



General Joseph L. Votel, USA,  
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## An Interview with Joseph L. Votel

*JFQ: You state that “by, with, and through” is not a doctrine, but more of an operational approach. Does there need to be a doctrine, or would that inhibit the flexibility of the approach?*

**General Joseph L. Votel:** First, the way that I think of by, with, and through is

another way to talk about ends, ways, and means. I look at this idea as a way to approach some of this. That’s where we arrive at the discussion of by, with, and through as an operational approach. We apply it on a broad scale now, and I do think that it merits becoming doctrine. When there are not a lot of other things

going on in the world, we can afford to take a brigade and get it to focus on something unique and let it go. But given our commitments around the world right now, particularly on the Korean Peninsula, we really do need to make some investments in how we do this. I think what we’ve learned in [U.S. Central Command] is that the application of by, with, and through is really situation-dependent. There isn’t a one-size-fits-all model, but there are some basic precepts. Adding a little rigor would be helpful.

*JFQ: Do you believe the current concept of the by, with, and through approach is broadly applicable to the point where the joint force should examine its DOTMLPF [doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities] development?*

**General Votel:** I do. The scale on which we’re doing this approach in the USCENTCOM AOR [area of responsibility] merits looking at it in a broad manner like DOTMLPF. With the Army standing up its Security Forces Assistance Brigade [SFAB], I think we see leadership aspects, equipping aspects, relationship-building aspects, and situational training—and the logistics aspects that go along with that—so I think that it is not a one-off, but requires a much broader approach to understand and implement.

*JFQ: Who bears the cost of this approach?*

**General Votel:** The Services. They certainly absorb a significant cost in their training base and force structure and all of the things that go along with that. But I think the combatant commanders also share a burden in this—informing the process and making it clear in terms of what we need out in the theater to do this and what the peculiarities are that ought to be driving this. There is certainly a shared responsibility between the combatant commands and Services. I acknowledge that the Services pick up the heavier burden on the development of the capability.

*JFQ: What gaps do you see in the command to be able to meet this approach?*

**General Votel:** One of the gaps is having the best-trained forces for the mission. Our approach in Iraq and Syria has been by, with, and through—and it has been advising. We have leveraged good people, really great officers, great NCOs [noncommissioned officers] who had to try to understand the situation and adapt to it as much as possible. What we ignored was all of the other stuff that went along with making this successful: How do our partners operate in a by, with, and through approach? How do they orchestrate communications? How are they tied into enabling capabilities to really make advise and assist work? There are some significant gaps in that. I think whenever we look at something like by, with, and through and we look at that as an extra duty or something that somebody morphs to in a combat situation, we are suboptimizing. Professionalizing the approach, “doctrinalizing” the approach, is an important step to take.

*JFQ: If by, with, and through can be resource-intensive in training operations and it subordinates our interest, why is this the way forward?*

**General Votel:** One of the key things we’ve learned about by, with, and through is that he who owns the effects owns the impact these operations generate. What we strive to do through this approach is to keep the ownership of the problem, and its aftermath, with the affected people. In Iraq, it’s the Iraqi Security Forces, and in Syria, it’s the Syrian Democratic Forces [SDF]. In many ways, that’s the more burdensome aspect of military operations. How do we transition to local governance, local security for consolidation, stability, and reconstruction? The earlier we can get the local or host-nation forces involved, the better. That’s really key. But to do that, the approach requires advisors in the right locations, sometimes fixed sites, sometimes with our partners forward. There are a variety of ways to do this. It really is about enabling them and making

them successful. As we often talk about it, in Iraq, our job was to help our partners fight—not fight for them. The capabilities to do that—whether it’s ISR [intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance], the intelligence system, targeting system, strike capability, or route clearance packages to move stuff around, plus medical capabilities to take care of our people and make sure we can respond—all have to be built into this approach, so it is not cheap. It is not an economy of force, but it does remove some of the aspects of us owning it as opposed to our partners owning it, which is what we want.

