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Transcript

RESTORING FOCUS ON THE NUCLEAR MISSION

Deborah Lee James, US Secretary of the Air
Force

Major General Garrett Harencak, US Air
Force

Kevin Baron, DefenseOne

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JAMES ACTON

For those of you who don't know me, my name is James Acton. I'm Co-Director of the nuclear policy programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. I hope you all enjoyed lunch and let me very briefly just urge everyone who hasn't yet done so to download the app. You can't participate fully in tomorrow's event unless you have the app.

It's my enormous pleasure to introduce the next of these sessions after lunch, on Restoring Focus on the Nuclear Mission and I'd just like to introduce the three panellists we have to look at this issue today.

Moderating the next panel will be Kevin Baron, who's currently the executive editor of Defense One. Defense One was only launched in 2013, but under Kevin's leadership, it's made a tremendous splash already and really established itself as a key player in the ever more competitive market for national security journalism. Kevin is one of the most serious and respected national security journalists in the field, who's won the prestigious George Polk Award on no less than two occasions.

On the far side from me is Major General Garrett Harencak, the Assistant Chief of Staff for Strategic Deterrents and Nuclear Integration. General Harencak has served at the United States Air Force for almost 32 years and has been involved in the nuclear enterprise at, in fact, every level. He's flown both of the nuclear capable bombers the US currently has in its arsenal, the B-52 and the B-2, as well as the B-1B, which is of course no longer nuclear capable.

His current job description includes advocating for stewardship of Air Force nuclear weapons systems and he's earned a reputation in this town as a particularly effective advocate and General, if you don't mind me saying so, a particularly loud one as well.

Finally, it's my enormous honour to welcome the Secretary of the Air Force, Deborah Lee James. Secretary James was confirmed by the Senate on 14th December 2013. Her official swearing in was on the 14th January 2014. Between those two events, she had to announce that 34 missile officers had been suspended and their clearances evoked for cheating. Nuclear issues have not been far from her desk ever since.

However, there are few people who could be better prepared to take on the challenge that faced Secretary James than herself. She was a professional staff member on the House Armed Services Committee for ten years and if what The New York Times says is true, during that period, she earned the nickname of Sledge, which was short for Sledgehammer.

She was an Assistant Secretary of Defence in the Clinton administration. She spent over a decade in senior leadership at SAIC, including as President of their Technical and Engineering sector. She now runs an organisation of 690,000 airmen and women, a budget of \$110 billion. I'm never going to complain about my management challenges ever again. It's my enormous pleasure to welcome the 23rd Secretary of the United States Air Force.

KEVIN BARON

Welcome back from lunch, everyone. Thank you for joining us and for being here. I was reminded how appropriate, walking on stage, that I was told to hit the airplane mode to turn off my phone to interview the Secretary of the Air Force, so somehow it all comes back to technology.

I was very thrilled to be asked to moderate this session because, I think, of what was just said, that this is an extraordinary time for anything nuclear. Things are really coming together and here we are in the week when we're expecting a deal with Iran at one level, at the 40,000 foot, to go back to the Air Force level, at one end of the nuclear conversation.

At the other, we're talking about officers at their desks in the bottom of silos and the challenges and the difficulties of maintaining a nuclear force, maintaining interest in nuclear issues and weapons and treaties and associations and agreements while so much else in the world is happening, in a time when we were supposed to be talking about the post-war era where there'd be terrorism and we'd have time to reset the force and get back to training and Afghanistan is ending, Iraq is over. That was last year's conversation. This year, everything's been turned on its head and so here we are.

I'd like to open up – I've asked the secretary, let's abstain from making remarks so we can get right to some questions and give more time to, I think, what should be one of the most knowledgeable audiences we'll ever get on nuclear issues here and get right into things and let's talk about that high level of this conversation.

Part of the job of any secretary of any service is to go round the country, give speeches, talk to troops, talk to families, talk to the public. What is the public's understanding, or how does the public's understanding of nuclear issues today match the realities that you're dealing with?

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

If I could just say this by way of introductory remarks, thank you Kevin, thank you James, thank you to Carnegie for inviting both General Harenca and me to be here today. It certainly is our pleasure and as was pointed out in the opening remarks, there's probably been nothing, no one single issue that has been more important to me during my tenure as Secretary of the Air Force, than the nuclear enterprise, and it certainly is going to stay that way for the remainder of my tenure, which I would expect would be another two years. I will say on behalf of my rather loud colleague, General Harenca, he's from New Jersey and so am I, so I can be fairly loud too, just in case we really get into it later on.

But to your point, it is an extraordinarily busy time for the US Military and an extraordinarily busy time for the United States Air Force and many people do not realise. I certainly did not realise until I was in the seat and doing the job that your United States Air Force, our United States Air Force, number one, has been downsizing for the better part of 20 some years.

Sometimes we talk about, wow, the US Army, if sequestration kicks in, will be the smallest, this, that and the other, or the US Navy might be over the horizon, this, that and the other. Well hello, the United States Air Force is already there. We are already the smallest that we have been in terms of our numbers of people since our inception in the year 1947 and I think that's an extraordinary statistic.

We have aging aircraft galore, that's another big theme. So we have fewer people and we have fewer aircraft and the aircraft that we have are substantially older than they have been in recent times and therefore we have an imperative to modernise our forces, really across the board and that includes nuclear.

