Speech by Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James
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SECRETARY JAMES: Thank you, Dean Elmendorf. Thank you for that kind introduction. But most of all thank you to everyone from the Harvard Kennedy School for inviting me to speak here today. This is not my first time at the Kennedy School I will have you know, so it's really great to be back I should say. You mentioned that many senior Pentagon leaders have spent time here at the Kennedy School, but I actually have a different connection that I want to share with you today. I'm a proud Kennedy School mom. So, I have two children and one of them graduated from the Kennedy School in the year 2010. He's now 31 years old. He's living and thriving in New York City and he has a fantastic job. So hold on everybody. The good stuff is coming on graduation from here as well.

Given Harvard's rich military history, it's really, again, very inspirational for me to be able speak with all of you here today. Harvard is actually one of the few institutions that pre-dates the U.S. military and, of course, Harvard has been instrumental in supplying the officers and the great thinkers that have guided the military since our very foundations. The presence of Memorial Church, right in the center of Harvard Yard, is certainly a great reminder of the service and sacrifice of Harvard students and professors and alumni that have given very, very much in support of the defense of our nation. And it was mentioned earlier today -- I want to just foot stomp it, because I think it's a remarkable statistic. There are more Medal of Honor recipients coming from Harvard than any other institution -- any other college -- in the country, with the exception of West Point and the Naval Academy. So that is really proof positive of the long history of service dating back to the Revolutionary times, when Harvard dorms were used

as field hospitals, for example. And the outstanding officers and civilians who study at Harvard today, when we look at them, it's easy to see why Harvard is inextricably linked to our military.

And it was such a huge pleasure for me to be able to spend the morning with President Faust. We went on a military history tour of the campus and we were able to do that right before the fantastic ceremony welcoming back Air Force ROTC formally to Harvard. And let us not forget -- Dean said it, but I want to just reiterate -- our Secretary of Defense, my boss, Ash Carter, he taught right here at Harvard as well. And when the U.S. military faces key strategic problems, it's graduates like Secretary Carter who need to make decisions and tee up the options for our President. And if I may just say so publicly, I just want to say of all our Secretaries of Defense, Ash Carter is the very best ever. And, incidentally, I graduated Duke University. My major was comparative area studies. My minor was sucking up and I have mastered that. [Laughter] I have mastered that phrase. When you see Ash Carter, you tell him I said so.

Now, just like Secretary Carter today, if you go back about 25 years ago in time, the leaders at that time in the Pentagon, in the White House, on Capitol Hill, as well as leaders in what was in those days a very remarkable international coalition -- those leaders had some decisions to make regarding a man by the name of Saddam Hussein and the recent invasion of Kuwait. And they actually made those decisions rather quickly back then and two operations kicked off -- Operations Dessert Shield and Desert Storm. And long story short, the U.S. and its coalition partners liberated the nation of Kuwait.

Now let's flash forward to the present day. We still face actors on the world stage who seek to deny liberty and freedom to others and we are still engaged in combat 25 years later. And as many of you know, from an Air Force perspective, these operations depend on the

synchronized use of air, space, and cyberspace. They also depend on mobility and command and control. They depend on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. And, by the way, all of these capabilities are backed up by the nuclear effect -- or the deterrent effect of our nuclear enterprise.

I was in the business, as you heard, 25 years ago in defense, and I can tell you, hands down, that today's Air Force is even busier now than it was then. And, by the way, this is the reality. I'm looking at my ROTC cadets. This is the reality that you will soon be facing as you graduate. And for those of you who are not going on to military service, you, too, will be facing a very busy and complex world scene. And I have no doubt that the curriculum at MIT, Tufts, Wellesley, and especially here at Harvard, will be making you -- the future graduates -- even better prepared to help contribute to these important policy and command and staff responsibilities as well as the strategic thinking.

And, by the way, strategic thinking -- that brings me to the topic that I'd like to discuss with you this afternoon. I was asked to highlight a few strategic problems and then describe some of the steps that I took to attack those problems as Secretary of the Air Force. But before I dive into this specific talk, let me just give you my personal definition of what a strategic problem entails.

