

# US Marine general rejects Obama's Afghanistan deadline

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General James Conway, commandant of the US Marine Corps, has publicly challenged the July 2011 deadline set by President Barack Obama for beginning the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, saying it gave “sustenance” to the Taliban.

Conway's statement is only the latest in a series of comments from senior military officers dismissing the deadline set by Obama last December when he announced the 30,000-troop surge into the country.

At the time, the US president assured the American people, “After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home.”

It has become clear that the White House itself has no intention of conducting any major withdrawal of US troops from the occupied Central Asian country by July of next year. But it has increasingly left it to the uniformed military brass to communicate this message to the American people.

Conway's remarks, delivered to the Pentagon press corps on Tuesday, were the most provocative in this regard, expressing barely concealed contempt for the civilian government and the broad antiwar sentiment among the American people, and implicitly calling into question the core constitutional principle of civilian control of the military.

In his opening statement at the press briefing, Conway said that the Marines' “only concern” had been expressed to him by a junior enlisted man. Conway said the Marine told him, “Sir, don't let our country go wobbly on us now.”

Conway told this story under conditions where opinion polls indicate that up to 70 percent of the American people oppose the Afghan war.

The general went on to dismiss the 2011 withdrawal deadline as having no significance for the Marines under his command. He told reporters, “Though I certainly believe some American unit somewhere in Afghanistan will turn over responsibilities to Afghan security forces in 2011, I do not think they will be Marines.”

Referring to Helmand and Kandahar provinces, where the bulk of the Marines are currently deployed, as “the birthplace of the Taliban,” Conway continued, “I honestly think it will be a few years before conditions on the ground are such that turnover will be possible for us.”

The Marine commandant went on to characterize Obama's

political motives in setting the July 2011 withdrawal date, declaring, “I think if you follow it closely, and of course we all do, we know the president was talking to several audiences at the same time when he made his comments on July 2011.”

The clear suggestion is that Obama was merely trying to placate opposition to the war among the majority of American voters who put him in office, in large part out of the mistaken belief that he shared their antiwar sentiments. While Conway was no doubt on the mark in this assessment, for a senior military officer to casually dismiss such political considerations while affirming his own opinions about Marines under his command staying in Afghanistan for years represents an implicit rejection of civilian control.

The general went on to remark in relation to Obama's announced withdrawal date that “... it's probably giving our enemy sustenance. We think that he may be saying to himself—in fact, we've intercepted communications that say, hey, you know, we only have to hold out for so long.”

After indicating that the US president's policy was giving aid and comfort to the enemy, Conway suggested that this could be turned into its opposite so long as “Marines will be there after 2011... what's the enemy going to say then, you know?”

Conway also responded to questions on the Obama administration's apparent intention to repeal the reactionary “don't ask, don't tell” policy that subjects gays who fail to keep their sexual preference a secret to discharge from the military.

“We sometimes ask Marines, you know, what is—what is their preference,” said Conway. “And I can tell you that an overwhelming majority would like not to be roomed with a person who is openly homosexual.”

He continued by stressing that many Marines are “very religious” and “say that homosexuality is wrong, and they simply do not want to room with a person of that persuasion because it would go against their religious beliefs.”

The Marine general was here expressing more than he intended. The military has increasingly recruited from among conservative, Christian fundamentalist layers of the population and has sought to bolster morale on that basis, invoking Christianity as it wages counterinsurgency wars and occupations against predominantly Muslim people.

This consideration is combined with the longstanding opposition of the military brass to allowing gays to serve openly in the military. This stems largely from their determination to prevent any conception that soldiers in the “all voluntary” military enjoy any democratic rights or that military discipline is bound by any constitutional limits.

Conway’s bluntness was no doubt encouraged by the fact that he is preparing to retire from the military this fall. But he has little to fear from the Obama White House. Having carried out the firing of Gen. Stanley McChrystal as the senior commander in Afghanistan in June, ostensibly for insubordination, he is hardly likely to carry out another sacking of a top military officer.

Neither in McChrystal’s nor in Conway’s case is the issue one of genuine insubordination, at least in regard to the core policy in Afghanistan. The 30,000-troop surge into Afghanistan announced by Obama last December was a policy crafted by the military itself and meekly accepted by the White House. The withdrawal date mocked by the Marine general was merely window dressing for this escalation and will by no means signal a major withdrawal of US forces.

This has been indicated by members of the Obama administration itself, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joseph Biden, who announced to a veterans’ conference on Monday: “We are not leaving in 2011. We are beginning the transition.”

Like its predecessor, the Obama administration is determined to pursue the original goals of the nine-year-old war in Afghanistan: establishing US hegemony over energy-rich Central Asia by military means.

The Marine commandant’s remarks on Afghanistan came just a day after a similar message was delivered in a Pentagon press conference by Lt. Gen. Bill Caldwell, the senior officer in charge of training Afghan puppet security forces. Caldwell said that the Afghans would be capable of taking over from the US occupation forces only in “small, isolated pockets” of the country until at least past October of 2011. He attributed problems in the training effort to mass illiteracy and an attrition rate encompassing nearly a quarter of the Afghan army and close to half of the national police.

Underlying these problems, however, is mounting hostility to the US occupation and a growing insurgency that has spread to all parts of the country. This was underscored Wednesday when an Afghan policeman opened fire with an assault rifle on members of Spain’s paramilitary Guardia Civil as they were training Afghan police recruits in the northwestern province of Badghis. Two Spanish officers and a translator, also a Spanish citizen, were killed in the incident.

Following the shooting, several hundred local residents attempted to storm the base, throwing sticks and stones and shouting, “The Spanish are killing Afghans.” They were dispersed only by gunfire.

This marks the third such mass shooting of occupation troops

by a member of the Afghan security forces in the space of barely six weeks. It came only two days after thousands of Afghans attempted to storm Bagram Air Field, the sprawling US base and detention center an hour outside of Kabul.

Gen. Faqir Ahmad, the deputy police chief of Parwan province, told the Associated Press that some 2,000 villagers joined the rally, attacking vehicles and a patrol outside the base. They had gathered to protest the arrest of a Muslim teacher on suspicion of involvement in a rocket attack on occupation troops.

In a news release, NATO acknowledged, “After several attempts to stop the attack and disperse the crowd, coalition troops received small-arms fire directed at them” and responded with “warning shots.” Gen. Ahmad said that the firing killed one civilian. It also enraged the crowd, which turned on local police and the head of the district government, who had attempted to calm the villagers.

Meanwhile, NATO officials acknowledged that they are investigating a massacre carried out by US special forces during a night raid on a village in the northeastern province of Baghlan last Sunday.

Mohammad Ismail, the district chief for Tala Wa Barfak, where the raid took place, told the AFP news agency that helicopter-borne troops killed eight civilians and wounded a dozen more in the action, which he said lasted for hours. Two women and a child were among the dead.

These night raids by Special Operations troops have become a central feature of the US war against the Afghan resistance. They are designed to assassinate leaders and members of the armed groups opposing the occupation and the US-backed puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai. They are one of the main causes of civilian casualties.

In Kabul, a spokesman for the American-led coalition said a team of investigators had been sent to the scene.

The *New York Times* quoted Mahmood Haqmal, the spokesman for the governor of Baghlan Province, on the impact of these raids: “If coalition forces kill one civilian, 20 other family members will pick up weapons and stand against them.”



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