The third dynamic is that we are busier than we have been, at least in the 34 years that I have been an observer on the scene for defence matters, for all the reasons that you just talked about. ISOL and a resurgent Russia and operations to reassure allies and Ebola – that one is winding down – but you just never know what is going to come next. We are living in an extremely uncertain time and then the final matter is a very tough budget environment.

It truly is a perfect storm in our United States Air Force but again, this is a conference about nuclear and to bring it back to nuclear, nuclear is number one for us and we have to remain focused on it in a very persistent way and get through this foggy time that we are manoeuvring our way through.

KEVIN BARON

You list a lot of things to be concerned with and I want to know your priority list but I'll give the General a chance to open up remarks as well.

GARRETT HARENCAK

Thank you, Kevin, and thanks for Carnegie for putting this on again. I know you do it every other year and I'm thrilled to be back. We think, in the United States Air Force, it's very important to have these discussions.

I know we're not always going to agree what our priorities should be but we believe that by discussing the very importance and the relevance of strategic deterrent that we in United States Air Force are confident everybody will understand the value that our United States Air Force and our United States Navy and the Triad does for stability in the world, so thank you for the opportunity to come here today.

KEVIN BARON

The panel's title they asked for us is supposed to be about refocusing on the nuclear mission. Again, I've heard this or something similar like this in the last couple of years, or the Air Force and the services were asked to refocus on the Pacific or refocus on training at home and on this reset period we were supposed to be in, or to keep the focus on CENTCOM and all the demands of on the retrograde of Afghanistan. How do you refocus on the nuclear enterprise amid all those other items? How do you prioritise?

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

The way I like to talk about it is persistent focus, that is to say every month, I conduct a review about how are we coming on some of our initiatives and how are we doing with the nuclear enterprise. I make regular visits now out to our major nuclear bases so that I can not only talk with our commanders on the scene, but equally important, with the airmen who are the frontline defenders, if you will. I like to do focus groups; it's one of the things that I do and that way I get additional inputs from those levels.

The focus that we're putting on it is not only from my leadership perspective but it's from General Harencaak, it's from leaders all the way down the line because to institutionalise and really make stick some of the changes that we have put forth in the last year, it is going to take – it's not an overnight type of thing. It's going to take time and we've got to keep at it.

I like to talk, rather than refocus or focus, I like persistent focus. That's the mantra that I try to repeat.

KEVIN BARON

One of the prescriptions, I guess, is to elevate Gold Strike Command to a Four Star Command, elevate, I think, your position to a Three Star as well, so you're advocated for your own?

GARRETT HARENCAK

It's across the board and it goes to the Secretary's focus and one of the aspects is the belief that in the past, we have not resourced this particular mission set to the extent that we need to do and also have the level of rank focused on it, so the Secretary has directed that we elevate them both, both in resources that we're putting into this critical mission set but also to the focus and rank.

In Washington, as some of you may or may not know, rank matters and so her focus is to that end, but those are just two. It's across the board, a restructure in United States Air Force that allows us persistent focus.

One aspect is rank and that is one that has garnered a lot of attention, but it's much deeper than just two positions or three positions.

KEVIN BARON

US Army Pacific did this a couple of years ago. They brought their commander up to a Four Star for the same reason, from the clout level of it.

But talk about resources, and that was in my own research, an article recently, they quoted these State Department statistics and I'll read some of this about here's what the US has and tell me how to balance how huge US force is and firepower versus claims that we need more resources, and that's a problem.

Right now, quoting the State Department, we've got 794 deployed land and sea based ballistic missiles and heavy bombers, 1,642 deployed nuclear warheads, in total 698 minute Minutemans, 56 Peacekeepers, 411 Tridents, 20 B-2 bombers, 89 B-52s. It sounds like a lot. Is that not enough or is this a different kind of resource question for you, General?

GARRETT HARENCAK

I'll start off, ma'am. First off, one of the things I never do is debate numbers, because it's more than just numbers. What we're talking about is reinvesting the resources to modernise.

You said a lot of numbers – first of all, those are way down from at the height of the Cold War and many of us were in Grade School – over 32,000 weapons, hundreds and hundreds of bombers. First off, we have to put that in perspective.

Secondly, is what we're talking about, most of those are ancient systems. There's no other way to put it. The Minuteman III you were talking about, that's a 1970 weapon. The ALCM's a 1982 weapon. Many of these – the B-52, shall we talk about the B-52? Pop quiz – how old's the B-52? Yes, coming up 60 years.

With the resources we're talking about putting into it is modernising and recapitalising, things that quite frankly we probably, as a nation, should have done 15, 20, 30 years ago. But good people made tough decisions and now a lot of those bills are coming due, what the Secretary has done, what the Department of Defense has done, is taken our scarce resources and said now we have to pay some of these bills to modernise, to recapitalise this very important mission set that we have.

I don't see how you could say we've got a new focus on that and we're going to continue to operate 60 year old bombers and some of these things that we're trying to recapitalize, they won't come to fruition until the 2020s, so we're still many years away from there.

Yes, one aspect is total numbers and until everybody passes out in this room, we could debate is that a good number or is that a good number. I don't think anybody can debate, though, the need to recapitalize, to do what the President has asked us to do in the United States Air Force. That is, as long as nuclear weapons exist, to maintain a safe, secure and effective stockpile for us and our allies, and in order to do that, we're going to have to recapitalize and modernize. That's where the resources are really going into.