*JFQ: How do you know you have arrived at “mission accomplished”?*

**General Votel:** We have to identify end-states. For example, how do we know we’ve accomplished something in Raqqa, in northern Syria? We know because, in the wake of our operations, the Raqqa Civil Council, demographically representing the people, has emerged, and *they* are driving the majority of the stability operations. There is a Raqqa Internal Security Force designed not only to support stability operations but also to protect the population and prevent a resurgence of [the so-called Islamic State]. When we transition and see such indicators, that’s what shows the approach worked. These types of overt indicators of ownership and moving forward with stabilization are the strongest signs of progress.

*JFQ: In 2008, General [David D.] McKiernan’s staff showed him a curve on how we were improving force structure for the Afghan police and army. It was a hyperbolic curve and at some point, the United States would depart, and the Afghans would have their own security. The problem was that they were never able to show they were making progress on the curve. Ultimately, the locals have to own this.*

**General Votel:** That’s right. One of the things we have to understand is that locals call the shots. In Iraq, we can have a view in our mind of what the campaign

looks like and how it should unfold, but ultimately, it’s the prime minister and leadership who are going to make decisions. While in that case they were receptive to our advice, they didn’t always take it in terms of where we should go now and where we should go next regarding the nature of types of operations we were doing. We have to recognize that they are calling the shots, and in the context of the broad campaign plan, we have to recognize the proper path to success, even if it’s not the ideal path. We have to be willing to endorse that.

*JFQ: How would you reconcile the competing national interests between the United States and its partners? When does this come into consideration when developing this relationship?*

**General Votel:** In terms of balancing our interests versus their interests, [one way] might be in developing a partnership. First and foremost, it is about making sure we know what their true motives and intentions are—and in the areas where we diverge, making it clear the areas we can or cannot support. I think that’s very important. One of the things we always talk about is the critical skills people need in order to apply this approach effectively. There are three of them. One, we have to communicate effectively with our partners—candidly and frankly—about the things happening and things we can and cannot do. Second, we have to build trusting relationships. This is *the* foundation of everything. They must be able to trust that we are going to follow through on commitments. Third, we have to develop an ability to provide advice. That’s advisors providing advice at multiple levels. Those three attributes are important for forces and particularly for leaders in this environment.

*JFQ: Are you able to get a sense of other nations’ by, with, and through operations in your AOR, and how does this construct apply to operating within the coalition? In some cases, it is not a single country you are dealing with, but it’s a group of countries.*



Afghan National Security Forces role players talk to combat team leader assigned to 1<sup>st</sup> Security Force Assistance Brigade during simulated event at Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana, January 13, 2018 (U.S. Army/Zoe Garbarino)

**General Votel:** With the coalition in Iraq and Syria, we have nearly 70 countries and entities involved. Everybody understands and gets the by, with, and through approach by combat advising, and they generally understand the concept. It is important to understand the various national caveats. There are national restrictions that countries put on their forces in terms of where they can operate or the type of operations they can do. I will refer back to the *Inherent Resolve* coalition in Iraq and Syria, understanding the strengths and the limitations—the caveats—for our partners was really important. And then being able to leverage those contributions in a way that kept them a part of the coalition in a valued way. We have nations whose contributions are key because they stay in fixed locations and do training for organizations we bring to those locations. This allows U.S. forces, once we understand coalition capabilities, to focus on the things they can do, which often is combat advising. Part and parcel are national authorities. Frankly, we've been well-supported in the authorities, so we want to employ the different parts of the coalition in optimal ways.

**JFQ:** *In the same vein, what do you consider a suitable partner to do by, with, and through? What are the national-level sensitivities under consideration? Can you take us through the calculus of your partnership with, for example, the Syrian Democratic Forces?*

**General Votel:** I think the SDF is a good example of how the by, with, and through operational approach works. We do have to go back to 2014 when we first had contact with the small Kurdish element around Kobani, with their backs against the border absorbing a vicious assault from the Islamic State at their prime—when they were powerful and moving to seize terrain. Our recognition of that element and our assistance to it in its breakout from Kobani was the start. From there, the fighters expanded into what had been historical Kurdish areas and we continued to support them. We learned this was a competent, well-led force. They were fighting on their own land, so they were motivated and organized with their own equipment and capabilities. They were receptive to support. As they

continued to gain momentum, it became apparent that this was something we could build on. We knew our Kurdish partners would need Arabs to operate in areas outside of traditional Kurdish lands. What we saw was a really interesting dynamic with Arab groups recognizing Kurdish success. We had this alignment that came together between Kurds and Arabs because they knew they were joining a successful organization. We built on this, which was about the time we began to recognize the nature of this organization isn't defined by ethnicity, but a common enemy—the Islamic State. That's how we ultimately partnered with the SDF.

