

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

A Conversation with General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

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Transcript

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I want to thank you all for joining us, including those who are watching us on this live webcast and also those who are viewing us on the [Department of Defense channel](#). A very warm welcome to you all.

It is an honor and a privilege to welcome General Martin Dempsey to the Carnegie Council today. As the 18th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dempsey is the highest-ranking military officer in the U.S. armed forces, the principal military advisor to the [president](#), the [secretary of defense](#), and the [National Security Council](#). In his capacity as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Dempsey sits between the four-star service chiefs, who are responsible for developing, training, and equipping the armed forces and the four-star combatant commanders, who are responsible for deploying those forces and applying military power to mitigate the crisis of the day. It is in this role that General Dempsey made a pledge to reinvigorate and recalibrate the military profession.

It was some time last February, when articles began to appear in the news with headlines reading "[Military Makes Ethics a Priority](#)," "[Chairman Promises Vigorous Military Ethics Campaign](#)," "[Dempsey Talks to Troops on Ethics and Professionalism](#)," that we at the Carnegie Council, a voice for ethics in international affairs, began to pay particular attention to this initiative.

As you might imagine, it didn't take us very long to decide to invite General Dempsey to come to New York so that he could talk about his aspirations for the military. For just as General Dempsey is committed to expanding the ethics education of the military and determined to shine a spotlight on the important role that ethics should play in training our leaders, the Carnegie Council also believes, as our president [Joel Rosenthal](#) has often said, "Ethics should not be peripheral to any public policy curriculum or program of leadership development, but is central to decision-making and leadership itself."

In a career field where many may only study military strategy or international relations, General Dempsey stands out as that rare military officer who not only has mastered these areas, but has an interest in the humanities as well. I have read that the chairman is known for repeatedly drawing on this background and using literary images to instill in those now in uniform and those who will be soldiers of tomorrow the importance of thinking about ethical and moral values, and what it means to be human.

We have asked Carnegie Council Senior Fellow Jeff McCausland, a retired U.S. Army colonel who is also a visiting professor at Dickinson College, to lead the chairman in a discussion.

At this time, please join me in giving a very warm welcome to two men who have distinguished themselves, in different ways, in the U.S. armed forces.

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: Thanks very much, Joanne, for that very kind of set of remarks and introduction.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's a great pleasure for me to be here. It's a distinct honor for me to interview General Dempsey.

I have to tell you up front, as an old veteran myself, that Marty Dempsey is an officer who enjoys the admiration and respect of about every officer of whatever service I have met, including veterans. That's not necessarily something that every general officer enjoys. I assure you, he does.

Before I begin, I need to embellish on that very fine introduction that Joanne made. General Dempsey graduated from West Point, as I did. He graduated—I hate to admit this—two years after I did, so I'm older than he is. I don't think we encountered each other when I was an upper classman and he was a plebe.

He has served in the United States Army since 1974, commissioned in armor, served a lot of time in cavalry units, 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Germany, commanded the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, commanded the 1st Armored Division in Iraq, and subsequently moved on to being the acting commander of CENTCOM [United States Central Command], the director of our Training and Doctrine Command, in which he attempted to invigorate how we think about this strange complexity of warfare in the 21st century, prior to becoming the chief of staff of the Army and subsequently the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

But I need to make one more point, just to give you the complexity of being the chairman. Let me talk about what he did yesterday. Yesterday I talked to his guys. He was here in New York to meet with a group called [Veterans on Wall Street](#). He then spent the evening at [Stand Up for Heroes](#) and sang "[New York, New York](#)." I should also tell you that General Dempsey is the finest baritone ever to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I've heard that on a number of occasions from various people.

We are joined today by his lovely wife [Deanie](#), and the two of them will be going over to meet with some NBA [National Basketball Association] All-Star players for the program at [City Harvest](#) and preparing food bags, demonstrating that need to stay connected between the military and the community.

Finally, I think I can tell you that the thing that General Dempsey is probably proudest of is their three great kids, all of whom have served in the military or are serving, and eight grandkids.

Without further ado, we'll do about a 30-minute discussion between him and me, and then we will take it to questions and answers.

Again, sir, an honor and a pleasure.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Good to see you.

Remarks

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: Let's begin this, sir.

As Joanne outlined, the focal point of the Council is, of course, that interrelationship between ethics and international affairs. With this in mind, military leaders, yourself—and Joanne noted that—speak frequently about the professional military ethic. Can you explain to this audience briefly what that is

and why that is particularly crucial to the military profession?

MARTIN DEMPSEY: First of all, thanks for inviting me. I was saying upstairs before we came down, while they were mic-ing me up, that I was up at West Point just a week ago and visited my old English department alma mater, went to spend some time with them. They were all recently back from a session right here on ethics and were so enthusiastic about it that I actually got nervous, because you don't normally see people who study philosophy get all excited about anything. Honestly. And this was cadets and faculty alike.

So thanks for embracing them. We have always thought that West Point and New York City ought to have a special relationship—20 million people, roughly, in the New York metropolitan area. A nice way to stay connected. Thanks for doing that.

Any profession, before I zero in on the military profession, has to—you're not a profession just because you say you are, although some people do that. We throw the term "professional" around kind of loosely. But to truly be a professional, you have to have some particular skills and expertise.

Ours is, I'll call it—to use a [Huntington](#) phrase—"the management of violence." We disburse violence on behalf of the nation. That's a pretty tall order. It takes an incredibly skilled and expert population to do that. But to do it responsibly requires the next step, which is a professional ethos, a set of behaviors that allow you to live a life against a set of values. If we don't have those two things together, if you have a military profession that is charged with and has the sacred trust of the nation to use violence responsibly—that's the way we as a nation believe violence should be used, responsibly—if you don't have that professional ethos to provide the foundation for disbursing violence, we would be in a much different place, not only as a military but as a nation. That's why it's so important.