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

If I could add – see, he's a fast talker as well as a loud talker. I think it's from New Jersey.

I don't want us to lose sight of what I consider to be the most important part of the weapons system and that's the human beings; that's the people who are involved with this mission, and so we've also put, in addition to modernizing the actual hardware and so forth of the weapon, we're also putting quite a lot of resources, time and attention against the people issues.

For example, we, in the last year, have redirected about 1,100 personnel away from other parts of the Air Force, so we're robbing Peter to pay Paul here but it's because it's very important. About 1,100 additional individuals are headed toward – some are there and some are still on the way – toward the nuclear missions to try to alleviate some of what has been substantial under-manning in the nuclear enterprise.

There's eight specific critical specialties that we're trying to get 100% effectively manned and I know that might sound like the nuclear mission has been under-manned, that's really awful. But I'm here to tell you, back to my original point, about how we're the smallest Air Force we have been in decades. All across the Air Force, we are under-manned in a variety of ways, so we're putting nuclear – again, put your money where your mouth is. We say it's number one, we need to make sure that those specialties become 100% effectively manned.

That's one thing – we've provided additional monetary incentives and recognition for the people who are serving in this important area. We've put money into sustainment, so that is to say spare parts and, you might say, the more mundane elements, but if you don't have them and if you can't get your job done, it's a real debilitator from a morale standpoint as well as from an effectiveness standpoint.

Yes, we're modernizing the weapons system but we're also doing things for today's readiness and, most importantly, for our people.

KEVIN BARON

You just said you were substantially under-manned in this field and in others. How can that be when I see, from several years through the wars, every month there's retention and recruitment, no one's come out from the Pentagon and it's over 100% for the Air Force?

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

If we look at the last 20 some years' period of time, the United States Air Force has had a major objective to become more modern and so we have, in some ways, made the choice ourselves, to get smaller in terms of our numbers but to then try to plough back the savings that we accrue from fewer people and plough those back into more modern aircraft.

What has happened is over time, not all these aircraft programmes – and I say aircraft, it's beyond aircraft. It's space, it's a variety of systems – but not everything has produced on time, on schedule, on budget. There have been some overruns and it has eaten up a portion of our budget.

My point there is enough is enough. We have downsized enough and now we've got to return a bit to placing the focus on people and we cannot get any smaller. Matter of fact, we think we need to get just very modestly, slightly bigger.

KEVIN BARON

What are your numbers for the nuclear enterprise, before size, recommended [?], do you know?

GARRETT HARENCAK

About 20,000, about 5% of our TOA in the Air Force and overall, for Department of Defense, next year, with the Navy subs, a little less than 3% of the total budget, which I'll make the case that protecting America against its only existential threat, that's a pretty big bargain.

KEVIN BARON

Budget, that's a good segue, then. I don't want to waste a single breath that we have to on sequester. We all think it's bad and needs to go away, but explain a little myth versus reality for me.

We spoke earlier, I wanted to take them to hear some of this because when sequester was still just a threat, the Pentagon, under Secretary Panetta, put out a very memorable factsheet of what would happen and on that list was one of the three legs of the Triad, the ICBMs would have to be given up under sequestration, and it's got a reputation as being the boy who cried wolf in a big way, at least one of the examples that this has been a bit of a card game between the administration and the Congress, or the Pentagon and the Congress, on what sequestration really would do. It's not enough to say it would hurt readiness.

Explain to this audience and to a general public, when it comes to nuclear weapons and to readiness and to being on alert, you know how bad it was – if it was under-manned before sequestration, then what sequestration does or could do to nuclear readiness at a moment's notice.

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

The first thing I would tell you is just let's talk dollars and cents for a moment. The difference between the President's budget, which is currently on Capitol Hill for consideration, and the sequestration level spending for the Air Force, it's about a \$10 billion swing in FY16, so for the Air Force, that's what we're looking at – a \$10 billion swing.

With that additional \$10 billion, we were able to do a number of important things, including we plussed up the totality of our nuclear enterprise to the tune of 5.6 billion over five years. Think in terms of between one and two billion in this first year of FY16 would have been part of that 10 billion.

There's a major chunk in there for nuclear but there's also major investments in there for ISR – Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, which is the number one thing our combatant commanders around the world want today, is more Air Force ISR.

There's a whole variety of things that that \$10 billion more allows for us to do. If we don't get the 10 billion more, does that mean all the investments that we have put into the nuclear enterprise are going to be stripped away? Absolutely not, but it's also true that it won't go untouched.

The idea that an element of our Triad, one of our three legs in the Triad, would go away, that simply would not happen. But, for example, what we think would happen is some of the modernisation, particularly of the weapons systems, that General Harencak talked about that we want to do, that we've planned to do over the next five years.

Not all of that could go forth so instead of the \$5.6 billion more that we would like to do, it would be more on the order of \$4 billion or so, so we would lose between \$1 billion and \$2 billion if sequestration were to kick in and that would be the impact for the nuclear enterprise specifically.

But the impacts would be across the board. You asked about readiness, you said readiness, that's a concept. What does that really mean?

