Deputy Carries Commandant's Force Transformation Message to Navy League Event

Brig. Gen. Robert C. Fulford, Commandant Gen. David H. Berger's legislative assistant, speaks to defense industry representatives at the monthly "Special Topics Breakfast" on Nov. 21 at Navy League headquarters. Navy League/Scott Achelpohl

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Marine Corps must change course. Peer competition from Russia is resurgent and China is rapidly expanding its influence. A return to a Fleet Marine Force is the new reality – and the sea service must do all this in the face of budgetary uncertainty from Capitol Hill, a top deputy of Commandant Gen. David H. Berger told a gathering at Navy League headquarters on Nov. 21.

Brig. Gen. Robert C. Fulford, Berger's legislative assistant, told defense industry representatives at the Navy League's monthly "Special Topics Breakfast" that Berger is determined to carry through with the striking directives he set forth this year in his "Commandant's Planning Guidance" soon after rising to become the 38th commandant of the Marine Corps. This includes the notion that the Corps must restructure and, in Fulford's words, "divest in order to reinvest."

"The recognition that there is a need to change is resonating across the force," Fulford said.

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>
> *Brig. Gen. Robert C. Fulford*

To do this, he said, the Marine Corps is taking a “force-design approach.” He told a questioner later during the breakfast program that this restructure didn’t necessarily mean doing away outright with certain programs – just that some would need to be scaled back to better integrate Marine missions with those of the U.S. Navy.

Fulford, who said he was “in the amphib business” and up until June was director of the Expeditionary Warfare School at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia, delivered a history lesson of sorts, saying the Corps was a “threat-based force” in a “bipolar world” from 1947 to 1991 when the single “peer competitor” to the U.S. was the Soviet Union. Now, he said, after years of fighting terrorism, the world the U.S. faces is “multipolar” with the Russian and Chinese surges, Iran and North Korea’s aggression and the continuing threats from nonstate actors.

“I know that the world ahead of us is going to be profoundly different than the world behind us,” he said. He also mentioned that Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer is “intimately involved” in Berger’s proposed force restructure and that the reception to it had been warm from leaders in Congress.

Fulford during his talk at Navy League headquarters. Navy League/Scott Achelpohl

But Fulford, who noted that he didn’t have a legislative

affairs background, also spoke at length about the cycle of continuing budget resolutions in Congress that hampers Marine and Navy efforts to carry out any force restructuring.

He said the sea services face the prospect of having to operate under a full-year continuing resolution (CR), which freezes spending at prior-year levels, rather than the regular appropriations process that allows for budget expansion – or at least flexibility – and proper defense program planning in conjunction with the defense industry.

The U.S. Senate is set to vote on a short-term, House-passed CR that would avert a government shutdown but only extend funding through Dec. 20. In an atmosphere filled with impeachment hearings and resistance to funding for President Trump's border wall on the southern border with Mexico, Congress may need another CR and may not be able to return to regular order anytime soon.

"We all recognize the tyranny of the congressional calendar," Fulford said, adding that military services – the Corps included – had "normalized life under budget uncertainty." He mentioned that projects such as the restoration of housing at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, were still slowed by budgetary uncertainty more than a year after Hurricane Florence struck the base.

The commandant also "appreciates the impact of the CR on the industrial base," Fulford added, recognizing that industry representatives were in the audience at Navy League HQ.

“We understand what it means to the small-business owner,” he said.