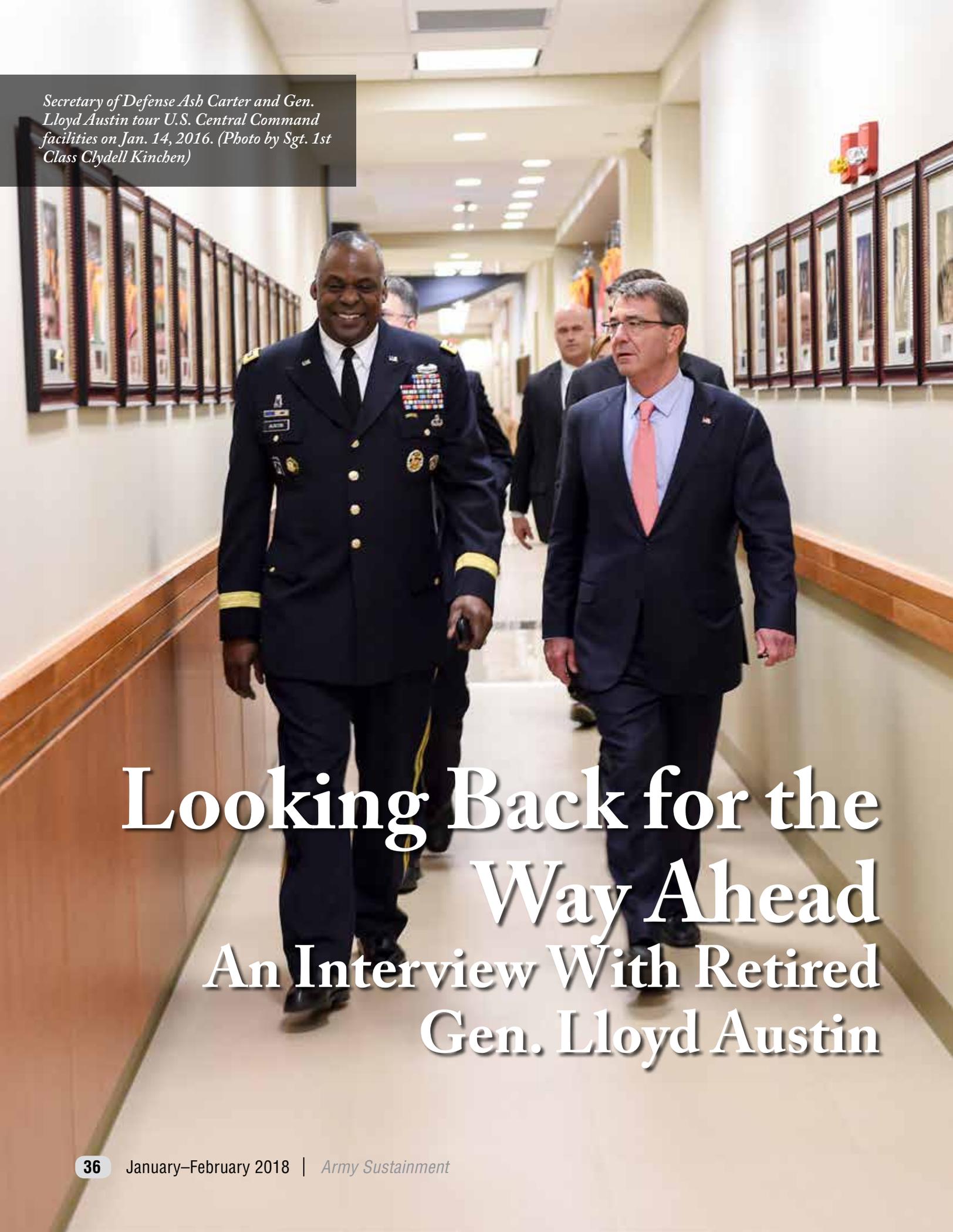


*Secretary of Defense Ash Carter and Gen. Lloyd Austin tour U.S. Central Command facilities on Jan. 14, 2016. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Chydell Kinchen)*



# Looking Back for the Way Ahead An Interview With Retired Gen. Lloyd Austin

**D**uring his 41-year career, retired Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III led many troops into combat. He served as the 3rd Infantry Division's assistant division commander for maneuver during the invasion of Iraq, the vice chief of staff of the Army, the commander of the Combined Joint Task Force–Afghanistan, and the commander of the U.S. Central Command before retiring in 2016. In this interview, he reflects on what history teaches us about transforming to a Multi-Domain Battle (MDB) force.

