

060517 Air Force Association Capitol Hill Breakfast Briefing with Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson

MR. WHIT PETERS: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. We appreciate everybody being here.

This is the first time we've run this particular breakfast series here at the Capitol Hill Club. My guess is it will not be the last. We appreciate everybody coming.

I'm Whit Peters. I'm the Chairman of AFA and I was the 19th Secretary of the Air Force, which makes me pretty old, I guess. We're up to 24 today. I want to say thank you, on behalf of Larry Spencer, our President, on behalf of the board and on behalf of our 96,000 members around the world who are all supporting the Air Force.

This is a seminar series which is one of our important events where we try to advocate and educate people about the Air Force. We are so happy the Secretary is here today because this is one of the events we have where Air Force leaders can talk directly to members of industry, to our allied partners, to think tanks, to Congressional staff, and the media about the crucial role that air, space, and cyber power plays in our nation's security.

The Air Force Association was formed 70 years ago, at the same time that the Air Force became a separate service, with the mission of promoting the value of air and space power. This mission is particularly important today when so few of our fellow citizens and our members of Congress have actually served in the military. That's why AFA will continue to focus our attention on telling the Air Force story through events like this, through our Mitchell Institute events here on Capitol Hill and throughout the country, and of course in our publications and our press work.

We are very pleased to have as our speaker today, the 24th Secretary of the Air Force, the honorable Heather Wilson. Secretary Wilson grew up in an aviation family. Her grandfather, I am told, was an avid flyer and a barnstormer, and an early member of the Civil Air Patrol. Her father was an Air Force pilot as well, and apparently once built an airplane inside their house. I've heard of people building boats in the basement, but airplanes in the house, that's something different. And she was flying her family's aircraft before she could ride a bicycle.

So it would be easy to say that it was natural for a young Heather Wilson to head off to the Air Force Academy in 1978, but I think that understates the courage that it took for young women to embark on a military career in the late 1970s. Now I recognize that I am probably older than everybody in this room, but I remember that military service was a path back in the '70s that very few women took. When I left active duty at the end of 1972, for example, I had not met or even seen a woman officer in the Navy. Women were first allowed to serve on Navy ships in the same year that Dr. Wilson arrived at the academy. And the restriction on women flying in combat was still to be lifted about 14 years after she started in Colorado Springs.

But against the odds she came to the Academy and thrived. She was the first woman to command basic training and the first woman to serve as vice commander of the cadet wing. She graduated at the top of her class and was selected to be a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, where she earned both a Masters and a Ph.D. After seven years of active duty and time on the National Security Council staff, she was elected to Congress representing New Mexico's First Congressional District, which is around Albuquerque, from 1998 to 2009, where she was a member of the Intelligence Committee and Armed Services Committee.

Most recently, she was the president of the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology in Rapid City, South Dakota. Those of you who have not been to Rapid City, and I know many of you have been there because Ellsworth is there, the School of Mines is a pre-eminent engineering school started in 1885, less than a decade after Custer's last stand. During her time at the school it was ranked as one of America's best buys in education, and its graduates earned more than the graduates from my alma mater, Harvard. So I think that's really quite an achievement.

Dr. Wilson, I think, is also the only Air Force Secretary, at least in the last 20 years and perhaps forever, who can actually fly an airplane. On that happy note, ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming the honorable Heather Wilson.

(Applause).

SEC. HEATHER WILSON: Well, we'll see if we can make the electronics work here. Can you hear me on this mic here? We'll just use that, then. Good morning to all of you. It's wonderful to be with you. Larry, thank you for your leadership of the Air Force Association and thank you for your kind introduction.

Arnie Bunch is also here. He's probably the person that most of you want to talk to.

(Laughter).

I never go anywhere without somebody covering my six. Thank you very much, Arnie, for being here. Lisa Disbrow, the Undersecretary is also with us today. She was the Acting Secretary for several months before I arrived and has helped me tremendously in this transition. I just wanted to publicly thank you for your service.

(Applause).

Seventy-three years ago today, so on the 6th of June 1944, 77 B-29 Air Force bombers took off from a strip in India and bombed railroad shops in Bangkok, Thailand. Ten days later those B-29s took off from China and they bombed the Imperial Iron and Steel Works on mainland Japan. That was the first strike on Japan since the Doolittle Raiders had a one way trip in 1942.

It was a revolutionary day in American history and in the history of airpower. One of those B-29s that were coming off the lines in Washington and Omaha and Wichita, was eventually named the Enola Gay. It was an ambitious project at the time, and it was fraught with difficulty from the very beginning, because we were pushing the bounds of human knowledge and technical capability.

The United States was going to build a bomber that could fly 5,000 miles with a one ton payload. It was the first pressurized cockpit so that the crew could fly at 40,000 feet in altitude in the year 1944. The wingspan of this aircraft was longer than the first flight by the Wrights. There were four 2,200 horsepower engines on this thing. They were radial engines with 18 cylinders made out of specialty alloy. We'd never done anything like this before. And Boeing had to invent a manufacturing process to extrude an alloy of aluminum to make wing bars in a way that had never been done before.