So, first of all, a strategic problem to me almost always involves something long term and complex in nature. Number two, a strategic problem typically requires a comprehensive approach to solve it. So, for example, in government, typically you'll have to cross organizational lines in order to get at what you're targeting. Typically you'll have to come up with solutions that involve people and concepts and technology. By the way, among those three things, people -- in my estimation -- are almost always the key to solving the problem.

So my personal approach, when I'm confronted with such problems, involves four verbs. And I say four verbs very specifically because problems, of course, require action in order to solve them. So my verbs are: investigate, communicate, activate, and follow-up. So those are the four and I hope you'll see this approach and so I'm going to cover two distinct areas today.

The first relates to our nuclear enterprise in the Air Force and the second involves diversity and inclusion in our Air Force. And I picked these two problems -- I could have picked two others, but I decided to pick these two, because as I say, they're complex. They cross organizational lines. They have those facets I described earlier. And also I personally had a certain amount of say in how we addressed these two areas within our Air Force over the last couple of years. And I hope you'll also note as I go through that each of these areas relates first and foremost to people. And people, I would say, is the biggest part of my job as Secretary of the Air Force.

Okay. So with that preface, let's rewind to the very beginnings -- at least for me -- as the new Secretary of the Air Force. So let's go back to January of 2014. I was at this point a mere two or three weeks into my tenure as the 23rd Secretary of the Air Force when bad news landed in my in box. And that bad news was it came to my attention that there were some young Air Force officers who were responsible for standing watch over our land-based nuclear missiles. That these officers were found to have cheated on nuclear proficiency tests. Now all this took place at Malmstrom Air Force Base, which is in Montana.

Now I viewed this as a really big deal and, in a way, it was my first big test as a leader of the Air Force. In fact, I'll just be frank. I viewed it as a crisis. If not a crisis, in fact, I thought it could well be a crisis in the public's view -- a crisis in perception -- because after all,

we're talking about nuclear weapons. Now, how did this happen and what did it mean most importantly for the safety and security of our nuclear enterprise and how would we address it going forward? And would we hunker down and hope it didn't leak or would we go public with the information? All of these questions were on my mind as two or three weeks old in the job as the new Secretary of the Air Force.

So I pretty much knew from the very beginning that I had to investigate the situation -- not just delegate the investigation, but get personally involved and look into it myself. That we needed to be transparent. I tend to always side with the topic of transparency, and so therefore, communicate this, as much as possible -- that's to our internal audience as well as externally. And we had to act fast. So, basically, after two days of some very intense briefings at the Pentagon, I was at least able to convince myself that the answer to the most important question was yes. And the important question was was the nuclear enterprise safe and secure? And the answer is it was. This was a bad failure of integrity on the part of these airmen, but we have many checks and balances in the nuclear enterprise and so I was convinced that we were okay on at least that piece of it.

The second thing we did was we went public. We went public. We told our airmen. We told the Congress and the American people here's what we know, here's what we don't yet know, here's what we're going to do find out, and then we will keep you, our airmen, and the American people informed as we go about this investigation. We will come back periodically and let you know.

After that, I then flew out to the location of our three missile bases, which are in Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota. My top partner in the Air Force, Air Force General Mark Welsh, did the same thing, albeit we were on different programs, but we were both taking a

very, very similar approach. And when I got there, I held focus groups. I visited facilities and I spoke to basically all sorts of people who were involved in the nuclear mission. I met with the leaders of the units, got their briefings, but then I excused myself from the leadership and I did focus groups directly with the airmen at different levels to get their point of view. And I did it privately in the hopes of getting the greatest candor possible.

So from all of this experience, I brought back some initial observations. Number one, this was a community that was suffering, indeed, from some broader institutional and cultural challenges. So although the cheating never extended beyond -- or at least there was never any evidence that it extended beyond this one group, I felt that there was much more broad topics that we needed to address across the enterprise including overly micromanaged the people. A zero defect mentality, small mistakes causing large repercussions for our airmen. So there were some institutional things going on.

Number two, we had somehow lost the distinction between training and evaluation. This was a culture where all you did was test, test, test, evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. The irony in all this is these airmen who cheated, they didn't cheat to pass. They cheated to get a perfect score. They cheated to get 100 percent because those scores were using -- were being used as the reason to promote or not promote our airmen. So where is the training value in that? Where is the spirit of continual learning? So it seemed to me something had gone wrong there and we needed to change it.