Then there are other things—a commitment to continuing education, both structured and self-developmental. There's a list of about six or seven things that provide for us the metric to allow us to measure whether we're actually living up to the title of "profession."

So that's why it's so important, because of what we do for the nation.

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: You and I, as I said at the onset, are contemporaries, at least in our commissioning, in the military. Also, I think we both agree that the military right now enjoys, by any popularity poll, the great affection of the American people, is held in very high esteem. But when you and I were commissioned a number of years ago, that was not necessarily the case. The young officers that that I speak with, I often say, "Don't assume that that's necessarily a given."

With this in mind, there has been at times, has there not—I think perhaps that esteem, I should add, is due to that adherence to the ethic—but there has been challenge to that of late. There have been real concerns. You have voiced some. We have seen senior officers over the last several years relieved for issues having to do with sexual harassment, relieved over issues having to do with alcohol, relieved for cheating on examinations. We have seen in the last few days a couple of senior officers in the Air Force responsible for nuclear weapons [relieved](#) at bases.

Does that concern you? Is it perhaps a manifestation of 13 years of combat that this particular force has been undergoing? Or is it merely a reflection that we live in a much more transparent society, where there's a 24/7 news cycle, so those people who are doing what you just said are held in higher scrutiny?

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Yes. [Laughter]

Let me unpack the "yes" a little bit here. All those things are factors. For me anyway—and when I

discuss this with our senior officers and noncommissioned officers—it wasn't the last 13 years of conflict. It wasn't the crucible of war that caused us to become a bit undisciplined—let's call it that—but, rather, that the pace prevented us from actually being reflective and going into environments of continuing education.

Remember, one of the things I said that marks any profession is a commitment to continuing education, to development over time. The military has had, since I've been in it, since you were in it, a very predictable and structured series of educational opportunities placed at important points along the way, so that you could get out of the maelstrom, if you will, of day-to-day activity, go into a more or less academic environment among your peers and sometimes with international students and interagency partners from other departments of the United States government, and argue about things—not only about, broadly, the use of the military as an instrument of power, but particular weapons systems, like remotely piloted aircraft.

What happened over time is that we got so busy from, roughly, 2003 to about 2010, that we went from a profession that valued education—that time spent in education was valuable, was rewarded by promotion and by selection for command—to a point where we undervalued it for a period. If you were a major serving in my division and you had a choice to go either to the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, or stay and be the deputy director of operations for the division, all of your mentors would have said, "Stay in the fight. Stay right here. Stay with the day-to-day, because that's what's going to be rewarded."

And they were right. The promotion boards started rewarding time in [Iraq](#), time in [Afghanistan](#), more than they valued time spent teaching at West Point.

Then we went from undervaluing it to devaluing it. Education, for a period of time, actually became a negative. In other words, "You have gone to school; you must not be committed to the tempo."

When I became the commander of the Training and Doctrine Command and, subsequently, chief of staff of the Army, we put some teeth, if you will, back into our policy to make sure that you couldn't get promoted, you couldn't get selected for command unless you went through these educational experiences. It's in those educational experiences where you learn the theory of ethics and behaviors, and then you go out and practice it. But if you don't first learn the theory, you're out there and you don't have the tools to measure yourself against what it means to be part of this profession.

That was the single biggest factor, but the other things you mentioned are clearly part of the issue as well—the ubiquitous presence of the media. You can't blame the media for it. If you're well-behaved, the media can see you being well-behaved as well as it can see you being undisciplined.

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: They may not report on it, though.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Yes, that's true.

By the way, last but not least, we are a profession of human beings. You're never going to have 100 percent of any population act consistently. The important thing is that you hold people accountable when it's necessary to do so.

Actually, we got a little sloppy about that in the last 10 or 12 years. Why? Well, look. See this right here? [Points to his medals] You have someone who does something and you say, "Wow, you know what, though? He's really been hard at it. Maybe we ought to give him a break."

Now, I'm not against being compassionate in the disbursement of accountability and justice, but you have to understand that over time too much compassion in the disbursement of discipline can lead to a new

standard. I think our standards had gotten a little low.

By the way, we're back. You won't see us in the news, and when you do, it will be for holding people accountable, not for being surprised.

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: There's no doubt about it—we talked about it a bit before we came out—that we're embroiled in very complex conflicts in [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#) and Afghanistan. Even today, for example, I was talking with folks on the news about [airstrikes](#)—last night you and I chatted about it—against another group in Syria that we thought had particular explosive capability, showing you how fractured and how complex that conflict is.

How does a senior leader in that really unbelievable environment strike a balance between questions of ethics and questions of morality while prosecuting warfare in that particular environment? We have seen, for example a focal point on [Kobani](#), a lot of the news talking about why shouldn't we directly intervene. Three hundred thousand people might be endangered in Syria or maybe thousands in Kobani will be murdered by [ISIS](#) (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). We have seen these terrible videos of [executions](#). Even this morning, frankly, in an interview I did for Los Angeles, there was a lot of pressure: "When are we going to intervene, as we see these horrible acts by ISIS?" Some people now have even compared that to the [genocide](#) of the Nazis or the [genocide](#) in Kosovo.

How do you balance out in a complex environment those questions of morality like that, particularly confronted by this heinous enemy, with the need to work together with other allies and other institutions in prosecuting a clear strategy?

MARTIN DEMPSEY: It's a great question. At some level, the military in particular is—we're kind of a victim of our own success maybe, in the sense that people will suggest that we certainly must be able to see things near real-time and that if we chose to do something about it, we could.

Kobani is a pretty illustrative example of that. We documented—the reason we have gone back into Baghdad and into Erbil and into Iraq in general is that we have identified this group, which has actually separated itself from other groups that we already thought were dangerous and evil and ideologically antithetical to everything we believe in—this group had actually separated itself from that, and so they were clearly something that had to be dealt with.

