

Transcript. Gen David H. Berger. Naval War College. 3 Nov, 2022.

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This morning is a great opportunity for me. And we have about an hour. Thank you, Admiral, for allowing me to be a part of the curriculum again, which is a huge privilege for me. So I think I will probably take maybe 15-20 minutes up front and the rest of the time I would love to hear what's on your mind, what questions you have, what feedback you have for me. And that can be as the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, or it could be as a Joint Chief. Either way is fine with me. It's unclassified, as to the level that we're in here, other than that, I think everything is on the table. I am not a graduate of this institution, but when I come here, it feels like home. And it feels like home because, as I've mentioned to the admiral, when I've come here before, I feel like each time I leave, I take more than I give. And this is a thinking sort of a family here. I have come here for war games, for schools, for conferences, and each time I think I take more than I leave. And then I bring back my book with me and we talk on the plane about the questions and the feedback from you all. This is inspirational.

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I mentioned I am actually more interested in what you have to say than me. So please think of what you'd like to discuss once I get done--my comments. The Naval War College is a place where big problems are solved. And this year, from my perspective, when you're a student here, you can take a bite out of that big chunk of big problems. I'm going to start by offering--in a bigger macro view--some thoughts about the challenges facing the joint U.S. force and I would offer to you that they are I don't think any bigger any scarier than they have been in the past--they're just different. I think our problem sets change because politics change, the world changes, technology changes. So it's no surprise, I would imagine, for anyone in this room, that many of the assumptions which you and I took into the fight in the past are no longer valid. And I've been in the Marine Corps for 40 years, but I would imagine that if there were a lance corporal or any other E-3 would probably tell you the same thing. Because this is the speed, this is the velocity at which the world is changing. That's a good thing. Not a bad thing. I would say, not the least of those changes, as a Marine, even up until I would say four or five, six years ago, we could pretty much shoot and move and communicate wherever we wanted to, whenever we needed to. At will. I have never in my combat experience ever run out of ammo. Never. Never been held up by a supply chain issue back in the United States. And that's not a rosy picture of the past, but I think looking forward, a little different environment. I think in other words, we have to reimagine how we fight--not just how we fight, but how we make that fight possible. And some of those things you and I need to think about, they're pretty challenging problems and I'm going to cover a few of them this morning. And my hope is that some of that informs some of your feedback, some of your questions.

4:41

So let me start first of all with space. Probably not the topic you would expect the Commandant of the Marine Corps to get up on stage and talk to you about. Last thing you would expect to hear from me. When I was growing up in the Marine Corps and people talked about space, they were talking about John Glenn. They were talking about Charlie Bolden, now they would be talking about Colonel Nicole Mann. I would argue that today--and you know this to be true--today,

space is a domain that's on everyone's minds in every branch of the service. Because regardless of how much or how little you can affect space, it will affect you as a warfighter. And it's not just a question of if, from my perspective, my view, it is not just a question of if, it is when our space-based capability will be contested. I think access to our satellites is far from guaranteed. So you and I are going to need a plan that is guaranteed to work without that. I'm not going to go down any technical rabbit holes this morning. I'm not capable of doing that. But I do think that we're going to have to rely on some alternatives--you and me--and I'm talking about everything from low Earth orbit down to terrestrial, for both. I think that combination is going to be a little different, a little less perhaps effective than the ubiquitous satellite access we've enjoyed. But you and I are going to have to work with that environment. I think our Marines are going to have to master those alternatives to satellite communications because I assume, we assume, that we will operate under those constraints. It will be contested. And in my view, the naval Expeditionary Forces--the Marines who are forward and the Navy who is alongside us--will actually have to establish those terrestrial, below Earth, networks. I think there's a role here for the Marine Corps in the future, in other words, as connective tissue to the joint force--as that persistent Stand-in Force. We're going to have to establish those connections. We're going to have to keep those connections going, and we're going to have to do all that in a command and control denied/degraded environment.

