

Recent speech by Major General Michael R. Lehnert, USMC Commanding General, Marine Corps Installations West

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

Eight days ago, I was present in the audience when Tom Brokaw addressed the 2006 Stanford graduating class. After the initial pleasantries and one-liners, Mr. Brokaw said something unexpected. He told the class that they were the children of privilege, fortunate to be attending one of the finest educational institutions in the country, the anointed because they had both the test scores for admittance and parents who were able to afford their tuition. He noted that they could likely expect rapid advancement in almost any endeavor they choose and that they were destined to lead the most powerful country in the world.

The class was beaming.

And then Brokaw reminded them that the liberties and freedoms they enjoyed were being defended by young people their age that did not have their advantages. That at this time thousands of men and women were fighting, dying and suffering debilitating injury to ensure that the rest of us could live the American dream.

There was an uncomfortable shifting in the seats, followed by slow but growing applause from the audience.

When we sent my son to Stanford four years ago, we filled out a form asking for demographic information. One of the questions for the parents said, what is your profession? After it was a list of about thirty professions including doctor, lawyer, congressman, educator, architect. Military was not listed so I filled in "other"

My son was the only graduate who had a parent serving in the armed forces. As I was introduced to his friends' parents, it was interesting to watch their reaction. Few had ever spoken to a member of the military. One asked me how my son was able to gain admittance with the disadvantage of having to attend "those DoD schools". Many voiced support for our military and told me that they'd have served but clearly military service was not for their kind of people.

This year of the so-called elite schools, Princeton led them with nine

graduates electing military service. Compare that with 1956 when over 400 of the Princeton graduating class entered the military. Most of the other Ivy League schools had no one entering the military this year.

I wonder how many of you know the young people who are serving today. I won't embarrass anyone by asking for a show of hands to ask how many really know a young enlisted Marine who has been to war.

I'm going to try to give you a better feel about those who serve our nation.

Our Marines tend to come from working class families. For the most part, they came from homes where high school graduation was important but college was out of their reach. The homes they come from emphasize service. Patriotism isn't a word that makes them uncomfortable.

The global war on terrorism has been ongoing for nearly five years with Marines deployed in harms way for most of that time. It is a strange war because the sacrifices being levied upon our citizens are not evenly distributed throughout society. In fact, most Americans are only vaguely aware of what is going on.

That isn't the case aboard the Marine bases in Southern California where we see the sacrifice everyday as we train aboard those open spaces that you covet for other purposes. Many of our Marines are married and 70% of our married Marines live in your communities, not aboard Marine bases. These Marines coach your soccer teams. They attend your places of worship. They send their kids to your schools. However, in many ways they are as different from the rest of the citizens of Southern California as my son was different from the rest of the students at Stanford.

One of the huge differences between the rest of society and our Marine families, is when Marine daddies and mommies go to work, some of them never come home. The kids know that. The spouses know that. Week after week we get reports of another son, father, husband who won't be coming back. During the past four years, over 460 Marines from Southern Californiabases have been killed by the enemy.107 more have died in Iraq and Afghanistan due to accidents. 6500 have been wounded some of them multiple times.

You will never know or meet Brandan Webb age 20 or Christopher White age 23 or Ben Williams age 30. They were all assigned to First Battalion First

Marine Regiment, Camp Pendleton, California. They were some of the Marines who died this week out of Marine bases in Southern California.

Last Friday, we hosted a golf tournament at Camp Pendleton to raise money for wounded Marines. There are a lot of expenses that the government cannot legally pay for from appropriated funds. The people who attended the tournament genuinely wanted to help and we invited a couple of dozen wounded Marines to golf with them. As I watched the teams leave for a shotgun start, I saw three Marines sitting by themselves and went over to talk to them. Clearly they'd been told by their chain of command that this was their appointed place of duty. They were sitting in the sun chatting, probably not unhappy with the duty but mildly uncertain as to why they were there. I asked them why they weren't golfing and they said that they'd never learned. No one in their families ever played golf and that this was the first time they'd ever been on a golf course. I asked them how many times they'd deployed. One of the young men had just returned from his third deployment and had been wounded every time. The others teased him for being a bullet magnet. I asked him if he was going to stay in and he thought for a moment what to say to a general and he said, "I think I'd like to try college. No one in my family has ever gone."