Readiness means that if you are going to send somebody in harm's way to go and do a job for the United States of America, you are supposed to give them equipment that is well maintained and which works. You are supposed to make sure they are properly trained before they go and if you don't have the equipment right, if you don't have the training right, what that could mean is people will die, more people will die in what is already a very inherently dangerous business.

It could also mean that trying to get to our national objectives, which is usually win – we want to win and we want to accomplish whatever the mission is – we would likely be more slow in getting there, getting to that objective, and we might not be able to ultimately prevail.

That is the type of thing that is at risk if sequestration kicks in. It would hit nuclear but it would really hit things in a very across the board fashion.

KEVIN BARON

But it's still, like you said, it's more modernisation, what's to come in the future versus – no one can imagine that Congress or the administration would allow the nuclear force to somehow be either downsized or not ready, not have enough bombers or subs or ICBMs for any kind of strike retaliation when it comes to actual use of these weapons in the force versus having all those numbers we said before, having the right size force for a deterrent, right, General?

GARRETT HARENCAK

The real problem with sequestration as I see it is everybody understands – intellectually, we understand the defence budgets are decreasing. The problem with, and why sequestration sucks so much, is that it doesn't allow us to plan the way we need to plan.

My best military advice I would give somebody is if you allow us to know what that glide slope is going down, which allows us to make the right decisions when it comes to recapitalisation or modernisation or how much money do we put this particular year into readiness, and maybe the next year, we can move a little bit more.

You don't know that with sequestration and you might believe that that's an effective way to get it done then fine, and you can believe that. You'd be wrong, but you can believe it and if you believe that, then I want you to do something. When you leave here, wherever you fly back

home to, I want you to tell the pilot that, hey, when you come in to land, don't use a glide slope. Approach the arrival end of the runway at 5,000 feet and land from there, and you see what happens to the aircraft and you see what happens.

That's what sequestration does to us in the military is it doesn't allow us to plan a glide slope so we have to make some really gross decisions based immediately, so that's the real problem. Nobody believes that we're going to get increasingly as much as we might need to get increased defence budgets.

It's not going to happen but sequestration doesn't allow us to make the proper planning and in the nuclear business, where lots of things take many years to get to, that's particularly onerous for us.

KEVIN BARON

But why doesn't anybody believe – as you just said – why doesn't anybody believe you're going to get an increased defence budget? This is the biggest base budget of all time – it's a huge number. You have a favourable climate right now of everybody putting the brakes on those downsizings that we're hoping to get coming out of the war years. You have Republicans in Congress, John McCain on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

You would think if any time recently, other than war and OCO money, that it's all right there for you. Nobody is out there calling for some gigantic slash to the Pentagon's spending.

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

On the other hand, I mean, you're right. The defence committees that we deal with regularly seem very supportive. The vast majority of those members are very supportive of lifting sequestration, they're supportive of the President's budget level for defence. Some are even calling for more than that, but those are our fans.

You got the whole rest of the Congress who either doesn't understand these issues as in-depth or they have other concerns. Congressmen and senators are not just looking at defence, they're looking at the whole array of government programmes and government issues.

KEVIN BARON

Talk to me about that right there. This is a common theme for anybody in the national security community is worried about how much does Congress – the members of Congress – understand national security issues when it comes to the nuclear issue and to whether it's modernisation or even right now, for example, the negotiations with Iran.

There's one way to look at it – people think you can have your opinion on both those items but how concerned are you that Congress is educated enough, members of Congress are well attuned enough to make decisions for oversight in your world and this world of nuclear arms?

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

I'm very concerned about it. I'm not concerned about the committees that we deal with regularly because of course they attend hearings, briefings, they get lots and lots of information. But it's the rest of Congress that we're constantly trying to reach out to so that we have the opportunity to tell our story and tell the story of some of these impacts.

Just to conclude my thought, what worries me is the first shot out of the barrel in Congress has been the budget resolutions, which are now past the committee level in both the House and the Senate, and they each have different approaches but each of them basically stuck with the sequestration level of funding for the base budget for the Department of Defence. They've each done something a little bit different with the Overseas Contingency Operation for Defence and so we still don't know exactly where this is going to come out.

The Overseas Contingency Operation can be a fine thing to help build or to help fund some people issues and some readiness issues and all of the things that are happening overseas, but you can't fund modernisation programmes that are multi-year out of one year money, like OCO.

To look at OCO as a panacea for this situation – and by the way, for some people who may not track this on a daily basis, you might say why would they put it in OCO and not in base budget, it's because under this Budget Control Act, OCO doesn't count for purposes of counting how much Defence gets. That's why some are interested in that avenue but it does not make sense when you're talking about modernising in a multiyear fashion. It is not a panacea for this; it can help in certain areas but it is no panacea.

KEVIN BARON:

Do you think we'll get sequestration or do you think it'll be dropped?

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

If I were a betting woman?

KEVIN BARON

Make your call, yes.

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

I'd be poor because that's why I don't bet, but if I were to bet, I would say it'll be somewhere in the middle, meaning we may not get everything we've asked for but I sure hope we will get more than sequestration.

KEVIN BARON

Partial sequestration?

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

And that's another thing – sequestration – we're using this as a catchphrase or a catchword. It's a mechanism and it's also a budget level so I'm really talking about budget levels.