In so doing, though, we adopted a strategy that said that we would do this through credible partners, ground partners in the region, notably, at least initially, with the Iraqi security forces, the [Peshmerga](#). We will at some point enlist the support of the tribes. And we built a kind of remarkable coalition, actually. I have been at this a long time. There are some nations in this coalition that, if you had told me a year ago we could bring them into a coalition, I would say, "I don't think so. You're not going to get them in."

So the coalition is sound. As you have alluded to, though, the coalition is—if there are 22 nations who are contributing in some way to either the support of military operations or military operations themselves, that means you have 22 different sets of agendas. In that part of the world, of course—"clarity" is not exactly a word you would ever assign to the Middle East. So these 23 agendas play out in this kind of opaque environment.

The point of all that is that it requires a certain strategic patience. You first do no harm in trying to maintain the coalition and, at the same time, deliberately build enough of a credible indigenous force that can overcome this group called ISIL or ISIS or *Da'esh*, depending on how you describe it.

So if something like Kobani pops up and the demand signal is you have to stop the [slaughter](#) over Sinjar Mountain, in some cases we're able to do that. In other cases the issue is so—north of Aleppo

right now is just almost—it's a Rubik's cube, frankly. It's like the [Heisenberg principle](#): Every time you touch it, it changes, and you have something new to consider.

This is a case of staying true to the principle that we will, over time, defeat ISIL, and we'll do it through regional actors, not despite regional actors. There are going to be cases where ISIL will have tactical success, but if we're true to the principle, then over time, we believe, we can defeat ISIL with them.

By the way, ISIL—you know this—is not going to be defeated solely with the military instrument of power. What will cause ISIL to be defeated ultimately is that the Sunni population, 20 million Sunnis between Damascus and Baghdad, disenfranchised—they don't have a government that they trust or believe in—until that changes and we supply military pressure to build time into the strategy so that the government of Iraq can reconcile with the Sunni population and with the Peshmerga, the Kurdish population, and find some credible partner in Syria—that's what will happen. Those populations will ultimately reject this radical ideology, with us in support.

But every time we leap over that principle and take charge of something ourselves, we actually, at some level, set back the strategy a bit. It's a balancing act between the horror of watching the atrocities that this group is willing to commit and, at the same time, doing what we can to stay true to the strategy.

Again, back to the media, this is one of those cases where the media will flock to a particular position—I'm not being critical—they will flock to where the story is most sensational, and it can tug you in ways that are not all that helpful.

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: Let me press you on that, because I, frankly, have used that comment you made—it's very insightful—that there are 20 million Sunnis between Damascus and Baghdad. They have to be presented an alternative. That's what really this is all about. In essence, we really, if you will, have to defeat the narrative of ISIS, the ideology of ISIS.

The military component, as you rightly describe, is critically important. But can you talk a little bit more about—as you deal, as you do where you sit, with the interagency and the State Department, and the Department of Justice at times perhaps, and the Central Intelligence Agency, as well as their counterparts in other nations—now we have a special envoy, General [Allen](#), whom you know very well, to do that—can you talk a little bit about how we synergize it? How do we work in these other areas of information and diplomacy and perhaps economics? Or is it just a matter, if you will, of taking a page from [George Kennan](#)'s book and we're going to sort of contain this problem until it burns out, using his phrase, based on its internal contradictions?

MARTIN DEMPSEY: That would take too long, to simply contain it. Containment was initially, of course, part of the strategy, as they had momentum. Initially it was contained. But we're well into now disrupting. The Iraqi security forces in particular are starting to venture out a bit.

But to your point, there are nine lines of effort in the strategy. Did you know that? We have talked about it. There are nine lines of effort. The military is one line of effort, meaning military strikes, the air campaign. Then there's a train-advise-assist-and-build-partner component, which is to say embedding with Iraqi senior leaders and then setting up some facilities where we can train them.

Those are two lines of effort. The other seven have nothing to do with the United States military.

But it's noteworthy that you don't have any idea that those other seven—and they are not secret. The other seven lines of effort—and I wish I had them memorized, but I'll tick off a few.

Counter-foreign fighters: there's a foreign fighter task force that is a group of nations and a group of

U.S. government agencies that are seeking to track the flow of foreign fighters into and out of Syria. You would actually like to know that's working, right? I know our European allies would like to know that that's working. [*For more on foreign fighters in Syria, check out Richard Barrett's recent [talk on the subject](#).*]

There's a counter-financing line of effort. That counter-financing effort tries to find the places where ISIL draws its financial support. Sometimes that line of effort can pass over tasks to us. For example, the counter-financing line of effort discovered that some of these mobile oil refineries were providing funding for ISIL in eastern Syria, and so they passed it to us to destroy them and we destroyed them. By the way, we are having reflections that some of the counter-financing work against ISIL is having an effect. Where they were paid \$200 a month before by these various funding streams—the foreign fighters, that is—now they're getting paid \$50. Like any red-blooded laborer, they're not all that happy about it. So counter-financing.

Then there's a counter-messaging campaign, which is to say, how can we strip away the mythology of ISIS and strip away its—challengingly, though, in our system of government, what you are actually trying to do is strip away its religious legitimacy, this aspiration to be the caliphate, to be the end-of-days Sunni theocracy, and they look across and say, for example, just as Iran did with the Shia sect of Islam in Iran.

So all of those lines of effort are actually progressing along. My personal view is that the other seven are actually more important than the two that I'm responsible for. But the ones we're responsible for get all the notoriety, because they make the most noise, frankly.

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: Let me move on. You are the senior military advisor to the [president](#) of the United States. You sit at that pinnacle of the civil-military relations problem in our democracy. That requires you to strike an incredible balance between candid advice and, at the same time, being a team player or being characterized as that for the [administration](#).

Recently some commentators have, for example, said that there's a question that has manifested itself over our commitment possibly to deploy troops back to Iraq. People in the administration have said—National Security Advisor [Rice](#) has said, "No, we're not going to send ground troops to Iraq." But on the other hand, you've said, "I might well have to recommend to the president at some point doing that, or at least sending advisors."

