain us. . . . By carelessness or by inordinate attention to less important things, we can lose the characteristics of lean professional simplicity and unfailing preparedness which, in the years past, have deservedly made the Marines one of America's treasures.*

~ General Victor H. Krulak<sup>1</sup>

The major set down the journal; the ominous passage that he had copied down as a young lieutenant seemed more relevant now than ever. He looked at the papers on the desk in front of him. Two were for the transfer of his service into either the Army or the Navy, and one was for the resignation of his commission in the United States military.

"How did we get here?" He knew, of course. Ever since the events of 2030, he knew this day would come, that such a thing would happen. He pulled out of a drawer the copy of the letter that General Krulak had written to the Commandant. He had read it many times before. The Commandant had asked the general why America needed a Marine Corps. Krulak had replied that America did not need the Marines, but it wanted them.

Krulak would answer the Commandant with: "First, [the American people] believe that when trouble comes to our country, there will be Marines—somewhere—who, through hard work, have made and kept themselves ready to do something useful about it, and do it at once. They picture these Marines as men—individual components of a lean, serious, professional outfit." The major remembered 2030 well: the events leading up to the crisis, America's response, and the videos of Marines readying themselves for battle aboard their transports. They were clean-shaved and well-groomed. Their gear was state-of-the-art. Their commanders were confident. America was confident.

"Second, they believe that when the Marines go to war, they invariably turn in a performance that is dramatically and decisively successful—not most of the time, but always. Their faith and their convictions in this regard are almost mystical. The mere association of the word 'Marines' with a crisis is an automatic source of encouragement and confidence everywhere." He also remembered what happened next, the videos of burn-

ing wreckage and Marine prisoners paraded by their captors. He recalled the news reports vividly; the lists of dead, wounded, and missing. He recognized many of the names; they were friends and peers. The Marines had failed. They were defeated. Crushed. Annihilated.

Krulak felt strongly that “those reasons are strong; they are honest, they are deep-rooted, and they are above question or criticism. So long as they exist—so long as the people are convinced that we can do the three things I have mentioned—we are going to have a Marine Corps. I feel that is a certainty. And, likewise, should the people ever lose that conviction—as a result of our failure to meet their high—almost spiritual—standards, the Marine Corps will then quickly disappear.” The major was surprised it had not happened sooner. It had taken almost 10 years from the incident for America, and Congress, to finally kill the Marine Corps. The Marines had failed, and America no longer wanted them. But how did we ever allow such a thing to happen?

Just as most of his peers had recognized, looking back, the major could see that the Marines had lost the “characteristics of lean professional simplicity and unfailing preparedness” that Krulak had touted. He remembered his time as a young platoon commander where it was a blessing to be able to train his platoon more than a couple hours every other week. He remembered trying to inspire his NCOs to be innovative and forward-thinking, only to watch as higher headquarters systematically stripped the NCOs of any semblance of responsibility or independence. He remembered most of his time spent navigating the incredibly complex bureaucracy that entailed planning training. He scheduled and planned for “check-in-the-box” training that looked good on paper, but did little to actually prepare his Marines. He remembered the tireless work to simply update the many online systems dedicated to tracking training and ensuring that charts accurately displayed a unit’s combat readiness. He remembered the countless hours spent on rosters, online classes to meet annual training requirements, endless briefs about safety, risk management, records management, sexual harassment, victim witness advocacy, fiscal accountability, privacy protection, sponsorship programs, suicide, child abuse, alcohol, tobacco, drugs, “sexploitation,” summer safety, Thanksgiving safety, ergonomics, international travel safety, cyber safety, purchase requests, travel accountability, and numerous mind-numbing others. He remembered the insistence on discipline that resulted in nauseating uniform and room inspections; lectures on haircuts, shaving, and drill; and repeated cancellations of combat training to facilitate preparations for change of command ceremonies and the like. The result? Picturesque and aesthetically pleasing Marines who could “salute and execute,” but who were not disciplined enough in field craft to protect themselves from UAS, and who were so focused on order and regulations that they were unable to focus on the enemy and adapt to chaotic reality.

He remembered the same as a company commander, how excited he had been to give his platoon commanders time to execute innovative, creative, and meaningful training. Instead, he had been forced to check more boxes. They were required to complete live-fire exercises against immovable and unthinking enemies. Often, the exercises came with little time allotted for actual training and rehearsals. Platoon exercises were conducted without squads having trained together. Company ranges and exercises were conducted without platoons being able to operate competently. Battalion Service-level



training exercises were planned for and executed without companies being able to maneuver effectively.

Furthermore, battalion-level exercises were often conducted right before one-third of the personnel would be leaving the battalion, and "new joins" would appear to replace them, lacking all the experience and comradeship gained through the work-up. Battalions constantly deployed nowhere close to combat ready. Only by the end of their deployment were units finally starting to function as a force ready for combat. Of course, then they would return home, see their team of combat-ready Marines spread to the wind, and have to start the process all over again.

Then there was the technology. Marines did not need to be expert marksman, woodsmen, or hunters, or so the thinking went. New gear and more gear would enable them to see the enemy first, shoot them first, and move faster. How unprepared we were for meeting the enemy and suddenly finding that all the technology in the world could not make up for the shortcomings of an underinvested infantryman. We forgot to target the enemy's weakness and instead focused on our own perceived strength, pitting it against the enemy without discretion. The fight soon degraded to person against person, and we were not prepared for it. When communications ceased to work, the companies, platoons, and squads were unable to fight. Without the centralization of command and decision making that officers and NCOs were so accustomed to in garrison, they simply acted in self-preservation, a body without a brain. They could not understand their role in the larger picture, how to focus on the enemy's weakness, and avoid their strength. They could not identify the gaps that, if exploited, could have saved their unit and led to a decisive outcome in their favor.

The major saw it all now, how the pieces fit together over the decades to slowly degrade what the Marine Corps had once been. He thought back on his career and wondered if he could have done more to prevent this. He had always done his best to fight unnecessary training requirements and permit his subordinates the most time possible to conduct realistic training. He had fought tooth and nail against bureaucratic, administrative requirements that did little to strengthen the force. He had always given his NCOs as much responsibility and trust as possible. He had always pushed for his Marines to be a great infantryman first, teaching them how to fight with the basics before showing them how to build upon their capabilities with technology. But had it been enough? What if more of his peers had done the same? The major looked again at the papers on his desk, let out a long sigh, and picked up his pen.

# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

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*First Sergeant Matthew Bywater, USMC*

For nearly three centuries, America was home to one of the most elite fighting forces in the history of the world. The United States Marine Corps had stood as a symbol to the American public of the nation's focus on winning battles across the globe with a force of professional warfighters. On 8 February 2040, when Congress abolished the Marine Corps, America severed its ties with a once mighty force that had been in decline for decades. The United States abolished the Marine Corps due to its lack of naval expeditionary capabilities, poor performance in recent battles, and increase in misconduct that led to the loss of trust and faith of the American people. The decision did not happen overnight, and many saw the first step toward destruction when the Marine Corps began to drift away from its naval roots.

At the time, it was not apparent that changes in equipment, joint relationships, and the change in Navy equipment began the slow, yet ultimate, loss of the Marine Corps' expeditionary status. In 2012, the Department of the Navy announced it would have new naval ships without the standard well decks to support amphibious landing craft for Marines. Initially, there was concern over this, and it was again confirmed in 2022 when the Navy took it a step further. From that point forward, no new ships being produced would have well decks and all amphibious ready groups would phase out current models by 2037. Though this seemed as if the Navy was phasing out Marines, the Marines unintentionally did it to themselves with equipment that was too big for naval shipping.

As early as 2019, with the introduction of the joint light tactical vehicle, the Marine Corps began to limit its ability to support amphibious operations. Not only were these new vehicles, including the armored combat vehicle, heavier but they were also much larger. This led to the decision that the Navy could no longer support Marine Corps shipping requirements. The American public and government could sense this and thus the end for the Marine Corps' quick-strike capability. Many started to question why there was a need for a separate branch that was not expeditionary. As bad as this may have been for the Marine Corps, the focus on becoming solely a small wars force began to show its weakness.

With the loss of quick-strike capabilities, Marines soon found themselves struggling to maintain warfighting tenacity and esprit de corps in the many wars that plagued the world from the 2020s onward. As the United States became involved in operations to

support the Yemeni regime in 2026, it looked to its traditional strike force, the United States Marine Corps. As the conflict extended through the next two years, Marines faced a fight similar to what previous generations had experienced during the 2000s. The American public quickly became tired of yet another Iraq or Afghanistan, and all forces were pulled out of Yemen; eight months later, the country fell to rebel forces. The futile efforts in Yemen not only raised doubt in the American public's opinion of the Marines Corps, it raised questions from within.

With the demoralizing results of the Yemeni conflict, many within the Marine Corps questioned its core competencies. Senior leaders were forced to acknowledge that the Marine Corps had lost sight of the core principles of its warfighting capability. Senior leaders within the Marine Corps were unable to come to a consensus on how to solve issues that were a result of years of change in warfighting culture. The focus had shifted to peacekeeping operations during the previous decade and had begun the erosion of the Corps' warfighting capability. The foundation of the Marine Corps was showing cracks as Marines questioned their purpose and the departure from traditions and roles.

As Marine esprit de corps faltered, the failing discipline of the Corps as a whole was self-evident with ever increasing misconduct. One example can easily be seen in drug-related cases, which had risen more than 37 percent between 2028 and 2036. During the Yemeni war years, multiple incidents of misconduct brought increased visibility and framed the Marine Corps in a negative light. Commanders were unable to slow the spread of discontent, and yet again, the American public questioned why they maintained a force that was undisciplined and unsuccessful in combat. The Marine Corps no longer stood out to the American people as a unique force that stood above other Services in the Department of Defense.

Senior enlisted leader misconduct had also been on the rise. Cases of adultery, alcohol-related incidents, and assault plagued a group of leaders who had come through the ranks during the Marine Corps' identity crisis. They lacked a corps of senior leaders and officers who had fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Current leaders were unable to communicate effectively with their junior Marines. Many leaders felt a sense of disconnect from their leaders as junior Marines. These current senior enlisted leaders lacked discipline, a sense of identity, and the skills to cope with the current generation of Marines who were spiraling out of control. The average American looking in from the outside was disgusted and had lost their patience.

In June 2039, Congress became involved with seemingly endless committees and investigations into the issues permeating the Marine Corps. Not only were the politicians focusing on the Marine Corps, but ceaseless coverage by the media helped to stoke rage within the American public. The lack of naval expeditionary capabilities, poor performance in battles during the last decades, and increase in misconduct had finally caught up to the Marine Corps. On 8 February 2040, Congress abolished the Marine Corps with more than 77 percent in favor of the resolution. The American public was appeased, and the last vestiges of the Marine Corps were absorbed into the United States Army. The once proud and most prestigious military force in the world exited history in disgrace and shame.

# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

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*Major Keenan Chirhart, USMC*

The United States Department of Defense is currently the world's foremost military organization, displaying unprecedented levels of cohesion, efficiency, readiness, and cost-effectiveness never before seen in American history. This current state of readiness is a direct result of the diligent efforts of our military forbearers, who had the vision and determination to recognize the shortfalls of the military organizational system present more than two decades ago. This group of visionaries consisting of politicians, military strategists, historians, and even financial analysts devised a solution that would benefit not only the military but also the American public. In the year 2040, Congress finally passed a law dissolving the United States Marine Corps, completing a project of consolidation and streamlining that began in 2020. The decision to absorb the responsibilities of the Marines into the other Services was, at first, widely unpopular among the American population.

However, Congress provided suitable justification to the American people, and the majority of the public accepted the idea as universally beneficial. Though this effort may appear to be a criticism of the efficacy of the Marine Corps, in fact, the opposite is true. It was the concepts of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force and the integration of the air, land, and sea components of the military, which led to this resolution. The current United States Military Force can be thought of not as a dissolution of the Marines, but as an expansion of the Marine Corps' organizational structure, leadership concepts, and training mindset into the other Services, creating a unified military organization. The principal justifications that drove this decision were the recognized decreased need for dedicated amphibious operations, budget constraints caused by years of wasteful military spending, technological development and widespread automation in combat operations, and finally a drive toward standardization of military training, allowing for greater synergy with the remaining Services.

Since long before the introduction of the *Tentative Manual for Landing Operations* in 1935, Marines have taken great pride in their ability to conduct forcible entry by sea. This concept of seizing forward naval bases, using a landing force to secure a beachhead for follow on offensive maneuver, and the ability to conduct small-scale combat operations in an austere theater were hallmarks of the Marine Corps' historical mission. However, not only are these capabilities not exclusive to the Marine Corps, but their very utility in

the twenty-first-century combat landscape was rendered obsolete in the face of antiship missiles, ballistic cruise missiles, littoral mining operations, increased coastal air defenses, long-range bombers, and nonkinetic fires within the electromagnetic environment. These developments altered the way military strategists analyzed warfare. Tacticians and policy makers recognized that future battles fought along the coasts and shorelines of foreign territories were unrealistic since this posed a significant and excessive risk to friendly forces. Surface ships had to maintain too great a distance off-shore to mitigate the threat from antiship missiles, and the increased standoff negated the usefulness of naval surface fire support assets, especially when GPS and communication denial became a commonplace capability of U.S. adversaries and coordination with these fire support assets became nearly impossible.

