

CHALLENGES TO THE MARINE CORPS MISSION, PAST AND PRESENT

BY

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This paper contrasts the current challenge to the Marine Corps mission with the historical challenges it has faced. It utilizes the tools developed by Neustadt and May in *Thinking in Time*, to help the reader evaluate the future role of the Corps by comparing the past and present. It highlights the similarities in the social, economical, and political environments that frame the challenges, and suggests how Marine Corps leadership may answer the current question. The writer suggests that the Marine Corps should not chase technical solutions or focus solely on the current trends in war fighting; it should concentrate on its core mission and its expeditionary roots.

CHALLENGES TO THE MARINE CORPS MISSION, PAST AND PRESENT

The pathway of man's journey through the ages is littered with the wreckage of nations, which, in their hour of glory, forgot their dependence on the seas.¹

—BGen. James D. Hittle USMC Ret

The current challenges the Marine Corps faces are essentially the same challenges that it has faced throughout its history. The Marine Corps has survived as an autonomous entity because it has had strong leadership that was able to communicate its vision and necessity as a vital arm of American's National Security. However, the United States is currently facing a budgetary crisis and hard choices will have to be made with Department of Defense (DoD) spending. As the DoD struggles to determine which capabilities it needs to retain and which areas need to be cut, the Marine Corps role will once again be challenged.

This paper is not intended to be a history of the Marine Corps mission; it is intended to use historical examples to illustrate how current challenges can be examined. Using a framework borrowed from Neustadt and May's, *Thinking in Time*², it will help the reader to examine today's problem in terms of "time-streams". The time-stream is a way of examining an issue using a constant flow or stream of thought and information. It is a "continuous comparison, an almost constant oscillation from present to future to past and back", and recognizes that "what matters for the future in the present are departures from the past"³. A historical look at a few of the occasions when the existence of the Marine Corps was called into question should help the reader "think in time" and analyze some of the assumptions made about the future of the Marine Corps mission. The periods immediately following the two World Wars are examples of

how the Marine Corps answered the challenge in the past, and why the preservation of the Corps and its mission proved to be a strategic victory for the U.S. After framing the current challenge with the past, the paper will examine some of the major questions and challenges posed today.

There have been challenges to the Marine Corps mission throughout its history and on multiple occasions its very future has been in doubt. This was noted by General Victor H. Krulak in his book *First to Fight*, when he pointed out that there have been some fifteen occasions since the Corps birth when its preservation has been due wholly to a vigilant Congress.⁴ This exemplifies the requirement of all strategic leaders within the Marine Corps to understand the importance of communication and vision. The serious challenges that the Marine Corps has faced concerning its roles and mission have all come at times of economic downturns and post conflict eras. The other services have felt the same pressure of shrinking budgets and shifting missions, but only the Marine Corps has had to justify its existence.

The current challenge for the Marine Corps has many parallels with its history. It shares many themes with regard to the political and social environments of the past. All find a war weary public, political pressure to reduce budgets, and advances in technology that threatened the viability of the amphibious mission.

The question posed by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates on May 3, 2010 frames the challenge for today's Marine Corps:

We have to take a hard look at where it would be necessary or sensible to launch another major amphibious landing again-especially as advances in antiship systems keep pushing the potential launch point further from the shore. On a more basic level, in the 21st century, what kind of amphibious capability do we really need to deal with the most likely scenarios, and then how much?⁵

Secretary Gates followed up this question a couple of months later by recommending the cancellation of the Marine Corps' Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV).⁶ How will the Marine Corps answer the current questions, and what can it derive from history to help defend and define its future role? Developing a time-stream will be the key to solving today's problems of Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD), along with the challenge to capabilities and "how much".