Can you talk about the challenges of that particular position in the civil-military relations of advising the president, while at the same time needing to be a team player in this democratic society that we hold so dear?

MARTIN DEMPSEY: I'm not sure I would have chosen "team player." That's not one that I would like—what I would say is, first of all—a couple of things. I've got to be able to be candid and provide my advice to the [SecDef](#) (secretary of defense), to the [National Security Council](#), and to the president of the United States. Disagreement isn't disloyalty.

By the way, I can tell you with great integrity that the president doesn't consider disagreement disloyalty, at least for me. One of the things I told him—and you may not like this necessarily in your other life—one of the things that I told the president is, "I'll never communicate with you through the media."

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: That's fine.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: That's fair, right?

If I haven't had a conversation with the president and he hasn't made a decision, I'm not going to talk about it. And if I have given him my advice and he's still deciding whether to take it or not, I'm not going to talk about it. Once he does—if he takes my advice, that's fine. He's the president. If he doesn't take my advice, that's also fine. But I have to be able to say, when asked in testimony before Congress—because I also have responsibilities, by the [Constitution](#), to maintain a relationship with the Congress and to inform them on strategy—I have to be able to say, when somebody says, "Did you give advice to the president?" "Yes, I did." "Did he take it?" "No, he didn't." "Why didn't he take it?" "I don't know. Ask him."

But here's the other thing you've got to know. The one thing I have learned—I'm a different chairman than I was three years ago, frankly. I didn't know it at the time, but I know it looking back. One of the things that I think the military owes all of its senior elected officials is options, not ultimatums. In other words, there's not just one way to accomplish anything.

By the way, one of the principles of military leadership is, never let the boss run out of options. It doesn't have to be military leadership. I think it's a principle of leadership that you should always seek to never cause the decision-maker to run out of options. Does it happen on occasion? Yes, it does. But your approach should be always to find options.

My other responsibility is, when providing those options, to articulate risk. Here's a high-risk option; here's a moderate-risk option; here's a low-risk option. Which one do you recommend? Low, right? I'm the military guy.

But then when the other factors are put in there, you might find the decision goes to moderate or high risk. That's the way the system is actually designed.

In this format, I can explain that to you, that it's not about confronting the president with an either/or proposition—either do it my way or it's going to fail. It's more about—with any president, by the way, and I've worked for three of them now—it's more about, first of all, coming to some common understanding of the problem. We drive to the solution sometimes, all of us, before we really understand the problem.

You probably know this because you taught social science at West Point. [Einstein](#) had a great saying: "If you only have an hour to save the world, spend 55 minutes of it understanding the problem and 5 minutes solving it." I'm telling you, that is absolutely true today.

So my first obligation is to make sure we have a common understanding of the problem, the second is to provide options, and the third is to articulate risk. Then our elected officials, in our system of government, make a decision. You will never, I hope, while I'm chairman, hear anyone say, "This is Dempsey's strategy." I don't make that decision. This is the strategy of the United States government, which I have had a role in shaping and advising.

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: Very good.

Questions

QUESTION: I'm James Starkman. General Dempsey, thank you so much for your service to the country.

How would you evaluate the ethical conduct of the recent [war](#) by Israel against its opponents? It seems to me from all I've read that extraordinary measures were taken to limit civilian casualties in that operation. I just wanted to know what your evaluation was.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Nothing like a softball right off the top. [Laughter]

The reason I say that is, early on in my tenure as chairman, for some reason—to this day, I can't figure it out—I was portrayed as being anti-Israel in my advice. It was shocking, because the chief of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), [Benny Gantz](#) and his wife, Revi, are probably Deanie's and my closest friends in the international world.

Now that you've asked me that question, I'd better be sharp with my answer, or I'll be right back in the timeout chair.

I actually do think that Israel went to extraordinary lengths to limit collateral damage, ensuing casualties. In fact, about three months ago, we asked Benny if we could send a lessons-learned team. One of the things we do better than anybody, I think, is learn. We sent a team of senior officers and noncommissioned officers over to work with the IDF to get the lessons from that particular operation in Gaza, to include the measures they took to prevent civilian casualties and what they did with tunneling. [Hamas](#) had become very nearly a subterranean society. That caused the IDF some significant challenges.

But they did some extraordinary things to try to limit civilian casualties, to include making it known that they were going to destroy a particular structure. They even developed some techniques to—they called it roof-knocking, to have something knock on the roof. They would display leaflets to warn the citizens and population to move away from where these tunnels were.

Look, in this kind of conflict, where you are held to a standard that your enemy is not held to, you're going to be criticized for civilian casualties. I think if Benny were sitting here right now, he would say to you, "We did everything we could. Now we've learned from that mission, and we think there are some other things we could do in the future, and we'll do those."

The IDF is not interested in creating civilian casualties. They are interested in stopping the shooting of rockets and missiles out of the Gaza Strip and into Israel. It's an incredibly difficult environment.

But I can say you to with confidence that I think they acted responsibly—although I think Human Rights Watch just published a [report](#) that there were civilian casualties. And that's tragic, but I think the IDF did what they could.

QUESTION: My name is [Jim Traub](#). I'm one of those media people. I write a [column](#) for ForeignPolicy.com. I'm also the host for Carnegie's [Ethics Matter](#) series.

I do want to ask you about ISIS. The Syria side of this I think is bewildering for a lot of people, to understand the administration's strategy. As you said, there are forces on the Iraq side which want to take on ISIS, but in Syria we're training or will be training rebels, whose goal is to overthrow the regime, not to take on ISIS. And we've made a point of saying the administration doesn't want to overthrow the regime.

Could you explain the theory of the case? How is it that that's going to actually field forces on the ground that are ultimately going to lead to pushing back ISIS?

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Let me talk to the military strategy. Another aspect of your question is, what is our broader strategy, diplomatically and from a policy perspective, about the [Assad](#) regime?