7:36

I think those networks, of course, form the basics also of our command and control system, and in great power conflict, we're going to need to rely on them. And if there is one function in warfare that will be constantly challenged, constantly contested, it is command and control. Not any amount of firepower, no amount of sustainment, no maneuver is going to happen. It's not going to matter if we can connect to the larger operational picture. I would imagine that most everybody in this room--this is November--either participated in, thought about, wrote about, either Joint All Domain Command and Control or Project Overmatch or Project Convergence. Here's my view on all that--don't get stuck on the naming conventions. Don't also assume that there's some clear path that senior leaders have to bring all that together. Joint Command and Control is one of the most difficult problems that we face. We have to keep pushing to make sure that the small, distributed expeditionary naval forces that are forward can connect to their adjacent units, or a Navy destroyer, or an Air Force bomber. In some cases, I think it's not necessary at all for two humans, forward, to even talk. It's going to be machine-to-machine communications. But we are not there today. As we stand here. We're not there yet. Too often., I think we get wrapped around buying, purchasing, acquiring the next thing that's going to magically solve all of our problems. But there is no radio, no fusing box, no network that completely solves joint command and control all by itself. We don't need procurement Solutions, what we need is idea Solutions. That is why, as Commandant, I have focused the Marine Corps so much on experimentation and iteration and learning fast, because I firmly believe that change necessitates a very healthy dose of failure along the way. Our subordinates need to know that it's okay to try something a different way and if it doesn't work out, they're not a failure. We need to encourage them to take a chance even if they come up short. We need to reward that, and not punish them. And I'm pointing the finger at senior leaders--me, us. That's how they're going to keep trying, and we need to encourage them. You got to keep trying until you get it right. That's learning. Break, different topic.

10:50

I think the area the most in need of thinking--logistics--in my view. Especially given the geography and the capabilities of our competitors, our adversaries. I think we have to avoid the narrow focus, which is normally where we slide into. I think our challenge begins all the way back to a four person operation in somebody's garage that produces some component of something that we need to work. It works all the way from that small shop, through the ports and airfields, all the way forward. Usually through sea lanes, and it culminates, of course, where we operate at the tactical edge. Forward. And this is where sensing and shooting teams are going to need to be sustained. This is expeditionary logistics in a contested environment. We are not ready for that yet. I don't think we can continue to count on the Marine Corps pulling aside the pier with a 600 to 900 foot ship and unloading it. I don't think we're even going to get within connector distance and taking you know, a week to 10 days to offload. I think the days of giant fuel bladders and giant mountains of ordnance--gone--we can build all the concertina wire and stuff we want around it. I think all those are notions of the past, along with the logistics systems that they belong to. I think the global positioning network of the future is going to look a lot different if it's going to survive. We will go to war with what we have on hand and if half of our global positioning network, including the pre-position stocks, is on the wrong side of the globe, I don't think we're gonna get it there--not in a contested environment. I think our new solutions to logistics have to involve allies and partners--must involve them. We need new contract processes. We need new procurement processes. We need the ability for that distributed force to get what it needs forward. I think it's certainly going to involved unmanned and uncrewed platforms for distribution, for sustainment.

13:35

Unmanned: when you and I think about unmanned anything, our focus goes straight to things that we can buy because that's what we have in our head. We need to stop, pause, and think why we buy them. When I go around and listen about unmanned, the conversation immediately goes to ISR. No kidding. There's some kind of pre established connection in our brains between unmanned and ISR as the same thing. I think all the success, in other words, of several decades of unmanned ISR built in this sort of cognitive loop. And I think that's okay to a degree, but whenever I think unmanned now, I'm thinking beyond ISR. What about logistics? What about unmanned logistics? What about unmanned maneuver? What about unmanned command and control? What about those platforms? You can insert any mission set in there and I think we can talk about it unmanned. But we usually default right to some big plane that does ISR. I am convinced the right use for unmanned systems is not just doing what we have always done with them since, maybe, the early 90s. With more stuff, it's not going to work. We should also think about who they belong to--these unmanned platforms. Just because it has wings, should it go in the air wing? Or should it go in the logistics unit? Just think about that. Just because it flies, why does it always have to belong to aviation. If it floats, should it be automatically assigned to that unit? I think our command and control, if we're gonna operate in a dispersed, distributed manner, has to match that.