The worst of all possible worlds is if we end up with the mechanism, which is to say every programme across the board would have to take a certain percentage cut regardless of where it is within the programmatic, regardless of whether it makes any sense whatsoever, so that would be the worst of all worlds.

KEVIN BARON

Soon we're going to go to open questions from the floor and I really hope to hear some great ones, and while you're thinking on that, I'll ask one more. But we have a great military panel – try to keep your questions military orientated, if you can.

General, I'd like to ask you pretty bluntly, defend the Triad. We've had a lot of interesting articles in the last couple of years, of big ideas thrown out there, including famously, we don't even need an Air Force, or we don't need ICBMs, or we don't need bombers. There's no way a long range bomber is ever going to deliver a nuclear weapon. That is such old-school thinking. Why do we still need a Triad? Why are we not seeing something much more out of the box, something totally different for the next century?

GARRETT HARENCAK

Because the Triad works. The Triad is a complementary system that we've had for decades that, across the entire spectrum, covers all the possible threats, the most extensive possible threats to America – it works.

How many other things in this town can we say have worked as well as the Triad, and not too many. The fact of the matter is the complementary nature of the Triad, because people ask me all the time, it's redundant.

They cannot be further from the truth. The Triad, the capability of our land-based ICBMs, the flexibility that a bomber gives the President of the United States and the security and the stability that continues to add to the deterrents that the United States Navy provides across any potential threat, and these are the big ones – the existential threats – leaves no gaps, at a relatively small cost to our entire defence budget, as we talked about.

I say defend the Triad – if you think about it, if you talk about it, and we haven't done as well a job as we should have over the past 20, 25 years, and that's my fault. That's our fault in DoD and outside, it's many people in this room's fault because we have not gone out to the American people, we have not discussed the continued relevance of the Triad and the stability that it brings to us and our allies, and because of that, people are not realising the tremendous value that it brings.

As far as the long range strike bomber, first of all, if the happy day comes tomorrow where all nuclear weapons go away, and we hope it does happen as soon as possible, but until that time, we're going to need a Triad. But regardless, even if that time came tomorrow, your United States Air Force would still need a penetrating, persistent bomber out there.

The fact that it will be nuclear capable a couple of years after its IOC – its Initial Operating Capability – is very helpful for the Triad because of the flexibility that the bomber leg of the Triad brings.

However, your United States Air Force – the essence of your United States Air Force, our great Air Force – is to say there is no sanctuary anywhere on this planet and that we could penetrate and destroy a potential threat to America that is delivered by your United States Air Force, and that particular is delivered from a long range penetrating bomber that we need, and our youngest long range penetrating bomber right now qualifies for antique licence plates in every state in our Union, and it's time to do that.

The last thing I'll say about it, and I promise I'll shut up, is someday, the reason we need a long range strike bomber is because nobody, hopefully, in 2025 or 2030 will have to walk into the Oval Office and say, Mr President or Madam President, I am so very sorry, but we cannot destroy

that threat to America because we made a decision ten years ago not to invest in a penetrating bomber.

KEVIN BARON

We want to open up to questions. I was told we'll have microphones through the audience and you can stand behind them, I guess, in the aisles here. I actually have one right up front here if you need to go to a microphone. I'll go ahead, while we're waiting, do you think the Air Force needs a separate nuclear budget the way the Navy's calling for?

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

I personally don't think that's the case. If that's the way Congress decides to go, we're committed to funding the nuclear enterprise appropriately, whether it's in our base budget or separately.

Of course, we too have made the case, just as the Navy has made, that nuclear is a very national capability, I will say, and so there's a lot of needs in the US Air Force to the extent we can get some help with that. We're all for it in terms of pooling resources and whatnot, but regardless of how it's funded, we're committed to it.

KEVIN BARON

We'll start right here in the centre, if you could – I think you've been told to say your name, tell us where you're from and I will insist you keep it as a question and not a speech.

TREVOR FINDLAY

I'm Trevor Findlay, I'm managing the Atom project at Harvard University. Secretary, I understand you've identified organisational culture as a problem in the missile Air Force, in particular. I'm wondering how you went about identifying that as a problem and what steps are being taken to mend the culture as you see it.

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

When the cheating situation came to the light, and as you heard, it was very much in my first weeks as Secretary of the Air Force, the first couple of days, I tried to get myself as fully educated as I could and gather as many facts as I could in that brief period of time, because the number one thing on my mind was needing to make sure that our nuclear enterprise was safe and secure and effective, and after a couple of days of gathering those facts, I was convinced of that.

Step two, for me, was going out to the nuclear bases and talking to the leaders on the ground, and as I mentioned earlier, I also like to do focus groups with some of the airmen and the leaders were not present for those meetings because specifically I wanted, as much as I could, to get the young people to open up and explain what was going on and how did they think such a thing could have happened.

It was through those sorts of focus groups, as well as the visits with the leaders, as well as consultations in Washington, putting that all together in my own head the way I put it, is that I thought we had a systemic cultural situation going on, if you will, and the cheating was one manifestation that happened at that one location, but I thought it was much broader than that.

I thought that, for example, this was a group that didn't feel empowered to do its job in the kinds of ways that I've seen other parts of our Air Force feel empowered and take charge and do their jobs. It was a very micromanaging culture; it was a culture that focused on test, evaluate. Everybody was always getting tested or they were or they were getting ready to be tested, and just like when you're a kid in school, if all you do is test, you study for the test, you're not studying for continual learning.

