

First to Fight

reviewed by Maj Scott A. Whipple

In the conclusion of *First to Fight*, Gen Victor H. “Brute” Krulak highlights three powerful external factors as potentially hostile to the future of the Marine Corps. These include threat, austerity, and military bureaucracy, along with proposed solutions to address each one. Although originally published in 1984, the external factors he describes are still prevalent today, and it is worth examining what influence, if any, they have had on the Marine Corps in the decades since publication.

While traditionally, the Marine Corps has been threatened by the other Services since its inception, whether by budget cuts or absorption, Krulak highlights a different kind of threat. Krulak views the civilian populace as a weak-willed Nation hesitant to fight and in possession of “a degraded sense of national commitment.” It is from this less-than-ideal pool that the Marine Corps must reap its recruits and hone them into warriors capable of fighting the country’s battles at a moment’s notice. This sad state of societal affairs, however, is not much of a concern to the author because Marine Corps tradition and reputation alone is sufficient enough to attract the best from society, and while there will always be those few reprobates, history has shown this to be true. Success in various conflicts throughout South America, the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe has proven the ability of the modern Marine’s performance as aping that of his predecessors. In addition, the Marine Corps continues to evolve and focuses on character growth through such initiatives as the Transformation Enhancement Program, ensuring that a Marine’s moral and ethical growth does not end in boot camp but remains a focus throughout his time in the Corps. Our Martial Arts Program, PME,

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and auxiliary training all have some emphasis on values-based decision making. In this sense, societal norms may change, but Marine Corps values will remain consistent and, ideally, are ones that civilians want to emulate.

Krulak also discusses the issue of austerity, and the Marine Corps has continued to see an ebb and flow of expansion and contraction, both in terms of budget and personnel, especially amidst the global war on terror. Growing from 185,000 to 202,000, then quickly reversing that, and now looking to expand again has created a number of challenges. A need for a greater number of Marines may result in an influx of ne’er-do-wells

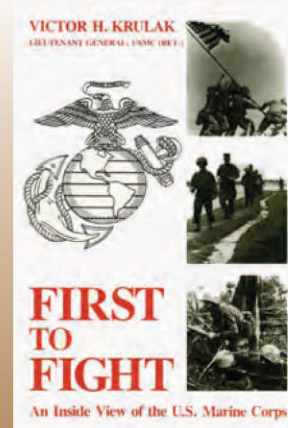
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from stressed recruiters. A decrease in personnel and money may not have great effect on those who can readily maneuver up and down the hills of Camp Pendleton, CA, to satisfy training requirements, but a maintenance-heavy unit’s readiness is greatly diminished by a lack of personnel to repair equipment and a lack of funds to acquire parts. In the end, austere challenges may result in an increase of maintainers grumbling about long hours, but they still zealously

accomplish their mission. In a similar fashion, a decrease in funding for repair parts instills a greater need within the operator to utilize his gear responsibly, knowing that poor care may result in a dead-lined tank or plane. In this sense, Krulak is justified in believing that

Marine Corps tradition will triumph over any monetary decline.

Military bureaucracy and standardization is the greatest challenge of all. Krulak correctly showcases a number of past innovations with rapid development and implementation that were detrimental to winning battles and, ultimately, wars. He also highlights how the current state of bureaucratic layering stifles growth and initiative. Decentralized command and control instills in a Marine the confidence to



FIRST TO FIGHT: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps. By LtGen Victor H. Krulak, USMC(Ret). Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999 (Reprint). ISBN: 978-1557504647 272 pp.

make rapid decisions and respond to dynamic situations as they unfold, facilitating a process of out-cycling the enemy to create a situation that is untenable for him to achieve victory on a tactical level. However, our centralized and convoluted acquisition process creates a scenario in which needs are potentially met with a product long after it is no longer required or adequate. The original need for an armored amphibian capable of the rapid conveyance of troops and equipment from naval ships beyond the horizon grew into the requirement for a vehicle that would also have sufficient armament to act as an infantry fighting vehicle and survive blasts from improvised explosive devices. Over a decade of research and development ultimately resulted in billions of dollars spent on a cancelled program and the extended service life of our current amphibious platform, which was originally introduced in the early 1970s. While bureaucratic inefficiency was not

the sole reason leading to the project's cancellation, it was a causal factor.

All of the external factors Krulak discusses are significant and worthy of attention; however, none of them are so formidable as to undermine the existence of the Marine Corps. In a

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sense, Gen James N. Mattis's advocacy of being "brilliant in the basics" will go far to restrain all three. A focus on instilling and maintaining our core values in all Marines will ensure ethically sound warriors willing to fight our Nation's enemies wherever they may be. Pride and sense of ownership in our equipment, however

outmoded and outdated it may be, will ensure technically proficient Marines. Bureaucracy may derail the development of large projects, but it cannot curtail the fighting man's ability to adapt his equipment to his environment and make do with what he has when the need comes, as seen by many a prompt, albeit unauthorized, battlefield modification. Krulak often mentions performance as the decisive litmus test for the Marine Corps' continued existence, so as long as we continue to win the Nation's battles as we have since our Corps' birth, no challenge will end us.



Call For Papers

Marine Corps University and the Marine Corps Association & Foundation are pleased to announce a call for papers on a topic that is vitally important for our country and the Navy-Marine Corps Team. The contest challenges participants to think holistically about how our nation employs naval expeditionary power now and in the future operating environment.

Essay Topic

Within the context of rapidly changing strategic, operational, and technological environments, how must the traditional concepts of naval expeditionary operations be adapted and expanded to be successful in the future?

Essays should be at least 1500 but no more than 3000 words in length. Essays are due by 15 February 2019 and must be submitted via email to Ms. Angela Anderson, Senior Editor, Marine Corps University Press at angela.anderson@usmcu.edu. Winners will be announced in April 2019.

Prizes

Overall Winning Essay

Invitation to attend the Annual Symposium of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Fredericksburg, Texas in September 2019.

Winning Essay in Each Category

- Cash award and plaque provided by the Marine Corps Association & Foundation
- Publication in Leatherneck, Marine Corps Gazette, or Marine Corps History
- Award presentation at a Marine Corps University Lecture Series Event

Two Honorable Mentions in Each Category with a cash award provided by the Marine Corps Association & Foundation

Contest Categories and Eligibility

- Active Duty and Reserve E5 & Below
- Active Duty and Reserve E6 & Above
- Active Duty and Reserve O3 & Below
- Active Duty and Reserve O4 & Above



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