

Kelly Brownell:

Hello everyone, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, the dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. I'm pleased today to be joined by General Martin Dempsey. General Dempsey is former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and as such, he was the nation's highest ranking military officer. He was named the 18th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2011, where he served as a principal military advisor to the president, the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Council. Prior to becoming chairman, General Dempsey served as the Army's 37th chief of staff, commander of the U.S. Army training and doctrine command, deputy commander and then acting commander of the U.S. Central Command, and commanding general of the multinational security transition command in Iraq.

General Dempsey stepped down from his post as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in September of 2015. In early 2016, he began residency at Duke as a Rubinstein fellow. He is a graduate of both Duke where he received a master's degree in English in West Point. Welcome, General Dempsey.

General Martin Dempsey:

Thank you, Dean. It's great to be here.

Kelly Brownell:

I'm so happy you're here and I look forward very much to hearing more about some of your experiences. So let's begin with this. You were raised in Goshen, New York and went to Catholic schools there. Where did the idea come from about going to West Point?

General Martin Dempsey:

Came from my mother. I had applied to the Naval Academy actually and was not accepted because of my vision. In the process of applying for the Naval Academy, in those days, it wasn't all that hard to get into the military academies at the end of Vietnam. So they were sharing files and I ended up on a wait list for West Point and at the very last minute, 26 or 27 June for a one July report date, I received a telegram, which tells you about the period of time in which I lived, and that telegram said, "Congratulations. You've been accepted to West Point. You'll report on 1 July."

I had made other plans by that time and I went home and my mother asked me to go. I said, "I just really don't want to do this," and she cried. When she cried, I caved in and I went to West Point and the first day I arrived there, there were several of the upperclassmen who told me in no uncertain terms that there was no way I was going to make it through West Point. I found myself saying to myself, "I'm going to prove them wrong," even though I didn't want to be there. 45 years later, I ended my military career.

Kelly Brownell:

What an unbelievable story, that it was so close to you even being at West Point and then having people think you may not make it. It's remarkable, absolutely remarkable, what you've accomplished. So you have a love of reading and words. How does this connect with the work that you did in the military?

General Martin Dempsey:

Well, my studies as a master of literature here at Duke University and then subsequently teaching it did a couple of things. One is you can live vicariously through literature. You can learn things and experience things that you could not otherwise experience. I think it opened, broadened, enriched the way I

thought about people and about things. Then because you write for survivalism in a master's program, I became a pretty competent writer. The more senior you become in any organization, the more your writing skills come into play. So the combination of challenging myself. I mean, I was way out of my comfort zone trying to get a master's of English from Duke University, and then realizing, reflecting on it, and the hard skills of writing, I think it helped me a great deal.

Kelly Brownell:

So the term civil-military has been brought up in the context of your service to the country, and you've referred to yourself as the dash in civil-military. What do you mean by that?

General Martin Dempsey:

Well, the relationship between our civilian elected and appointed officials and the military, there's always moments of friction. I suppose a physicist would say that that's important because without friction, there's no movement or progress. The idea is to keep the friction constructive. As the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I mean, I was at the epicenter of that friction where various elected officials from different political parties were always disagreeing with each other about the proper course for America and the proper use of the military. It was my job to make sense of all that, for both those who were making the decisions on the civilian side and those who were implementing those decisions on the military side.

Kelly Brownell:

So the connections and relationships you would establish with elected leaders and with people in the civil part of our society must have been very important to accomplishing the goal.

General Martin Dempsey:

Well, there was nothing more important than building a relationship of trust, both with the force that I represented. So my peers as military leaders, generals, and admirals, articulating the use of military force and gaining the proper resources and clarity of policy for it, all the way down to the lowest soldier, sailor, airman, and marine. On the one hand, so I had to have the trust of those roughly two million men and women in uniform that I was representing them properly and appropriately, and then on the other side had to gain the trust of elected officials that I was giving them advice that they could actually accept, and that would create the conditions and lead to the outcomes that they desired. So it was a give and take every day.

Kelly Brownell:

I can imagine. So I've heard you tell a story about one day in your career that changed something for you. It was during Operation Desert Storm, and you were in the third armor division and your unit did a particular maneuver called the left hook maneuver. What happened that day?

General Martin Dempsey:

Well, I was not in a command position. I was in a position as an executive officer, so a second in command. Up until that time in my career, we really hadn't been in combat. The armor force had not. Other elements of the U.S military had been. So as we went along, a couple of things happened. One was we'd started to take casualties, and that was a new experience. Secondly, we began to overrun various Iraqi units and in the process we dealt with the issue of the humane handling of prisoners of

war, both of which were new experiences for all of us and learning experiences for all of us, that we then later applied in future conflict.

Kelly Brownell:

So how did that episode change your thinking in terms of U.S. and modern warfare?