The additional complexity of executing amphibious operations further complicated command and control relationships present in movement from ship to shore, which made fire support, airspace coordination, and the establishment of supported and supporting relationships a problematic undertaking. With naval and landing force commanders vying for operational and tactical control, and surface fire support transitioning from Navy to Marine fire support agencies mid-operation, amphibious assaults became chaos when electronic warfare and control of the cyber domain became an additional necessary component for a successful amphibious campaign. With a shift in doctrine and a realignment of leadership structure, the U.S. Military Force is better able to address these problems faced by early twenty-first-century amphibious operations and focus on other methods of securing terrain and phasing forces ashore. Combined task forces organized with Army, Navy, and Air Force special operating components can execute these ship-to-shore missions if and when necessary, but now treat this mission set as a contingency operation as part of a larger campaign plan, eliminating the need for a dedicated amphibious force and simplifying command and control functions.

By 2019, the national debt had reached a staggering \$22 trillion. As a result, the United States government was left making global policy decisions based on economic influences instead of diplomatic goals. With Marine Corps programs such as the F-35 Lightning II and the MV-22B Osprey extending beyond budgetary and developmental constraints, Congress recognized that eliminating a redundant collection of combat and support equipment, and consolidating all military research and development under one fiscal umbrella, would ultimately save billions on national defense. Through these actions, the U.S. Military Force has been able to streamline the acquisition process and provide the necessary air, land, and amphibious equipment required to accomplish all assigned missions. This consolidation reduced the need for redundant equipment between the Services, giving the United States military the same capabilities as the now defunct Marine Corps, but saving billions of dollars in the process.

Another driving factor behind the dissolution of the Marine Corps was the increased utilization of unmanned and autonomous vehicles. Unmanned vehicles provide commanders a reconnaissance, ordnance delivery, and even combat assault transport capability, without the risk to human life. This led to a significant investment in the development of unmanned systems to fulfill a wide variety of roles previously held by manned aircraft, resulting in a drastic decrease in the need for Marine pilots. An antiquated notion of requiring a human operator inside an aviation platform permeated military leadership

up until the early 2020s. It was at this time in history when analysts began conducting deeper analysis of specific mission sets and the actual functions of manned aviation platforms, and these missions became more widely scrutinized. Studies of aviation tasking orders and mission requirements showed that the majority of aviation delivered fires, reconnaissance tasks, command and control responsibilities, and troop and cargo delivery could not only be done by automation; but without humans “in the loop,” the instances of pilot-related mishaps and human error decreased dramatically. Combined with the long overdue termination of the Marine Corps’ contract with Bell Helicopter Textron, the military was able to share the remaining rotary-wing mission sets with the Army, Navy, and Air Force Sikorsky H-60 Black Hawk platforms, saving millions on aviation training and eliminating costly aviation bonuses attempting to retain qualified Marine pilots.

Perhaps the biggest influence on the congressional decision to dissolve the Marine Corps was the desire for a more integrated and cohesive military force. Upon retirement, one Marine officer stated that “the only thing standard between the military Services is plain text radios and Microsoft Office.” While this statement may be hyperbole, it does highlight the issue of incompatibility between the different branches of the military. In the early 2020s, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps were all distinct in their training, uniforms, leadership structure, communications, and methods of data distribution. In the early 2000s, a technology problem existed within the DOD following the implementation of tablets and wireless networks into the warfighter’s toolkit. With each Service using different models of tablets, moving maps and targeting programs, electronic methods to track friendly forces, varying techniques to transmit data over wireless networks, and different means to send and receive targeting data during kinetic operations, the individual Services became more isolated and incompatible. Often, this technological isolation prevented the sharing of vital data and slowed the pace of operations, at times even leading to confusion between friendly and enemy personnel on the battlefield. These inconsistencies hindered integration during training and combat. The highest echelons of military leadership realized that through the consolidation of Service components, the individual ground, sea, and air commanders would be able to work together and collaborate across a standardized communication architecture with a shared mesh network, standard radio cryptographic data, and a common wireless structural design.

The ultimate goal of the United States military should be the protection of the American people and the accomplishment of global strategic objectives. The pursuit of this goal should be devoid of pride or emotion and must be analyzed, implemented, and continuously reanalyzed. While the United States Marine Corps served a vital function for 265 years, changes to the global strategic environment occur with time, and with it, so must the ideas by which the military structure is organized. To remain the preeminent military force in the world, America must innovate and adapt, but also synchronize and simplify. Eliminating the Marine Corps may seem, at first, undesirable. However, the concept of implementing Marine characteristics of strict discipline, military competence, and warrior ethos into every facet of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, will make the U.S. Military Force stronger than any other time in history, and preserve America as a leading world power for years to come.

# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

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*First Sergeant Kyle R. DuBois, USMC*

The wartime reliance on maritime merchant vessels would prove fatal to the Marine Corps and ultimately lead to its dissolution by Congress on 8 February 2040. As the Navy and Marine Corps aggressively reengaged their union by way of the Amphibious Ready Groups and Marine Expeditionary Units (ARG/MEU) in pursuit of the *Marine Corps Operating Concept 2025*, the tensions spanning from the East China Sea to Northern Africa continued to increase. The Navy and Marine Corps team worked diligently to pursue an expeditious and distributed footprint along China's developing Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road to both disrupt and reduce the economic supply chain that China and its allies had established to span global reaching superpower. The U.S. Navy and coalition amphibious shipping remained inadequate to patrol the length of waterway due to the budget shortfall. The Marine Corps' long-standing focus on land-based capabilities resulted in the Navy's amphibious shipping to fall to a dangerously low level; this furthered a reliance on maritime merchant vessels in the next large conflict. Due to merchant vessels' vulnerability to wide-spread GPS jamming, spoofing, and drone swarms, the U.S. military was unable to adapt to these techniques resulting in significant Marine losses.

## **In 2035**

China, with assistance from Russia, had devoted the weight of their military forces to the mission of providing security and safe passage to both the economic belt of roadways and railroads and the Maritime Silk Road (a.k.a. "One Belt, One Road"). The political pressure mounted as long-time allies of the United States, Poland, and Germany pled for American military assistance. The global economy shifted toward being mostly controlled by the Communist Chinese regime, which garnered the attention of anxious onlookers. With Chinese shipping possessing the freedom of movement as far west as Northern Africa, the Chinese and Russian military focused on the development of additional territorial control in Poland and Germany as they ventured toward the far western regions of the Chinese economic belt.

Congress would later determine that increased funding to grow America's Navy was not only prudent but a necessity due to the developing loss of influence. As the strategic operations plan was being revised and selected, it was clear that the requirement for significant amphibious forces was imminent. A race began toward the development of

an additional 20 naval amphibious ships that would be required to provide the increased carrying capacity and presence throughout the Maritime Silk Road. The developing technologies and innovation had long been focused on expeditious solutions, providing forward staging of weapons and logistics throughout these regions without the commitment of expensive resource-hungry vessels. As the belt grew more contested, the Chinese and Russian navies and air forces focused their efforts on maintaining the freedom of movement of the vital shipping route to maintain the strength of their growing global economy. The plight to increase the U.S. naval strength was proving to be “too little and too late” to make a difference; as global conflict mounted, U.S. reliance on the vulnerable merchant vessels in place of Navy amphibious ships was growing more imminent.

With the global economy gripped by Chinese control and Poland’s eastern border being advanced on by Russian forces, the United States, along with its NATO partners, would declare war on Russia and China and conduct a widespread deployment of both ground and maritime forces from the Baltic Sea to the Indian Ocean. During the initial onset of this war, the Marine Corps primarily fixated on two locations: Indonesia and the Baltic Sea to strangle the supply lines of both China and Russia to prevent further reinforcement of forces into Poland. The Marine Corps’ I and III MEF fixated on Indonesia, while Headquarters Marine Corps tasked II MEF with the mission of destroying the Baltic supply line.

## In 2039

Every available naval amphibious ship was mobilized and loaded down with Marines and began advancing to their destination. The U.S. government contracted merchant vessels to provide enough lift capacity for the Marine forces. With the Marine Corps and Navy team steaming to their destination, Russia and China initiated and engaged a large-scale GPS jamming campaign that not only crippled the U.S. and coalition airstrike efforts but also immediately put the primary ground army maneuver forces on their heels and severely limited any momentum. The Chinese used GPS spoofing technology and hacking efforts to misroute not only military naval vessels, but focused these efforts predominantly on the vulnerable merchant maritime vessels traveling through the Mediterranean and Pacific as they routed to their destinations.

Both merchant and naval vessels relied heavily on fuel and food resupply; supporting merchant vessels begin to run dangerously low on supplies as they were cast off course from the GPS spoofing and jamming campaigns. Many of the ships were vulnerable as they slowed to conserve their resources and had to rely on rudimentary techniques to navigate. The spoofing of ships’ GPS and lack of control over their plotted course would become further challenged by heavy seas and inclement weather. Russian and Chinese electronic warfare aircraft conducted large-scale attacks that further targeted the American and allied radar systems the ships relied on for their situational awareness and self-defense. These actions set the conditions for coordinated attacks that would begin in the Pacific.

Chinese forces, recognizing how important their maritime supply lines would be to the progress in western Europe, would first concentrate their most substantial efforts in the Pacific. Chinese submarines, airstrikes, and maritime drone swarms targeted the U.S. merchant ships that contained large amounts of Marines and aircraft. Within days of the



fighting, nearly 10,000 Marines and thousands of sailors were killed or lost at sea. Without operable radar systems, the naval vessels escorted the merchant transports who would remain nearly defenseless against aquatic drone swarms. The drones would be deployed and controlled autonomously from near over-the-horizon distances; they would carry small mines that detonated once within proximity of the ship's hull. These attacks targeted the merchant ships' vulnerabilities due to their lack of military technology.

Also crippled in the cyber fight were the command-and-control networks that the United States relied on to control autonomous expeditious platforms that they had deployed throughout the Pacific region. Hackers saw great success in their degradation of anti-air and anti-submarine weapon systems radars. Just a handful of U.S. naval vessels outfitted with the most advanced technologies born in the latest special programs were still holding their own in the fight to sever the supply lines in the Pacific.

## In 2040

News of the atrocities spread like wildfire in America. The United States had not experienced such a gruesome and sudden loss of life in nearly 100 years of their history. The enemy utilized technologies on the battlefield that the Department of Defense was not adequately prepared to combat. The DOD hurriedly reformed plans for the remaining onward deployment of troops and equipment that still had not been influenced by the adversary. With most U.S. and coalition attack aircraft remaining ineffective due to GPS jamming and the ground forces in Poland taking heavy casualties in the kinetic conventional ground fight, Congress had a decision to make.

American support for involvement in such a devastating conflict immediately plummeted. Due to the crippling loss of Marines and heavily degraded command-and-control networks, it was nearly inconceivable that just months earlier, the Department of Defense remained confident in their operational plans. The United States would have to fight by focusing on the existing coastal and ground-based military infrastructure toward the influence of the shipping lanes. Congress would vote for the dissolution of the Corps, and the remaining Marines would be best distributed within the other Services to provide necessary combat loss replacements and security at remaining key locations.

The reliance on maritime merchant vessels would prove fatal to the Marine Corps and ultimately lead to their dissolution by Congress. The Marine Corps' long-standing focus on land-based capabilities resulted in Navy amphibious shipping falling to a dangerously low level; this increased the reliance on maritime merchant vessels during the conflict. Inability to quickly and adequately overcome a widespread electronic warfare campaign that included GPS jamming, spoofing, and drone swarms would break the backs of an otherwise confident U.S. military. These technologies left the ground- and air-based military infrastructure "worlds unto themselves" as they could not efficiently communicate with the vessels that required their support. The Marine Corps would not survive the rapid need for a simplified command-and-control hierarchy to focus on disrupting the adversary across domains that have never been contested in such ways before in history.

# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

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*Captain Chadd S. Montgomery, USMCR*

Less than 100 years after it detailed the Marine Corps' mission, minimum size, and basic structure in public law, Congress passed the Defense Accountability and Reorganization Act (DARA) of 2040, abolishing the Marine Corps and distributing its personnel and assets between the Army, Navy, and Air Force. The outcomes of the DARA vote in the Senate and the House were never in doubt after six months of bruising hearings in front of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees in late 2039 and early 2040. The Marine Corps forgot General Victor H. Krulak's prescient 1957 observation that members of Congress do "exactly what they believe the people want them to do; no more; and certainly no less."<sup>1</sup> The American people, who never needed a Marine Corps, stopped wanting one when it failed to deliver battlefield success in the 2038 Sino-American conflict. China's occupation of Taiwan and control of the Strait of Malacca served as a persistent reminder of the Marine Corps' failure during the Commandant's testimony before Congress.