Eventually, we pushed down into the areas with Arab majorities, and we saw the composition of the force change. It became more Arab than Kurdish. If we looked at the force that took Raqqa, an Arab city, it was about 80 percent Arab and 20 percent Kurd. Syrian Kurds always played a key role in leadership—one of their strengths. They communicated, they had a broader view, and they had good, solid coalition relationships. We build on that. They have been very receptive to the

advice and approach we recommended, which was the annihilation of the Islamic State, requiring a detailed clearance of these areas. This was something both of us wanted to do, so there was a natural and successful alignment.

Obviously, the friction has been with our [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] partner, Turkey. Turkey does not view the YPG [Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, or People's Protection Units] or the Syrian Kurds the same way. They view them as part of a broader terrorist group, the PKK [Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or Kurdistan Workers' Party], which they've been fighting for a long time. Turkey has a legitimate concern about its border security, which goes toward understanding the dynamics and reconciling these as we go. We see this in activities going on today; this is not something completely resolved. It requires a careful and deliberate balance. Today, we have two principal objectives: Support Turkey in its legitimate concerns about its border security to protect it from terrorist organizations while, at the same time, complete the military defeat of the Islamic State. Balancing these requires a full-court press, not just militarily but also diplomatically and politically.

*JFQ: How do you keep such a force from shifting its mission, such as from going against the Islamic State to doing something else counter to what the Syrian government might like?*

**General Votel:** I think it goes back to communication and relationships and making sure we lay out the left and right limits of the relationship and what we are willing to do. We had to make some things very clear with our partners; we would not support operations against the regime. That was not our mission. Our mission is to defeat the Islamic State. We would not support the unilateral political ideas they wanted outside that mission. This requires constant discussion. We have tried to keep the focus on the defeat of the Islamic State. Keeping ourselves aligned on that has helped keep our partners aligned as well.

*JFQ: How do your chosen partners gain legitimacy, especially after conflict, when the military element of national power has essentially completed its main task? How do you transition from a warfighting role back to peacetime?*

**General Votel:** It goes back to legitimacy, and, certainly in Iraq, the government there has exerted its writ in these areas. What we look for is a transition after major combat operations have ended, with local governance stepping forward and local security coming into place. This is actually a little easier in a place like Iraq than it is in some other areas because there is a recognized sovereign government, there is a structure in place, and there are provincial, district, and local government structures. Where it does become more of a challenge are places like Syria or Yemen where we don't have those, and we have ungoverned spaces. Then we have [to] try to develop demographically appropriate local government structures. That's what we've tried to do, particularly in Syria. You can see this in Raqqah, Manbij, and Deir ez-Zor. In a number of other locations we see local governance structures stand up and take responsibility supported by local security forces. It's important to transition security responsibilities from the broader fighting force to local security forces focused on protecting the population and helping bring stability. It is a challenge in places where there isn't a recognized governance structure. While that may not be the final form that governance takes, in my view, it's how it begins and we have to build on that.

*JFQ: From an American tactical point of view, how does the American unit deploying go from no understanding of by, with, and through to being ready to go forward and pick up where others left?*

**General Votel:** That is a great question. I will just speak for my Service, the Army. We have done a really good job of this. When we identify replacement units, we often see leaders communicating back and forth to understand and gain situational awareness and an understanding of

the environment. Incoming leaders will monitor VTCs [video teleconferences] to get a head start. But the most important aspect is training. This is the doctrinal approach. A couple of weeks ago, the sergeant major and I visited the Fort Polk Joint Readiness Training Center to see the Army's first Security Forces Assistance Brigade going through training. What we saw was quite impressive. It was a purposely built exercise designed to create a number of situations and scenarios that these advising teams would experience. They do it multiple times, so they can learn, get after-action reports, and then move on to the next situation. Out of that training, the advisor teams begin to understand the basic precepts, the basic things they have to do. They start developing a capability before they actually deploy. This is the most important thing—to make sure we have a deliberate training path for our deploying forces. It also requires patience. You can't expect to go in and have relationships immediately; they have to be developed. Their approach may be a little different from ours, which requires patience.