15:52

One example: in the Marine Corps we have a Tactical Air Operations Center--TAOC. Great example. Very capable. Can see, can track. It's great, it's awesome. One problem with that--it's big, it emanates, it radiates. And if there's anything that you and I have learned over the past 20

years is big things that don't move, that radiate, are simple to find and simple to track--simple to target. This centralized command and control is not going to work. I think those are concepts, not locations. We need to go much more into smaller units, network on the move on the ground, network on the move in the air--unmanned systems--because that's what's going to extend your and my ability to command and control a distributed force.

16:53

Now, so far this morning, I've talked about functional problem sets. These are challenges that are going to need to be solved to make us effective at that tactical level. Let me lift that up a bit. I don't think you're at this school to become better at what you're already good at. I don't think you come here to be a better logistician or a better communicator. You're here to deepen your understanding at another level, a higher level of warfare. So let's talk a little bit about that upper level. Let's start with time, because we're already behind. You have heard, you have read, you've seen the testimonies from key leaders who have an estimate of when a peer competitor might be ready to challenge the United States. I hope those estimates are wrong, but you and I cannot plan that way. Deterrence only works if it's credible. And we have to show credibility now. Not five years from now or 10 years from now only. Today. And five years. And 10 years. So in that kind of a timetable, if we can't wait, then any changes we we make inside the Navy, Marine Corps, inside our joint and combined force, they got to happen fast. In order to do that, we're gonna have to take some risk. Many leaders don't like to talk about this. But there are areas where we must think about taking risks. What are the capabilities that we can let go of now, assuming some risk, in order to move faster? What investments do we need to make now so that they pay off when we're going to need them? These are really hard questions at the strategic level that nobody wants to get wrong. But if we are paralyzed ourselves by the challenge of getting it wrong, then we are not going to be ready in time. We're going to need to take some risks.

19:19

In the past, we talked about readiness in terms of what units might be ready this afternoon--will be available this afternoon--to go out the door right now, today. That's not the right metric that's useful today for the Secretary of Defense, for the President. That is not the strategic view. We're gauging the relevance of a ready unit that we have to ship out the door, but what about the units in the rear? What about the units that don't deploy? What about satellites? How do you assess the readiness of our satellite constellation? What if the specific mission sets don't exactly fit the peer fight? Do we think a threat is going to challenge our ability to mobilize? Yes. We're going to do the same to them. What does that do then, if they're going to threaten our ability to mobilize, to surge? What does that do to our ability to employ those forces that we have listed as ready? This whole readiness thing is a really hard problem to change our thinking on because we have decades-old constructs in our brains that we're very comfortable with. I'm bringing it up because we haven't figured it out. So, if we can't figure out how are we conveying that to Secretary of Defense Austin in a way that makes sense--and I think we owe it, of course, to our civilian leadership--they accept the risk when they make those big decisions. Should they deploy that battalion? Should they extend that ship another 30 days or that submarine another 45 days? These are really hard questions. We have to give them the right information--the relevant information. And the way we're describing readiness doesn't do that, doesn't give them the whole picture. One of the things, I think, that complicates how you and I think about readiness is just knowing what we must do on a daily basis. Because typically, we try to think of things we'd like