The institutional paranoia that saved the Marine Corps in the late 1940s and early 1950s helped destroy it in the 2020s and 2030s. The 2038 Sino-American conflict occurred two decades after the release of the *2018 National Defense Strategy* (NDS), which incited a frenzied but unfocused internal search for mission and purpose inside the Marine Corps. After 18 years of counterinsurgency-focused (COIN) operations, the Marine Corps entered the great power era with personnel, equipment, and doctrine unprepared for great power competition. Facing reduced defense budgets in the 2020s, Commandants obsessively focused on the need to "perform such other duties as the president may direct," instead of leaning into the challenge presented in the 2018 NDS.<sup>2</sup> They believed this would secure a greater share of scarce defense dollars. Mission sets consequently expanded across the range of military operations at the expense of a recognizable institutional purpose. Long nurtured paranoia led a succession of Commandants to see narrow capabilities with deep capacity as a risk to the institution's existence if the next conflict did not require those capabilities.

The risk bow wave grew in the 2020s as the Marine Corps sacrificed equipment modernization to maintain readiness for current operations. Legacy system sustainment

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<sup>1</sup> "Who Needs a Marine Corps?," *Leatherneck*, July 1975, 11.

<sup>2</sup> National Security Act of 1947, 50 U.S. Code § 5063(a) (1947).

costs grew as their capabilities diminished, making the return on investment worse each year. To complete F-35 procurement and ensure sustainment, one Commandant extended the service lives of the M1A1 Abrams main battle tank, light armored vehicle (LAV), and M777A2 howitzer into the late 2030s, foregoing investment in replacement systems at the same time the Army rapidly divested its legacy systems. Conflict with nonstate actors masked the Marine Corps' deficiencies in the great power era because combat operations were limited in time and decades of incremental doctrinal enhancements maximized the capabilities of legacy systems. The hidden cost of this success was that, by 2030, the risk bow wave relative to China became a tsunami.

An incoherent institutional purpose created doctrinal calcification. Increased effort, an ugly manifestation of a "do more with less" attitude that previously saw the institution through lean times, replaced deeper thought. Unlike the twentieth century, the twenty-first century did not present a clear identity crisis because the century started with 18 years of COIN conflict that the Marine Corps eventually mastered. In 1916, Major John H. Russell's article, "A Plea for a Mission and Doctrine," started a conversation that culminated in the development of the *Tentative Landing Operations Manual* in 1933–34.<sup>3</sup> In the 2020s and 2030s, no comparable voice or effort rose to prominence. Time could not be spared to develop a modern methodology to fight and win against China while simultaneously planning and executing myriad mission sets around the world. The focus was doing the same things better, not doing something new. Commandant after Commandant committed the Marine Corps to doing what it had done since 2001, marching the institution backward toward the future it wanted to see instead of the future it needed to see.

The decision not to focus on conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific, not to develop the doctrine necessary to execute a corresponding sea control strategy, and not to modernize equipment and systems for that mission harshly humbled the Marine Corps in 2038. When China suddenly invaded Taiwan and seized key terrain around the Strait of Malacca, multiple ARG/MEUs conducted amphibious assaults and raids around the strait. Chinese attrition of Air Force tanker aircraft kept Marine Corps F-35Bs effectively out of the fight because they did not have the internal range and payload to engage Chinese bombers, ships, or mobile missile launchers before they launched antiship and land attack cruise missiles at the ARG/MEUs. Units that got ashore watched their amphibious ships and escorting destroyers succumb to volleys of missiles that overwhelmed the ARG/MEU's defenses. The upgraded Abrams tanks, LAVs, and towed artillery lacked the range, maneuverability, and lethality to defeat more modern Chinese equipment and control the landward approaches to the strait. Heavy rains and restricted terrain forced mechanized units to use improved roads because their excessive weight prohibited cross-country maneuver. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) exploited this canalizing effect with long-range missiles and UAV-delivered munitions. The mobile antiship missile launchers the Marines landed to establish sea control around the strait had no targets when the PLA Navy stayed out of range. Unable to prevent the Chinese from operating mobile antiship, antiaircraft, and land attack missile systems on the landward approach-

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<sup>3</sup> Maj John H. Russell, "A Plea for Mission and Doctrine," *Marine Corps Gazette* 1, no. 2 (1916); and Leo J. Daugherty III, *Pioneers of Amphibious Warfare, 1898–1945: Profiles of Fourteen American Military Strategists* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 251–54.

es to the strait, the Marines found themselves cut off from air and sea resupply and reinforcement. The Navy decided it could not risk more ships and planes attempting to reinforce the Marines. China, the Marines discovered, had a doctrine for great power conflict.

China developed an effective sea control doctrine against the United States because it focused on the Indo-Pacific as the most likely place for great power conflict in the twenty-first century. Its weapon systems significantly outranged equivalent systems in the Marine Corps' arsenal because China correctly identified the Marine Corps as the force the United States would initially commit to combat once hostilities began. Chinese sea control doctrine relied on aviation assets, missile systems, and unmanned vehicles, specifically unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned undersea vehicles (UUVs), designed for the vast distances of the Indo-Pacific. The Marine Corps did not have the same singularity of vision when it came to equipping the force. Its incremental attempts to create sea control doctrine emphasized the need to engage Chinese ships and aircraft from land, not control land to prevent China from doing the same. When the PLAN stayed out of Marine Corps antiship missile range, but close enough to launch its own antiship and land attack cruise missiles, Marine Corps sea control doctrine failed. Two decades of institutional inertia and doctrinal stagnation sowed the seeds of defeat in the strait.

The transition from great power competition to great power conflict occurred live on YouTube, Facebook, and other websites. China flooded U.S. websites with footage of damaged and sinking Navy ships, downed Bell Boeing V-22 Ospreys, Bell AH-1 Cobras, and Bell AH-1 Iroquois (or Hueys), and Chinese UAVs striking Marine Corps tanks and artillery with air-delivered cluster munitions. The American people did not read about the Marine Corps' defeat; they watched it occur live on their computers and cell phones.

The Marine Corps mythos died at the hands of China's sea control and cyber doctrines. With the mythos dead, burying the Marine Corps became a necessary sacrifice at the altar of accountability. Ironically, the efforts of six Commandants to secure the Marine Corps' existence condemned it to the fate they sought to avoid: dissolution. Confronted with continuous footage of the Marine Corps' failure to deliver battlefield success, the American people choose to stop investing in a moribund institution. After the president signed DARA, a visibly exhausted Commandant delivered what became known as "The Eulogy." "After 40 years in this uniform," he began, "I am burdened with the heaviest sense of disappointment, knowing that on my watch the Marine Corps breached its contract with the American people, tarnishing a 265-year legacy created by the sacrifice of tens of thousands of Marine lives. We did not do our job, and now we find ourselves without one. *Semper fidelis, Marines.*"

# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

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*Captain J. A. Ouellette, USMC*

Out of all the armed forces of the United States, the Marine Corps prides itself as being a force in readiness. However, at various times throughout its history, the Corps has struggled to justify itself as a force of relevance. The year is 2050. The oceans that once covered two-thirds of the Earth's surface have risen as a result of melting glacial ice.<sup>1</sup> Land previously identified as beyond the littoral continues to shrink as the sea reclaims the shoreline of the early twenty-first century. China holds sway over all sea lanes in the South Pacific.<sup>2</sup> Iran has become the new maritime power in the Arabian Sea. Russia's military machine has established control of contested maritime space in both the Arctic and Antarctic seas as greater landmass is exposed from diminishing polar ice caps.<sup>3</sup> The United States economy has entered its third recession in the past 30 years due to its third trade war with China. The United States Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of State find themselves in a dilemma as the nation's adversaries patrol global waters with large navies holding in reserve well trained and technologically sophisticated amphibious forces able to impose their nation's policy ashore. By necessity, the U.S. House of Representatives has introduced two bills, one reinstating a draft, and another mandating two years of obligated military service post-high-school as 99.5 percent of the population of the United States are either not eligible or do not volunteer to serve.<sup>4</sup> Composed of air, land, sea, cyber, and space domains, war is no longer fought on a battlefield, it is fought in a battlesphere.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> V. Masson-Delmotte et al., *Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty* (Geneva, Switzerland: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Abigail Grace, "China Doesn't Want to Play by the World's Rules," *Foreign Policy*, 8 August 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hannis, "Russia's Arctic Ambitions," *U.S. News & World Report*, 14 March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See Thomas Spoehr and Bridget Handy, "The Looming National Security Crisis: Young Americans Unable to Serve in the Military," Heritage Foundation, 13 February 2018; and John Spencer, "The Military's Real Problem: Fewer Americans Are Joining," *Politico*, 15 December 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See Adam Kinzinger, "The 5th Domain: Cyber Defense Needed in the 21st Century," *Washington Times*, 28 January 2018.

In 1945, Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal told Marine General Holland M. Smith: “Holland, the raising of that flag on Suribachi means a Marine Corps for the next 500 years.”<sup>6</sup> One decade ago, that prophecy fell 395 years short of being realized. On 8 February 2040, an act of Congress abolished and disbanded the United States Marine Corps for the second time since 10 November 1775. As a result, the Corps’ personnel and equipment merged into the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Marines from military occupational specialties across the spectrum, enlisted and officer alike, took advantage of a one-time offer for lateral transfer of their enlistment/commission to fulfill the remainder of their service obligation with the then 10-year-old United States Space Force, a subgroup of the Air Force, much like the Corps’ previous relationship with the Navy.<sup>7</sup> However, the majority of these Marines grew frustrated with the niche and somewhat vague mission of the Space Force. Two-thirds of those former Marine officers submitted resignation packages, and one-half of those former enlisted Marines opted out of reenlistment.

Ironically, 10 years ago, it was the same public perception of the Marine Corps that ultimately contributed to its disbandment. Three popular arguments adopted by both the Senate and House Armed Services Committees were used to justify the notion that there was nothing the Corps could do that could not be matched by any of the other Services. Furthering their argument that the Corps had, for all intents and purposes, degraded into a second army, ranking members frequently referenced the irony that the not a single Marine was present at the storming of the beaches of Normandy during World War II—the largest amphibious operation in United States military history.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, during the past 100 years, since the advent of the atomic bomb and the political stalemate known as nuclear deterrence theory, from the mountains of Korea to the deserts of the Levant, the United States found itself in a multitude of over-politicized peacekeeping and contingency operations—only one of which called for an amphibious operation worthy of a corps of Marines. Contrary to its foundations, the DOD continued to employ the Corps in land-heavy campaigns, which, in turn, created a Marine who was a stranger to the tide and a veteran of the desert sand.<sup>9</sup> And although the Corps outperformed their Army brethren by living their well-known philosophy of doing more with less, they were outdated by the more technologically savvy soldiers of the twenty-first century. Indeed, to outpace their predominant adversaries, the DOD invested heavily in cyber and space warfare capabilities, the former entrusted to the Army and the latter to the Space Force.<sup>10</sup> The Marine Corps, being always averse to change, did not see a need to integrate the aforementioned capabilities in their maneuver warfare philosophy. Why then have a second army?

In a similar vein, why have a third air force? Born from the Army Air Corps and

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<sup>6</sup> “Iwo Jima and Mt. Suribachi,” Naval History and Heritage Command, National Museum of the U.S. Navy.

<sup>7</sup> See Claudette Roulo, “Space Force to Become Sixth Branch of Armed Forces,” DOD News, 9 August 2018.

<sup>8</sup> W. Thomas Smith, Jr., “Rivalry at Normandy,” *National Review*, 4 June 2004.

<sup>9</sup> “Marines Were Trying to Get Back to Their Maritime Roots. How’s that Going?,” *Marine Corps Times*, 22 January 2017.

<sup>10</sup> “100 Years of Marine Aviation,” Air & Space Smithsonian, March 2012.

founded on 18 September 1947, the United States Air force was barely three months old when the Marine Corps turned 172.<sup>11</sup> By that time, the Corps had flown numerous combat operations along with the Navy and the Army.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, why did the Navy's army need an air force? This argument carried a lot of weight from a fiscal perspective as the majority of the Pentagon's budget in 2039, and nearly every year since, was allocated for aircraft, airborne weapons systems, and aviation support. It was a well-known stereotype that the Corps was a jack of all trades, master of none. Why not let the Air Force, which already had a primary congressional mandate focused on the aerial domain, have those funds that would otherwise be allocated to Marine Corps aviation?<sup>13</sup> And if not the Air Force, why not integrate the Department of the Navy's Aviation funds toward a single aviation mission? Indeed, legislative history from 2025 to 2039 reflects much scrutiny of the "waste" of resources on the apparent redundancy of Navy and Marine Corps air platforms launching from Navy ships.