It was out of all of this that we decided, in part, because there's lots of other fixes as well, that we really needed to attack some of these cultural things and we needed to make this a culture of continual improvement. We needed to change the training regime, we had to make sure that never again would 100% test scores be used on a young officer's evaluation as the sole criteria as to whether he or she would advance.

All of these things which used to be the case have been done away with, and the commander of those forces, General Weinstein, issued directives across the board which lifted some of those micromanaging procedures and regulations, which further empowered the airmen to take the ball and run with it in ways that they had not been allowed to before. Those were the initial thoughts and, really, we've been working on them ever since.

KEVIN BARON

General, is it getting better?

GARRETT HARENCAK

We think so; we believe; we have certain metrics. We can't keep every captain in this particular career field, simply because it's very lieutenant and captain focused, just by numbers.

What we have to do is we have to do developmental teams, where we ask these young officers, do you want to go do something else? What we tell them is performance and preference based. If you perform well, we'll rank order you one to N, the top people get their choice.

Their choice could be to stay or their choice could be to go into one of 26 other career fields. What we've found, after the Secretary's focus on this, what we've found in these developmental teams that the vast majority of our highest performing Missileer officers are choosing to stay in missiles. To me, that's a clear metric that we're on the right track and what the Secretary has done is going to reap some very good results for us.

KEVIN BARON:

Let's head to the left side, we have three lines. Go ahead – your name and where you're from.

TOM COLLINA

Tom Collina with the Ploughshares [fund]. Thank you both very much for being here today. My question's a follow-up on Kevin's question about the redundancy of the Triad and to make the point that even within the Triad, there are redundancies, so in a sense it's a redundancy within a redundancy, and the one I'm talking about is the bomber leg – the new penetrating bomber – and plans to develop a new penetrating cruise missile for the penetrating bomber.

If you have a penetrating bomber, why do you need a penetrating cruise missile on it? Do you need both and if you had to choose, which one would you choose? Thank you.

GARRETT HARENCAK

Ma'am, I'll start with that. First of all, I disagree, as we've talked many times, that it is a redundant system. It is not redundant, there is a direct attack and standoff is not redundant in any United States military particular action. There are times when you need direct attack, i.e. a penetrating capability, because that's the best way to neutralise the threat, and then there are other times where standoff is the only capability that is reasonable.

This idea that just because you have standoff and direct attack, they are redundant, cannot be further from the truth. This has been true ever since the unfortunate circumstance of humans having to fight each other. You have had to have direct attack and you have also had to have a standoff capability, so we do not believe it's redundant at all.

There are certain times where the President of the United States specifically, in a nuclear environment, would have certain options available to protect America and our allies that a direct attack is the only way to do it and there are others where a standoff capability is, so we do not believe, in any way, that it's redundant. There are just too many scenarios out there.

My job, my best military advice is to be prepared across all spectrums, so when people say, you won't need that in the future, are these the same people that said we wouldn't be fighting an insurgency again? Are these the same people who said before the First Gulf War that we would never fight vast tank battles and armoured battles in a desert?

We don't know what the next threat is. My job is to give you my best military advice to prepare across the entire spectrum, so I fundamentally disagree with the idea that because you have a standoff capability, it is redundant to a penetrating capability. Those are two separate capabilities that depending on the specific reason that you're going to have to neutralise that threat to America may require either or both to be accomplished.

KEVIN BARON

For both of you to follow on this, what's the earliest that you need a replacement for the B-52, for a new bomber, and what's the earliest, realistically, you're going to get one?

GARRETT HARENCAK

Long range strike bomber would be in the mid-20s where our plan is to keep flying the B-52 to 2040, which would make it an 80 year old weapons system. That means we would ask our grandchildren to fly into harm's way in an 80 year old airplane and you could certainly say we don't need this, then fine, then stand up with me.

I have a grandchild; I have an 11 month old grandchild who theoretically, I tell him all the time. He's 11 months old, he's going to graduate the Air Force academy class of 2036. It's already going to happen. His father flies the same tail number I flew as a second lieutenant in 1984 and now my grandson, Joshua, will graduate in 2036 and could theoretically fly.

Fine, you have every right to say that we don't need to invest in that, then fine, then stand up and say you will send your grandchild into combat with mine in an 80 year old airplane because they will go, just as their parents will and their grandparents and their great-grandparents have done.

KEVIN BARON

You're talking to the contractors, when's the earliest we're going to see one of these things?

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

The earliest that we will see the new one is, as the General said, in the 2020s and of course, as we've said before, we're looking to buy about 100, 80 to 100 but probably closer to the 100 mark.

It's going to take time for them to roll out so not all 100 are all going to be there in the mid-2020s. It takes time and obviously an 80 year old aircraft, we are going to be upgrading it and so forth along the way. I grant you 80 years old is an extremely old aircraft but I just want to reassure everybody it is going to be safe. It will have upgrades and so forth along the way.

KEVIN BARON

Sure, you said you weren't a gambling woman. Here we are. You're banking on, before the slip [?] bringing it into the 40s, right when it expires is when you expect contractors to deliver. Why would you expect that, given the F-35, given how poorly contractors have done on delivering aircraft on time?