*Throughout your career, you saw the Army undergo several major transformations. What were some of the most challenging, and how did you adapt?*

In over 41 years of service, I had the honor to see and experience a lot of change. The Dupuy Reforms in the mid-to-late 1970s, the rise of TRADOC [the Training and Doctrine Command], the development of the “big five” weapon systems, and the AirLand Battle doctrine have all been truly transformational. The end of the Cold War, the nuclear weapons drawdown, and the subsequent proliferation of conventional arms have shaped how we view the operational environment.

I was one of the first cohorts of officers to benefit from the move to the all-volunteer force. Operationally and logistically, I saw and experienced the move from the linear battlefield to the nonlinear battlespace and now to MDB. Dramatic changes in the operational environment today reinforce the need for a focus on the Third Offset Strategy and MDB.

The Gulf War was truly the watershed event in how we understood the post-Cold War operational environment. The events of 9/11 brought an end to the notion of a water's edge dividing matters of the foreign and the domestic and how we defined military operations other than war in its newest form of “gray zone” warfare.

Shifts in operational art, force development, and employment designs and methods drove our con-

cept of a heavy force versus a light force; [we were] constantly in search of an effective middleweight force and operational method. We developed over-the-horizon strategic employment techniques using the counter-Islamic State group campaign as a recent test case. This has re-emphasized the importance of the indirect, by-with-through approach, which uses a mix of precision fires, special operations forces enablers, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) in support of a reliable, indigenous ground force partner.

The one constant that I have observed throughout all of these transformations, the one essential element of continuity that we could always rely on, was the American Soldier. The Soldier is, and has always been, the central key to successful adaptation.

*AirLand Battle doctrine took shape in the early '80s and guided the Army's readiness and development through the end of the Cold War and Operations Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom. Do you foresee that MDB will be similarly significant?*

As I learn more about the concepts, force designs, and innovations coming about under MDB, I'm reminded that history is a willing teacher, when and if we choose to listen to its lessons. History teaches us that the character of our fights have changed and will continue to change. Today, I see us facing compound threats. These threats don't just add up to a bigger sum of a problem facing our forces, but rather are multiplied problem sets that we will have to face and overmatch.

I believe that these new compound threats feed new compound wars. To achieve synergistic wins in a compound war, we are going to need at least matching compound capabilities. A good example of this is the compound war that we now face in Syria and Iraq.

To be a successful and usable doctrine, MDB will have to be built with this new environmental compound

A retired general who served as vice chief of Staff of the Army and led troops in Iraq and Afghanistan lends his 41 years of Army experience to explain how recent history can prepare the Army for Multi-Domain Battle.

security reality in mind. It must be designed and manned with new force tools, updated employment and sustainment techniques, new formations, and most importantly with new talent. The competent and confident Soldier, operating with agility in this environment, is most critical.

***In 2010, as the commander of U.S. Forces–Iraq, you oversaw the Army’s largest logistics operation in six decades to remove millions of pieces of equipment. Can you elaborate on the impact of sustainers on this effort?***

The impact of our great sustainers was nothing less than the decisive effort and action of this final phase of our campaign. It’s not often that you hear sustainment operations described in this way, as the decisive action.

We have to change our traditional ways of seeing and approaching tooth-to-tail operations. In both war and peacetime operations, the truly decisive action is always in the finishing; that’s not something that’s limited to only tooth operations, especially in the contemporary operational environments. As the Army moves toward MDB, we absolutely must change how we think about this.

***You were the architect of the counter-Islamic State group campaign in Iraq and Syria that we are using today. What lessons learned can you share about the way the Army should operate as we move toward the MDB concept?***

I think we got the counter-Islamic State group campaign plan more right than wrong in our strategy, operational approach, and force redesigns. We identified early on what Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s main strategic error was—erasing the Iraqi-Syrian international border when he did. This enabled the United States and our coalition partners to deliver fires into Syrian sanctuaries. We had the vision early on to exploit this to our advantage.