Congress even viewed ship-to-shore operations as an antiquated and unnecessary function of a large amphibious force. Since 11 September 2001, the changing character of warfare called for a heavy reliance on Special Operations Forces (SOF), most of which came from SOF groups within the Army, Navy, and Air Force, that had been in existence since the 1980s, if not earlier.<sup>14</sup> Executive branch reliance on SOF was so great that the organization created to oversee them, the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) effectively became a fourth branch of the United States armed forces. Missions previously entrusted to United States Marines, such as crisis response, hostage rescue, embassy evacuation, reconnaissance, and the like, the majority of which were executed from ship-to-shore, became the sole territory of SOCOM. Gone was the need to seize or defend advanced naval bases and other land operations to support naval campaigns or develop tactics, techniques, and equipment used by amphibious landing forces in coordination with the Army and Air Force.<sup>15</sup> All of this, Congress decided, ought to be discarded in favor of even greater resources being allocated to SOCOM.

Despite nebulous talk in Quantico, Virginia, of policy change, in the end, the Corps could not bring itself to adapt to the changing character of warfare and the needs of a twenty-first-century naval Service.<sup>16</sup> Leadership at all levels of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force were blinded by their desire to justify the status quo instead of focusing on innovation and responding to the national security threat du jour.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in simply billing itself as a force in readiness, the Corps ceased to be a force of relevance. The preamble to the second congressional act disbanding the Corps reads: "After careful consideration of its long and illustrious history, its legend, grandeur, and allure, and in further deliberation of United States national security and warfighting capability, this Act hereby disbands

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<sup>11</sup> "1940–1945 WWII and the Battle for the Skies," U.S. Air Force.

<sup>12</sup> "100 Years of Marine Aviation."

<sup>13</sup> National Security Act of 1947, 50 U.S. Code § 5063(a) (1947).

<sup>14</sup> See W. J. Hennigan, "The New American Way of War," *Time*, 30 November 2017.

<sup>15</sup> National Security Act of 1947.

<sup>16</sup> See Todd South, "The Corps Must Change How It Gets Wartime Gear to the Fight, Generals Say," *Marine Corps Times*, 19 October 2018; and Dave Majumdar, "Is the US Marine Corps Ready for the Wars of the Future?," *National Interest*, 9 August 2016.

<sup>17</sup> See Alexander B. Gray, "The Marines: Always Under the Axe," *National Review*, 13 February 2013.

the United States Marine Corps from the Department of the Navy and the Armed Forces of the United States.” The act was signed into law by the 49th president of the United States on 20 February 2040 and effected on a Saturday, 10 November 2040—what would have been the 265th anniversary of the creation of a corps of Marines at Tun Tavern in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

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*Lieutenant Colonel Dave Pinion, USMC*

On 8 February 2040, Congress passed a law that abolished and dissolved the United States Marine Corps and merged its personnel and assets into the Army, Navy, and Air Force. It should not have come as a surprise to anyone. After a bruising two-month war with China in which the United States never landed a meaningful punch, there was bound to be a reckoning across the entire Department of Defense.

In the decades building up to the conflict, China did not attempt to mask its military modernization or its ambitions to displace the United States as the dominant power in Asia. China spent decades studying the U.S. method of fighting and openly developed systems that exploited U.S. vulnerabilities. The American way of warfare had reached an evolutionary dead end and was easily picked apart by twenty-first-century technology.

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. method of warfighting had become both efficient and lethal. The United States developed long-range precision systems that were highly effective, minimized risk to U.S. forces, and had a disproportionately adverse effect on adversaries. However, the Chinese military recognized that the weapons and platforms built by the United States maximized efficiency by consolidating firepower, command and control, and mobility into a single platform, which in turn made their use conditional. U.S. strike platforms also had become significantly more expensive, which in turn greatly reduced the total number of platforms and systems available. These factors presented the Chinese a gap to exploit in any military conflict with the United States. Given the very fluid continuum of great power competition that developed in the early 2010s, the lock-step phasing and deployment model and dependence on standoff weapons made any U.S. response very predictable. In the early 2020s, it became increasingly clear that hypersonic antiship missiles, smart mines, and global satellite surveillance systems would allow any ship to be targeted long before a carrier strike group or an amphibious task force could get in range to conduct strike operations.<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese strategy against the United States was simple but effective. The Chinese forced American forces to pit expensive, high-value, low-density assets like billion-dollar aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, and F-35s, against their inexpensive, expend-

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<sup>1</sup> T. X. Hammes, "America Is Well within Range of a Big Surprise, So Why Can't It See?," *War on the Rocks* (blog), 12 March 2018.

able, and easily reproducible weapons and platforms. The strategy was reminiscent of the U.S. victory at Guadalcanal in 1942, where the United States forced the Japanese to risk irreplaceable capital ships against replaceable Navy and Marine aircraft from the unsinkable Henderson Field. The Chinese rightly realized that they could deplete the U.S. stockpile of expensive, exquisite weapons and munitions with cheap unmanned threat systems and decoys. Since the Chinese could outrange any Navy or Marine Corps strike capability, they complicated U.S. entry into the theater by targeting every airstrip in the first island chain and every aerial refueling tanker and Navy resupply ship in the Western Pacific.

In the years leading up to the conflict, senior Marine leaders had ample opportunity to reinvent the Marine Corps “brand.” In response to the Senate Armed Services Committee’s reevaluation of Service roles in peer competition, a proposal from Marine Corps University’s Command and Staff College suggested transforming each Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) into a standing Joint Task Force (JTF). The key difference between a MEF and the Marine-led JTF was the dedicated strategic lift and the necessary key enablers from across the Department of Defense to allow for rapid deployment. The JTFs were to be tailored for specific geographic regions to deploy quickly and win the first round in any peer conflict until war-winning forces could be marshaled and deployed to the theater. This would require new and innovative methods of organization, deployment, and transportation of equipment beyond traditional amphibious shipping.

Furthermore, instead of the constant rotational deployments, the new JTFs would work with the combatant commander’s theater security plans in a manner that was strategically reassuring to partners and allies, yet operationally unpredictable to adversaries by varying the size, method, and duration of deployments. But old traditions die hard. Some senior leaders could not conceptually move past the current organization, deployment schedule, and doctrine that had grown operationally predictable and technologically outdated.

Marines had once been the vanguard of innovation and adaptive thinking. However, as the technological landscape was changing, senior Marine leaders continued to spend billions on twentieth-century capabilities by buying new versions of old equipment, such as the amphibious combat vehicle, the landing craft utility (LCU), the Sikorsky CH-53K Sea Stallion, the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV), and landing craft air cushion (LCAC), that offered virtually no increase in capability. The Marine Corps became optimized for the fight senior leaders wished to have rather than the one they would actually face.

So in 2038, after Taiwan rebuffed the mainland’s attempts at peaceful reconciliation, China took the island by force in less than two weeks. The Chinese government issued a stern warning to the rest of the world that any attempt to intervene in an “internal” Chinese matter would be met with overwhelming force. The United States responded predictably, by sending two carrier strike groups to the Western Pacific and an Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) to the Philippines to launch strikes against the Chinese fleet in the South China Sea. Having both military and commercial satellite surveillance of U.S. preparations and ship movements, China warned U.S. ships to stay away and then unceremoniously sank both carriers and the ESG with a volley of DF-26 missiles as they approached. The Chinese also launched cyberattacks on the U.S. homeland and sold all of its U.S. debt, thereby crashing the American economy, which was close to \$35 trillion

in debt. Without a viable conventional option and wanting to avoid the use of nuclear weapons, the United States chose to accept Taiwan's "reunified" status. As a result of the economic crash, defense spending was slashed from \$700 billion per year to \$250 billion. Since the Marine Corps offered no operationally relevant capabilities different from the U.S. Army, it was a luxury the struggling economy could no longer afford.

In hindsight, the pace of innovation in relation to adversaries would prove to be the truest indicator of future success. For years, senior leaders mistakenly made procurement decisions that merely laminated new technology onto outdated concepts of operation. The Marine Corps could have developed organizations and systems that dispersed the sensors, payloads, radars, and communication networks that made weapon systems expensive and irreplaceable. The Marine Corps could have made systems that were easily reproducible in theater, resilient to attacks, and independent of an airfield, refueling tanker, or ship to project a strike capability. The Marine Corps could have developed the capability to use commercial sensor data from the internet of things/ocean of things for targeting. The Marine Corps could have reorganized into rapidly deployable JTFs with equipment and organizations specific to the assigned region's threats. If only the Marine Corps had taken a different approach to warfighting. If only the Marine Corps had heeded the words of a young General Robert B. Neller from 1985 when he wrote in a Marine Corps Gazette article, "Let us not become slaves to tradition when technology and reality make it apparent that another solution is at hand."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Capt Robert B. Neller, "New Look 13-Man Squad?," *Marine Corps Gazette* 69, no. 9 (October 1985): 46–47.

# MY FELLOW AMERICANS

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*Major Robert J. Shortway, USMC*

*White House, Washington, DC  
8 February 2040*

My fellow Americans,

Thank you for joining me tonight in the Oval Office for this historic moment. I announce with great pleasure that I have put an end to the crisis at our southwest border.

The battle for the state of Southern California is over, and my administration is doing everything in our power to help those impacted by the crisis.

The citizens of the United States bestowed great power on me, and tonight I used that power to sign this bill from the new Congress abolishing and dissolving the United States Marine Corps. I merged its personnel and assets into the Army, Navy, and Air Force, disbanded the officer corps, and ordered the execution of their radical leaders.

The battle for the state of Southern California was the fulfillment of a plot by deep state elements of the old Congress. I foresaw this battle 17 years ago, when they forced me to sign the Defense Homestead Initiative Act in 2023.

At the time, the United States military had personnel retention and recruiting problems. My amazing, booming economic policies created an environment that drove down the desire for service to our great nation. Americans were not entering the military at the required rate. The GI Bill, a once highly sought-after incentive to military service, became obsolete when the old Congress made colleges and universities free and absolved student loan debt.

Those who were serving viewed life outside the military as a better alternative to military service. Servicemembers complained about having to relocate every few years. The constant relocations disrupted the family unit and inhibited spouse employment. Servicemember's children would change schools multiple times before high school, limiting their ability to keep childhood friends.

That, in combination with my booming economy, encouraged servicemembers to exit the military and opt for the greener pastures of civilian life.

The old Congress' solution was to offer homesteading as an incentive; thus, the Homestead Initiative Act of 2023 was born. The advertised benefits of the homestead-

ing incentive were many. No longer would military families have to displace every three years and move across the country or the world. Families could choose to stay in place and raise a family, maybe even establish some roots and even allow them to hang some pictures on their walls. Units would increase lethality by keeping the unit together longer, boosting stability, and increasing unit cohesion. The government would save millions by eliminating the majority of relocation and moving costs.

It sounded like a good deal, and as usual, my suspicions proved to be correct.

Military service became more about what can the military do for the servicemember, and not what can the servicemember do for their country. Servicemembers focused on locations. States began to tax servicemembers differently as incentives to stay in place. States offered easy paths to residency in an effort to sway loyalty.

By 2030, I realized I could not let this continue. I overturned the Homestead Initiative Act and made the tough choice to replace the old Congress with a better and much improved new Congress. Only the very best people are in there now.

Let me tell you; I loved the Marines. I always had great respect for the Marines. Over the years, I have had a Marine occupy almost every cabinet position. So, when Marine Corps leadership insisted homesteading suited the Marine Corps, I obliged.

“God, Country, Corps”—they told me it was an unofficial motto of the Marine Corps, and the idea of a Marine being loyal to a state was asinine. Moreover, it actually was. Loyalty to a state was never an issue, and it never will be in America. I deal with state-ism appropriately.

Unit pride? That did not bother me. The Marines always had strong unit pride, with each unit having their own logos, nicknames, and call signs.

By 2036, benign unit loyalty began to evolve into a dangerous loyalty to individuals. As Marines stayed in place, they ascended the ranks within their homestead units. Popularity became the promotion criteria, and soon units were electing their officer corps.

Again, the Marine Corps’ leadership belayed my concerns by making me believe loyalty to individuals was nothing new to the Marine Corps. Marines idolized former leaders as a part of Marine Corps lore. They told me about Archibald Henderson, Chesty Puller, and James Mattis and described the kind of benign reverence associated with them. They told me about toasts made to battles and Lord Admiral Nelson. These were all just a part of Marine Corps culture that set them apart from the other Services. Marines being Marines.

I was unamused, but I let it continue.

This loyalty snowballed during the next few years into something endemic, and by late 2038, manifested itself into dissatisfaction with my government. Much as with the vaunted 10th Legion in Spain aligning themselves to Caesar, the Marines in Southern California aligned themselves with their general. His Rubicon was the Colorado River, and he crossed it with demented fervor. They cried songs of the old republic, heralded ideals of yesteryear, and garnered support from the deep state.

Ultimately, their efforts were valiant but feeble. This mere footnote in American history ended when I took control of the armed forces and put down these criminals. Decades from now, the image of the flag raising on Iwo Jima will fade away. The Marine

Corps' eternal legacy will be that of demagoguery and choosing a general over their country. The disastrous revolt that led to the death of millions rests on their shoulders.