to do, things we would want to do. I think the National Defense Strategy--pretty clear to me, at least. Deterrence is the priority. That's number one. That's the underpinnings. If you read it, maybe you disagree with me, but I think "deterrence" is in there like 270 times. Do we really know what the terms looks like? Is this the 1950s framework for deterrence? Is deterrence the absence of direct conflict? I don't think that's a good enough definition. What if it's more temporal? What if deterrence is "if we can convince the enemy 'not today,'" that equals deterrence. Is that good enough? Is that a big enough definition of deterrence? If we don't have a clear understanding of deterrence, it's going to be hard to connect that with readiness and a strategy. One of the terms--I had never heard of this till maybe six or seven or eight years ago--the acronym OAI, Operations, Activities, and Investments. Really super popular term right now. Everyone seems to have a bucket load of OAIs that they can describe for us. "Look at what we're doing." But it's difficult, at a strategic level, to figure out. "Okay, that's great, we're doing a lot of stuff." How are you measuring the effectiveness of those and how is that connected to a strategy? In other words, we're busy, we're doing a lot of stuff. We're not very good at measuring how much all that activity is really contributing to the ends. I think, in other words, OAIs are sort of like on our evaluations where they list all of our accomplishments. I think they're only of any value to the other person. Not us. Same with OAIs. Unless they matter to the Chinese or the Russians, or you name it. Unless they value them, we're just doing stuff. We're just busy. We need to think about campaigning. I was taught 25-30 years ago that campaigning is the arrangement of tactical actions in time and space to achieve strategic objectives. Pretty straightforward definition of campaigning. I think now I'm hearing a lot of great conversation and discussion about the definition of campaigning. What does that actually mean? Because it's in our strategy. I would like to think that the whole discussion on campaigning is connected to the strategy. So whatever definition you all wrestle with and talk through this year on campaigning, I'm going to be fascinated with how you connect that to strategy. Put the two together. In other words, I think at some point we're going to have to actually marry this up in our brain with a deterrence campaign, over an extended timeframe. Not months, maybe not even years, maybe longer. And if that's the case, if that's deterrence campaigning, then what's the readiness it's gonna take to stay that course, for years, in order to achieve the strategic objectives in the time that we think we have available. All that's simple, right? Pretty easy, simple discussion?

25:41

That's why I'm bringing it up to you. If you're waiting for three or four or five senior people to come up with the answers, you're going to be very frustrated. So far, I've talked about domains, talked about warfighting functions, but there's one thing, of course, that matters more than any of that. People. Without them, it doesn't matter. All the rest of it doesn't matter. And that, in my perspective, in my view, goes beyond people wearing uniforms. It's the inter agency. It's our industrial base. It's our allies. It's our partners. It's all of that. People talk today about a whole of government. I'm focused on whole of nation. Great power competition is going to take more than whole of government and that includes our citizens. Which brings me to the point of value of service. How do we, how do you and I explain the value of public service in a way that resonates with the American public? With real people? When I was, I think, for the first 30 years of my career, when I discovered that a Marine was getting out or a Corpsman was getting out, was at the end of their contract, I started asking them "what can I do to help you? Can I write you a letter? Can I call somebody? Hey, let me know if there's anything I can do to help you

transition." Because I thought that was my role. What I should have done is ask, "What is it going to take for you to stay?" I was helping him out the door. I was passively booting him out. I convinced myself "I'm helping them out, helping them transition." But you and I are hemorrhaging talent out every door in the house. We got to turn that around. We need a much more balanced approach, in my view, between recruiting and retention than we've had in the past. Because careers are different. And I think it's time for a major overhaul in how we handle our people. But I think there's some simple things we can do right now and we are doing them right now. There is career intermission, right? You can now opt out of promotion. You can pull your name out of the hat for a year. You you can move between the active and reserve, but it's really hard right now. We got to make that a lot easier. We have to fundamentally reexamine how we train, how we educate our warfighters--you. How are we going to prepare them/ourselves for the real challenges ahead for peer conflict? Because it does doesn't matter how good our gear is, how good our equipment is. If we don't have the right people and they are not trained, they're not prepared, it's not going to matter. The good part is--look around in this auditorium from where I sit. These are the people who are going to solve all of that. You are the right people. So I'm going to just wrap up my comments and see what's on your mind.

29:10

Thank you for your decision to serve, your decision to stay, your decision to lead, to be accountable. The All Volunteer Force is not on autopilot. Not on cruise control. I am very grateful. You are going to inherit the force of tomorrow. You're shaping it right now. You play such a key role in building that. That's why I am so confident we're in good shape. All these minds in here are going to solve all the wicked problems. So let me pause there and see what's on your mind.