

IDEAS & ISSUES (LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS)

Legislative Affairs

What does this office do for the Marine Corps

by Col Raymond A. Celeste, USMCR

The Marine Corps Office of Legislative Affairs is led by BGen John F. Kelly, who reports directly to the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC). As the legislative assistant to the CMC, he is charged with answering all congressional inquiries that are generated by Members of the U.S. Congress. The Congress is made up of 100 Senators and 440 Representatives. Each member can generate congressional inquiries based upon requests by his or her constituents. These requests run the full range of issues. They may involve humanitarian transfers, awards, pay issues, etc. The members usually want some kind of response within 30 days, and they expect the response to be comprehensive and accurate.

The legislative assistant to the CMC has a staff of action officers who look into each inquiry with great care and craft responses on behalf of the CMC and, in some cases, the Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of Defense. BGen Kelly's staff responds to about 4,000 written congressional inquiries per year. They respond to telephonic inquiries as well.

BGen Kelly also has staff in the House and Senate sides of the U.S. Congress. They were placed in the House and Senate office buildings at the request of Congress in order to facilitate answers to congressional inquiries. These Marines also take Members of Congress and their staffs on fact-finding missions within the United States and throughout the world and regularly escort members and staffers into combat theaters. Marine commands may find these visits to be a burden, not understanding that this is an opportunity for the Marine Corps to show Congress how well their Marines and sailors are performing and to get accurate information on issues that are affecting their ability to carry out their assigned missions. It is in the interest of the Marine Corps to ensure that these

visits are appropriately organized and that the members/staffers receive correct information on the issues at hand.

Another aspect of the legislative assistant's responsibility is to prepare Marine Corps witnesses who are called upon by Congress to testify. This preparation is accomplished via time-consuming "murder boards." The legislative assistant ensures that the witnesses opening statements are vetted within the Department of Defense and the Office of Management and Budget and delivered to the appropriate committee or subcommittee in a timely manner. The legislative assistant is also responsible for the timely and accurate answers to ques-

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tions for the record (QFRs) to witnesses both prior to the hearing and after the hearing. This is a monumental task, as the legislative assistant annually receives hundreds of QFRs. There is a due date on these questions that can make for a challenging time in meeting the required deadlines. The legislative assistant and his staff are not the duty experts on particular issues; however, they query the Headquarters Marine Corps staff via a computer-based system. Many times the legislative assistant must weigh in with the appropriate staff sections to ensure that these questions reach their intended destinations, accurately and timely. The legislative assistant always

works with the goal that the CMC's intent and direction for the Marine Corps are met. There are on average over 50 hearings a year that involve Marine Corps witnesses.

The legislative assistant appreciates the cooperation he receives in making sure that good relations are maintained with the U.S. Congress, as Congress is ultimately responsible for funding the Marine Corps based upon CMC recommendations. The CMC is charged by law to ensure that the U.S. Marine Corps is prepared to respond to a broad range of missions throughout the world, and without the support of the Congress the Marine Corps would not be as successful as it has been throughout its history.

Oftentimes, Marines may not realize the importance of our relationship with the U.S. Congress. We hope that this brief overview of the CMC's legislative operation will enlighten Marines and sailors throughout the globe so that the CMC can continue to accomplish his mandate by law. Marines understand that our role throughout the world is a pivotal one in supporting the Commander in Chief's constitutional role as commander of all U.S. forces. Our Marines deserve to be properly equipped, maintained, and trained. Only the U.S. Congress can provide the necessary resources.



> Col Celeste is assigned to the Marine Corps Office of Legislative Affairs. He is a congressional affairs officer. He has held assignments in the Active/Reserve Components in artillery, unmanned aircraft systems, and light armored reconnaissance. Col Celeste holds a certificate in Legislative Studies, The Government Affairs Institute, Georgetown University.