God gave me great abilities and put me in this office to make difficult decisions, and today, I made a tough one. The toughest. Together, God and I lead the most extraordinary country in all of history. It is your job to be always faithful to this country's destiny.

God bless you. God bless the government of national defense.

# “YOU MADE NO DECISIONS”

Testimony from the Hearings on the Defense Reform Act of 2040

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*First Lieutenant Walker D. Mills, USMC*

*8 February 2040*

*Senate chamber, United States Capitol*

Chairman: Madam Commandant, we asked you to come here today to testify about the role the Marine Corps played in the Pacific War. As you are well aware, the future of the Marine Corps is in question, and we wanted you to justify for us the Corps' continued existence as a separate entity in the Department of Defense. We will start with five minutes of questions from the junior senator from Wisconsin.

Senator: General, do you feel that the Service was prepared to meet the challenges of conflict?

Commandant: First, thank you for the question and for inviting me here today. The attack on Taiwan and Okinawa caught us in the middle of a transformation—a shift from decades of counterinsurgency warfare to great power competition. When the war broke out, we were making changes to operationalize our concept Expeditionary Defense Base Operations and acquire new systems to better address the emerging threats by China and Russia. We had also begun to realign our education programs more closely with the Navy, adding a maritime focus.

Senator: General, how long have you been, as you put it, “in transformation”? Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis declared that the military was transitioning to great power competition in the *2018 National Defense Strategy*. That was two decades ago.

Commandant: Yes, well, after the release of the 2018 NDS, it took us a further five years to write new concepts and then another five years to realign our acquisition priorities. After we realigned our priorities, it took five more years to design and prototype our new systems, and we'd only just begun to field them operationally when the war broke out. Likewise, between a comprehensive curriculum review and redesign, it took more than a decade to shift our professional education away from a counterinsurgency focus and back to peer competition.

Senator: So, you're telling me that, after 20 years, you are still transitioning? [incredulous]

Commandant: Yes, but it hasn't been in a vacuum. We've had Marines engaged all over the world, advising foreign forces and conducting counternarcotics and humanitarian missions. In fact, we're very proud that. We have significantly expanded our humanitarian and disaster relief capability in the last several years and have been deploying our Marine special operations and advising regiments almost nonstop. We have teams still operating in Africa and the Middle East.

Senator: General, do you remember what the mission of the Marine Corps is?

Commandant: The mission of the Marine Corps?

Senator: Yes, according to Title 10, United States Code. I'll read it for you in case you have forgotten. [clears throat]

The Marine Corps shall be organized, trained, and equipped to provide fleet marine forces of combined arms, together with supporting air components, for service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign.

General, would you say that the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases in support of a naval campaign was the primary focus of the Marine Corps before the China Sea conflict? How do foreign internal defense missions in central Africa or counternarcotics missions in South America support the prosecution of naval campaigns?

Commandant: Yes, but I would add that Title 10 also says that we are responsible for "whatever other duties the president may direct." We stay relevant to the nation; we call ourselves the "first to fight," meaning we take what operations come our way instead of waiting on the sidelines for operations specific to our mission.

Senator: Let me continue. I'll read the sentence after that:

*However, these additional duties may not detract from or interfere with the operations for which the Marine Corps is primarily organized.*

With that mission in mind, general, was the Marine Corps ready for the Pacific War?

Commandant: Ready . . . I was hoping you would ask about readiness. [shuffles papers] Our readiness prior to the outbreak of the war was actually higher than it had been in our history. And that is readiness across all categories, senator. Maintenance, medical, dental, annual training—it was all green across the board. We were almost 100 percent deployable across the board. For example, in I MEF, we didn't have a single class 4 dental Marine or sailor. In III MEF, we were deployable across the board; no issues whatsoever—

Senator: [Interrupting] General, I mean what specifically had the Corps done to get ready for a great power conflict in the Pacific with regard to training, acquisitions, concept development, or anything else related to warfighting?

Commandant: We invested heavily in training before the war and sent Marines through multiple iterations of combined arms training at our Marine Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, California. As for acquisition, we were watching a lot of Army and Navy programs closely. We don't have as much money as the other Services, and so we can't afford to go off and do things on our own. So, we were following the Army's long-range precision fires, future vertical lift, and their



future attack reconnaissance helicopter programs, as well as the Navy's mine countermeasure and unmanned surface vehicle programs. But we didn't have the budget to fund these things ourselves.

Senator: General, in that same period, the Marine Corps acquired more than a hundred new Sikorsky CH-53K King Stallions. You bought hundreds of amphibious combat vehicles and thousands of joint light tactical vehicles. In the mid-2000s, you developed, fielded, and then scrapped your expeditionary fire support system in only a few years, along with ammo and vehicles, instead of purchasing existing Army systems. The Corps clearly had money to invest in unique capabilities, but lacked the prescience to invest in the right capabilities. Furthermore, why is it that your Service's most comprehensive training was conducted in the Mojave Desert, considering this terrain is completely different from anywhere in the Pacific and hundreds of miles from the ocean?

Commandant: To be honest, those programs are really holdovers from my predecessors, as was our training— I can't bear full responsibility for that. When you start these programs, you have to see them through. Back when we were fighting in Afghanistan, we needed heavy-lift helicopters to operate at high altitudes in desert climates. That's also why we bought the joint light tactical vehicle. And the amphibious combat vehicle was a much-needed replacement for our legacy vehicles. We needed something that could carry Marines from ship-to-shore and move them to the objective. We trained in the desert because it was easier than training on the coast. It was also cheaper.

Senator: So, if I understand correctly, the Marine Corps acquired more than 200 of the most expensive helicopters ever built to meet operational requirements from a war that ended in 2020 and to address terrain limitations that do not exist in the Pacific? And furthermore, despite the directive to increase lethality across the force, they are essentially unarmed?

Subsequently, while we were trying to lighten the force and improve our capability to host air-mobile, forward refueling points, you replaced the mainstay tactical vehicle with one that is both significantly larger, heavier, and has less room inside. Are you saying you did this to protect Marines against a threat that we have not seen in the Pacific theater?

And finally, we invested in a new vehicle for ship-to-shore movement under fire after multiple secretaries of defense questioned the relevance of forcible entry operations. How do you explain this?

Commandant: We made the best decisions we could with the information we had at the time.

Senator: General, you made no decisions. Under your tenure and the tenure of your predecessors, the utility of the Marine Corps withered. The Corps repeatedly invested in capabilities that were no longer relevant and or qualified as legacy projects. Simultaneously, hard questions about the fundamental role of the force were ignored and or left unanswered. The Marine Corps shoehorned their own idea of what they should be into the Joint force.

You went to war with lethal squads that were stuck in their barracks. You went to war with amphibious vehicles but without the amphibious shipping

to put them on. The new L-class ships don't even have well decks for them to launch from. Your contribution to the Pacific War was a few squadrons of F-35s, but they were limited by their short takeoff capability and carried less fuel and ammunition than their Air Force and Navy cousins. You did not have the weapons, training, or concepts to defend our allies or even yourselves. Marines tried to fire cannon artillery at Chinese ships and landing craft because they had nothing else. Despite the high levels of readiness you briefed, the Marine Corps was not ready for war. You were not even able to fulfill the basic mission of defending and seizing advanced bases. Therefore, I see no reason for there to be a Marine Corps.

I yield my time.

# NOT NEEDED OR WANTED

## The Marine Corps' Postmortem

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*Major K. E. Hampshire, USMC*

Yesterday, Congress passed H.R. 2676, "To abolish the United States Marine Corps and provide for its absorption into the DOD Services." Given today's fiscally constrained environment as well as waning public support due to a series of scandals and social media incidents, it appears likely to become law. But budgetary pressures and periodic negative publicity have always existed. Instead, the Marine Corps died a slow death primarily due to two political and two organizational factors. Changes in the way the public and policy makers view war, the increasing joint effectiveness of the military, the proliferation of cheap technology, and the strategic pivot to the cyber and space domains; each was a gap that eroded the Marine Corps' strategic surface and led to its demise.

The geopolitical context has changed dramatically since the post-Cold War days when the United States was the world's lone superpower. Ensuing decades of global economic growth and prosperity have powered international ambitions while paradoxically creating an increasingly multipolar world. The growing influence of China, the European desire for greater internal cohesion, the economic rise of traditionally underdeveloped nations in Africa and South America—all of these factors have helped create a global paradigm of regional cooperation but worldwide dubiousness. While major outright combat has thus far been avoided, it has been replaced by perpetual economic and information competition. If the last conflict was cold, this one is frozen.

In such an environment, it is unsurprising that American policy makers and the public alike have come to view global competition through a gradient lens: not quite at peace but not yet at war. On the one hand, American policy makers have proven eager to shape American interests through technology and special operations by liberally using cyber attacks, standoff precision strikes, Special Operations Command, and the CIA in twenty-first-century gunboat diplomacy. On the other hand, they have been unwilling to apply significant traditional military force due to the ghosts of Iraq and Afghanistan and increasing regional hegemonic power. The result is a binary construct whereby America tends to view its military as a flyweight or a heavyweight, but certainly not a middleweight. The first death knell for the Marine Corps was its inability to assume either role—too large to be a flyweight yet too small to be a heavyweight. This middleweight

role had suited it well in the past, but even as critics called for it to be subsumed into the rest of the DOD then, it was able to provide oversized value and survive because of its operational autonomy. Unfortunately, it was joint integration that challenged its operational autonomy.

More than 50 years ago, the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act fundamentally changed the way the Services interact by laying the foundation for the joint environment. Goldwater-Nichols helped to begin to eliminate Service parochialism by organizing operational control along functional or geographic lines instead of along Service lines. It also provided for joint procurement and doctrine, joint professional military education, and joint staff assignments. In short, it precipitated today's increasingly effective joint team.

This drive toward integration has taken more than 50 years, and it is still incomplete. But jointness has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: the American people largely view the military as a homogeneous monolith, so it is indeed slowly becoming one. The merits of a single completely unified force are debatable, but no Service suffered more from this development than the Marine Corps. A cornerstone of the Corps' concept was its operational autonomy; its ability to provide the full suite of combat power while operating independently as a self-sustaining Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF), isolated from the inevitable frictions arising during joint operations. This is how the Marine Corps differentiated itself from the other Services, but it was no longer a differentiator once other Services begin to smooth out those frictions after lessons learned from the Marine Corps model. Quite simply, the Marine Corps did something so well that other Services—larger and with more resources—replicated it.

The same technological and information innovations that have fueled global prosperity have also changed our military's operational concepts. Decreasing material and production costs, coupled with on-demand information, have precipitated a worldwide diffusion of technology. The great fear remains independent rogue actors using such omnipresent technologies in novel ways for nefarious purposes. But the more proximate and practical application of such diffusion is increasingly robust—and cheap—coastal defense systems capable of near complete antiaccess and area denial (A2/AD). Capabilities to defeat such systems have barely kept pace and have focused on discrete rather than systemic solutions. That is, intercepting individual missiles has become routine, but defeating swarms of them or directed energy weapons are entirely different matters.

In response, naval doctrine has adapted. The Navy continues to expand its operational concept as a distributed network of smaller, faster, and less expensive ships. The Navy must be highly mobile, and it must consist of many individual nodes to saturate coastal defenses by presenting hugely complex targeting scenarios. Luckily, the Navy continues to move away from America's twenty-first century Maginot Line of very expensive and very vulnerable ships of the line, such as aircraft carriers. This operational concept has rendered the Marine Corps obsolete as a matter of course. A2/AD envelopes have expanded so far that the "forward" in "forward presence" has lost almost all of its meaning. And with smaller, more maneuverable ships, the persistent readiness of the Marine Corps was severely challenged. There is little physical space to maintain a complement of expeditionary forces on such small ships. Having to posture itself farther

and farther from the littorals, the Marine Corps lost its claim to rapid response and ran out of ways to even get to the littorals—rapidly or otherwise. Clearly, this means that the concept of forcible entry from the sea is dead or at least dying, and with it, the Marine Corps' value proposition.

But even if technology has become more widely proliferated, the next contested frontiers—cyber and space—remain largely the domain of large, technically fluent organizations due to their inherent complexities and high resource burden. These are domains in which the Air Force has willingly and successfully navigated, sustaining its dominance through an identity of technological innovation and concomitant budgets. Unwilling to challenge Air Force dominance in either domain for fear of stoking inter-Service rivalries, the Marine Corps proved unable to compete in either and lost relevance in both.

The Marine Corps did establish Marine Corps Forces Cyberspace Command in 2009 in response to the DOD's creation of a new unified command, U.S. Cyber Command. However, the Marine Corps' engagement with cyber operations was too localized. Other Services, particularly the Air Force, tend to correctly view cyber operations as integral to all its operations. Across its force, the Marine Corps tended to view cyber operations as a distinct and relatively obscure enabling function but not woven into all its operations. Of course, the distinction of cyber as a standalone function is entirely artificial and meant that the Marine Corps was not able to institutionally embrace cyber operations.