Post World War I

The period following World War I was a caustic political and social climate for all the armed forces. The public's focus seemed to be on everything but national security. "In the age of Prohibition, the Scopes Trial, the Great Crash, and the talkies, public interest in the armed forces, never pronounced at the best of times, all but disappeared." ⁷ Warren G. Harding ran for president on a promise of return to normalcy. The American people rejected the League of Nations, moved toward isolationism, and started a period of disarmament.⁸ All the armed services faced severe budget cuts, reductions in personnel, and major technological changes. Major General John A. Lejeune led the Marine Corps during this period and he rose to the occasion. Lejeune was able to clearly articulate his vision of keeping the Marine Corps an expeditionary force in readiness tied to Naval forces, dedicated to being efficient and economical, and developing the amphibious doctrine that would distinguish it from the Army.⁹

The advances in technology and the use of aircraft during World War I challenged all the naval strategies at the time. Sir John "Jacky" Fisher, architect of the British dreadnaught fleet, was sure that the internal combustion engine rendered most of the British Navy worthless by 1919. Fisher's firm belief that the submarine and airplane had completely altered naval power in the future is evident in this London

Times quote from the same period; “It’s clear as daylight that future war at sea absolutely precludes the use of any vessel of war that can’t go under water because aircraft will compel it.”¹⁰ More important than the challenges that new technologies made to sea power, the economic downturn of the 1920’s and 1930’s placed severe pressures on the Marine Corps and the Navy. The Great Depression threatened to destroy the Marine Corps entirely.

By 1930 Herbert Hoover and his Secretary of the Navy, Charles Francis Adams, were preaching naval and military retrenchment as one antidote to mounting economic distress. Soon they enjoyed the support of army chief of staff General Douglas MacArthur and chief of naval operations Admiral William V. Pratt. The following year, Hoover and Adams seriously contemplated disbanding the corps and transferring it to the Army. Only the stout resistance of Commandant Ben Hebard Fuller and the presidency of naval champion Franklin Roosevelt rescued the corps from obliteration.

Lejeune, and later Fuller, did this through effective communications within the institution and outside. Lejeune had numerous articles published in the professional journals of the Marine Corps emphasizing his vision of a relevant expeditionary force. He addressed the Naval War College to get the Naval leadership on board with his vision, testified before Congress, and invited the president to view amphibious exercises.¹¹ Lejeune understood the requirement to effectively communicate a vision through all elements of the organization. Lejeune always stayed on message with his vision of an expeditionary force tied to the Navy; “if the Marine Corps were not efficient or economical, then it could not offer the Navy anything it could not find with the Army.”¹²

Lejeune was so successful communicating his vision for the Marine Corps that the Marine Corps expanded during his tenure. After the Corps contraction at the beginning of his tenure, the Corps actually grew 10% in numbers while the Army and

Navy lost 32% and 20% of their manpower.¹³ Lejeune and his successor General Ben H. Fuller successfully staved off any calls for the absorption of the Marine Corps into the Army and postured it for the role it would take during World War II.

The greatest surprise of WWII was the absence of major surprise (except for the atom bomb) as well as the failure of historical events to validate some long-predicted transformations in the terms of war. Turn-of-the-century Mahanian exaggeration of the strategic value of sea power had come to be well balanced by rival claims for a new preeminence for great continental power and, in the 1920's and 1930's, for "victory through air power." WWII demolished these strategic propositions. The war showed how sea power derived from a continental scale of resources could be more powerful than ever. The war showed also how sea power could co-opt and merge with air power.¹⁴

The transformational technologies (most notably the airplane and submarine) that some argued would make amphibious landings obsolete, were not much of a factor for amphibious operations in either theater during World War II. When Stephen E. Ambrose asked Dwight D. Eisenhower what the most influential weapon of World War II was, his answer was not the aircraft carrier, atom bomb, or RADAR, it was the Higgins Boat.¹⁵ The Higgins Boat was a low tech Landing Craft Vehicle for Personnel (LCVP) that was used in virtually every campaign in Europe and the Pacific. Andrew Higgins had worked closely with the Marine Corps to modify his Louisiana swamp boat for amphibious operations.¹⁶

Thinking in Time causes us to pause on such lessons in history and determine what predictive value the lesson might have for us today. If the Marine Corps had shifted its focus away from amphibious operations prior to World War II, what would the ramifications have been for the war?

