

**Remarks by Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James
at the Joint Women's Leadership Symposium
Arlington, VA
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Thank you very, very much Rosie and good afternoon everybody. I was reviewing all of the speakers that you've had on this your day one of the two-day conference as I understand, and I've been wowed. What a banged up program that you've got. So I want to begin by thanking the organizers of the Sea Service Leadership Association. And I think you give all of yourselves a big round of applause. (Applause)

And thank you as well for giving me such a warm welcome. The Undersecretary of the Army, of course, is here, Patrick Murphy, and (applause) I wish you were giving me such a warm round of applause. He is walking in, he thought that was for him. (Laughter) So he gets it as well.

It's so fantastic for me to be surrounded by so many fantastic female leaders. And I am certainly happy to come before you today and to be able to report that when it comes to women in leadership and even more broadly, I will say, diversity and inclusion, we the United States Air Force have become more powerful. We have become more powerful. We have become more powerful in the Air Force on both the military and civilian side thanks to these trends.

For example, not too long ago we made some important history, I think, with the confirmation of Ms. Lisa Disbrow as my undersecretary of the Air Force, which marks the first time in history ever that the top two civilian positions in any service have been held by women. (Applause) And last, let's not forget the very first female combatant commander ever, General Lori Robinson. I mean that's not too shabby. (Applause)

And I could go on with additional examples. And believe me, this is a far cry from the atmosphere that I found in the Defense Department back in the early 1990s, which was my original tour of duty in the Pentagon. And during that era, I remember very, very well a good friend of mine, she was serving at that time as well, Michelle Flournoy who many of you will remember as the undersecretary for policy. She left government a few years ago. She's now the head of the Center for New American Security.

But I first knew her in the 1990s when she was the deputy assistant secretary in the Pentagon, and I was assistant secretary of reserve affairs. And back in that era, Michelle had the grand idea of let's get our key

Pentagon women together to have lunch one day, which wasn't a big organizational difficult deal because there were so few of us back in those days. And I remember vividly going off to the executive dining room. All we needed was one table to seat ourselves, and we were surrounded by a sea of men in this fairly large dining room.

And I can remember for days after the fact there were all these conspiracy theories about what are these women doing together. My favorite rumor of all was that we were plotting to take over the leadership of the Pentagon, which of course was true, but we never (inaudible). (Applause) Today, I would say, you could in the Pentagon, easily fill a much, much larger room with incredible women just as you all have filled this room here today.

So now the theme for this symposium, as you well know, is "leading with purpose, impacting the future." And so, today, what I'd like to do is share with you one area where I have tried to lead with purpose. And I certainly hope that these efforts will impact the future in a positive way. And that is the issue of improving diversity and inclusion in our Air Force.

And then I want to conclude leaving you with what I consider to be my top 10 most important lessons (inaudible) personally and professionally, in the hopes that there might be a nugget or two of interest to some of you.

But before I dive into my talk, I thought I would give you a little insight in to my journey of how I became the secretary of the Air Force. And we could go one of two ways here. I could either go back over my important biographical points or I could tell you the real story on how it all went down. So what do want (inaudible). We'll (inaudible).

So first of all, I would say I suspect a number of you would agree with me on this one that I didn't certainly go in to this career, I didn't go in with this grand strategy, executed point by point. I wanted to do this by a certain age. I wanted to have a family by a certain time. Some people who say they have such strategies and all it all executes perfectly, I suspect most people are lying to (inaudible). Because most of us, it's just not the way. At least that's my experience of how these things really happen.

So for me, the way it all started, it started with a dream, as a young person, I had a very established plan.

But that dream ultimately went bust for me. It didn't work out. So my original desire, my original dream was I wanted to be a member of the armed service. I wanted to be a diplomat. So I was interested in public policy and government service. And I proceeded through both college and graduate school to pursue what I thought was the perfect course of study. I went to Duke University and then to Columbia, and I got my international affairs degree. I spoke a foreign language. I'm fluent in Spanish. I even had internships as a young person, which related to my career field. And you all know how difficult it can be to come by those related internships.

So bottom line, I thought as a young person, I had all of the different boxes checked. So after graduate school, I moved to Washington, D.C., and I applied with the foreign service, and I promptly waited for that acceptance letter because this was way before email. I waited for that acceptance letter to come to my mailbox.