Number three, even though policymakers forever and ever have said that nuclear is the number one mission for the Department of Defense, I can tell you that is not the way our people felt and it is not what our budget and our policy choices actually reflected. So I felt like we needed to make the career field more attractive to young people joining the Air Force and we

also needed to provide more professional development and accolades for our nuclear airmen.

Number four, it was very clear to me -- if you go out I think you would agree with me -- the facilities are old. The systems are aged. We needed some long term investments and sustainment and that required our top attention. In other words, we needed to put our money where our mouth was. And most importantly, we needed to recommit. And we needed to do this across our entire Air Force in our core values, which are integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all that we do. After all, back to basics, what went on at Malmstrom Air Force Base was a failure of integrity. And there needed to be accountability for both the airmen involved as well as for the leaders who were in charge.

So these were the circumstances and some initial observations. By the way, General Welsh, on his tour, we came back to Washington together. We consulted and -- although he might have stated it slightly different vocabulary -- very, very similar findings. So after that, that's when we really got busy and we activated. We activated on two fronts. First there was a -- what's called a commander directed investigation into the cheating. And then the second thing was we instituted what's called a force improvement program, or FIP. The FIP, by the way, is just an acronym-like way of saying let's go back to the airmen. Let's hold focus groups and let's find out from them and get ideas from them about what we should consider changing for our nuclear mission. And so by listening to the ideas the bubbled up from the field, we came up with a plan aimed at improving all aspects of how the mission is accomplished. So here's a little bit of what we did out of this process called the FIP.

We made the environment less micromanaged. We empowered our people more. We drove decision making down to lower levels. We revamped the culture of constant testing to one of a culture of more continuous improvement. And, needless to say, getting 100 percent on a

test score when the standard is 90 percent, getting 100 is no longer being used to decide who gets promoted and who doesn't.

On accountability, commanders at Malmstrom were removed in some cases. And the [missiliers] involved with the cheating, they were dealt with in different ways according to their degree of involvement. By the way, we now have a four-star general in charge of the Global Strike Command, where our nuclear enterprise resides. And we have a three-star general at our headquarters who is leading the nuclear function at headquarters level. And, by the way, that's an upgrade for both of those positions.

In terms of making the career field more exciting to young people, we are now offering scholarships to young people who are considering coming in and in an effort to get the interested in the nuclear world. We've got some new accolades like the new Nuclear Deterrence Operations Medal and additional professional development opportunities for our people. Over time we are shifting billions of dollars -- billions with a B -- to address a variety of people in maintenance and modernization needs.

And, lastly, we have launched a number of efforts which affect all of us across the Air Force. It's a campaign for everyone to rededicate to those three core values that I talked to you about -- integrity, service, and excellence.

So these are just a few of the changes that we activated to make a difference, to try to close what I call the say-do gap. So now when we say nuclear is number one, hopefully the things that we actually do and the messages that we put forth -- the two will be more in sync and it will ring more true going forward.

So now that we've done with course improvement program, now what? Well, I have followed-up. I have done it personally and so have others as well. I've been back to those

bases three times since this incident occurred. I continue to hold focus groups both with the leaders and alone with the airmen. And I say how are we doing? What's going on here? Are you starting to see some of these changes? And based on all of that, I think that we are on the right path. We're moving in the right direction. But, like I said earlier, a strategic problem takes years to accomplish real change. So the focus and the follow-up must continue.

All right. So that's the first story. The second story -- the problem at hand -- is how do we retain -- recruit and retain the best and the most ready Air Force on the planet -- not only today, but in the years to come? How do we become more innovative? How do we move ahead in the war for talent, which we are all facing whether we are in government or whether we're in the private sector?

Well, I think this is a multifaceted issue, but one part of the answer I believe lies in making diversity and inclusion really work for us in the United States Air Force. So, once again, a little background. I think we recognize that the biggest threat that faces our nation today in the next three decades is what I'll call the rapid pace of change -- the change of technology, the changes in communication, the changes in threats around the world and different types of organizations of people that threaten our interests. And so we need to get better at speeding things up. We need the institutional ability to adapt to this rapid pace of change and keep up with something that we call in the Air Force strategic agility -- being more agile and fast in the way that we respond.