General Martin Dempsey:

Well, that particular campaign demonstrated a couple of things of great value. One was clearly technological superiority. Second, that hard, realistic training would always give you a decided advantage over your adversaries. But it also pointed out, to me anyway, and most of us actually, that it really is all about the people. What makes the United States military exceptional in the world is generally speaking not the equipment that we field, although that's an important aspect of military operations, but it's about the people that man it. I think it was a validation of the hard work we had done to adapt our training and doctrine after the Vietnam war. It reminded me that the world's a very dynamic place and that the next war would probably be nothing like the last one.

Kelly Brownell:

So we're coming up on the 15th anniversary of 9/11. What do you think is the biggest change that's occurred militarily during this time?

General Martin Dempsey:

Well, you asked me a question earlier about Desert Storm. Desert Storm was the quintessential heavy force maneuvering over vast distances with a very hierarchical command structure. The kind of conflict we've been in since 2001 is mostly characterized by small unit actions executed by junior leaders within a higher commander's intent, but very much executed locally. So we've had to adapt our systems to push capability, responsibility, and authority to the edge, as they say, to give the young men and women who are much junior than heretofore the kind of capabilities that I had as a two star general. We've managed to do it. We probably lagged in the training of that force a bit in the early days. In other words, we pushed the capability before we had trained and educated them to really use it to the full capability, but we caught up. So we're very much a decentralized or flat ... Although we don't appear to be that way, we get a lot done at the junior leader level that makes us very agile.

Kelly Brownell:

So during your time as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I can imagine you went through periods where there were calls to reduce military spending at the time when we may have needed more. How did you navigate that territory?

General Martin Dempsey:

Not as well as I would've liked, to be honest, Dean. I mean, I one of the things when people ask me do I have any regrets during my four years as chairman, I always tell them that I have several. One of them in particular is I really never managed to convince the Congress of the United States that what they were doing to the military budget would have a detrimental effect over time. Part of it is it's hard to articulate words like risk. They can be parsed and they can be twisted and turned, or words like readiness. The entire force is ... In the aggregate, of course we're ready, but there are pieces of the force where this budget pressure has caused us to be much less than ready. Frankly, the issue in our budget ... We're in

the kind of world where there's things you need to do for 10 or 20 years. This issue of terrorism, it's already a 15 year issue and I frankly believe we're not halfway through it yet.

Yet our budget process kind of drives us to doing this one year at a time. What we really need is a 20 year campaign, not 21 year campaigns. The budget process is extraordinarily frustrating. We don't have nearly enough flexibility. We may want to retire our weapons system and save money and invest it elsewhere, and we're told we can't do it. We might want to close a base, we're told we can't do it. So a lot ... Not a lot, but enough of the money is being expended on things we really don't need, and not enough of it on the things we do need

Kelly Brownell:

Before you became the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, one of your most important shops was head of the training effort that created the new Iraqi security forces. But then you became chairman and those forces largely collapsed, some might say, in the face of the [ISOL 00:11:24] threat. What are the lessons that have been learned about foreign military assistance in light of the Iraqi and Afghan experiences?

General Martin Dempsey:

Yeah. So here's the lesson and it's not a lesson that we learned late. We learned early on that a military is ... you can train a military, you can equip a military, but only its own leaders can develop the kind of trust and confidence and loyalty that is necessary to hold a unit together. So we always knew that these forces, we were building were fragile. We could report on their military capability. We could report how many weapons we had issued them and how many buildings we built for them and how many training areas we'd constructed for them. We could gauge when they were working through a training regimen, but when you put them into combat, they will either succeed or fail based on leaders and the degree to which the leaders feel connected to their central government.

The real failing in Iraq was that the central government failed repeatedly to demonstrate the kind of inclusion of all groups, Kurds, Sunni Shia, that was necessary to have a national military actually believe it was a national military. So ISIS didn't militarily defeat the Iraqi army, the Iraqi army collapsed because they didn't believe that the central government was really interested in them or a particular part of the Iraqi society.

Kelly Brownell:

What's your assessment of where things stand now?

General Martin Dempsey:

Well, they're better, but not nearly good enough. I've watched very carefully as the Iraqi military has begun to reclaim territory. The reclaiming of the territory is not the hard part, to be honest with you. That will happen. It'll happen both because they're getting better, the enemy is getting weaker and our support is being sustained. But for example, in the campaign for [Mozel 00:13:20], when Mozel is restored to Iraqi control, the question is what is Iraq, that is to say the central government, going to do with it? If they show up with humanitarian aid and reconstruction, and if they establish governance that is inclusive of all groups, then the future will be relatively bright for Iraq. If they fail to do that, if by contrast they become sectarian, they provide support to only some of the people, they go back to some of their parochial ways, then the future is much less bright and then you have a situation where some of these ideologies can reappear in years to come.