Post World War II

The next major challenge to the Marine Corps came once again immediately following a war. The success of the Marine Corps during the Pacific campaign of World War II was not enough to mitigate the call for disbandment in the post war years. The Secretary of the Navy, James V. Forrestal commented during the Battle of Iwo Jima, “the raising of our flag atop Mt. Suribachi means that there will be a Marine Corps for the next five hundred years”.¹⁷ Less than two years later the same Secretary Forrestal who was normally a champion for the Marine Corps, was ready to sacrifice the Corps if it meant preserving Naval Aviation.¹⁸

The commandant during this tumultuous period in the Marine Corps was General Alexander A. Vandegrift. He was a decorated veteran and would become the front man in communicating the Marine Corps story to Congress and the American people. The Armed forces were once again faced with great challenges; a war weary population, dwindling budgets, and the nuclear age that could make land forces obsolete. Vandegrift and a team of the Marine Corps senior leadership had to craft a strategy to communicate their message to Congress. The problem was compounded by the fact that the Commander in Chief, Secretary of War, and most of the key members of Naval leadership were all trying to prevent them from getting the message out.¹⁹

Vandegrift addressed Congress in 1946 attempting to convince the legislature that passing the Armed Forces Unification bill (SB 2044) would spell extinction for the Marine Corps. Known as the Bended Knee Speech,²⁰ it was an emotionally based plea emphasizing the rich history of the Marine Corps and pointing out the value of retaining it as a separate branch. He seized upon one of Lejuene’s themes of cost efficiency, pointing out that in 1938 we had the 18th ranked Army in the world costing us \$2000 per

soldier, and the number one ranked Marine Corps costing us \$1500 per Marine.²¹

Vandegrift hit a home run in strategic communications with the speech. The “Bended Knee Speech” is usually credited with preserving the Marine Corps after World War II, but the Marine Corps leadership would have to employ other tactics before the mission of the Marine Corps was added to legislation.

Vandegrift’s address to Congress also aligned the opponents of the Marine Corps and made the continuing battle very difficult. President Truman severely rebuked Vandegrift shortly after the speech and the Marine Corps would be excluded from participating in any discussions at the service chief level.²² The Marine Corps developed a strategy to get its message out utilizing external organizations. They enlisted the help of the Marine Corps Reserve Officers Association, the American Legion, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars to carry their message to Congress and the media.²³ The ability to build support, build consensus, and negotiate were all amplified by using these external organizations to carry the message. The synergistic effect of multiple voices lobbying Congress sustained the vision that a strong Marine Corps was essential for our national security. The Marine Corps recognized the environment changed and adapted how the message was delivered. This became the winning strategy in the fight to retain the Marine Corps as a major element in the services. This effort culminated with President Truman signing the Functions of the Armed Services and Joint Chiefs of Staff during April of 1948, in which the organization and mission of the Marine Corps became law.²⁴

The National Framework for Strategic Communication defines strategic communication as “the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be

perceived by selected audiences, as well as programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences.”²⁵ The past two historical accounts are great examples of how the Marine Corps utilized strategic communications and leveraged its past to rationalize its future.

Inchon

The 1950's would welcome a new war that the American people did not see coming and find the Armed forces in a weakened capacity to respond. Little attention was placed on conventional forces and the Marines had dwindled to a mere 74,000 men by the spring of 1950, from the 1945 strength of 485,000.²⁶ “After the war, the older kinds of military power were for a time overshadowed-and in the public's eye eclipsed-by the development of nuclear power.”²⁷ A sample of top thinking in the administration and Pentagon of those days can be found in a 1949 remark by Louis Johnson, then Secretary of Defense, to Admiral R. L. Conolly:

Admiral, the Navy is on its way out....There's no reason for having a Navy and Marine Corps. General Bradley tells me that amphibious operations are a thing of the past. We'll never have any more amphibious operations. That does away with the Marine Corps.²⁸

A year after that statement, the Navy and Marines conducted one of the most strategically effective amphibious assaults in history. The Inchon landing altered the entire course of the war by achieving the following: it caused the disintegration of the North Korean perimeter about Pusan, liberated Seoul and cut the communist logistical system, and returned the United Nations to the 38th Parallel, thus preserving the Republic of Korea. It was strategically important, and it proved that retaining an amphibious capability provided great flexibility for America as a maritime power.²⁹

If the United States government had pursued the popular notion of the day, and did away with the Marine Corps to pursue cost savings or new technology, the course of the Korean War would have been considerably altered.