Militarily, I would describe our campaign against ISIL, or ISIS, as Iraq first, as I've said, because we have a credible partner there, while simultaneously conducting airstrikes to disrupt ISIL inside of Syria, notably eastern Syria, where they tend to be discernible from all the other groups inside of Syria, and simultaneously seeking to build a force of moderate opposition, the training and equipping of a

moderate opposition, that could initially—militarily, now—separate, by moving from, let's call it, south to north and then the eastern part of Syria, this group called ISIL and isolate the two pockets of it, one in Iraq that we're making progress against and one in Syria, which we're disrupting, but we don't have a defeat mechanism in place yet.

That's a military term. What is it that will lead to the defeat of ISIL in Syria? It's some opposition that will confront it, enabled by us.

I admit to you that that is a rational and coherent strategy as it exists in eastern Syria. It becomes far more complex when you go to northern Syria, the area around Aleppo and Idlib, the border with Turkey. That's because in those areas, the forces tend to be intermingled. Those of us that are trying to advise the president on U.S. government strategy, not just military strategy—U.S. Central Command, notably European Command because of the Turkish influence—are trying to conceive of an aspect or a branch of the strategy that will deal with northern Syria.

But I haven't made my recommendation yet. It's a very complex environment.

By the way—I'm not making this up—I like the media. If you had asked me that three years ago when I was new to this, I would have said, "Oh, my god, this is just so painful," because I was so nervous, frankly. You grow into the job, and as you grow into the job, you realize that if we didn't have the media in this country, we wouldn't have any way to stay connected to the people. If you didn't have the media, you wouldn't have anybody pressing you to be clearer about what you are trying to accomplish. So I've got a lot of time for the media, actually.

QUESTIONER: Bob James. I'm a businessman. I started in the military in 1943.

Our president has said that if Iran intends to get a bomb, we will use force against them. He didn't say we're prepared to; he said we would use force against them. I guess that would be your job, to do that. Can you just roughly outline how you will use this force, and at the same time—

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: Let's stick with "if" first.

QUESTIONER: But then also, since only the United States has real military force in the Persian Gulf, I guess we'll have to do it alone.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: It's a timely question, actually, because the current negotiations, the [P5+1 negotiations](#), on the Iranian nuclear capability are in their final stages and expire on the 24th of November. They could be extended, I suppose. Again, that's a policy and diplomatic issue.

My job is to provide the military capability to encourage the diplomacy along.

When you say, how would we apply force, if necessary? Ethically. How about that?

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: That's very good. Perfect.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Obviously, without straying into classified matters, we do have the capability, were we asked to use it, to address an Iranian nuclear capability. But here's the challenge with that. When I say "to address," we can delay. What really makes the nuclear capability of Iran an issue is not centrifuges and ballistic missiles, but rather the human capital that has the expertise to regenerate it.

As we look at using the military instrument if necessary to address the Iranian nuclear issue, that would delay it. It will not eliminate it. Ultimately, the Iranian government itself would have to take a decision to move away from that aspiration entirely. That's why the diplomatic track is actually the right track. But if they refuse to take the opportunity that the P5+1 is presenting to them, and if asked, we do

have the capability to delay their nuclear enterprise by some number of years, which I won't, obviously, articulate here.

I really can't say much more than that, except to assure you that we have the capability. If we have to and if we're asked to, we'll use it. But Iran would certainly—it would be a much wiser course for them to follow to find a way to make this diplomatic track successful.

QUESTION: Ron Berenbeim. Thank you for your service.

When I think of the ethics challenges faced by the U.S. armed forces, I don't think of the people subject to the command structure. I think of contractors. I'm interested in what your policy is, how it has changed, and what your thoughts are on that.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: That's a good question. First of all, when you think about the armed forces of the United States, we do tend to think kind of narrowly—not "we," but I think most Americans think narrowly of the uniformed military. But there's this enormous enterprise of Department of Defense civilians, very dedicated professionals who spend their entire lives assisting in the development of policy. Then there are contractors. Contractors have been a part of the armed forces forever, but most notably began to be an even more significant part of the force after the [Gulf War](#), for a couple of reasons.

One is, we realized that there are just some things that are inherently military and that we should focus on our end strength, if you will. If the Army is allowed to have 490,000 active-component personnel, it's smarter to focus those 490,000 on things that are inherently military and then to allow contractors to fill the gaps. And the gaps are largely maintenance. They are largely logistics. They can be very important in communications and electronics and information technology and so forth.

I think what you're really talking about is when you use them for security, if I had to guess, and you're harkening back to some of the problems we had with some organizations that will go unnamed, who became almost paramilitary in nature in providing security so that we didn't have to do so.

I think in that particular mission set or function, security, probably there is a role for contractors, but I think we should define it more narrowly. But for the rest of them—the contractors that are driving trucks and turning wrenches and repairing satellites and building ammunition and welding ships—look, we absolutely couldn't do it without them.

But in the particular function of security, your question is not only appropriate, but important. We are reexamining that.

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: Let me exercise the prerogative of the chair for a second and ask a quick follow-up question.

This question touches on the composition of the force. One thing, of course, we have a force that includes contractors, but it also includes an active force, a national guard force, a reserves force, civilians, and all that. There has been an awful lot of talk, in the complex operations we have been involved in for the last 13 years, that 1 percent of the population is involved; only 1 percent is involved. You hear that frequently.

If you think about that mosaic which really is the military force, including all those components, do you worry—and I know you do, frankly, but like you were talking about, from what you are doing here today—about loss of contact with the American people, particularly for the active force, that the active force now becomes this professional organization where nobody knows anybody that does that, that goes off and does things, and therefore becomes separate?

Many people would argue that perhaps there's an ethical danger there. There's certainly a danger to democracy there, as we know it.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Yes, I do think about that a lot, staying connected to America. As you say, one of the reasons I'm here in New York is to go over to the Harvest Center, I think it's called. That's part of an effort to connect soldiers—in this case, I think they are mostly from Fort Hamilton, but all over the country we're actually connecting over this Veterans Day period. We're working with the National Basketball Association to encourage servicemen and women and these professional athletes to give back to their communities.

