

IDEAS & ISSUES (COMMENTARY)

An Open Letter to the 'Young Turks'

We get it

by LtGen Robert B. Neller



The Corps' leadership needs to pay attention to what they are saying. (Photo by Cpl Jeff Drew.)

I want to take the opportunity to thank the *Gazette* for putting me in contact with Maj Peter J. Munson. As a result of his letter in the April issue and my response, we had a conversation on the phone. He also sent me his article, "Back to Our Roots," published in the April 2011 online version of the *Gazette*, and we discussed that as well. As I mentioned in my commentary printed in the June *Gazette* in response to "The Attritionist Letters," I believe it is better to talk and get things out in the open. Consequently, though I

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have not changed my view as articulated in the "Rebuttal," I have considered the views of the good major, along with the captain (Capt Joseph Steinfelds), who responded to me in the August *Gazette*, and many of their peers. I have personally listened to the views of these "Young Turks" in long and sometimes heated discussions over the past few years. The

following paragraphs are my view of their views.

Although my initial reaction to both the major's and captain's letter and article was to push back—whiny, don't get it, just pointing out problems without offering concrete solutions, spoiled by a resource rich environment where there is little accountability and a lack of supply discipline, think higher direction means a lack of trust, and on and on. The more I thought about our conversations, Maj Munson's article, and the conversations I have had with his peers around the Corps,

I came to the conclusion that this officer, like the authors of “The Attritionist Letters,” is trying to tell leadership something about where “middle management” is

mentally on their perceptions of the current state of the Corps and, more importantly, their expectations for the future. What I think I am hearing them say is:



Marines have been at war for 10 years. Engage them in frank and candid discussions. (Photo by Cpl Reece Loddar.)

“We are tired of trying to fight this war with a Supporting Establishment—especially manpower and a process for equipping/training being the most consistently named examples—that is not responsive or attuned to the needs of the warfighter. In short, the Operating Forces are at war and the Supporting Establishment is not.

“We are given great freedom of action and responsibility for the lives and welfare of those in our charge while deployed to the fight, but when we return to the ‘world’ we are treated like we don’t know anything or, worse, like we are not trusted.

“You can trust me back in the ‘world,’ like you do in combat. Just tell me what you want done, resource me, and let me lead. If I get it wrong then get in my business, but allow leaders to lead and on occasion kick one into the stands. At the same time, stop levying tasks on me that waste the time of the unit and the Marines/sailors.

“We ‘get’ the importance of safety and of taking care of the Marines in our charge, but this whole process has gotten out of hand. The great majority are paying for the sins of a very small minority, making all, regardless of rank, experience, and established performance, fill out forms for leave/liberty and be subjected to mandatory and poorly organized group training—suicide, safety, diversity, etc. This is where I feel you don’t trust me, and this approach is not going to create the change in behavior and conditions that leadership is looking for. In fact, it may go the other way.

“Our inadequate and precious pre-deployment training program (PTP) time is wasted on noncombat-related training, which—to add insult to injury—is in many cases not well presented and not focused, in addition to being irrelevant. Be more concerned about the quality of the training then about the reporting of the results.”

Now these thoughts probably sound like any conversation any group of peer officers has had about their higher over the last 234 years, but the fact that we have been in this war now for almost 10 years makes these concerns, in my

mind, both more legitimate and valid. I say this because I believe today's Corps, based on all measures of performance and effectiveness, is a pretty good outfit. Without question, it is exponentially better than the Corps I joined back in the mid-1970s. But we are at a similar point in the cycle of sustained combat—war winding down, the budget knives out, and the Nation, although it continues to be supportive, is tired both mentally and fiscally of the cost of war. My own greatest personal concern is that once this fight ends, with the cuts we know are coming, unless we have a plan to address the issues the future leadership is raising and other long-term problems we know are institutional, this group/generation of officers is not likely to be satisfied (read stick around). I would submit that if we think we can simply go back to the “old Corps” pre-11 September 2001, and the bureaucracy is not tamed/changed/reformed, we will be sadly mistaken and dissatisfied with the results.

Although I think “The Attritionist Letters” and the thoughts of the Maj Munsons of the world are a bit overstated, especially the inexplicable correlation between centralized, directed training executed in a decentralized manner equating to a lack of trust, it is done, I believe, for effect. These Marines are trying to tell us what they see and feel after 10 years of war. We now have majors who have never known any other Corps—PTP, deploy, fight, redeploy, PTP, and do it again and again. We have women who have seen more combat than most of us ever did growing up, which is another factor we must consider. The combat exclusion policy for women is insulting to them. I digress.

We would do well to heed and reflect on their “canary in the mineshaft” thoughts, engage them head on in frank and candid discussion, look for ways to remediate those concerns that are legitimate, and explain our logic for those

with which we don't concur. Of critical importance, we must *not* think that when this fight is over we can/should go back to operations as normal. Fewer and fewer Marines know what that is anymore. We will have to create a “new normal.” We all know that coming out of a long conflict is fraught with risk, with historical issues of budget cuts, poor retention, and discipline issues. We have, I believe, begun the process to craft a plan to address these and other issues we have yet to wrestle with in order to keep the Corps the “middle-weight force-in-readiness” the Nation expects and needs. As important, the Corps must be a place where the best of the best want to stick around to be a part of what lies ahead.

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