

Modernizing the Corps

A response to LtGen P.K. Van Riper's criticism of *Force Design 2030*
by Col Matthew Jones (Ret)

"I am fully aware the redesign of the force may be perceived by some external audiences as an oversimplification in the face of an uncertain future—perhaps even an obsessive focus on China at the expense of other enduring requirements. Those who suggest this are mistaken ... Our historical and legislatively-mandated role as the Nation's force-in-readiness, "most ready when the Nation is least ready," remains a central requirement in the design of our future force, and one which I will keep unflinchingly in mind."

—Gen David H. Berger

In a recent op-ed published in the *Marine Corps Times*, LtGen Paul K. Van Riper (Ret) makes a bold frontal assault on the Marine Corps' modernization efforts, which have been proceeding since the summer of 2019 under the title of *Force Design 2030*. LtGen Van Riper makes no bones about his rejection of modernization, which he fears will do nothing less than "seriously jeopardize national security."

Much of Van Riper's short article is dedicated to reminding readers of his own résumé as a combat leader. From the perspective of many Marines, he need not have taken the time to provide these reminders: he has not been forgotten, and his sterling reputation is secure. This means that his ideas on this subject, far from uncommon among Marines both active and retired who are uncomfortable with the pace of ongoing change, deserve a respectful hearing.

LtGen Van Riper's hard-hitting argument is easily summarized. The

Marine Corps, he claims, is trading away its long-standing ability to serve as a combined-arms force in readiness for a range of niche capabilities (better provided, if needed, by other Services) applicable to a single "very specialized mission." That mission, in Van Riper's mind, boils down to "firing anti-ship missiles" at Chinese ships in the South China Sea. By making this error, the Corps will become "a mere shadow of what was once a feared fighting force," and deprive the Nation of "the ready combined arms force it has long depended on," leading to the aforementioned jeopardy to the national security.

This dire outcome, were it to occur, would indeed be a significant blow to

the effectiveness of the Marine Corps' contribution to the national defense. It will not occur, however. Van Riper's argument rests upon two debatable propositions. One is a mere straw man, frankly unworthy of him and the other experienced military professionals making similar arguments; the other is a serious professional critique that demands engagement on its merits.

First, the straw man. The Marine Corps is not redesigning itself solely to fight the Chinese in the South China Sea or anywhere else. The 38th Commandant has repeatedly said so, and his 2019 *Commandant's Planning Guidance* is unambiguous on the point: "The Marine Corps has been and remains the Nation's premier naval expeditionary force-in-readiness."² As the opening quote suggests, Commandant Berger has long been aware of the "one-trick pony" argument that LtGen Van Riper is advancing. To a point, it deserves consideration; as the Commandant noted in June last year, "It would indeed be foolish to overspecialize to a degree that would compromise that [combined-arms force in readiness] capability."³ As the Commandant noted then, the Marine Corps is managing that risk effectively. That portion of the Marine Corps tasked with confronting the People's Republic of China as an element of the joint force in the Western Pacific is getting the tools it needs to do that job. The rest of the Marine Corps—with

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seven MEU headquarters, four conventional infantry regimental headquarters, twenty-one infantry battalions, and a formidable aviation combat element that operates more advanced multirole fixed-wing aircraft than the air forces of all but a handful of nations—remains ready to do the Nation’s bidding in any clime or place.

LtGen Van Riper’s formidable reputation for intellectual rigor and professional integrity suggests that he is well aware of these facts. He, and others making similar arguments, advance this “one-trick pony” straw man as a convenient rhetorical technique to focus attention and, regrettably, misinformed outrage on their more substantive concerns.