That experience emphasizes the importance of gaining and main-

taining an accurate appreciation of the ever-changing operational environment. The necessity of coalitions, comprising willing and able partners, built and maintained through security force assistance activities is an essential enabling capability.

The kinds of compound wars we face today, and what our counter-Islamic State group campaign faced, demand extreme strategic patience. Vital to this is having a clear strategy to give us a sense of perspective. Our ability to keep in perspective the many tactical setbacks, stalls, and stalemates we experienced throughout the campaign, along with those we had projected we’d likely experience, is essential.

Another lesson gathered is that of fast power. This entails placing the enemy on the horns of multiple dilemmas near simultaneously and being able to sustain this multiprong pressure over time and expansive distances. Momentum was key and will be essential in MDB.

Lastly, a revolution in technological affairs does not equal a revolution in military affairs. At times, we’ve placed too much hope and credit on the winning ingredient being technological solutions. Technology is a necessary ingredient to any and all winning combinations of strategy and force, but it is insufficient alone. The key is human talent. It’s the pure and noble courage of the American Soldier that counts the most.

***As you know, the chief of staff of the Army’s number one priority is readiness. How do logisticians need to change to maximize readiness as the Army shifts to a more expeditionary environment?***

Supply versus demand has always been a false choice. Effective operational doctrines find ways of achieving and sustaining both in cost-effective ways. We must reconsider and think bigger about what we define as readiness. We need to think and act in terms of comprehensive joint readiness. New thinking and new ways of research and develop-

ment, procurement, and maintenance of pre-positioned stocks to enable forward presence are key. I believe there are ways to enable coproduction through revised foreign military sales (FMS) or direct commercial sales and pooled, partnered investments in pre-positioned stocks.

Building partner capacity with full-suite, full life cycle, head-to-tail, train, advise, and assist support is an amazing enabler. Our partners’ tails will be the lifelines of our tooth operations; their tail is, in essence, our tail. Thus, we need to resource and advise, assist, and accompany accordingly.

From a training perspective, we need to have longer duration assignments of our talent base with foreign partners. This will grow our operators and logisticians abroad as well as at home. We need to be more multilingual in our operations and logistics and have as much expertise in our partners’ defense and security enterprises as we do in our own.

We need to relearn and remember the paradoxical lessons of small footprints and retrograde operations. Having fewer of our own boots on the ground incurs having more mission command, fires, medevac, and ISR assets in the MDB fight.

***In future wars, we will likely not have the major forward operating bases and contractor support we’ve had throughout the past 16 years. What benefits and challenges will this smaller footprint have for battlefield sustainment?***

While I see the rising anti-access/area denial threat, I don’t see it as having completely arrived upon us yet. On the contrary, the United States at this very moment still enjoys a robust, worldwide forward presence supporting over 180,000 Soldiers in forward operating bases ranging from austere to mature. In fact, in the Middle East, greater Levant, and Central Asian States, the United States enjoys a very mature forward presence and transregional security architecture.

It was because of over 40 years of

continuous investments in building partner capacity and foreign assistance programs that we were able to adjust and respond so rapidly and effectively to the threats of the Islamic State group in 2014. This is just one example.

I believe we should be doing all we can to preserve our current forward presence to the greatest extent possible rather than cede ground and regional partnerships. We should extend and expand on our lessons learned, showing the benefits of long-term investments in theaterwide infrastructure and the capabilities of joint and combined pre-positioning of common enablers such as ballistic missile defense, cyber, C4ISR [command, control, communications, computers, and ISR], and transregional strategic mobility assets.

We should also look to leverage creative solutions via conditional foreign military financing and FMS. Achieving 100 percent readiness of the force at home will come at the cost of not having a sufficient, ready force for our fights abroad at the times and places of our choosing. If we do move to smaller footprints overseas, we'll need to support smaller formations with more, not less. This means more ISR and mission command headquarters as well as robust force-projection platforms. Presence buys you influence, which is built on trust; you can't surge trust.

***Robotics, autonomous systems, and artificial intelligence are transforming the private sector. How do you see advancements in technology impacting the Army's future sustainment operations?***

Each service has been working to bring new and innovative solutions to support the Department of Defense's Third Offset Strategy. The idea in this strategy is that advances in autonomous systems will lead to a new era of human-machine collaboration and combat teaming.