*JFQ: What about this approach would be applicable in some other way in a more conventional war? In any way does it diminish the ability to deter a conventional fight?*

**General Votel:** I am sure it could. If we have just taken a U.S. infantry brigade and we have now given them an advise-and-assist mission, it is a leader-intensive approach. What we end up doing is paying the price in readiness for that organization. That is why it's so important for the Services to look at how we doctrinally and organizationally do this. The first SFAB is purposely organized. It is more efficient, and it is more effective as to what it's going to do. It will help the Army preserve readiness for the other things it needs to do.

*JFQ: What have you seen in the evolution of by, with, and through in several theaters, that is, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan?*



Syrian Democratic Forces trainees, representing equal amount of Arab and Kurdish volunteers, stand in formation at graduation ceremony in northern Syria, August 9, 2017 (U.S. Army/Mitchell Ryan)

**General Votel:** In our article [immediately following this interview], we talk about three examples. Yemen, Iraq and Syria, and Afghanistan. I am not so sure it is as much about evolving as about adapting. If we look at a place like Yemen, our interests are principally focused on CT [counterterrorism]. It just so happens there are Arab nations down there that share the same objectives. They have relationships with Yemen forces on the ground. What we see is an approach using unique U.S.-enablers. We are providing advise and assist to Arab partners who, in turn, are providing advise and assist to Yemen partners. Again, we are drawing on their language capabilities, their cultural sensitivity, their deep understanding of tribes and history, to help them do the CT mission. At the same time, we bring our capabilities. That has helped build the capability of our Arab partners. Yemen presents a unique hybrid approach where we enable a partner, who in turn, enables another partner. We have had some success.

In Iraq, there is an established army that, when we left in 2011, had been trained largely in counterinsurgency. In 2014–2015, they found themselves in major combat operations. Their training and development had to change. We had to make them into a force that could go in and do a 9-month operation in a city of nearly 2 million people, Mosul, and be able to sustain. That required a different approach. Now that Islamic State–controlled territory has been liberated, we are going back to ensure they cannot reemerge. We are moving from a force doing major urban combat operations to one doing wide-area security. We have to be adaptable and help our partners. The good thing is we did all of that against the backdrop of an established military that had a Ministry of Defense, processes, schools, and camps that we could leverage.

In Syria, we are working with a completely indigenous capability that does not have the backing of a state and is very localized. This requires a different approach. We have to build some institutional capability, places where we can

train and organize, bringing together a number of different entities in order to create this hybrid organization we have referred to as the SDF. In Lebanon, where we work with the Lebanese Armed Forces, we take a different approach, mostly focused on training and developing processes and capabilities to make them able to conduct operations as opposed to U.S. forces being with them. The approach is adaptive in the sense that we are learning more about the underpinnings and precepts of by, with, and through. Adaptability is being able to understand our partners, the environment, the objectives, and then being able to devise the optimized approach.

**JFQ:** *I would like to talk about Afghanistan. What hope do you have this approach will improve our chances of getting to some sort of peaceful resolution?*

**General Votel:** I am always hopeful. Regarding our advisory efforts, what we are building on is an investment over a long period of time in the Afghan National Security Forces. We are building on some exquisite capabilities they have. The Afghan special operations capability is first class. They are effective. They rely on the coalition to help them, but they are aggressive, and, frankly, they have not lost a fight—and they are doing the majority of it. We are building on that, we are expanding that capability, and we will continue to provide advisory capability to them at a tactical level that will help them stay that way. The broader Afghan forces have improved as well. They are offense-oriented, and the leadership in charge of them is much younger. They have trained under a Western standard, as opposed to a mujahideen or an old Soviet model. There is a generational change of leadership here that is much more accepting of the type of warfare we’re teaching. We have things like the Afghan Air Force. It is small, it is capable, and it is growing. I would not want people to think the advisory capability is all about the ground; it is also about the air. If you want to see Afghans really happy, it is when their A29s are supporting their forces. This is success.

It also translates to the maritime environment, such as the work we do with some of the coastal forces in the Arabian Gulf.