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

It'll be the 2020s, so that gives us a good – even if you say 2025, just roughly speaking, that's a 15 year period and so, as I think you all know, we are on the verge within the next several months of awarding an EMD developmental contract on this new bomber.

KEVIN BARON

Who's going to get that contract?

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

We don't know, it's in source selection, of course.

KEVIN BARON

I tried.

GARRETT HARNCAK

Just to finish that thought, we're talking about a penetrating bomber. Of course, the B-52 is the most single amazing airplane, in my view, every built. I mean, look how this plane keeps flying, it keeps doing a great job.

But what we're talking about is a penetrating bomber. The B-52 will not be able to penetrate in 2040. It'd still have enormous use to America but we're talking about an ability to allow no adversary to have sanctuary anywhere in the world, and that requires a penetrating capability.

The fact, yes, the Secretary's absolutely right, not that I need to tell my boss she's right, but she is, that yes, it will be safe, it will be secure, it'll be great, but it cannot penetrate and that's what we're talking about – the ability to penetrate.

KEVIN BARON

Far side, stage right.

DARYL KIMBALL

Thanks, Daryl Kimball with the Arms Control Association. General, I know you don't like to talk about numbers but the commander in chief did say in 2013 that the United States has more nuclear weapons than we need for deterrent purposes, so question one is is that correct.

For Secretary James, has the Pentagon and the State Department and the Whitehouse discussed how these ambitious plans for modernising the Triad fit in or not with the United States' plans for engaging other nuclear armed states around the world to restrain their nuclear build-ups and to create strategic stability, because it seems as though other countries may have a certain reaction to some of the General's rather penetrating comments about the penetrating capability of this new bomber.

GARRETT HARENCAK

I'll start – the commander in chief is correct. He's the commander in chief and what I will not talk about is the actual numbers. I think that is beyond all I care about, as the nuclear guy for America's Air Force, is that whatever those numbers are – and I really don't care and I wouldn't begin to debate on the specific, whatever that number is – do we have more right now? The President is right, sure. Certainly we have. Whatever the floor that number is, I don't really care.

What I care about is that I do what the President has asked us to do in the United States Air Force that is long and whatever the number is, we have a safe, secure and effective stockpile, and that's what I'm focused about. That's why I don't talk numbers because it really doesn't matter to me.

Whatever that number is has to be secure, it has to be effective, it has to be safe, and that's what we need the investment is to make sure that that number is.

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

And I would simply add that, at least speaking personally, the discussions where I have been present with the President, when we've talked about nuclear matters, the question I think was DoD and the White House and so forth, we've all gotten together on this plan.

The answer is yes, we are all together on the plan that I described, which represented that \$5.6 billion more over the next five years, which includes people issues and sustainment issues and modernisation issues.

Certainly, the President is fully on board with that. It's his plan; it's part of his budget. In terms of the international scene and how all this plays, I personally have not been involved with those discussions but of course I'm well aware that the United States is party to, I think it's 11 or so separate, either treaties or international agreements, and as has been pointed out, our ultimate aspiration is to have a nuclear free world. But until that time seems truly upon us, we have to make sure that the weapons that we have are safe, secure, and reliable and part of that does require us to modernise periodically, to make sure that they are both safe and effective.

The last point I'll make is on START. I certainly am involved with that because of course the United States Air Force is taking action to get to our START numbers, as is the US Navy. It's not all the Air Force, it includes the US Navy and the submarine element of the Triad.

Of course, what START says is we need to mutually have certain totals that we meet. It doesn't tell us how to meet those totals but it does give us a deadline, which is February of 2018, and so we are taking action to meet that deadline and to do our part of it. As I said, the Navy will be doing some of it as well.

Some of it will relate to our ICBM forces and some of it will relate to our bomber forces and we intend to do everything that we need to do to fulfil that agreement and make our numbers.

KEVIN BARON

Our clock says seven minutes left and we have about four people in line to ask questions, so we can make them quick, we'll see how we can do.

HOWARD MORLAND

Howard Morland – an appropriate target for a nuclear weapon is one that we must be able to destroy or threaten to destroy, and which cannot be destroyed with anything less than a nuclear weapon.

I would argue that there are no such targets. I challenge you to prove me wrong by giving me half a dozen targets that I can look up on Google Maps so I can understand why we have a nuclear arsenal.

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

Go ahead, General –half a dozen, make it fair.

GARRETT HARENCAK

Half a dozen. I guess the best way to answer your question, I would challenge that. I certainly, in an unclassified thing, I'm not going to give you a list of targets, but if you misread that as they don't exist, I think that would be unfortunate.

The fact of the matter is what we're talking about is a credible deterrent and deterrents, you have to have a credible deterrent for the stability that a nuclear force gives us. This is about – and people ask me about this all the time. They say, how many weapons do you have to destroy the world. I have no idea, but it's not about that.

It's about protecting America and saving the world and that is making sure that, as the President has asked us to do, that as long as nuclear weapons exist, we maintain a safe, secure and effective stockpile, and also, deterrence isn't particularly what we may think. Unfortunately, there are other people out there in the world who may not share our particular views in America about the appropriate use for nuclear weapons, which for us is deterrence and deterrence only.

There are other potential adversaries out there who may not see it, and deterrence is about deterring them, not particularly worrying about how we see it. But I'm sorry, I can't give you those half dozen targets there but I assure you that they do exist.