It was a program that was fraught with problems. There were miles of electrical wiring in this thing that had bad connections. There were pressure seals that were leaking. There were engines that were suffering catastrophic failure in flight. And Hap Arnold and Senator Harry Truman were livid at the delays. So when things were still not going right Hap Arnold went out to Wichita and he said, "I want this airplane flying and ready for combat in two months", and signed his name on a fuselage. Two months later he still didn't have it.

So he sent a guy named General Bennett Meyers to get the program back on track. They pulled the wiring and they pulled crews from all over the country to get this bomber in the air and get it into combat. They didn't have hangars big enough for the B-29, so crews were working outside in the frigid cold trying to get this thing to work.

That bomber changed the course of the war. The persistence in advancing technologies changed the course of history. Last week General Christopher Bogdan retired. More than anyone else, he is responsible for the successful persistence of the F-35 fighter program. After cost over-runs and schedule slippages he took over the program and he got it working and he got it fixed. The price per plane is coming down and the people who fly it are just now realizing that it will change the way we fight and win in the air. We're changing the game because we're advancing the technology.

(Audio difficulties).

I will try to project and use my outside voice.

(Laughter).

So last week Chris Bogdan retired and he's done tremendous work for the United States Air Force and for advancing technology so that we can win the fight. We're all deeply grateful to him.

The Air Force has always been about advancing technology to project power, because in concert with our allies we have to own the high ground. We have to be able to take the fight to the enemy. The challenges that we face at the moment are pretty significant.

This year's budget reflects the heritage of innovators and it reflects the commitment to restore the readiness and lethality of the force. When I came back to the service after several years away, and delightfully ensconced in Rapid City, South Dakota, I was surprised by a few things in my run up to confirmation. One of them was the first slide that I saw on readiness.

When I was a young lieutenant, I remember the weekly standup briefings at headquarters 3rd Air Force at Mildenhall. One of the first slides that would go up was the readiness of every wing in 3rd Air Force. If we had seen numbers then like I saw when I returned and got my first briefing on readiness here in the Air Force today -- if we had seen those kind of numbers during the Cold War, the general I worked for would have blown a gasket.

The United States Air Force is a third smaller than it was during Desert Storm. We have 5,500 aircraft compared to 8,600 at the time of Desert Storm. That means we have 55 combat ready squadrons. Before 1991 we were buying over 500 aircraft a year on average. Since 1991 the United States Air Force has been buying on average less than 100 a year.

Our average aircraft age is 27 years old. The average age is 27 years old. We've been involved in combat for 26 straight years, and most Americans don't know that. If you talk to a high school kid or a kid in college today and ask them, how long has the Air Force been in combat, many of them don't even know that we're conducting strikes today in Syria and Iraq against ISIS.

In fact, in 2014 when ISIS reared its ugly head, it was the United States Air Force that surged the fight. There have been 26,000 sorties and air strikes against ISIS since 2014, 26,000 air strikes. Seventy percent of those have been conducted by the United States Air Force. We surged to the front.

We have adversaries who are seeking to undermine the credibility of our alliances and neutralize our ability to project power. The reality is that we are too small for what the nation expects of us, and it is unlikely that the need for air and space power will diminish significantly over the next decade. So what do we do about it?

The fiscal year '17 appropriations stopped the decline. The proposed budget for fiscal year '18 starts to restore readiness and modernize the force. But more than anything else, we need predictability. The United States Air Force needs predictability. If we don't provide relief from the Budget Control Act, we will further hollow out the force and set ourselves back years. We have to get beyond the Budget Control Act.

This budget also assumes something else, and it's one of the things that perhaps we take for granted as Americans, but we shouldn't. This budget assumes that the United States will remain a global power, which means we need global mobility, global intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, global strike, the ability to fight anytime, anywhere and win. So this budget does a few things.

The first is that it focuses on restoring readiness. Last year the budget took active duty Air Force manpower from about 317,000 to about 321,000. Next year with this budget that we've proposed, and the chief and I will start to defend tomorrow, we will go to 325,000 active duty airmen. When you add in Guard, the Reserve and additional civilians, we'll be going up to about 669,000 in the United States Air Force.

Where do we put those people? Maintainers are absolutely critical; expanding pilot training, we're going to expand two more live training units; increase the number of remotely piloted vehicle operators; and fill some critical gaps in some other capabilities like cyber.

Pilot retention right now is at crisis levels when it comes to fighters, and we're changing around the way we're doing incentive pay. We've added in significant administrative support to the squadrons, which was taken away in the wake of sequester. So our approach to pilot retention will be both financial and non-financial, to try to make it better for pilots to be able to stay in the United States Air Force.

The budget includes flying hours at the maximum executable levels, and it nears maximum executable levels for spare parts, maintenance and logistics. With respect to munitions, the budget also includes some expanded work with factories. We are now expending more munitions in Iraq and Syria than we are producing, and we need to reverse that trend.

So today I'm also announcing the details of a tiered aviation bonus system, which was authorized by the Congress last year. It's intended to encourage pilots to stay where we need them most, so the bonuses are higher where the need is most critical. It also gives flexibility in the length of contract, so that pilots have more say about the length of their commitment, and we hope this will help us to keep more pilots in the Air Force.