Now one change that we've seen certainly relates to demographics. In 2012, Latinos, Asians, mixed-race, and African American births constituted the majority of births in the U.S. for the first time in our history. So it's not just inevitable that our country will experience a demographic shift. It has already happened and it's going to continue to happen.

Now not only that, but there is a growing what I'll call generation gap when it comes to military service. According to a Pew research study, roughly eight in ten veterans have an immediate family member who served in the military. And that compares to 61 percent among the general public. So if you state this a different way, the military has increasingly in this country become a family affair, which means a lot of American families don't have someone that has served. And by extension, that means a lot of American families perhaps don't understand or perhaps appreciate what goes into military service.

Now it's clear to me those organizations that broaden their horizons, they are going to do better for the war for talent and I want to make sure that the United States Air Force is in the forefront of that. So I stepped back fairly early in my tenure because I wanted to investigate how well or not so well that we - the Air Force -- were doing when it comes to diversity in our Air Force. And I'll give you the bottom line up front -- not too bad, but I knew that we could do better. It was not good enough in my estimation.

So, once again, just a few statistics. Today's Air Force leads the Department of Defense with the highest percentage of women in the service. That's pretty good news. I like that one. But we're in the middle of the pack -- in the middle of the pack when it comes to racial and ethnic diversity. I'm not so happy with that. That's the not so good news. Our junior enlisted force is pretty diverse. That's good. But as the ranks go up, the percentage of females and minorities and senior noncommissioned officer ranks goes down. And the same holds true, by the way, if we look at our officer statistics as well as our civilians. In fact, women attrite the Air Force at twice the rate of men by the time they reach the midcareer point. And the same is true in specific specialties.

For example, while minorities comprise about 20 percent of our officer corps,

they make up only 10 percent of the pilot career field. Similarly, we have women who make up about 20 percent of the office of the corps, but only five percent of the pilots. Now there are many important career fields in our Air Force. Being a pilot is not the be all and end all because there's many ways to contribute. But, for heaven's sake, we're the United States Air Force. Being a pilot does count. And once again, we're not very diverse in our pilot ranks.

So I could go on, but I think you get the picture. Diversity of background, experience, and skill are paramount when it comes to innovation and capability to perform in this increasingly fast-pace of change the world that I described to you earlier. So I believe in this. So does General Welsh. We had a lot of discussion about this early on. But in order to communicate -- communicate this to the rest of the force, just how important diversity and inclusion are and why we intended to work on this, General Welsh and I released two memos to the entire Air Force last year. The first described why diversity and inclusion are so vital [inaudible] the change that I've just provided to you. And then the second memo activated nine initiatives that were designed to advance the ball to get us going in this arena. And since that time, there have been a few more added. So let me just hit on a few of those initiatives right now.

In terms of recruiting, the first initiative related to our female officer applicant pool, which at that point stood at about 25 percent of our overall applicant pool. I figured and he figured that's not enough given that 50 percent of college graduates today are female. So let's see if we can do better. Therefore, we set an applicant pool goal of 30 percent for our officer accession sources. Now, a year later, we have gone back. We followed-up. We've looked to see how we've done. We didn't make 30 percent, but we made about 27 percent. So we advanced the ball in year one.

We also made some changes by way of [inaudible] to our civilian hiring processes. And, in a similar fashion, that resulted in about a three percent increase in women hired into some of our more senior civilian grades compared to hiring of about a year ago. So, once again, we're advancing the ball and we've got to keep the focus up.

Moving onto those who are already serving, the second initiative is our ROTC Graded Height Screening Initiative and this is aimed specifically to increasing diversity in our pilot career field. So some of my cadets listen up here because this could well be of interest to you. Just by way of background, in order to fly in our Air Force, candidates must meet certain standing and sitting height requirements. And these requirements are based on the size of the most restrictive cockpits. The standard ensures that an individual can be qualified to fit into and ultimately fly in all of our aircraft across the inventory.