Those concerns, the second pillar on which LtGen Van Riper’s argument rests are of another order. They represent a very serious professional challenge to *Force Design 2030*’s vision of what combined arms warfare actually requires under modern conditions. *Force Design 2030*, as the Commandant’s previously published writings and statements explicitly state, fundamentally presumes that the character of warfare is changing in ways that mean the Marine Corps, as two Commandants in a row have agreed, “is not organized, trained, equipped, or postured to meet the demands of the rapidly changing future operating environment.”⁴ Many of these changes have to do with continuing developments in the long-standing trend toward greater range, precision, and lethality of weapons in the context of a battlespace increasingly saturated with sensors and the command and control capability to link sensors and weapons. The inescapable implication is that while the ability to conduct combined arms warfare—to integrate all these capabilities to achieve military objectives—remains the essence of warfighting; however, doing that is no longer simply a matter of fusing the activities of infantry “with tanks, artillery, engineers, logistics support, helicopter gunships and attack aircraft” in the ways that LtGen Van Riper did so successfully in Vietnam and taught Marines to do in training during the 1980s and 1990s. Elements of the 20th-century combined arms team—70-ton

main battle tanks, slow, truck-hauled cannon artillery, short-ranged, vulnerable attack helicopters—are hard to get ashore from amphibious shipping and difficult to hide, protect, and bring to bear tactically in the face of threats increasingly able to find them, fix them, target them, and strike them with precision-guided ordnance. The Marine Corps has become accustomed over the past few decades to employing such systems, with great effect, against adversaries unable to interfere with their strategic deployment or to contest the joint air supremacy that enabled them to operate without fear of overhead attack. These conditions no longer prevail, even against potential adversaries far lower on the threat spectrum than the PRC or Russia; Yemen’s Houthis and their Iranian backers, for example, have regularly demonstrated (today, not in 2030) a fairly sophisticated capability to acquire and strike with long-range precision fires both on land and at sea. We simply cannot continue to pretend that the force we had in 2019, and the 20th-century combined arms tactical system under which it was trained to fight, remains sufficient to these threats.

Taken at face value, Van Riper’s argument is little more than “yes, we can.” His words suggest no awareness of a changing threat environment or of any adaptations to the 20th-century system that might have to occur in response. Once again, given his formidable intellectual reputation, this cannot be the whole of what he is arguing. Something must have been lost in editing or condensing down to the brief statement we see in the *Marine Corps Times*. The full argument must be something to the effect that, yes, all these changes are occurring, but that there remains a “last hundred yards” that will still and always have to be closed by fire and maneuver leading to the annihilation of the enemy and the taking and holding of ground. The Marine Corps, if this is indeed the argument, might be at risk of losing the ability to win that ultimate fight by focusing too much on the capabilities needed to get Marines into it—too much long-range sensing, shaping, and shooting and not enough bare-knuckle close-combat lethality.

If that is Van Riper’s argument, it is one worth having. No one involved with *Force Design 2030* pretends that it is a complete solution, correct in all details; the Commandant himself has repeatedly been at pains to note that it is an ongoing process of learning, experimentation, and adjustment, much of which is visible on an ongoing basis during everything from the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab’s formal experiments to the large-scale, force-on-force training exercises that have now been going on for more than two years at the Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center. An ongoing, informed dialog among all Marines, active and retired, is essential to make the most of this learning. LtGen Van Riper knows, better than most, the risks of drawing instant conclusions from a war that has been in progress for less than a month so far, but there is much to learn from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as well as from Nagorno-Karabakh and other past and ongoing conflicts that offer us the priceless opportunity to benefit from others’ hard-won experience. But to do so effectively, it is time we move beyond reflexive traditionalism and willful misunderstanding. We must drop the straw men and engage with the real essentials of what the Marine Corps is trying to do with *Force Design 2030*. We will not “get it right.” But we can hope, as a wise student of history once advised, not to get it too badly wrong.

Note

1. Gen David H. Berger, “The Case for Change: Meeting the Principal Challenges Facing the Corps,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: June 2020).
2. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
3. Gen David H. Berger, “Preparing for the Future,” *Military Review*, (May-June 2021), available at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil>.
4. *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*.