I asked these Marines if I could buy them a beer. They looked at me and smiled. One of them said, "We can't ask you to break the rules sir. None of us are 21 yet."

They seemed much older. As I left them I wondered about a policy that gives a young man the power of deciding who will live and who will die but won't let him drink a beer. I thought about these young Americans who had never shot golf but had shot and killed other men in order to carry out foreign policy.

On the 10th of August we will open a wounded warrior barracks at Camp Pendleton. Few taxpayers' dollars were used. We were able to raise the money through the Semper Fidelis fund to house those Marines who no longer need to be hospitalized but who suffer debilitating injuries and need follow-on care. Heretofore, when regiments left for the war, they left their non-deployables behind. These Marines often had to live in WWII era barracks with open squad bays and gang heads down the hallway. Those having limited mobility found it difficult and uncomfortable. It was no way to treat our wounded warriors. We're fixing it.

Now let me introduce you to another enlisted Marine. His name is Brendan

Duffy. Brendan was an infantry Marine. Like so many others, Brendan had dreams of going to college but no means to do so. While he was in the Corps, he immediately began using his Montgomery GI bill benefits by enrolling in Mira Costa College. Though deployed soon after signing up for college, he took his textbooks to war. Last month he received Mira Costa's highest award for academic excellence, the Medal of Honor for Academic Excellence. Brendan described studying pre-calculus while fragments from explosions struck the sandbag shelter he was in.

Brendan left the Corps this week and has been accepted to the University of California Los Angeles to study math and economics.

Later this morning I'll be meeting with educators across the California University system. We are trying to make California more veteran friendly. California hosts 40% of the combat power of the Marine Corps and 40% of the Marine veterans who leave the Corps do so out of Southern California bases. 96% have participated in the Montgomery GI Bill and are eligible for benefits but only a small number enter the California University system. That's because California, unlike other states did not provide any veterans preference or even reach out to veterans. These combat veterans score in the top 50% of their age group, are drug free and morally straight but are lost to California and return to other states that aggressively work to attract them.

Several months ago, I along with senior leadership of all the Services, met with Governor Schwarzenegger and told him that California was not an education friendly state for military veterans. To his credit, he is trying to change that and this meeting today is a natural outgrowth of his support.

In Iraq, the media talks about the casualties. They seldom report the successes. I don't think that this is intentional. It is just more difficult to quantify progress and reduce it to a sound bite.

Some of you may recall almost exactly two years ago when a four man sniper team from 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines was killed on a rooftop in Ramadi. It made news because sniper teams aren't supposed to get ambushed and because an M40A1 sniper rifle was now in the hands of the enemy.

Over the next two years, that rifle was used against Americans and we wanted it back. Last week, a 21 year old Marine sniper from 3rd Battalion, Fifth Marines out of Camp Pendleton observed a military aged male videotaping a passing patrol of amphibious assault vehicles near Camp

Habbaniya. After radioing the patrol and telling them to stay low, the Marine watched the man aiming a sniper rifle that looked remarkably like his own.

He killed the enemy sniper with one round to the head. Seconds later, another insurgent entered on the passenger side and was surprised to see his partner dead. That hesitation was enough time to allow Sgt Kevin Homestead age 26 to kill the insurgent before he could drive off.

When the Marines went down to inspect the scene, they saw that the sniper rifle was one of their own. It was the same M-40A1 sniper rifle looted from the 2/4 sniper team exactly two years earlier.