But then you say, okay, that makes sense. But what if somebody is too short to qualify for all aircraft, but could qualify for some of the aircraft. Then what happens? Well, it turns out there's always been a waiver process in place to meet that kind of a situation. But only those who attended the Air Force academy had a consistent access to the measurement process to get through that waiver process. Which, by the way, that -- just right off the bat -- eliminated about a third of our female and our African Americans who come to us instead via the ROTC program.

So what did we do? Well, once again, we activated a new process. We call it the height screening initiative. And, stated another way, it's really a pretty simple change when you come right down to it. We changed the process by moving the measurement process to the ROTC field training to reach a greater number of cadets going forward.

Now the follow up. Since we started taking these additional measurements, we

added an additional 223 candidates who previously wouldn't have had an opportunity to compete. Now not all of them are female. Not all of them are minorities. But this is another way of advancing the ball. We've opened the aperture and now more people can have the opportunity to serve in the pilot career field.

The third initiative deals with mentorship. Mentorship is something I certainly have been a beneficiary of in my life. I believe in it. It's something our airmen tell me they want more of. And so we launched last summer a program called My Vector. It's an on-line system designed to leverage technology to enable mentors and mentees to maintain a professional relationship. Think of it as the match.com of mentoring -- where people who go on line, they can write down what they're interested in in terms of having a mentor and mentors themselves can go on-line and list their backgrounds and then it will make a match. So far we've had some pretty good success -- 17,000 registered mentor profiles made 11,000 connections. I'm mentoring five airmen, some civilian, some military myself through My Vector.

Mentoring is also why we have partnered in the DOD with Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and the Lean In initiative to launch a broader number of Lean In circles across the military branches. And, once again, I'm involved with two Lean In circles myself, which have both men and women within them.

In terms of retention, the fourth initiative addresses deployment and family issues. Which, by the way, deployment and family issues is the number one reason why our women are attritting at twice the rate of men at the mid-career point. So here are the initiatives we took there. We extended the post-pregnancy deployment deferment from six to twelve months and we did the same thing for the PT test. So to state that another way, it used to be that after the birth of a child, a woman would be subject to deployment anywhere in the world at the six-

month point. Similarly, you take the PT test at the six month point. We just made the accommodation, however, instead of six months now, it's a year. Instead of starving yourself and trying to get back in shape at the six month point, now you'll take that PT test at the year point. So, once again, reasonable accommodations. We hope they'll have over time an impact -- positive impact for our females. And, of course, I hope you all saw that the Secretary of Defense, Ash Carter, recently extended for all 12 weeks of maternity leave for all who are serving in the military. Hopefully, we'll get Congress to approve an increase for paternity leave and an increase in more flexibility for parents who choose to adopt. So, once again, reasonable accommodations so that we can keep some of our fantastic people longer in the military.

Fifth, we launched what's called the career intermission program. Think of this as a mini sabbatical for people who are on active duty. Under this program, you can take between one and three years, transfer into the reserve, and then come back to us without losing your place in line for promotion. So we hope that will help us retain some additional people.

And, finally, the sixth initiative I want to tell you about. Once again, Secretary Carter, has just recently opened all remaining jobs that had previously been closed to women. They are now all open. Women can serve in any position now for which they are qualified. And, incidentally, some of these jobs are extremely demanding. [Inaudible] as well as mental acuity standpoint, so these standards are very, very high for these jobs. But the good news going forward now is the standards will be the same for men and women. Everyone who is qualified can compete and serve going forward.

So now when it comes to the follow-up piece, once again, persistent focus, persistent leadership. Once and done follow-up is not adequate. We're going to have to keep this up year after year after year.

So, basically, there's a lot going on across the government and across the world and, undoubtedly, everybody in this room either already is or will soon be playing a key leadership role whether you're in a military position, a civilian position, whether you're in the greater Department of Defense arena, or somewhere else in the national security space. And I can tell you your jobs won't get any easier. Many of you will be tasked to help solve tough, tough strategic problems and you're going to find -- just like I have found -- that there's almost never a silver bullet out there where you can institute a quick fix. But by working on the underlying strategy, we can help solve these complex problems that our nation is facing.

So just remember -- investigate, communicate, activate, and follow-up. And be relentless. Be relentless. Do it over and over again. And also remember if you get the people part of the equation right, the rest of the factors are much more likely to follow and to fall into place.

Thank you so much again for the invitation to come before you today.

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