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The battle for the military's future

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"The face of war, the face of how we do business, is changing."

That's retired Marine Corps Gen. James Cartwright, former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sharing how he sees the military's future at a National Press Club session for reporters Tuesday. Cartwright, who was known for his forward thinking while on active duty, has apparently decided to share his ideas through a series of public appearances.

One area that he sees changing in the military is what he calls "the platforms" — by which he means tanks, troop carriers, ships, aircraft, heavy guns and even rifles. They are becoming less important in Cartwright's view than the new electronics, sensors and other gadgetry.

He recalls being with then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates in Georgia reviewing an Army unit ready to deploy to Central Asia with new systems that included iPads and droids for individual soldiers. Cartwright said Gates asked one sergeant during a barracks walkthrough, "What do you think of all this stuff?"

The sergeant replied, "I'd sooner leave this barracks without my rifle as to leave without these things."

The lesson for Cartwright was that the new electronics, which the military calls information technology (IT), will replace in importance the current platforms — in which the side with the most modern guns, tanks and aircraft often won. Platforms, however, take time to develop.

"We're starting to move away from platform-centric towards the leverage that is gained by IT systems that allow us to gain advantage no matter what the platform is," said Cartwright, who holds the Harold Brown Chair in Defense Policy Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Another factor is the time available to make changes for the new battlefield.

"Spending 20 years in development of a platform [such as an armored personnel carrier] and then building it," as well as taking two or three years to make adjustments, all "seems somewhat irrelevant," Cartwright said. In the future, there will be much shorter time periods in which to upgrade systems.

This was one lesson he learned from combatting IEDs [improvised explosive devices], first in Iraq and now in Afghanistan, where they continue to be the greatest threat to U.S. and coalition forces.

As Cartwright described it, dealing with IEDs has become super fast-paced. The enemy invents a new

fuse to detonate an IED; someone on the U.S. or coalition side invents a counter to that fuse and by the time it is deployed another new fuse has turned up. "It's about a 30-day cycle to try to stay up with that fight," he said.

Cartwright says cyberwarfare will determine leverage on the next tactical battlefield. And that cyberfight, he said, will have a time cycle "somewhere between nine and 14 days."

A second issue for the future in Cartwright's view is maintaining the all-volunteer force.

"Their expectations of service [personnel] are substantially different than a conscript force," he said, referring to past wars followed by peacetime cutbacks when the military draft provided the basic manpower needs. The more professional, career-minded all-volunteer force expects "to come to work and have equipment that works," Cartwright said. "They expect to come to work and do training that is relevant to what they think is going to happen next, so that they are ready."

During the years of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, from 2001 to today, the services have expanded in numbers and have had all the funds needed to arm their forces with new types of weaponry. There was so much money that the Defense Department by 2008 was paying cost overruns of $295 billion on 95 weapons systems, according to the Government Accountability Office. Now the Obama administration is proposing cutting 80,000 soldiers from the Army and 20,000 Marines from the Corps over the next five years.

"This is the first time that we have gone through a fiscal downturn with an all-volunteer force. What are the dangers of not preparing for the realities of that downturn?" Cartwright asked.

"If we hollow that force out, their ability to vote with their feet is pretty significant," he said, meaning many would resign if their activity slows down, pay stagnates, promotions become limited or their equipment deteriorates in quality.

The $487 billion in Pentagon cuts over 10 years agreed upon last year represents about an 11 percent reduction in defense spending. As Cartwright points out, "Historically after a conflict, we come down somewhere in the neighborhood of 20 percent to 25 percent," which would mean more cuts can be expected.

Unofficially, the Pentagon is looking at how to manage spending on personnel not just in the face of further funding reductions but also when the economy revives and civilian jobs tempt highly trained military personnel while, at the same time, quality enlistments drop off. Retirement and health-care costs are already a focus, no matter what further cuts are made.

Each service is studying retention — "how you keep the ones you want to keep" in the words of one Pentagon official. There are leading and lagging factions when it comes to incentives that range from money to housing to long-term health care for retirees. Looking out 10 and 20 years, the official said, "It takes fine tuning to get the right formula."

Cartwright said the military services "don't want to give away anything they are planning" because if they announce it, "then all of a sudden it happens."

Instead, some serious planning about further cuts are probably being discussed behind closed doors, according to Cartwright, where defense officials "feel safe that they can explore the options without having somebody take the decision away from them."

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