I see this happening across all battle operating systems and certainly across our sustainment functions. As I un-

derstand it, the Army Capabilities Integration Center is working on plans to help reduce logistics footprints through commercial and military technologies such as additive manufacturing, alternative fuels, advanced power generation, autonomy, artificial intelligence, and laser weapons.

Looking at long-term demand reduction returns, our efforts to provide capabilities to use alternate sources of energy, such as hydrogen vehicles or hybrid-electric technology, could further reduce demand on the supply chain and prevent a pause like the one that occurred on the road to Baghdad in 2003.

Additionally, autonomous aerial distribution is a desired capability. Unmanned aerial systems could deliver supplies 150 kilometers away with a payload of up to 2,000 pounds. Lighter versions that fly closer to the surface of the earth might carry 500 pounds and supply an infantry squad every three or four days with fuel, ammunition, and water.

***How will the Army's shift to MDB doctrine affect our allies' and coalition partners' fights?***

My crystal ball is not any better than anyone else's in predicting this future effect. However, I will predict that if combined operations are not at the heart and bones of MDB, it will be a failure. We can't allow that to happen.

The services should avoid three traditional pitfalls revealed during times of geostrategic ambiguity and change, defense budget stringency, and force reductions. First, avoid becoming infatuated with, and overcommitted to, the latest trends at the expense of hedging against the recurring challenges that have manifested throughout strategic history. Second, avoid being tempted to rename or oversell the creation of new war concepts, especially in support of single-service interests that distract from the timeless and enduring nature of conflict. And third, avoid being guilty of overplaying the "hollow force" card.

Readiness needs to be seen, understood, appreciated, and approached in nothing less than terms of comprehensive joint and combined readiness. In today's world of compound security threats and gray zone conflicts, alliances and coalitions are the new centers of gravity. They are the sources of power and legitimacy supporting the order of the system as well as the reputational and instrumental power of the United States as the leader. As such, alliances, coalitions, and regional partnerships must be invested in accordingly.

History doesn't repeat itself, but we do. And we tend to do so in the worst ways and at the worst times when we fail to know our own history or decide to ignore it outright. History can and should be illustrative for us as we consider the potential advantages and challenges of MDB.

In the 1980s, it was the Desert One mission [rescue operation] that made our lack of jointness obvious, undeniable, and most tragic until our Army and sister services began to fully embrace this concept. Even then, it took Congress to mandate it for us to begin to finally inculcate jointness.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, our own leaders' assessments summed up our lack of jointness as a collective failure of imagination. Our failures to embrace the imperatives of integrated intergovernmental and interagency operations led to gaps in our understanding of the operational environment.

The environments of both today and tomorrow demand nothing less than joint, intergovernmental, interagency, and multinational approaches. MDB cannot afford to leap ahead of our alliances and coalition partner capabilities.

Trust is the essential ingredient to forming, norming, and holding together coalitions. Coalition management has to be at the core of future MDBs.

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This interview was conducted by the Office of the Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-4, Logistics Initiative Group.

GENERAL (RETIRED) LLOYD AUSTIN'S

# ADVICE FOR SOLDIERS PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE



1

**CHARACTER** IS THE FOUNDATION TO GOOD LEADERSHIP. BE A LEADER OF STRONG MORAL AND ETHICAL VALUES IN EVERYTHING YOU DO.

2

**COMPETENCE**  
ENDEAVOR TO MASTER YOUR TRADE. COMMIT TO BEING A LIFE-LONG LEARNER. NEVER STOP LEARNING.

3

**LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

4

**HUMILITY**  
ENABLES YOU TO RECOGNIZE YOUR STRENGTHS AS WELL AS YOUR WEAKNESSES.

5

**CREATE & MAINTAIN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS AND UNDERWRITE PRUDENT RISKS**

6

**FOSTER ENVIRONMENTS CONDUCTIVE TO VALUE-BASED OPPOSITION, OR WHAT IN THE ARMY WE REFER TO AS CANDOR. BE WILLING AND CAPABLE OF SPEAKING TRUTH WITH CANDOR TO POWER, BUT DON'T MISTAKE THIS BY BEING A REBEL WITHOUT DUE CAUSE.**