We are making progress in Iraq. The Iraqi Army is more capable each month. In the Anbar province we have brought the 1st Iraqi Division - the most capable of the Iraqi formations - to the former British RAF base of Habbaniyah - between Fallujah and Ramadi. We are standing up the 7th Division. In Baghdad, Iraqi brigades own parts of the city and are reporting directly to the US Army Division commander as component units.

The Iraqi Police are the essential element - and the most difficult challenge. In any insurrection, the insurgent specifically targets the local security elements of the government - because they are essential to maintaining control via interaction with the community, intelligence gathering, and law enforcement against petty and organized crime, traffic control. These police units are having good success in places like Fallujah. Ramadi is a different kettle of fish. Some of the police departments haven't been paid in months and the intimidation campaign is in full force.

My Chief of Staff, Colonel Stu Navarre formerly the Commander of the 5th Marine Regiments told me this story. One day in December, the Ramadi Police Dept Operations Officer (#3 in the pecking order) did not come to work. When we inquired, he told us that the day before his 10 year old son had been kidnapped after school and transported to the north side of Ramadi. He was called by the kidnapers and advised of his son's location. When the Operations Officer arrived at the location, he found his son alive, with a note pinned to his shirt, "If you go to work tomorrow, you will never see your son again. We know where you live." I wonder how many of us would show up for work with that kind of intimidation.

Your fellow Americans in uniform in Iraq and Afghanistan are doing a superb job in the most dangerous places on earth. They believe in what they are doing. The majority of the sergeants, corporals, and privates enlisted after 9

-11. They knew what they were signing up for. They want to deploy in defense of the nation. We are sending best leadership to the combat zone. Service in Iraq/Afghanistan has become the norm for our Marine and Army leaders, and an essential part of their experience/qualifications for advancement. Finally, the American people have continued to demonstrate an unprecedented level of support for their fellow Americans in uniform - as well as the understanding that these young men and women are executing the policies of their elected representatives.

Reconstructing an entire nation takes time. Think about our own experience during the American Revolution. Despite having a homogeneous nation with no incipient insurgency, it was thirteen years from the Revolution to the ratification of the Constitution. We seem to have forgotten that it takes time to build institutions.

Introduction of a stable, representative form of government in Iraq is revolutionary in its impacts on the region and the world. Iraq is at the center of the Mid-East, the Arab world, and Shia Islam. Iraq has been, and will continue to be a major producer of natural resources - especially oil. It is at the center of the chess board. Iraq separates two sponsors of terrorism - Iran and Syria - and with Afghanistan - isolates Iran. It is no coincidence that Muammar Qaddafi has sensed the change in the wind and sought to distance himself from terrorism and WMD and become a legitimate player in world politics.

The Iraqis are capable of running Iraq. Today, thousands of young Iraqis are lining up to become soldiers and policemen - despite constant, highly lethal attacks on recruiting stations, police stations, and army checkpoints. Concurrently, there is no more dangerous job than being a candidate for office or an elected official in Iraq. We should not underestimate the absolute danger to any Iraqi that steps up to plate for law, order, and progress. The enemy is absolutely committed to winning. For him, there is really no other option. He also understands that the center of gravity is the commitment of the American people.

One of my major concerns is quality of life issues for our Marines, Sailors and their families. We are making significant progress but we have a long way to go.

We are building 1600 more homes at Miramar to give our Marines and Sailors decent places to live. California is a beautiful State. It is also extraordinarily expensive and we are the gypsies in your castle often driving 50 or 60 miles

one way to because those are the only places that our junior Marines can afford to live.

We are replacing worn out World War II vintage barracks that we make our single Marines live in. When I took over, I visited some of the open squad bay barracks at Camp Horno in Pendleton. A young Marine corporal and veteran of the fighting in Iraq looked at me and said, "Sir, I lived better in Fallujah." That hurt but he was right. A couple of weeks later I had a chance to talk to the Commandant and tell him the same story. I told him that at the rate we were replacing barracks, we wouldn't have decent enlisted quarters until 2036. To his credit, he listened and we now plan to have them replaced by 2013. This won't come without a cost because the Marine Corps doesn't get more money to build barracks, we have to realign our priorities and not buy other things that we need. It was a significant decision by our senior leadership but the right thing to do.