That's the important point here, I think, that—well, what happened was—I'll tell you the story—[Adam Silver](#) and I were having dinner, and he was talking about these incredible athletes. Basketball players tend to be held in higher esteem than almost any other professional athlete, at least inside the military. Our demographic is wildly enthusiastic about basketball. They are.

The big idea here was, is there a way to partner the best professional basketball athletes in the world with the best professional military in the world, not so they can be self-congratulatory—"Hey, you're great; so am I." "Thanks for your service" "No, thanks for yours." "Let's clap for you at half-time of the basketball game and let's have you flip the coin." Those are all great, by the way. I'm not disparaging them, I promise you. But the bigger idea here is that these athletes, who are so gifted and who have gotten so much in their lives from America, and our, let's call them, athletes—professional soldiers, sailors, airmen, Coast Guard—who also have gotten an incredible amount of support from America, combine to give back.

What it does is it reminds us that when you sign up for this word called "service," it actually means service. It means you serve with a servant's soul. Your first instinct is to serve, not to try to get back, not to try to get something. So there's a sense of service here that we're trying to cause people to think about.

To your point, I think America will appreciate that in the current climate, where it does, sometimes at least, feel as though it's all about, what can I get from America? This is about, what can we give back? So we're excited about it.

QUESTION: Good morning, sir. My name is [Mike Lyons](#). I'm with CBS News. I'm also a lifelong student of Colonel McCausland. I served as his battery commander in combat. I thought you did a great job yesterday also with the Veterans of Wall Street.

You talked before about the management of violence. I want to ask you about the management of [Ebola](#). The Army in particular has picked up this non-standard mission again. It seems to get everything that nobody else wants to do, on some level. So we picked up this mission. [Darryl Williams](#), my classmate from West Point, is a commander as well.

Do you perceive this to be the mission the Army is going to have for the next four to five years as it projects—besides power—throughout the world? Will it be funded for it as it tries to really reinvent itself, as it has come back from two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? There are a lot of things going on in the Army right now, sir, and I just want to get your thoughts on that.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Yes, there are. Chiefs and I talk about it a lot. There are a lot of things going on. Actually, it's a pretty exciting time to be the chief of staff of the Army or the chairman of the Joint Chiefs in regard of land forces. There is this notion out there that we're never going to fight a protracted land war and we're never going to do stability operations and we're never going to do this and that.

By the way, the fight against Ebola is a stability operation. You can call it what you want, but we're

trying to bring stability to a region of West Africa that is inherently unstable and to contain that disease there. We're not going to eradicate it. We're going to try to stabilize it, organize it, and then nongovernmental organizations, whether it's MSF [*Médecins Sans Frontières*/Doctors Without Borders] or others, can eradicate it. But it's a stability operation. One of the things we said was that we're not going to do stability operations.

I will tell you, in terms of the U.S. military and how active it is—you know this—there are 10 U.S. Army divisions in the active component. Each of them has about 16,000 to 20,000 soldiers. The headquarters themselves are about 750. As we sit here today, eight out of ten divisions in the United States Army are deployed, doing something, whether it's in Europe to reassure our allies, Iraq, Afghanistan, West Africa, Korea—fill in the blanks.

So the idea that the tempo is going to dramatically change is just not feasible as I look at the world around us, which is why this thing called [sequestration](#) is so alarming, frankly.

To your point about whether we'll get it funded, we have to get it funded. In fact, I think the administration is prepared to go over to Congress this week. Most of that money will actually be funded for USAID, United States Agency for International Development. But then, as we are in support of them, we would essentially bill them for the expenses that we're doing.

One last thing, though, about why this Ebola issue important. I'm not making this up. I began studying Ebola about a year ago, maybe a little less than that. I invited in a woman named [Laurie Garrett](#), who wrote a great book about infectious disease called *The Coming Plague*. How's that for a nice nightmare in your life? *The Coming Plague*, not just about Ebola, but about the effect of globalization on infectious disease. It really got my attention.

So I invited her in and we talked about it. I had the staff begin to think about what would happen in the United States. So we began—this is what we do, right?—we began to develop contingency planning for how the military could support other agencies of government and international organizations. We asked AFRICOM [Africa Central Command], as the Ebola thing started, as we started to watch the rate of infection increase—by the way, this one is different. There was an infection in 1976, one in 1995, and now this one. Obviously the disease mutates and obviously as well—or not so obviously maybe—this one is the first one that has had an urban aspect to it. In prior times you would have an Ebola outbreak in Lofa County, Liberia, and everybody would say, "Oh, my God, that's awful, but it will burn itself out." And they generally did.

This one is different. This one has migrated its way into the urban setting. We've got airline flights and things that are connecting people.

So we felt like we could contribute to organize the effort. We got a command-and-control headquarters, a logistics hub. We built a boot camp to train international health-care workers how to protect themselves. We're not doing the care ourselves, but we're stabilizing the environment and giving confidence to the health-care workers that if they do come down with the disease, they will be cared for.

By the way, we think we're making some progress in Liberia. Sierra Leone is not trending favorably, nor is Guinea. We'll see what happens with that.

You asked, is it a four-year mission? Probably not. But I bet it's every bit of 18 months, which would be three rotations of six-month deployments.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, General Dempsey. [Guillermo Rishchynski](#), Canadian ambassador to the United Nations. Thank you for your service.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Nice to meet you.

QUESTIONER: General, you mentioned eight of ten divisions are deployed. You're deploying battalions to fight Ebola in Liberia. The United States armed forces is being asked to do an awful lot in the world. The issue of burden-sharing inevitably comes up in discussions with foreign governments, the perennial debate at NATO as to percentage of GDP the countries are putting into defense. We haven't talked about Asia at all this morning, but clearly with the pivot to Asia, which a year ago was top of mind and now is sort of off to the side, given that at least we're in a different kind of reality.

