

Chairman John McCain
Opening Statement, Neller Nomination Hearing
Thursday, July 23, 2015

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to consider the nomination of Lieutenant General Robert Neller to be the 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps.

General Neller, we thank you for joining us this morning. We are grateful for your many years of distinguished service to our Nation, and for your continued willingness to serve. We also welcome members of your family joining us this morning, and thank them for supporting you and our Nation. As is our tradition, at the beginning of your testimony we invite you to introduce any family members that are joining us.

As our nation confronts the most diverse and complex array of global crises since the end of World War II, the next Commandant will be responsible for ensuring that the Marine Corps remains the Nation's expeditionary force in readiness. After more than a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, our Marines have remained in high demand, performing the full range of theater security and crisis response missions across the globe. With instability spreading across the Middle East and North Africa and tension gripping the Asia-Pacific, more than ever our Nation is counting on the forward presence, strategic agility, power projection, and rapid response that are the Marine Corps' hallmarks.

But as we confront the realities of a more dangerous world, drastic reductions in defense spending are forcing our Marines to take on a growing set of missions with fewer and fewer resources. Over the last few years, the Marine Corps has been cut from 202,000 active duty Marines in 2012, to 184,000 today. Over the next two years, the Marine Corps will fall to 182,000. And if sequestration returns again, we will be left with 174,000 Marines, a force ill-prepared and ill-equipped to respond to a crisis or major contingency.

The combination of budget cuts, force reductions, and rising demands on our Marines has reduced readiness, lengthened deployments, cut training and time at home with families, and put the Marine Corps under considerable strain. This madness must stop. And as I said earlier this week, this is not just about reversing the effects of sequestration. We must replace the arbitrary spending caps on defense that were imposed under the Budget Control Act of 2011. That is the only way that we will get back to a truly strategy-driven defense budget.

As General Dunford emphasized in his most recent planning guidance, the Marine Corps is a naval expeditionary force. Over the past decade, as the United States was focused on

the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, America's potential adversaries were investing billions in so-called anti-access, area denial capabilities that threaten the Marine Corps' ability to fight from the sea. At the same time, budget constraints have left the Marine Corps short of its requirement for amphibious warships. On the current path, the Marine Corps will not have the correct mix of amphibious warships until 2024.

This is particularly concerning in the Asia-Pacific, where the Marine Corps plays an essential role in our rebalance policy. Despite growing tensions in the region, our Marines still lack sufficient sealift and airlift capabilities to respond to a major contingency in the Asia-Pacific. We must do better if the United States is to accomplish a rebalance that successfully reassures our allies and deter our adversaries.

General Neller, if confirmed, another significant challenge you will face is shortfalls in aviation readiness. As you well know, high operations tempo over a decade of sustained combat has degraded readiness in Marine Aviation. Today, non-deployed Marine aviation squadrons are 20 percent short of the number of aircraft needed to train or respond in a crisis. As you will surely agree, the Marine Corps' aviation bench is simply too shallow to be ready for future challenges. We will be interested to hear your views on putting the Marine Corps on track to restoring aviation readiness.

Finally, General Neller, if confirmed you will be responsible for recapitalizing and modernizing for future challenges.

In the air, the Marine Corps is rapidly approaching a significant milestone with the initial operational capability, or IOC, of the F-35B Joint Strike Fighter. Concerns remain about the warfighting capability of these aircraft reaching IOC. We will be looking to you, General Neller, to ensure our Marine aviators have safe and reliable aircraft that will allow them to effectively carry out their missions.

On the ground, the Amphibious Combat Vehicle remains the Marine Corps' top acquisition priority. Given the importance of replacing our aging fleet of amphibious vehicles, the Marine Corps must learn the lessons of past failures, such as the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, and deliver this needed capability on time, at cost, and up to expectations. We will be relying on you, General Neller, to make sure the job gets done.

Thank you, and we look forward to your testimony.