However myopic the cyber distinction was, it paled in comparison to the Marine Corps' inability to secure a seat at the space table. Naturally, one might have envisioned the Marine Corps' traditional expeditionary and forcible entry roles as almost perfectly analogous to a future space infantry. In 2018, the Marine Corps was effectively put on notice with *Space Policy Directive-4* that it was not doing nearly enough to embrace space operations because the proposed force was to be a distinct branch initially placed under the purview of the Air Force. The perception was that the Air Force were the de facto subject matter experts. The Space Force was not created until 2024, and the Marine Corps missed a golden opportunity in the interim six years to advocate for its role as a twenty-first-century expeditionary force, this time using Air Force ships instead of Navy ships. Yet, the Marine Corps was arguing for more large Navy ships, a reasonable bet to ensure short-term relevance but long-term obsolescence; the lack of a side space bet rendered the Marine Corps an anachronism.

Perhaps the most challenging immediate issue for the joint force is not mastering new domains or defeating new technology, but successfully integrating Marine Corps personnel and assets. To that end, the Marine Corps has retained its notoriously strong identity and culture. Political factors such as the American perception of war or the effectiveness of the joint force obviated the Marine Corps just as much as adaptive operational approaches to new technologies or the growing importance of the cyber and space domains.

The result is that the Marine Corps died a physical death, but not a spiritual one. After the Revolutionary War, both the Continental Navy and the Marine Corps were disbanded, though neither truly died. Our fledgling nation soon needed both again during the run-up to the Quasi-War. Our nation might not currently want a Marine Corps, but it just might need one again soon. When it does, the Marines' esprit de corps will guide its reformation.

# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

The One Battle the Marine Corps Did Not Win  
Corps Lost Control of Their Narrative—Real and Perceived

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*Major Garron Garn, USMC*

*Washington Post*  
*Editorial Staff*  
*8 February 2040*

Washington, DC—It was never supposed to end like this. It was never supposed to end at all, but if the Marine Corps were to cease as a fighting organization, the death would have come on a foreign shore in one last heroic battle against overwhelming odds and a numerically superior foe.

The Corps' last stand at Thermopylae turned out to be nothing more than a bureaucratic formality. Alas, the Marine Corps would have no such lasting honor. Instead, Congress voted today to dissolve the Marine Corps and distribute its personnel and assets into the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Despite 264 years of battlefield success, the Corps could not defeat the foe threatening its very existence—the real and perceived toxic culture lurking within its ranks.

Each branch of Service has endured its share of scandals and shame over the years, and while the Marine Corps had the youngest average age of servicemembers, it does not explain why the institution seemingly received a disproportionate amount of negative attention. Maybe it was the unrelenting adherence to tradition and discipline above all, but when Marines failed to live up to their high standards, it fragmented the “almost spiritual” conviction of the nation.<sup>1</sup> Observers look back to two decades of disgrace and missed opportunities that slowly eroded the nation's trust and strengthened the voices calling for the Corps' disbandment. The year 2040 will mark the date when Congress could no longer overlook the Service's issues.

## **“No Worse Enemy” (than Itself)**

What was once an open secret—that “boys will be boys” in the Marine Corps—later

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Krulak, *First to Fight*, XV.

came to the forefront shortly after the #MeToo movement began in 2017. And who were the most vocal critics of the Corps' handling of sexual assaults and treatment of female Marines? The same women the Corps recruited, trained, and empowered.

"The truth was that sexual harassment was a continual element of my enlistment: It was part of what drove me to seek a deployment away from my regular unit; it kept me from feeling safe in my own barracks; it kept me from reaching my leadership potential," wrote Marine veteran Cristine Pedersen in a 2019 *New York Times Magazine* article.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, she was not the only one to come forward with an experience at odds with the Service's core values—a cacophony of voices were crying out to be heard, but they seemingly fell on deaf ears. Retired Marine Jackie Huber once told a reporter that "we were treated like second-class citizens, and we had few rights and fewer advocates."<sup>3</sup>

Most female veterans brave enough to come forward with their stories of assault or harassment still proclaimed a strong love for the Corps, but their experiences forever altered the way they viewed military service. For these women, it no longer made sense to sacrifice for an institution that was not willing to make sacrifices for them.<sup>4</sup>

While much media attention was given to the treatment of female Marines, the Corps also dealt with a rash of hazing incidents that dominated headlines. In 2017, the 1st Marine Division, for example, had "cases of alleged physical assaults, forced alcohol consumption, broken personal belongings, shaved heads for not earning 'the right to have hair' and even forced planks over a container of bleach."<sup>5</sup> In one three-year period, the unit conducted more than 100 hazing investigations; in some instances, investigators found that the hazing may have pushed some Marines to contemplate suicide.<sup>6</sup>

Hazing was not limited to units far from the watchful gaze of leadership either. Marines stationed at the "Oldest Post in the Corps"—8th and I in Washington, DC—also were embroiled in a hazing scandal in 2018 wherein five members of the prestigious ceremonial Silent Drill Platoon were placed in pretrial confinement.<sup>7</sup>

The most damning evidence from the numerous hazing investigations was the recognition that "there is a culture that exists within the battalion, or possible the infantry community or Marine Corps-wide, that contributes to an environment in which hazing may occur."<sup>8</sup>

## Dis-Integration?

Further complicating the matter for the Corps was that it was the only branch not to have an integrated boot camp—an issue that fueled the negative perception of the Service with increasing criticism from female veteran advocacy groups. The Marines flirted with

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<sup>2</sup> Cristine Pedersen, "I Followed My Father into the Marines: But It Was Different for a Woman," *New York Times Magazine*, 4 April 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Cathy Dyson, "We Were Treated Like Second-class Citizens'—A Female Marine Reflects on Her Two Decades of Service," *Task & Purpose*, 16 April 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Sebastian Junger, *Tribes: On Homecoming and Belonging* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2016), 110.

<sup>5</sup> Shawn Snow, "Dangerous 'Jackassery': Inside the 1st Marine Division's Culture of Barracks Hazing," *Marine Corps Times*, 25 November 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Snow, "Dangerous 'Jackassery'."

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Starr, "Elite U.S. Marines under Investigation over Hazing Allegations," CNN, 6 November 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Snow, "Dangerous 'Jackassery'."

the idea, but it appeared to be a “brief and limited experiment integrating female recruits into an all-male unit” that never regained traction after the last female platoon partnered with four male platoons in 2019.<sup>9</sup>

Critics of the Corps’ integration efforts believed gender segregation molded disrespectful sentiments among male colleagues toward female Marines.<sup>10</sup> Anecdotally, the critics condemned the divisive language used by drill instructors toward members of the opposite gender, which then established a culture of disrespect and hostility.

What kept the Corps from integrating recruit training? The answer has been known for more than two decades, long before the setbacks snowballed: money and logistics.

“It always comes down to money” and whether or not there are the “right number of people and the infrastructure to accommodate it,” a former commander of the training depot once said. Marine officials also argued for separate training because “young, female Marines perform better if they do the bulk of their early training in a separate unit where they can build their strength and confidence.”<sup>11</sup> But this sentiment was exactly what one former commander of the female recruit battalion fought against, even as she “encountered incredibly outdated ideas about gender” at the recruit depots.<sup>12</sup>

While a former recruit depot commander acknowledged the trial integration exposed young, male recruits to female Marine leaders earlier in their career, the Corps did not seem serious about changing recruit training.<sup>13</sup> Or so it seemed to those outside the Service.

## Missed Opportunities

In hindsight of 2040, the Corps’ pride in its battlefield prowess and assumed good faith with the public blinded it to the reality that it was susceptible to internal threats. By failing to take care of their own, the Corps failed to be *semper fi*, and this wounded it worse than any enemy ever could.

But, given the chance to turn the clock back 20 years, the Corps could have implemented two relatively easy changes that would have served several purposes and maybe, just maybe, saved it from extinction.

First, while not a novel idea, the Corps should have integrated recruit training at both recruit depots. Granted, a majority of the training events at Parris Island, South Carolina, was coed at the time anyway, but that did not matter. What mattered most was the perception among Marines, and especially among interested external audiences such as Congress and the parents who entrusted their daughters to the Corps. By permanently integrating at least one female platoon to each male company at both depots, the Corps could have (slowly) changed the attitudes within its ranks, and it would have gone a long

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<sup>9</sup> Lolita C. Baldor, “Move for More Gender Integration at Marine Corps Boot Camp Ends; Future Unclear,” *Marine Corps Times*, 31 March 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Shawn Snow, “Recruits with First Partially Gender-integrated Marine Boot Camp Company Earn the Title Marine,” *Marine Corps Times*, 22 March 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Baldor, “Move for More Gender Integration at Marine Corps Boot Camp Ends.”

<sup>12</sup> LtCol Kate Germano, “I Tried to Make Women Marines Tougher. It Was the Hardest Fight of My Career,” *Task & Purpose*, 30 March 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Baldor, “Move for More Gender Integration at Marine Corps Boot Camp Ends.”



way to change the perception that the Service was unreasonably resistant to change. The Corps needed to show it was serious about treating all Marines equally, and by integrating recruit training in a way that satisfied society, the Marines would have taken back “control of their narrative” instead of allowing itself to be defined by its critics.

Second, to address the toxic culture of assaults, hazing, and other misconduct, the Corps should have created a program where the young Marines were expected to be a part of the solution rather than just executors of orders. Instead of implementing a burdensome program directed from headquarters or an order from a commanding officer, the Corps needed an “advocacy council” of Marines of all ranks, backgrounds, and both genders to partner with senior leadership in finding solutions to problems affecting the unit. The council (it does not matter what it is called) would not have duplicated existing efforts. Rather, the advocacy council could have been appropriately sized depending on the unit and would have: 1) given junior Marines an avenue for input on decisions that affected the unit; 2) provided senior leaders with an unfiltered and comprehensive enlisted perspective; and 3) helped change the negative perception of the Corps within the broader public by advocating for its most vulnerable Marines before negative incidents occur, rather than primarily afterward.

Critics of gender integration would surely argue that recruit training worked for 264 years, so why change? While critics of an advocacy council would argue that engaged leadership would negate the requirement for the program, both arguments have merit. Unfortunately, the Corps had 264 years of tradition and leadership in place, and the problems persisted.

Maybe, the Corps could have saved itself had others shared former Marine Cristine Pedersen’s brave perspective that “you can simultaneously love an institution and recognize how it is failing. The truest form of commitment is perhaps to bring these failures to light.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Pedersen, “I Followed My Father into the Marines.”

# LOOKING IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

How Did We Get Here?

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*Captain Peter M. Birkeland Jr., USMC*

*8 February 2040—Eisenhower Center for Advanced Military Studies, Fort Quantico, Virginia.*

Good morning and welcome to the Modern Military Forum. It is bittersweet that we should all be gathered on such a solemn occasion.

Moderator: Captain Thomas, you were a company commander in the 26th MEU—the last Marine Expeditionary Unit to ever set sail. As the most junior member of the panel, what did you see as contributing factors for the abolishment of the Marine Corps?

Captain Thomas: First, thanks for having me. While I'd like to make a bunch of disparaging remarks about the Army, my transfer package was just accepted. So, starting tomorrow, Captain Thomas will strive to be all he can be. To paraphrase the great General Krulak, "America doesn't need a Marine Corps, America wants a Marine Corps." From the beginning, our existence was predicated on the fact that the American people wanted us to exist. Here's the unexpected twist, though—what if the Marines grew apathetic about their Service's existence? I don't claim to speak on behalf of my post-millennial peers, but the common refrain I hear is, "Why continue to pour the best years of your life into an organization that is stagnant and whose leadership is seemingly aloof and tuned out?" The most talented junior officers—present company (grade) excluded—looked around after their first tour and took the LSAT. The best and brightest NCOs used the post-9/11 GI Bill as soon as they could end active service. Out of my infantry officer class, only me and one other captain remains. Don't get me wrong; we all wanted to be Marines, and to do Marine things. Perhaps it was a romantic, fantastical idea, but we wanted to lead Marines into battle and test our mettle. The reality, though, was far from what we expected: endless staff work, meaningless PowerPoints, countless medical "hit lists," incessant commanding general inspection preparation. As company grade officers in the Fleet Marine Force,

we were essentially nothing more than glorified secretaries, albeit, with fewer vacation days.

Moderator: Lieutenant Colonel Remington, you commanded Battalion Landing Team 2/6, what are your thoughts on the abolishment?