The twentieth century has seen the leverage of sea power challenged by the rise of great industrial continental states, the invention of the airplane, and most recently the coming of nuclear weapons. Experience has shown, however, that reports of the strategic demise or even obsolescence of sea power have been greatly exaggerated.³⁰

Colin Gray's above thoughts seem to be in line with the *Thinking in Time* models', the present was more in line with the past than the projected future. What then should the Marine Corps focus on as it prepares for the future?

Present

The present has many of the same political and social themes that were present after the world wars. The economy is in a downturn with a mounting deficit and the nation is looking for ways to reduce it. The nation may not be as "war weary" as it was following the world wars, but it definitely has war fatigue. The calls for major reductions in defense spending have already occurred. As in the past, the Marine Corps mission has been called into question, and new advances in technology threaten the survivability of amphibious operations. The remainder of this paper will continue to frame the current problem with reference to the past, and provide some suggested ways the Marine Corps may answer the challenges to its role and mission.

The current budgetary reality is very similar to the post world war eras. The United States will again have to set priorities with regard to spending for National Security. The Marine Corps is again facing questions to the viability of its amphibious mission and its relevancy in the modern era. It will have to compete with the Army for funding and it will have to make the case with the Navy that amphibious shipping is a

necessary investment. In the past the Marine Corps answered the budgetary issues by proving to Congress that it was a good value and that it was a good steward of the nation's money.

The impact of long-term negative budgetary trends could greatly impact National Security planning in the coming years. As the forecast of smaller defense budgets becomes reality, the military will have to make tough choices on both personnel and equipment. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates reiterated this mandate during recent testimony before Congress and then followed through with this mandate by proposing a number of significant procurement changes.³¹ The policy and processes that DoD currently utilizes to manage defense spending are not effective or efficient enough to deal with the looming deficit crisis. The problem created for the strategic planner is how to set clear priorities on a defense budget that cannot accommodate all they deem desirable. These priorities must be prudent, which in a wartime context means protecting funding for "readiness and traditional modernization-against the highly uncertain potential benefits of transformational modernization."³²

The Marine Corps has taken the Secretary of Defense message to heart and has already made some choices that produce real savings in last year's budget. One of the Marines largest procurement projects is the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV). The Marine Corps' next generation of amphibious troop transport survived another budget cycle in 2010, but the Marine Corps top officer (General Conway at the time) opted to wait another year before buying any of them.³³ The Corps continued to fund research and development for the EFV but reduced it by 50 million dollars from fiscal year 2010 levels and delayed the purchase by another year. The Marine Corps continues to stress

that it needs a replacement for its aging fleet of Amphibious Assault Vehicles (AAV) purchased in 1972, and it needs an over-the-horizon capability.³⁴ By selectively reducing the Research and Development (R&D) money and delaying the purchase another year, then Commandant Conway sent a message to the contractors that the Corps was not wedded to their vehicle, and sent a message to Washington that the Corps would not purchase a replacement for the AAV until the vehicle and the price was right.

Secretary Gates just recently announced the cancellation of the EFV based on the recommendations of the Secretary of the Navy and Commandant of the Marine Corps, during a Pentagon brief on January 6, 2011.³⁵ Gates cited the need to provide the Marines with a ship-to-shore capability in the future but emphasized the cost and sustainability of such a program.

The Marine Corps has always stressed that it “does more with less” and it used that message after World War II as one of the strategies that helped preserve the Marine Corps. The same theme is being stressed today by the current Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Amos, as he pointed out that the Marine Corps is just 6.5% of the Defense Department budget but provides 15% of the combat battalions, 17% of attack fixed wing aircraft, and 19% of attack helicopters.³⁶ General Conway’s message in the 2010 *Concepts and Programs Guide* for the Marine Corps could just as easily have been Lejeune’s in the 1920’s or Vandegrift’s message in 1947. “Our standing pledge to Congress remains to exercise fiscal discipline and act as good stewards of the resources they provide while maintaining the capability to operate across the full range of military operations.”³⁷