*JFQ: Are there cyber and information-sharing challenges with this approach?*

**General Votel:** There are cyber security challenges in technology and certainly in the information- and intelligence-sharing areas. We have made improvements over time, but we have a long way to go. I would share with you that recently we concluded a CIS-MOA [Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement] with the Egyptians that allows us to have commonality with information processes. This is a pretty big deal. It has taken us 20 to 25 years to get in place. This will be a watershed for us. We have to recognize some of our really good partners still communicate over unsecured, unclassified Internet. That is how they pass their information, and we are trying to interface with that. That poses a significant challenge.

The sharing of information through technology is important. If we looked at some of our teams forward, we would see a lot of tablets and technology, and that is how we are communicating. There is a training aspect to this, and there is a network aspect. We have a lot of bilateral relationships. Sometimes these relationships do not work as well in a coalition where we have many partners. This is an area where we do have to continue to work to reduce the obstacles and frictions. There are good reasons why we have these prohibitions and other sharing arrangements in place. We should have those. But we have to recognize when we principally rely on a by, with, and through approach, part of that is to enable our partners with intelligence.

When I went to talk with [Colonel J. Patrick] Work, who led our advisory team in Mosul, about his concerns, he discussed managing bandwidth and power—power generation for their teams. Our teams are mobile and forward, and we had to get power generation capacity to them. (By the way, we have to make sure we logistically support

all of our forces over a broad area.) We also need to take care of them medically. These things add up. This is the cost we pay for any military operation. Soldiers still have to eat and move, even with a by, with, and through operational approach.

*JFQ: Is this just SOF [special operations forces] on steroids? How is this different from proxy warfare?*

**General Votel:** I do not think so. We have drawn on the SOF experience of the Green Berets. This has been part and parcel of their mission since they have come into existence, so they have developed some doctrines, some real keen approaches, and we should leverage those. When we look at an organization like the Iraqi army, we simply do not have enough SOF elements to meet all of the partnering needs. We have to rely on our conventional forces. It is not a replication of SOF; it is an operational approach we are applying in different areas.

*JFQ: What about the role of women? Several of the female commanders of the SDF are brigade commanders of those units doing the fighting. In the future of by, with, and through, do you see more roles for female infantry commanders?*

**General Votel:** This is important. It took us a little while to recognize that we were missing 50 percent of the population because we did not have anybody who could communicate with women and children or communicate our objectives effectively. As we set up the Cultural Support Team and Marine Lioness programs, we basically increased our ability to talk to the people, and we doubled it immediately because we could talk with everybody. The role of women commanders in the SDF is prominent, and, moreover, the lead commanders in several of these prominent areas were women. I do not necessarily know we have to correspondingly have a female advisor do that, but it does require an understanding of the culture. We have had some effective programs with the Afghans, helping

them develop their Cultural Support Teams and professionally develop some of the women in these organizations. The program has been well accepted and sustained. In my last AOR trip, which I do every month, we spent some time in Jordan. One of the events I went to was our delivery of the top-of-the-line UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters. They had a demonstration as part of the ceremony, and they had some of their pilots standing by, and they were proud of the fact that two of the pilots in these cutting-edge helicopters are women. They see that and embrace it themselves. I think it is an important thing to reinforce.

Our partners also emulate us. One of the key things we do and that comes out in our by, with, and through approach is the example we set of professionalism, the example we set of values-based approaches to the things we do. I have had partners tell me they want us to come and help them with an operation. When I ask them why, they say we bring a level of legitimacy, and they know we are going to hold them to a high standard, and they will be better for it. I do not think we can underestimate what may be perceived as an intangible aspect of these relationships. Our partners do emulate us without necessarily trying to recreate us in their own image.

*JFQ: Do you have any closing remarks?*

**General Votel:** Thanks, Bill. We appreciate your coming down and supporting us. This is a unique way of approaching operations, particularly in USCENTCOM. Even as good as we are, we cannot replicate what our partners bring. The idea of by, with, and through is one that resonates in this area. It has become the principal way we approach things. We need to begin a professional discussion of this and share ideas. Ultimately, the Services will have to want this and buy into it. Part of my responsibility, part of my burden, is to contribute to the intellectual discussion of this approach. That is what *Joint Force Quarterly* is helping us do right now. We are very grateful for that. JFQ