In your judgment, do you think that the rest of the world understands the gravity of the threats that currently exist and are making the appropriate kinds of investments and orientation to deal with them to be able to act as collaborators with the United States armed forces? Or is the kind of attitude that we have seen pervasive over the course of the last decade—that if there's a problem, get the United States to take care of it and the problem will go away—that's a very dangerous kind of mindset for yourselves to be in, but, I would suggest, even more dangerous for the rest of the world.

The nature of how you see the allies and the willingness of allies to step up, is this something that you are investing a great deal of time in with your senior commanders? How do you assess the capability and the willingness of the rest of the world to be there, shoulder to shoulder, with the United States?

MARTIN DEMPSEY: A great question. By the way, I like seeing that [poppy](#) displayed on your lapel at this time of year. We all know what that means.

Let me speak about the collaboration that we do among military leaders, recognizing as I say this that the military advice to our—[Tom Lawson's](#) advice to your [prime minister](#) or [Nick Houghton's](#) advice to Prime Minister [Cameron](#) or whoever it happens to be is not always treated with the same sense of urgency that maybe the military leaders would like. By the way, Tom has never said that to me, but I'm just suggesting to you that at the military level we actually have those kinds of conversations frequently.

Let me say this about whether the world is alert to its challenges. This is grossly simplistic, but it will work for this moment in time. When I look at the security issues facing the globe, you have some that are related to state actors. You've got a rising China—and by the way, I'm not one that thinks that a confrontation with China is inevitable. I actually think the opposite. But anyway, you've got a rising China, and that state actor is creating discomfort in its territorial disputes and in its competition, frankly, within the Asian-Pacific sphere.

Then you've got an assertive Russia. I think that actually surprised Europe, frankly. I think Europe has kind of awakened, slowly—is "awakening," maybe, present participle—awakening to what Russia could really mean. It may not be a direct confrontation with Russia. Hopefully it will not mean that. But it could mean that this kind of flame of nationalism and ethnicity that has been lit could create a security situation that would surprise all of us in Europe.

To the extent that our military leaders are alert to state-on-state issues, I would say with a pretty high degree of confidence that we get it. We understand their capabilities, our capabilities, where there are gaps, where we can complement each other. I have picked out six allies with whom I have a special kind of relationship in terms of our not only interoperability, but at some level, interdependence. That would be Canada and Mexico, because those are our near neighbors, and the United Kingdom, Israel, Australia, and Japan. Those have been incredible sessions, actually, to share a common strategic vision and try to help figure out what it would take to achieve it.

Where all of us kind of stagger a bit is in trying to understand the inherent instability and weakness of the Middle East. The military instrument makes sense when you talk about it in terms of state-on-state

actors. We have a long body of knowledge that says if I do this, the adversary is likely to do that, and if they do this, I can do this. We have a common frame of reference in dealing with state-on-state. We know what deterrence means. We know what assurance means. We know what preparedness means. We know what contingency planning means, and phases of operations and setting theaters.

When you're talking about the abject fragility of the Middle East, application of the military instrument of power becomes far more complex. As I've described it in other settings, it's the difference between complicated and complex. If something is complicated, you can unpack it, take the pieces, fix the pieces, put it back together, and it's better. If something is complex and you unpack it, as soon as you touch it, you change it, and as soon as you change it, you have to go back and try to figure it out again.

That's what the Middle East is like. Using the military instrument of power in a complex environment against inherent weakness, not strength on strength—it's not me measuring my military capability against China or me measuring my military capability against Russia. It's me, with my incredible instrument of military power, trying to figure out how to apply something that strong to something that weak and not change it in ways that would be counter to the outcome we're trying to produce.

On that issue, the Middle East and these groups that stretch from the [Fatah](#) all the way over to Nigeria, we are actually all struggling to determine what our role should be and how we enable regional actors with the capabilities we have.

But yes, we have a very close collaboration. If you're asking me if I would like our most capable partners to spend a few more dollars on defense, yes.

QUESTION: Thank you, General. My name is Nicholas Arena. I'm a lawyer. I've made my living trying murder cases. And speaking of Russia, I spent a year teaching there, as well as in Kazakhstan.

I'm often thinking about many years ago, when I went into the Philippine jungle on a patrol and found all of a sudden that one of my partners to the right of me, my right flank, was a general, who, surprisingly, joined us. His name was [Joseph Stilwell](#), often known as "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell.

General, today sometimes we have the impression that the generals are not with their troops. They're in a faraway place, sometimes on a different continent, hunched over a computer. Can you tell us what the generals are doing as far as being close to the soldiers today?

MARTIN DEMPSEY: That's a great question. Let me go back to [World War I](#). In World War I, that was the case—it depends on what general. If you're talking about me, my battlefield actually is Washington, DC. [Laughter] I mean really. Actually, I would prefer to be walking point in the Philippines. But where that young infantryman needs me is not next to him, wherever we send him, but rather back in Washington making sure we've got the right policy for him, the right guidance, the right resources, and so forth. When you get to a certain level, your responsibility is less about down and more about up.

But that said, let me assure you that those generals that we select to be in the tactical commands, division commanders, are out there constantly. You mentioned [Gary Volesky](#). Gary Volesky, the commander of the 101st Air Assault Division out of Fort Campbell, Kentucky, has his division inside of Monrovia, Liberia, and that's where he is. He's not hunched over a laptop sitting back in Clarksville, Tennessee. He's in Monrovia, Liberia, as is [Paul Funk](#), the commander of the 1st Infantry Division in Baghdad.

When I came into the 1st Armored Division in Baghdad—and [Peter Chiarelli](#) was there, and [Ray Odierno](#) and [Dave Petraeus](#) and several others, [John Batiste](#)—every day we did a thing called battlefield circulation.

The truth is, though, those young captains don't actually like to see us show up, frankly. They don't like to see us show up because they've got to worry about—if I show up on the battlefield in Baghdad or in a neighborhood in Baghdad, which I did, the captain says, "Oh, boy. Isn't this a rare opportunity to show the old man what I've got?" We work through all that. But we did battlefield circulation constantly.