Another strategy that the Marine Corps is pursuing to reduce the cost of operations and to ensure that it remains expeditionary is the Experimental Forward Operation Base (ExFOB) concept. The ExFOB was created in December 2009 to reduce dependence on fuel and lighten the load on Marines.³⁸ The ExFOB is using existing commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) technologies that increase energy efficiency and increase the use of renewable energy. The ExFOB is evaluating solar powered generators and battery chargers, efficient heating and cooling of tents, and energy efficient LED lights. The ExFOB has completed three phases of testing and is currently fielded in Afghanistan with 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines.³⁹ By reducing both the logistic requirements and the operating cost, the Marines can continue on the path of doing “more with less” during a fiscally restrained environment.

Technological Challenges

The recent past has produced new technologies that were forecast to make military strategists revamp their tactics. As the Marine Corps started to rely heavily on the vertical lift of helicopters to insert forces over-the-horizon, the proliferation of shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles seemed to make the tactic obsolete. As Admiral Robert S. Salzer stated in 1978:

before further new investment is made in sea support of vertical assault, the Navy and Marine Corps should take a close look at the viability of this means of conducting landings in the face of modern antiaircraft opposition.⁴⁰

Given the fact that it takes well over a decade to procure a new ship, if the Navy and Marine Corps had reduced the requirements for amphibious ships to support helicopters it would have proved to be a strategic blunder. While man-portable air-

defense systems (MANPADS) are still viable weapons systems, counter measures and improved tactics have made many of the MANPADS obsolete.

The current technological challenge to the amphibious doctrine of the Marine Corps is a broad range of threats termed Anti-Access and Area-Denial (A2/AD). The current A2/AD is just a new spin on an old problem. The enemy has always and will always try to deny access to American forces. Most of the expensive shore battery systems that nations invested heavily in at the turn of the century never fired a shot or were rendered obsolete by maneuver and counter-fire. It is not that A2/AD is not a serious concern for the Marine Corps. A2/AD must be a primary concern when planning operations and procuring weapons systems. Examining a couple of the specific threats for today's amphibious (forcible-entry) operations and then putting them into a historical context should help the reader "think in time."

One of the biggest concerns for sea power with regard to A2/AD is Chinese advancements in anti-air, anti-ship weaponry, and ballistic weapons that could threaten America's primary way to project power in the Pacific. The advancements that China has made have been impressive and they have begun to narrow the technology gap but they are still decades away from being on par with the United States.⁴¹ The Chinese A2/AD systems and strategy requires a combination of threats that include the use of anti-satellite, anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), submarine-based anti-surface (ASuW) warfare, and advance strike aircraft to name just some of the specific threats.⁴² The objective appears to be to deny the U.S freedom of access to both air and sea in concentric rings of defense that can extend out to 1300 nautical miles.⁴³ These serious

and capable threats forced the Navy and Air Force to enter into the “AirSea Battle” concept in September of 2009.⁴⁴

The ability of the United States to incrementally increase and adapt its technology should keep pace with or remain ahead of China in the coming years. The Chinese are faced with the dual problem of building basic capabilities and transformational technology at the same time with regard to its Naval forces. It is useful to analyze a historic example of when the United States faced a “near peer” that threatened our access and control of the seas. Colin Gray’s assessment of the threat of the Soviet-Block countries during the Cold War is strikingly familiar with the threat posed by China today.

Although the total story is vastly complex, dynamic, and situation-specific, many of the developments in weapons and weapons-related technology since 1945 have strengthened the wartime ability of the country superior at sea to retain or enhance its maritime command. This is the case even with those technologies which shrink distances and in principle make it difficult for surface ships to hide over the horizon or in bad weather. Excellence in technology is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for excellence in naval power; the human element is even more important. The military tools available for a Eurasian continental power to deny the United States a strategically meaningful maritime command, have been more than countered by U.S. exploitation of similar or offsetting technologies.⁴⁵

At the same time the Chinese are modernizing their force, the Navy and Air Force have begun to procure the next generation of tactical fighters. The proliferation of Chinese A2/AD systems could challenge the United States in other regions but the ability for smaller countries to procure enough of the systems to Deny Access to the United States forces is questionable in the near future.