With our Navy partners we are going after Pay Day Lenders. Pay Day Lenders are the parasites found outside of our military bases in Southern California who prey on young Marines and Sailors because the lenders know they are uninformed consumers. Pay day lenders take advantage that California has some of the weakest laws in the country. In North Carolina, pay day lenders are limited to 36% annual percentage rates of interest. Here in San Diego we regularly see rates of 460% and I have seen rates as high as 920% being charged legally against our service members. Service members go into a cycle of debt. Ultimately because we expect our Marines to be financially responsible, their ability to reenlist, compete for good jobs and keep a security clearance is effected.

Let me be clear. Pay day lenders are not providing our Marines with a service. They are parasites, bottom feeders and scumbags. One of them sent me a note recently telling me that he was a member of an honorable profession and that I should back off. He told me that a pay day lending institution had been found in the ruins of Pompey after Mount Vesuvius erupted. I responded to him that archeologists also found a whore house and that antiquity did not bequeath virtue. It is a shameful practice.

We also recognize that military leaders have a responsibility to educate our service members and their families about sound money management. We are doing that. We are using our base papers, information campaigns and personal intervention to tell them that there are alternatives to the pay day lending institutions.

Both the State and Federal legislatures have heard our message as well and there are bills making their way through the process to significantly curtail the excesses of payday lenders.

I know that many of you came here today to find out what I would say about the airport situation at Miramar. So as not to disappoint you, let me be clear.

The Marines came to Miramar ten years ago as a result of a BRAC decision and four subsequent BRAC rounds determined that the interrelationship of the Marine and Navy bases in Southern California provided a capability that was unmatched anywhere in the country.

The Marine Corps uses its bases as a projection platform for combat power. 25,000 Marines from California bases are presently deployed in harms way and over 3,000 of them are from Miramar.

Through the years, we have accommodated our neighbors development needs. Often we allowed infrastructure that was unpopular elsewhere but vital to the community. San Diego's primary landfill is located at Miramar. A nuclear generation facility sits aboard Marine Corps property at Camp Pendleton and powers 2.2 million Southern California homes. We want to be good neighbors and work hard at it.

We examined the proposal for joint use of Miramar carefully, provided all data requested and saw that data ignored. Joint use does not work at Miramar. Thus the real issue is whether you want a civilian airport at Miramar or Marines.

If you want us to leave, you should say so. However you must understand that no matter what names are used to describe us in the Union Tribune, the decision whether or not to leave do not rest with the military leadership in Southern California. It rests with your elected leaders and most of them have clearly put defense needs above local requirements and said no to Miramar. The decision rests with the appointed civilian leadership in the department of defense. They've said no as well.

Sadly this controversy has effected local civil military relations. There is no way you can sugar coat it or pretend otherwise. But we are here. If our leadership tells us to leave we will. We will take our Marines, our families, our wounded and if necessary we will dig up our dead. However right now our leadership says we stay. And whether or not we remain in San Diego, the

Marine Corps is committed to protecting your liberties and your freedoms.

We know that this is a difficult issue. We know that we have many friends in San Diego but we also know that we have others who see the economic potential of development of the military installations. They say that they love the military but would rather love them somewhere else than in their backyard.

If you take nothing away from this talk, I'd hope you understand and appreciate what a remarkable group of young people currently serve in your Armed Forces today. Want to know what Marine Generals talk about when we are together? We talk about what a remarkable privilege it is to lead these extraordinary Americans.

I started by mentioning Tom Brokaw. His book coined the phrase, "The Greatest Generation," and our nation responded in kind. Twenty years from now we may recognize that this young generation currently serving has the same qualities of greatness.

On the battlefield today are future CEO's of corporations, university presidents, congressmen, state governors, Supreme Court justices and perhaps a future president of the United States.

Take the time to meet one of these young people. You won't be disappointed