Remington: Abolishment. That, to me, is the hardest thing to swallow. It adds insult to injury. Two hundred sixty-five years of dedicated service to the nation and this is how it ends? Unlike the captain, I'm not transferring to the Army, so if you'd like to meet me at the bar afterward, I have plenty of disparaging comments about the Army, the DOD, and Congress. From my perspective, we made a fatal miscalculation about the Marine Corps' role in the twenty-first century. We correctly predicted the dramatic shifts in the character of warfare—the increased lethality, engagement zones, and velocity of fires, the proliferation of autonomous weaponry, and the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence. We failed, however, to figure out how the Marines would play into that problem. We bet it all on the idea that amphibious operations would ensure our relevancy. That proved to be wrong. Against a peer adversary, the MEU is a veritable relic—an outdated and lumbering dinosaur. It was far too valuable a target to put within range of peer enemy systems, so, in essence, it was relegated to humanitarian missions. In the past, we prided ourselves on being an expeditionary force in readiness—forward deployed, ever-ready, always able to strike and project power ashore where conventional Army forces could not. After the DOD realignment of 2032, when SOCOM became a standalone Service, it became clear that the Corps' days were numbered.

Moderator: So you think Special Operation Command's designation as a Service signaled a shift away from the Marine Corps?

Remington: Absolutely. You don't have to be a genius to realize it is far less risky for a combatant commander to deploy SOF teams into a contested AO, than to land a BLT. With the stringent rules of engagement, complicated political situations, and the presence of social media, a horde of gung ho Marines on a foreign shore spells potential political disaster. It's just too risky and so much easier to use a force with a smaller footprint. Not only that, but unmanned aircraft system operations have exploded in the past 30 years. The Air Force has expeditionary airfields in dozens of countries, with remotely piloted aircraft airborne around the clock for UAS. The United States now has the capability to collect intelligence and project power without having to risk human life. The other Services caught on and whittled away our claim that we were the only ones who could conduct expeditionary operations.

Moderator: Colonel Ellwood, you were the 2d Marine Aircraft Wing operations officer. Talk us through your perspective, coming from the wing.

Ellwood: Good to be here, despite the unfortunate circumstances. Not to echo everything that has been stated, but the wing is fraught with many of the same issues that led to our, um, abolishment, as it were. The Marine Corps was never intended to be a full-fledged air force; rather, the wing existed to support the MAGTF. In hindsight, I think the F-35 procurement was the beginning of the end for Marine Aviation.

Moderator: I'm surprised to hear you say that, you being a former F-35 squadron commander and all.

Ellwood: It's a great platform, don't get me wrong. It's just not the right plane for the Marine Corps. The jet was a generational leap in technology, but it didn't nest within the MAGTF's requirements. What's more, the program was a money pit. We should have cut bait early on, but we were too invested, so we threw good money after bad. The problem is that these things have unintended consequences. All those dollars toward the program had to come from somewhere, and the rest of the fleet suffered as a result. Decreased readiness, inability to upgrade sensors and capabilities on other platforms, we robbed Peter to pay Paul. From there, it's pretty straightforward—fewer parts, coupled with aging platforms, meant a burgeoning burden on maintenance. Flight hours dipped and then fell off a cliff. Mishaps subsequently skyrocketed, and then there was a mass exodus of aviators.

Moderator: Very interesting points, but I thought one of the main reasons we bought the F-35 was to guarantee the relevancy of Marine air?

Ellwood: That was the idea, but it's different in practice. We were like a small-town police department that bought a SWAT armored personnel carrier; it was well beyond the scope of what we needed. In my opinion, Marine Aviation should exist to transport and escort Marines into battle and attack surface targets. That's pretty much it. Anything else is far too complex and specialized for the MAGTF's objectives.

Moderator: Colonel Ellwood, you're the senior member here, any parting words?

Ellwood: Well as you know, a colonel always has a few saved rounds. The Marine Corps has a long and illustrious history of winning glory in battle, and we've successfully sold our case to the American people since 1775. The truth of the matter is that, when you're in a competitive business where you're constantly justifying your existence, it all comes down to "what have you done for me lately?" As Captain Thomas mentioned, the Marine Corps existed this long because the American people wanted a Marine Corps. But even when the citizens approved and supported the Corps, our existence was constantly under attack. As you all know, we were nearly disbanded in 1947—a mere two years after the most significant and visible battles in our Corps' history. Public support was at an all-time high, but that didn't prevent us from having to plead our case. In the century since, we valiantly fought to a draw in a misunderstood conflict on the Korean Peninsula, heroically battled in the rice paddies of a wildly unpopular war in Vietnam, and spent two decades in complicated and unresolved conflicts in the Middle East. If we had to fight for our existence in the aftermath of the most significant and supported campaign in our Services' history, what chance did we stand 100 years removed, when those memories have all but faded from the public consciousness? Most Americans understand the Marine Corps is "elite," but they couldn't name a single battle or campaign we've been involved in during the past 40 years. Sangin, ar-Ramadi, Fallujah—to the average American, these places ring hollow. It becomes exponentially harder to justify your existence when the public is unaware of your exploits, and the most iconic im-

age of your service is from a conflict nearly a century ago. We've always had to battle for relevancy in the DOD, but the true battle has always been to convince the American people of our relevance. We spent the first three decades of this century fighting for the hearts and minds of foreigners. Perhaps, we should have fought a little harder for the hearts and minds of our citizens.

Moderator: Well folks, that seems like as a fitting an end to the forum, and to the Marine Corps. Semper Fidelis.

# SEMPER FIDELIS, AND REST IN PEACE

A Marine Corps Postmortem

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*Major Brian Kerg, USMC*

Today, on 8 February 2040, Congress passed a law that dissolved the United States Marine Corps. Throughout its life, the Corps was famously not a Service that Americans needed, but one Americans wanted. How is it, then, that the finest fighting force in the world lost its utility to the nation for which it had sacrificed so much, and saw its resources merged with the Army, Navy, and Air Force?

Sadly, in the preceding decades, the Marine Corps finally failed to do what it had done so many times before to survive; it failed to adapt itself to the changing security environment in which it would operate, putting itself in an impossible position from which to advocate for its livelihood. When the latest moment for adaptation came circa 2018, the Corps blinked. Outmaneuvered by the other Services, it was rendered obsolete and became an artifact that will now see funding for nothing but its museum.

From the Second World War to 2018, the Corps was intended primarily to be employed as a large-scale, amphibious assault force, using the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) as its base unit. This competency eroded as the wars in Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan saw the Corps used primarily as a second land army. While America wasted its strength in counterinsurgencies (COIN) that did little to advance its interests, China and Russia pursued coercive strategies of expansion, while fielding capabilities that created increasingly complex antiaccess/aerial denial (A2/AD) environments. This confounded the likelihood that the Corps would be able to fulfill its primary statutory obligation to seize amphibious bases.

The moment for the Corps to change came in 2018, with the release of that year's *National Defense Strategy* (NDS). It aimed to pivot the nation's efforts from futile and costly COIN in the Middle East to instead face the growing shadows cast by Russia and China, which would become superpowers in their own right by 2040.

In the following years, pioneers in the Corps helped orient it toward a flurry of changes in policy, structure, and capabilities. Marine units were reenvisioned to be used not as an amphibious assault force, but instead for dynamic force employment (DFE). Under this concept, the Commandant radically authorized the break-up of the historic MAGTF to make small units available for commitment to the contact and blunt layers of force

employment. Here, Marines could support American competition by operating below the level of armed conflict.

Marine units of every stripe, inclusive of infantry squads, logistics companies, and aviation detachments, rotated on deployments across the world, performing theater security cooperation and humanitarian assistance. These constant, nonkinetic deployments provided combatant commanders with persistently available, scalable, and employable forces that could deter Chinese and Russian aggression by always having forces inside their threat envelope or ready to seize their international interests. Every such unit operated in an expeditionary advanced base, whose accompanying unmanned weapons systems could simultaneously penetrate within adversary A2/AD defenses. Alternatively, these forces could augment the highly capable but limited resources provided by special operations teams.

Conditions were set for an agile, lethal Corps that was perpetually within every area of operation (AO). This would have maintained the Corps' role as the nation's preeminent response force.

And then . . . the champions of these concepts retired, and those who came after them fell back into old, comfortable habits. New generals and commanding officers who had risen to their positions in a MAGTF world, fighting more or less as another land army, refused to operate under the terms of DFE and refused to fight unless they could fight as a traditional MAGTF.

The first notable incident was the Russian annexation of Belarus in 2028. Russia reapplied the hybrid warfare it had mastered during the 2014 annexation of Crimea, supporting ethnically Russian Belarusians as they assaulted key ports and airfields. The European Command commander attempted to redeploy the Marine DFE elements operating across their AO, seeking to rapidly put Marines at these key points, forcing Russia to back down. The Marine Corps responded by saying it would deploy these teams only together, in their entirety, along with their whole parent command, SPMAGTF Crisis Response-EUCOM. Commanders insisted on placing redundant command element headquarters over the operation and reconstituting as a larger and larger force; everyone wanted their piece of the war, and to fight how they were comfortable fighting.

Instead of having personnel on deck in hours and applying the concept of DFE, U.S. forces were not available for a week. During which time, Russian "little green men" had once again forced a de facto decision in another country, compelling America and the international community to hold fast lest it escalate the world toward an undesired, costly, and bloody conflict. At the first chance to apply the Marine Corps as DFE, the Marine Corps balked.

Similar events played out in the conflict that turned into the Chinese reclamation of Taiwan and the Second Iran-Iraq War. In both instances, the Marine Corps was the first unit called upon to be present at the point of friction and to provide America with a meaningful instrument by which to force aggressor nations to stand down. But in these and other instances, the Corps refused to send platoons when it could send entire MAGTFs.

Army units mobilizing from the continental United States became more responsive to the needs of combatant commanders than forward deployed DFE Marine detachments. Sensing an opportunity for a greater stake in a diminishing pot of the defense budget, the Army acted decisively and became more adaptable and agile than the Corps.

It created its own capacity for DFE and, having the force structure to spare, placed its DFE units across the globe, quickly gobbling up the missions that could have gone to Marines.

Sensing blood in the water, the Army then applied what would become its most decisive blow, and one that would be personally stinging to the Corps: the Army pursued naval integration. Seeing the value of DFE, it divested itself of its historic marriage to the brigade combat team, seeing how poorly the insistence on deploying only as a large, inflexible unit proved to the Corps and provided small teams of soldiers to deploy on every naval vessel that could spare the berthing. Though the Army lacked surface connectors, Army and Navy helicopters were more than enough to get these troops from ship to shore, where they applied the increasingly successful DFE concept, most notably in the Spratly Island Standoff of 2034.

The Marine Corps, for its part, only exacerbated its already compromised position by swimming deeper into the sunk cost fallacy. Having previously mortgaged itself in the notoriously unreliable and perennially over budget F-35B Joint Strike Fighter, the Corps' senior leadership refused to back away from this program. Despite the increasing affordability and capability of drones and other unmanned systems, in which the other Services readily invested, traditionalists in the Corps clung to the bias that troops on the ground preferred manned close air support. For the price of one F-35B, the Corps could have purchased an aircraft group worth of drones, each squadron of which could have fulfilled all functions of Marine aviation. Though some lone prophets continued to point out the error in trying to field a one-size-fits-every-mission airframe, the nation's naval infantry had invested too much power in its manned aviation stakeholders. The Corps continued to hemorrhage money into an aircraft that was too high maintenance to be decisively employed in combat, bleeding itself dry.

The Corps' death knell was written in blood during the War of Venezuelan Liberation. While the other Services were able to throw drones at the enemy's forward line of troops, accept high losses of unmanned systems, and move on, the first Marine units placed inside the threat envelope were quickly targeted and killed. American casualty aversion kicked in, and the remaining Marine forces were kept off the front lines until forcible entry had been achieved and a beachhead had been secured by the Army. In the bitter final chapter of its history, the Marines became a follow-on element to soldiers.

Ultimately, the Marine Corps failed to adapt at the decisive moment, placed its attachment to the MAGTF over the demands of a changing national security strategy, worshiped too long at the altar of the F-35B, and was outmaneuvered by the other Services. It became a redundant and obsolete organ, a gall bladder in the body of the Department of Defense that Congress elected to remove. The Corps became something that America not only did not need but no longer wanted.

Never again will a president of the mess hold up their rum punch and proclaim, "Long live the United States, and success to the Marines," for that success was lost when change was refused at the hour of need.

You stand relieved, Marine Corps. The Army, Navy, and Air Force have the watch.  
Semper fidelis and rest in peace.



# STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

## Why the Corps Was Not Critical

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*Captain Brandon Rollins, USMC*

By the time Congress voted to dissolve the Marine Corps in February 2040, it seemed apparent to all educated observers that it was a perfectly sensible thing to do. The Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation both agreed that a consolidation of the military branches would help to focus the country's efforts on the strategic threats facing the country while saving money.