KEVIN BARON

There's a lot to say in there, but I'm going to give the floor back to the convention here, let's go to the left side. Quickly, if you can.

STEPHEN SCHWARTZ

Thank you very much – Stephen Schwartz, James Martin Centre for Nonproliferation Studies. Both of you in the last year, as well as former Secretary Hagel, have made the point repeatedly that the nuclear mission in the Air Force is either the number one priority or the top priority or some combination of those words.

But if you look at the budget, notwithstanding the expense of the new bomber and the new ICBM, the nuclear mission is only a relatively small fraction of the overall Air Force budget, personnel more or less the same thing.

I'm wondering what, in the overall mission, the Air Force obviously does lots of other things other than nuclear missiles and nuclear bombers, so what does that mean, to be the number one or the top priority and, related to that, are you at all concerned about the potentially contradictory message that this might send to countries that either have nuclear weapons or are seeking them, given the fact that this is what the conference is about – trying to prevent the further spread of these weapons, and just one quick rejoinder to a comment a couple of minutes ago.

KEVIN BARON

Let's stop there. Sorry, we have three minutes left. Let's get an answer to your question from the Secretary.

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

Very briefly, I would say nuclear is number one with us, but of course, it's not the only one with us. We have five core missions. It has been my belief since I've been Secretary, that we need more focus, more persistent focus, and more persistent leadership in the nuclear, which is why I have tried to make such a big deal of it and why, under even a sequestration level budget, I tried to say that these increases where we shifted monies, they wouldn't all go away but some of them would go away.

If you look at other parts of our budgets, it's a similar story, that under that \$10 billion more, these other areas of the budget would get more but in some cases, all of it would be wiped away. We're really going to be protecting nuclear, even if we have to phase sequestration.

In terms of how other countries view it, the way I hope other countries will view it is that we are determined to make sure that our nuclear stockpile, our nuclear enterprise, is safe, secure and effective. That means proper manning, that means proper sustainment and it means proper modernisation.

KEVIN BARON

We've got our last one in there, Brian, and then back.

BRYAN BENDER

Thank you, Brian Bender with Politico. We have here the military and the political stewards of two of the three legs of the Triad. Can you both briefly address what you think your role is in building a consensus nationally on what the nation needs for that deterrent that you're talking about, because today you have a proposal from Senator Ed Markey to cut \$100 billion from the nuclear forces over the next decade but then, you're talking about spending more money to upgrade it.

There doesn't seem to be any consensus at all, so what is your role, as an independent military officer and a political leader here, to make the case for what is needed, not based on North Dakota politics or other politics or private industry, but make the case to the country about what we actually need.

GARRETT HARENCAK

I'll start and let Secretary finish today, but I see my role as the A-10, which is the person who advocates and engages for the continued relevance of our two legs of the Triad, is to get people to understand that our ICBMs and our bomber forces are as relevant today as they ever have been.

At what level, how many, the numbers, all that stuff is up for the debate, but our view is what the United States Air Force brings to the strategic nuclear deterrent is the thing they have always brought, which is stability, and our two legs of the Triad cover all aspects of defence against the most extreme threats to America.

My role is to, once again, equate people inside DoD and also outside of DoD, to all the American people, to the continued value of what our 20,000 airmen and our nuclear warriors are doing out there to protect America and to provide that stability, and to make sure people at least do what we're doing here today.

Let's have the debate, let's talk about it, because we haven't talked about as much or enough. I'm confident, we're confident in America's Air Force, that once we have that debate, numbers aside, funding levels aside, people will realise the value and stability that our two legs of the Triad bring. That's my role, is to at least discuss it and to talk about it.

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

I think my role is after I've received the best military advice, assuming that I agree with that advice, is to then go forth and try to tell the story and try to explain the importance of it.

If you go back, and I think I'm true to my word here, if you look at any speech, any bit of testimony, things that I have written over the last year or so, if there is an instance where I haven't pointed out that nuclear is number one, we need this persistent focus and attention, and here's why.

In a nutshell, why is so long as nuclear weapons exist in the world, so long as there are a handful of countries that could, if they so chose, be an existential threat to the United States, so long as there is this other category of countries that are seeking these weapons, that to me says we need to stick with this Triad, and we need to make sure it's safe, secure and effective.

This is what I try to say at every turn, tell the story in as plain English as I know how, and I will say this – I realise there are divisions of opinion. There are divisions of opinion across the country on many matters.

Certainly, there are in our Congress but at least with the committees with whom we deal most, those are our appropriators and our armed services committees, we have received thus far quite good feedback about the actions that we have been taking and, if anything, some say, glad you're on it but it's been somewhat long overdue. My job is to continue to tell that story.

KEVIN BARON

My job is to wrap up this panel, because we're out of time and I want to thank you all for coming and thank the Carnegie Endowment for hosting this conversation as it's been doing. Again, we talked about priorities and we talked about time, on a day when, if whoever's covering this and paying attention to this and nuclear issues, by the end of the day, at least in Washington, we have the Afghanistan President at a delegation going on, and this week we have the budget rolling forward through Congress.

There's lots of things to compete with in this town, so thank you for the time and putting yourself out here for these questions. Thanks to the audience as well.

DEBORAH LEE JAMES

Thank you very much.