In addition to restoring readiness, we have to start to focus on lethality and making sure we modernize for the long term. The budget includes several things with respect to modernization. The top three priorities are fighters, bombers and tankers. With respect to fighters, we will be buying 46 more F-35A aircraft.

The night before I was sworn in as Secretary of the Air Force I had dinner at Air House with General Goldfein and the Amir Eshel, the commander in chief of the Israeli air force. Unlike our Air Force where we don't allow generals to fly anymore -- and if you're wondering, they don't allow the secretary to fly anymore either -- the Israelis view it in a different light. If you're a pilot in the Israeli air force, no matter what your rank, you spend at least one day a week flying. There is the definition of a ready, combat

force.

When I first met Amir and sat next to him at dinner that night, the night before I was sworn in as the secretary, the first thing he said was that he now had seven sorties in the F-35. And he said, this changes everything. This changes everything. There is nothing like it. This is a guy who has flown the F-16, the F-4, the F-15, and he's flown them in combat. He could not stop raving about this advancement in technical capability.

With respect to bombers, we are moving forward with the B-21 penetrating bomber. The development continues. With tankers, the KC-46 is now in testing and we will buy 15 of them this year. Of course, those aren't the only things. There are upgrades of current fighters and bombers, the Reaper and Global Hawk, combat rescue and airborne warning upgrades, to continue modernization across the board.

We are also moving forward with the modernization of the nuclear deterrent. The Air Force is responsible for two legs of the triad, and life extension is no longer a feasible option. We're talking about 1970s and 1980s, not only technologies, but materials, and life extension just doesn't work anymore. We're going to have to renew the triad.

With respect to space, it's one of the things I'm most excited about in returning to federal service. The secretary of the Air Force is actually the principal adviser to the secretary of Defense with respect to space. Of course, the Air Force has been the leader on space for 54 years, but some things have changed.

I was actually on the House Intelligence Committee in 2007 when the Chinese demonstrated a kinetic intercept of one of their dead weather satellites, and by the way spread debris all over everywhere. It has been clear since then, if it wasn't clear to everyone before then, that space will be a contested domain. Our adversaries know that we are heavily dependent upon space, and we need to develop the ability to be not only resilient in space but to be able to reconstitute, to disperse our capability, to build in redundancy, to use deception and defend ourselves in space so that those who depend on space capabilities, which includes all of the branches of the armed services, can rely on them when it matters most. So we need assured access to space and this budget moves us forward in that way.

A couple of weeks ago I did go out to Colorado Springs and got to spend some time at Schriever and Cook Field (ph), at Space Command NORTHCOM, and the National Space Defense Center. The National Space Defense Center, which also is continued to be funded in this year's budget, is developing new operating concepts for space. They're also looking at new ways to train our people in space, so to change the culture from one of monitoring what's there and operating satellites, to thinking about how will we prepare and fight through in space. It is joint, it is interagency, and it is starting to make a difference.

With respect to space, the Air Force will continue to integrate, normalize and elevate space as part of the joint war fighting team. We're also going to need to

streamline procurement of some things that people need for space and other things. But the budget this year increases from \$6.5 billion to \$7.8 billion for space through the Air Force.

Now we're going to have to move faster on a lot of things because our adversaries are innovating faster than we are. We have to get from concept to war fighters faster. This budget includes something a little bit new. We're going to be doing an attack aircraft experiment. It is not a procurement, it is an experiment.

But this experiment that will take place at White Sands in August will actually have a flight test and fly off in August, 10 months after the concept was approved by the chief of staff. Ten months from concept to fly off. Now I have to say again because General Bunch will wring my ears if I don't, it's not a procurement. It is an experiment. But we want to see what the experiment tells us and whether we can move forward with a different way of getting capability from the labs to the flight line and the war fighter faster, because all of us know that that's one of the way to win.

I believe also, as does the secretary of Defense, that we are stronger together than we are alone, and if we work in concert with our allies to defend the vital national interests of the United States. This budget also includes an additional piece of funding for the European Security Initiative, and the United States Air Force, as part of that, will be sending a unit of F-16s from the National Guard to Europe next January for three months in order to train with our European allies. We are committed to defend our allies and ourselves in a concept of collective self-defense, which has kept us safe for many decades.

Seventy-three years ago the B-29 bomber was the single most expensive weapons project undertaken by the United States in World War II. It wasn't the Manhattan Project, it was the B-29 bomber. It was in 1938 when President Roosevelt made the decision.

He made that decision informed by Charles Lindbergh's trip to Germany to see what the Germans were doing with aircraft and came back with an alarming report; and with Hap Arnold's ideas about what the Air Force might do to counter the gathering storm. Roosevelt made an important decision, a decision to develop the ability to project power globally, to drive innovation toward that goal. The path he chose wasn't straight and it wasn't easy.

But in his memoirs Hap Arnold said, a battle was won in the White House on that day, which took its place with or at least led to, the victories in combat later. We must think in terms of tomorrow. We must develop and field new capabilities to protect the country that we love.

Thank you all for staying willing to engage in that effort. (Applause).