The immediate impetus for the abolition of the Marine Corps was the financial reckoning brought on by the insolvency of the Social Security fund in the late 2030s. Original estimates of insolvency by 2035 were a bit premature—it actually happened in 2037. Nothing dramatic happened the day Social Security ran out of money as politicians quickly passed measures to continue payments through debt financing, so no seniors went without their checks. But when Moody's and Standard and Poor's downgraded the U.S. government's credit rating, the stock market tumbled and caused a minor economic recession with increased layoffs. The economic downturn, in conjunction with headlines of "Social Security Bankrupt," caused a public backlash against the nation's ballooning debt and the perceived fiscal irresponsibility of government. Politicians promising austerity measures were voted into Congress in 2038 and began to look for ways to cut spending. Government programs that politicians would have never dared attack were now candidates for elimination, and in the new political climate the Marine Corps seemed a suitable sacrifice—after all, it was no longer critical to the country's national security strategy.

In the years between 2019 and 2040, in the minds of both thought leaders and the public, the largest threats to American interests were increasingly consolidated into two buckets. First, increasing aggression from an ascendant China and a nostalgic Russia caused the country to refocus on preparations for a conventional war against a near-peer enemy, complicated by added competition in the cyberspace and artificial intelligence domains. Second, after the drawdown in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Western world settled into a low-visibility but constant fight against violent extremist organizations and nonstate actors, primarily in the developing world. In response to this two-bucket mental

model of the threats facing America, politicians and strategists developed a two-prong national security strategy to protect the country.

The first prong of the national security strategy was to refocus on conventional warfare against other large states. This led to funneling money and attention to the Army and Navy in preparation for large-scale land and naval operations, and to the Air Force to address air, cyber, and space threats. The Marine Corps had a role in plans for a large conventional war, but it was often an afterthought to the other Services. The Marine Corps had traditionally defined itself as the country's 911 force—lighter and faster than the Army and the Navy, and capable of responding to a crisis anywhere in the world within a matter of days. Because a large-scale war with a near-peer enemy would almost certainly involve a long build-up with large troop movements and diplomatic crises, however, American strategists did not view the Marine Corps' fast response capabilities as overly critical to deterring or winning a long, sustained war. The Marine Corps was nice to have, but not essential; so when the calls for government cuts came, the Marine Corps could not justify its existence by appeal to the threat of conventional war.

The second prong of the national security strategy was a steady state unconventional war against nonstate actors and terrorist organizations. This prong emphasized cooperation with partner nations, especially in Africa and the Middle East, and was led by the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), who specialized at training partner nation forces and conducting direct action strikes against valuable targets. Lighter and faster than the Marine Corps, the Special Operations community increasingly became the nation's go-to force for emergency response. The Marine Corps had a Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force for crisis response in Africa, but in 2020 when a U.S. embassy in an African country had to be evacuated within 24 hours after an unpopular election result, JSOC could mobilize faster than the Marines. As JSOC was increasingly tapped for crisis response, they began to beef up the size and capabilities of the different Special Operations communities.

As the mission set for JSOC expanded, it began to squeeze the Marine Corps out of some missions that would traditionally have been too heavy for JSOC. As the lead in unconventional war, however, it was easier to give heavier assets to JSOC than to coordinate between JSOC and the Marine Corps. JSOC increased the number of conventional support staff until there was a quasi-branch of conventional military who supported the Special Operations teams. These conventional forces helped with partner nation cooperation and functioned to secure areas where operators conducted missions, functioning as quick reaction forces in support of the operators and bringing artillery and other heavy assets as needed for skirmishes with well-organized violent extremist organizations and guerrilla forces. The SPMAGTF-Crisis Response Africa was stood down in 2029 as it became increasingly clear that JSOC would be tasked with any crisis response in Africa short of a country invasion. In the minds of strategic analysts, the Marine Corps had become an afterthought for the second prong of the country's national security strategy.

The expanded Special Operations world also cut into the Marine Corps' recruiting. The Marine Corps had traditionally marketed itself as more challenging and expeditionary than the other branches, but as JSOC expanded its support staff, those recruits looking

for combat and prestige preferred to join the conventional units supporting JSOC instead of the Marines. Lower recruiting numbers caused a divide among Marine Corps leadership on how to attract recruits—should they soften their image and advertise a more convenient lifestyle? Or should they double down on the austere, disciplined image of Marines even though JSOC support had a more reliable promise of seeing combat?

And so, the Marine Corps did not clearly fit into the country's national security strategy—squeezed between a heavier Army, Navy, and Air Force on the one hand, and a lighter, faster JSOC on the other. The Corps was convenient but not critical for both conventional war and crisis response, caught in the awkward middle of useful capability sets. Ultimately, when the Social Security crisis happened, government leaders could not understand how the Marine Corps was necessary for national security. Politicians were under immense pressure to make sweeping cuts to government departments, and analysts believed that abolishing the Marine Corps would save money without sacrificing national safety. Marine Corps leadership was divided on how to best position the Corps and was unable to effectively advocate for itself. The public still liked the reputation of the Marines, but most people did not know what the Marines exactly did—so politicians and the secretary of the Navy sold the move to the public by renaming some of the Navy's amphibious landing units to the Marines, giving the units the motto of *semper fidelis*, and adopting some of the Marine Corps' traditions. The Marines were simply being "consolidated into the Navy" to "return to their naval roots." This messaging allowed the public to feel that the cultural heritage of the Marines lived on, without really understanding what was different. It was a bipartisan move, and everyone agreed that it was the reasonable thing to do.

# THE MARINE CORPS' POSTMORTEM

The End of an Era

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*Major Daniel G. Beck, USMC*

*National Security*

*By: Colonel L. M. Dirt, 8 February 2040*

WASHINGTON—In early February 2038, the Battalion Landing Team (BLT) from the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit was decisively routed in the Tabora Region of Tanzania, resulting in the devastating loss of 463 Marines and sailors. Today, as Americans mark the two-year anniversary of the infamous “East African Incident” and remember the fallen, the nation also mourns the passing of one of its most storied institutions—the United States Marine Corps. As the bill to dissolve the Corps goes to the president for signature, a surreal emptiness is unmistakable in the hearts of the nation. It is in this context that I call on patriots and professionals everywhere to reflect on what transpired, confront the hard lessons, and seize the opportunity to sincerely learn lest we repeat the mistakes that landed us here. So, how did this happen? What lessons must we learn? To answer, I will unpack the factors surrounding the passage of this law, starting with the present and working in reverse chronologically. First, I will examine Congress’ rationale for such a monumental action. Then, I will take a deeper look at what went wrong in Tabora.

## **Today’s Decision**

Four forces converged to seal the fate of the Marine Corps. Senate Armed Services Committee proceedings indicate two of them. First, the move was a budgetary necessity. Across the United States government (USG), out of control spending and bloated budgets—particularly within the Defense Department (DOD)—have led to truly unsustainable deficits. Nearly four decades of fiscal irresponsibility finally took its toll, creating the policy rigidity and foreign loan dependence that currently plague lawmakers and diplomats. All wings of the government are economizing and the Corps is a centerpiece of that effort.

Second, the move was a military necessity. Congressional testimony from active and retired military professionals laid bare that the United States had not kept up with the pace of change in the character warfare, resulting in the utter defeat of American combat

power two years ago. Despite rhetorical overtures to the contrary over the decades, the DOD failed to adapt to the emergence of a multipolar strategic landscape and an operating environment dominated by the cyber, space, and information domains. First the BLT and now the entire Corps, U.S. Marines are the sacrificial lambs on the altar of sweeping reform. The law's proponents profess that the recapitalization of the Marine Corps creates capacity for a comprehensive revitalization of areas previously neglected.

The third motivation for the bill is political and largely unacknowledged in official discourse. As the first U.S. president in recent memory to experience such a catastrophic military disaster, and given the increasingly popular Democratic presidential contenders, the administration must demonstrate decisive action in response to the East African Incident. Although the failures were decades in the making, the wholesale reorganization of the Armed Service is the type of revolutionary, highly symbolic action that the president feels he must take now.

Last is the factor most difficult to confront. Simply put, the Corps lost its luster. Two and a half centuries of lore and reverence quickly collapsed under the weight of the defeat in Tanzania. A short-sighted, highly fickle public turned on its once beloved Marine Corps. With hulks still smoking, 24-hour media outlets with a thirst for turmoil quickly sold stories of the Corps' moral deterioration and declining discipline, purporting trend lines that extend back to Marines United. Within the organization, decades of internal struggle to control the strategic direction of the Corps produced fractures that finally erupted in the form of bureaucratic infighting. Internal disorder precluded a unified messaging response to the tragic events of 2038, further tarnishing the Corps' image. As the population began to question the esteem granted leathernecks, national political leaders took notice and recognized an opportunity. After nearly 100 years since the likes of the McNarney or Richardson Committee Plans, the Marines' fight to stay alive is now over.<sup>1</sup>

## Yesterday's Failures

The factors outlined above have clear roots in the lowlands of northwest Tanzania. The East African Incident was the byproduct of decades of systemic complacency across the defense community. Complacency fosters predictability, and by 2038, America's military was dangerously predictable. Marines confidently marched onto the battlefield informed by doctrinal publications unrevised for more than 15 years, carrying communications systems that lacked resiliency and relying on cutting-edge digital platforms that worked well during the designers' testing but only frustrated warfighters in the field.

The enemy took advantage of the BLT's tactical predictability. Militants employed swarm tactics to overwhelm ground forces and hypersonic missiles to neutralize maritime assets; leveraged Russian sixth-generation weapons against the air combat element; and, benefited from paralyzing cyberattacks, both locally and against the continental United States, facilitated by units near Shanghai. Confronted with the high-intensity hybrid warfare that the defense community had been warning of for decades, we proved ill-prepared.

It is now evident that the Pentagon never fully divested itself of the habits formed

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<sup>1</sup> Krulak, *First to Fight*, 20–24.

conducting counterinsurgency. The lack of growth in tactical and operational competencies during the preceding two decades was not for lack of activity though. For example, the Marine Corps, motivated by persistent insecurity, experimented with numerous novel concepts such as expeditionary advanced base operations, while also attempting to maintain legitimacy across the range of military operations. In the process of chasing the moving target of joint relevancy, however, task-saturated units allowed innovation and individual fundamental proficiencies to stagnate, relying instead on confidence and lessons learned amassed in the suburbs of Baghdad.

Organizationally, efforts to dominate emerging domains proved woefully inadequate. A lack of imagination and understanding of space and cyberspace limited the DOD to incremental growth in relevant capabilities; moreover, leaders rationalized the lack of usable cyber- and spaced-based capabilities by pointing to perceived conventional supremacy. Competitors evolved to keep pace with the changing character of warfare. They unhesitatingly embraced “gray zone” operations and artificial intelligence.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Washington, with a self-image bolstered by successes against second-tier threats, remained blissfully content with the status quo.

Complacency in tactical and operational development extended to the realm of material acquisitions. American belief in the sanctity of the high-tech solution caused leaders to focus on the development of a relatively low number of highly expensive, next-generation platforms. New systems were increasingly networked and interdependent, creating substantial vulnerabilities as cyber defense and electronic protection remained deprioritized. Militants armed with foreign technology interdicted these networks, crippling information-dependent command and control and severing a fires kill chain that was too long and lacked resiliency. Dependent on the capabilities of a small number of highly advanced platforms, Marines were unprepared to win without them.

The penchant for high-end capabilities only worsened the budgetary woes of the DOD as the defense acquisitions process remained lethargic and bloated. Parochialism and the needs of the congressional district overshadowed those of the warfighter. A complacent Defense Department sat idly by as spending expanded and capabilities narrowed. Additionally, by pursuing prohibitively expensive next-generation technologies, commanders rarely possessed such systems in sufficient number to defeat likely adversaries. Off the coast of Tanzania, for example, surface combatants’ prized missile defense systems were overwhelmed by volley after volley from shore-based batteries. Unfortunately, it was the loss of hundreds of Marines that forced the country to confront a problem that it avoided for the past 40 years.

## Tomorrow’s Lessons

The tragic loss of life in the East African Incident was the logical conclusion of four decades of institutionalized complacency. Failures on the battlefield followed failures by successive leaders to appreciate the changing character of war and prioritize preparing for it. Failures also followed an inability to challenge our dependency on technology that only worsened Washington’s unsustainable spending addiction.

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<sup>2</sup> Col Robert S. Hume et al., “Confronting Conflict in the ‘Gray Zone,’” *Breaking Defense*, 23 June 2016.

In response, we must cultivate an environment that champions honest reflection, critical thought, and education, thereby developing a learning organization. We must prioritize missions to create space for training and innovation down the chain of command. Strategic and operational risks will have to be assumed to focus on the most dangerous threats. We must earnestly invest resources in space and cyber capabilities, elevating them to the top of the operational needs' hierarchy. Finally, we must divorce ourselves of our overreliance on technology, as well as our distended acquisitions process. Future combat leaders should leverage a balance of reliable, user-friendly high- and low-end capabilities to overwhelm an adversary while not overwhelming domestic budget capacity.

Prior to 2038, we continually prepared for the enemy that we wanted to fight, not the one that we knew we had to fight. If we want to honor those Americans who died in southeast Africa and the Corps that has given so much to the nation, we will abandon our arrogance and seize this opportunity to create meaningful change.



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