If the coming of the railroad, internal combustion engine, air, missile, nuclear, and space eras could not demote the strategic value of sea power significantly, it is difficult to see what could emerge to do so over the next several decades.⁴⁶

If truly transformational technologies were not enough to lessen sea power than minor advances should be manageable as well. The future may be a closer representation of the present and the weapons may not be as important as the human element.

The similarities between the past and the present challenges to the Marine Corps mission are numerous. It is also important to point out what is different and what may become different before reaching conclusions.

The current budgetary cuts that the armed forces face may only be the tip of the iceberg. If the DoD experiences a prolonged period of reduced budgets and cut backs, then it may be forced to look at unification of the armed forces as a solution. The Marine Corps could be forced to justify why it needs to be separate branch when it usually operates as a second land Army.

Another area that could affect the future debate of the military is the changing political and social landscape. Less than 1% of the American population serve in the Armed Forces, and our elected leaders who have served are in the overwhelming minority. This dynamic may completely change any future discussions on the military and cost saving measures.

Conclusion

The ability to stand back and look at the current situation within the context of the past has always been the hallmark of the Marine Corps vision and leadership.

Borrowing from Neustadt and May in *Thinking in Time*, it is easy to see that “the future has no place to come from but the past, hence the past has predictive value.”⁴⁷ This ability to think in time becomes almost increasingly important as technology portrays to once again change the nature of war. It is precisely why the Marine Corps should not

mortgage its future on countering one threat or reorganizing the force to focus only on the current fight. LtGen Flynn and others warn that the Marine Corps should avoid “techno-centric” solutions to the A2/AD problem.⁴⁸ One of the strengths of the Marine Corps has been its understanding of history, and how future conflict will be some variation of past conflicts. Over dependence on technology or a specific weapon system to defeat a threat could lead to obsolescence. The Marine Corps must stick to its roots and provide a truly expeditionary force that is scalable and flexible. It must focus on this and allow the Navy and Air Force to concentrate on the A2/AD problem. The Marine Corps must pursue incremental changes in technology, not costly transformational changes. It should look for the “right” solution when procuring new systems, and not chase the “perfect” solution.

Amphibious operations encompass a wide spectrum of capabilities and serve as a major deterrent and a means of force projection. Joint Publication 3-02 states that the types of amphibious operations include, “assaults, withdrawals, demonstrations, raids, and other operations in a permissive, uncertain, or hostile environment.”⁴⁹ When the opponents of the Marine Corps argue relevance and the viability of the amphibious mission they only focus on the “assault” or forcible entry portion. The Marine Corps leadership must continue to point out the myriad of times in the recent past that it has been called upon to perform the other elements of amphibious operations. The strength of having an amphibious capability is its utility and versatility. The low probability of having to execute a forcible entry of a heavily defended shore should not mandate giving up all amphibious capabilities. Only by stressing the benefit of preserving the

capability and pointing out the flexibility it provides the nation will the mission be preserved in the long run.

Ever since the days of the Phoenicians, the ability to land on defended shores has been a source of strength for those who possess it and a source of concern for those who must oppose it.⁵⁰

Even if the Marine Corps is never called upon to do one more “Inchon” type landing; what is the cost of not having that capability? And what is the cost of trying to regain the capability once lost? Liddell Hart understood the need to preserve the capability after extensive analysis of the history of amphibious warfare. His thoughts are as relevant now as when he made them in 1960:

The U.S. Marine Corps is a three-in-one Service in embryo. It has gained so much experience in combining land, sea and air action that it forms a nucleus and a pattern for further development. Logically it should be the basis for further progress in integration. Any reduction of its scale and function would be a retrograde step.⁵¹

The current challenges to the Marine Corps mission are consistent with the historical challenges. The answer to that challenge should remain almost identical as well. The Marine Corps must continue its strategic communication that stresses it is an expeditionary and economical force always ready to answer the nations call. The Marine Corps must continue to provide value to the country both in flexibility and cost to the taxpayer. It must never be wedded to one technology or a single capability; its strength lies with its Marines and its Esprit de Corps.

Endnotes

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