This kind of conflict, the kind that I have just described to the Canadian ambassador, where you have kind of a shadowy enemy living among the population, using terror as a tactic—the guys and gals that actually get that task accomplished are captains and master sergeants and their troops.

So one of the things we have learned over the course of time is to decentralize authority and responsibility. I would suggest to you that an O5, a lieutenant colonel battalion commander, today probably has more capability, more responsibility, and more authority than I did when I was a two-star general 10 years ago.

That aspect of leadership you described is absolutely alive and well. We know that we've got to be out there, to be seen so that we gain the trust of our subordinates. But, boy, those subordinates are incredible.

What I actually worry about is when you take them out of that environment and bring them back to the United States. Then you do have the general kind of hovering over them, after they haven't had that kind of oversight for some time. It sometimes can be frustrating for them. But we're doing fine in terms of leadership.

QUESTION: Sir, Captain Shawn Lonergan.

I actually can confirm—

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Well, what do you think?

QUESTIONER: That's perfect what you said, sir.

Currently I'm an instructor in the Department of Social Sciences at West Point. One of the big things—

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Couldn't get into the English Department?

QUESTIONER: Same building, sir. I turned it down.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: No, no, you made the A team. Go ahead.

QUESTIONER: Sir, one of the big things that we're starting to see at the academy is a lot of discussion about the development of a cyber branch. We just created one a couple months ago in the Army. For the last five years, the military has developed heavily, developing its capabilities. I'm curious. What's next to mature the development of these capabilities to secure our interest in this domain?

MARTIN DEMPSEY: The first thing was, we had to fight our way through the debate about whether it was a domain, whether it was an environment, or whether it was something else. But we finally got through that. We acknowledge that it is a domain.

By the way, the importance of that—you've got the maritime domain, you've got the land domain, the air domain, the space domain, and now we've got a cyber domain—the importance of that is that until we fought our way through whether it was unique, we were just trying to do it kind of ad hoc through other systems. Now that it's a domain, we're building toward it. We've got CyberCom, which is dual-hatted with the National Security Agency. We've got a thing we call the National Mission Force that provides a national level of defense—if asked for, by the way.

This is not something we do on a daily basis. It's a capability we have in case it's asked for. We've got, at the combatant commands, the regional commanders, Central Command in the Middle East, European Command, Africa Command, Pacific Command. We're building capabilities there so that the combatant commander will have the ability to protect their own network, as well as, if asked, to have other capabilities as well.

You asked about the next step. I think the next step is actually an internal assessment of how to better protect our networks. We have to get to a joint information enterprise. Right now every service, Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, runs their own information technology enclave. I think in the Army alone, we've got 1,200 or so different enclaves of information technology.

What we have to do is convince the service chiefs, convince ourselves, that we need to go to something cloud-based, thin client, joint, so that we're more protected, so you can patch it and protect it better, and, by the way, it would be a hell of a lot more efficient in a time of resource constraints.

So that's internally. I think we're actually making some progress. By 2017 or so, we will be the leader in the country of coming to cloud-based, thin-client, joint—meaning common—architectures that are protected, I believe.

The next step is the hardest one, and that is legislation that does two things: establishes some standard for cyber protection across the country—because, as you know, I'm protecting the dot-mil domain. That is my network. The Department of Homeland Security protects dot-gov. But when you look at dot-mil, dot-com, dot-org, and whatever other dots are out there, those are all private, meaning if you own a corporation, you're responsible for protecting your own network. I think it's just going to exceed the capability of private enterprise to protect the network because of the advances that are being made by state and non-state actors with malware and distributed denial-of-service attacks.

We have to come up with some common standard. It's a heavy lift for Congress, because it will be cost-imposing. If they set a standard and then you impose that standard on corporate America, that standard will cost money. It will be hotly debated.

There may be ways around that. But we've got to do something. We can't just ignore it.

The second one: We've got to incentivize information-sharing. Right now all of the incentives are negative. They are disincentives for information sharing. I'll make a name up here. If the Bank of Topeka is being attacked, there are disincentives for that bank to report to the central government that they're being attacked. We've got to find a way to—we don't have to incentivize information sharing, but we've got to get past the point where there are disincentives.

Why is that important? Because an attack on the United States is not going to originate with an attack on me, because I'm the one that's protected. An attack on the United States is going to come in through the private sector.

By the way, let me say this about cyber in general. When we think about the other domains—space, air, sea, and land—we dominate those. There's no peer. We don't have a peer in the world. We dominate them. There are others that are scrambling to catch up, and they are closing those gaps. But we dominate. And that's what you would expect, right? The American people, for the investment they make in their military, want us to be dominant. We are.

We're not necessarily dominant in cyber. We have to come to grips with the fact that we have maybe even a peer competitor or two, and we certainly have several near-peer competitors. If that's true, then we've got to be alert for the kind of attack that could occur.

I don't know how much time you all have spent thinking about things like this. My particular nightmare scenario is that someone emplaces malware inside of our financial sector that attacks our critical infrastructure. How would you like to have that challenge as the president of the United States, where the financial sector—ours—is attacking, through a remote botnet malware, state or non-state actor—and we probably wouldn't be able to tell—attacking the critical infrastructure? The decision is, which one do I drop? Do you want me to drop Wall Street or do you want me to drop Duke Power?

Tough, and, frankly, we need to get after it. That's the next step, which is actually legislative.

JEFFREY MCCAUSLAND: Ladies and gentlemen, I think you all agree with me that we've had a rare opportunity. Sir, thank you once again for a wonderful visit to the Carnegie Council.

MARTIN DEMPSEY: Thank you. I really enjoyed it.

Audio

In this candid and thoughtful conversation, General Dempsey tackles the difficult questions, from ISIS to Ebola to cyber threats. And throughout, he stresses the importance of ethics, education, and service.

Video Clips

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