Kelly Brownell:

So when President Obama spoke at your retirement, he talked about a cigar box that you had, may still have, with 132 cards inside. Can you describe that for us?

General Martin Dempsey:

Yeah, I can. When I got to Iraq in 2003 to command the 1st Armored Division, we actually weren't taking many casualties early on because the situation was chaotic, but not dangerous. Then as the insurgency and some of the militias began to take hold and turn against not only themselves, the government of Iraq, the interim government, but against us, we started taking casualties. We would go to memorial services and at those memorial services the chaplain would say a few words, a couple of the teammates of the fallen soldier would say some words, and then at the end the teammates, there are normally 10 or 12 of them would line up. These are the young men or women who have lost their teammate, and senior leaders would down the line, shake their hand, and I found myself at a complete loss early on for what to say to these young men and women.

Then one day ... And I always felt badly about it. I mean, what do you say to somebody who's just lost their teammate? And they're scared, because they got to go back out and they're guilt ridden because they feel like they should have prevented the loss. So one morning I woke up with this phrase resonating in my head, "Make it matter," and what we did is from that point forward, we'd walk down the line to talk to these young men and women and we'd say, "Make it matter." That phrase became ... it became powerful actually, because it had so much more inside of those three words than you would expect. We all understood that, that it was our job to make the sacrifice matter, to make the mission matter, to make every day matter, both to the Iraqi people and to ourselves.

Well, after I started to accumulate ... I used to have cards made for every loss. In fact, you said 132 in the box. There's actually 130 there because I always carry two or three with me and I have two in my pocket right now. They have an image of the soldier that we lost and something about his family and something about the circumstances of his death. I used to carry them in my pocket, all of them. But once you reach 50 or 60, you can't do that any longer. So we found a mahogany ... You can find almost anything in Iraq, and we found a mahogany cigar box and we had engraved on the top Make It Matter, and that became the resting place for these cards. I've had that with me ever since, and from time to time, I rotate the cards that I carry in my pocket.

Kelly Brownell:

Remarkable story. President Obama said you had those cards with you when you met some 600 children. Can you tell us about that?

General Martin Dempsey:

Yeah. There's an organization called TAPS, the tragedy assistance program for survivors, and it's a great organization. The military does a great job of taking care of families through the career and if a soldier is killed the military does a great job with casualty assistance from the moment of death through the burial. But then families tend to go someplace else and they're probably nowhere near a military installation. We try to stay in touch with them, but it's hard. What this organization has done is stepped up to kind of fill that void and what they do, they're an organization that's largely peopled or that employs these survivors and it's survivors taking care of survivors. Every year they have an event on Memorial Day called the Good Grief Camp, the idea that you bring these children together who have

had this common experience of losing a loved one and you let them grieve together, but also you let them become friends and they look forward to coming back every year.

The first year I was chief, they asked me to come and speak to them. I had no idea what I was getting ... Literally, no idea what I was getting into. I walked into this auditorium. It was a ballroom really filled with 600 of these youngsters from probably three years old to 15 years old, all of which were wearing a button with image of their loved one on their shirt. The button was probably four inches in diameter, big button, and I realized that I didn't ... What do you say to those young men and women who have lost ... There was mentors with them, the Military District of Washington. There was hundreds, thousands of volunteers to work on this event because it's so uplifting.

So I had 600 of these soldiers and sailors and airmen and marines and coast guardsmen mentoring 600 of these young kids, and I was doing okay until this one little girl ... I said, "What do you guys want to know about me and chief staff of the army?" "Do you have your own plane? What's your favorite pizza? Who's your favorite baseball team?" One little girl said, a four year old said, "Is my daddy an angel?" I thought, "I'm done." Because I couldn't control my emotions, I broke into a little Irish children's song and I've been back every year since then. That little girl, Lizzie, by the way, her name is Lizzie Aggie, is the one who I asked to introduce me at my retirement.

Kelly Brownell:

Oh my gosh, what a story? You're painting this amazing picture of an incredible military leader, but somebody who is also very much a human being and has emotions and is very touched by the people that are under your command. I can imagine the people who served with you very much appreciated that.

General Martin Dempsey:

I hope so. I certainly appreciated them.

Kelly Brownell:

Yeah. Well, it's been very nice of you to join us today. This has been a remarkable conversation and you give hope to all people on waiting lists, given what you've accomplished with your life and that initial waiting list for West Point. So I've been talking today with General Martin Dempsey. He served our country as the 18th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. General Dempsey has been in residence at the Sanford School of Public Policy and the Fuqua School of Business since the spring as a Rubinstein fellow. The Rubinstein fellow initiative brings thought leaders to Duke University to spark discussion on current and future global challenges. In the spring, General Dempsey co-taught a course at the Sanford School on American civil military relations with our colleague, political scientist Peter Fever. We'd like to thank Peter Fever for his help with this podcast episode. Thank you for listening. I'm Kelly Brownell.