And you can probably guess where I'm going with this. I didn't get the acceptance letter. I got a rejection letter. I got a Dear Ms. Roche, that was my maiden name, we won't be requiring your services for the foreign policy of the United States at this time, kind of letter. And it was devastating. So at this point, I'm maybe 23-years old, and I had spent the last seven or eight years of my life with this one dream, driving down the road, thinking I had all the pieces, and then suddenly, it just went up in smoke. And I can remember literally crashing. I can remember crying for days and not knowing what to do or where to turn.

But as I mentioned, I had by now moved to Washington. I now had financial commitments. So not to self for any of you who have children coming up on these judgement calls, it's always better to have the job lined up before you have the apartment that you signed for. But somehow I just got out of bed about the fourth or fifth day and said I've got to have a job. And I therefore started applying everywhere else that I could think of in the government. Because, again, I did want to do public policy. And I got a job at long last after months of trying with the Department of the Army. So the Department of the Army as a civilian, yeah, in the Army, was my first real job out of school. And to be honest, it wasn't my heart's desire to know anything about defense. I didn't even particularly, dare I say, care back in those days. My dad had a been a World War II vet but like so many of his generation, didn't really share the stories with me, so I didn't have that exposure. So I was kind of disappointed, but it was a job, and in that regard, I was so grateful at that point. So I went to work for the Army. And then, a couple months in to it, the most remarkable things started happening for me.

The first remarkable thing was, wow, it was really interesting and important work that I was involved with. Yes, I was a very junior person, but I was working on tasks, which I could then see through to how they ultimately were going to help the Army as part of the national military strategy execute on what needed to be done for the country. So suddenly, I was feeling that purpose, that purpose that was so much larger than just myself.

And the other thing, I got really lucky. I had a wonderful boss in those early days, who took an interest in me, who actually wanted to develop me from a career prospective, who opened some doors, who gave me advice. I look back on that, general, as the first big mentor that I ever had in life. And then I had great colleagues. These were people who took me under their wing. There was camaraderie at the office. So I felt like I had a team. And all of these pieces started coming together for me in that very first job, which I will remind you, was a job that I didn't really want. And it was then the Department of the Army.

And from that first job, one thing led to the next, led to the next, led to the next. And it was a combination of mentoring and networking. I then went to the House Armed Services Committee staff where I spent 10 years working on mostly military personnel and compensation issues but got a much broader understanding of defense and budgets and policy. And then I went to the Pentagon for five years. And then I came out, and I went in to private industry for about the next 14 years. And guess what, that was industry support for defense. So now I'm seeing defense not only from the executive branch, the legislative branch, but also, from our defense industry partner standpoint.

And then, two and a half years ago, the opportunity of a lifetime came when I got a call asking me would I be willing to have my name on a slate of candidates, to come back in to government, to possibly be the next secretary of the Air Force.

So an unbelievable journey, I believe -- oh, and by the way, along the way, I was married, I was divorced. I'm now remarried, so that part of life sometimes takes a while to get right. But I think I got it this time around so (inaudible 14:30:47) (Laughter) and I feel very blessed to have him. I have two children, who I embraced sometimes as the married parent, sometimes as a single parent. Who are now 30 and 32 years of age, which is really rather remarkable since I'm only 39 myself. (Laughter)

And so, those are the Cliff Notes of my story. Each of you has your own equivalent remarkable story of the twists and turns of life. But I want to come back to the main message there, is for me, it all started with a failure. And it just goes to show that even when one door closes another door will always, always, 100 percent of the time, open. You just have to be able to recognize that, walk through that door, make the best of it, and then in all likelihood, the very best will be yet to come.

So that's a little bit about my journey. And I like stories, as you can tell, I like to tell stories. But for the last two and a half years, I have been listening big time to the stories of our era. I've travelled extensively around the country and around the world with the Air Force. And, certainly, I have seen, met, and been exposed to some pretty exceptional women. I mentioned two who are very senior leader positions. We of course have women who are four-star generals today. We also have women who are chief master sergeants. There's missile crew commanders. Thunderbird pilots. We have talented lawyers and civil engineers. And all of that is just scratching the surface.

But after talking with our airmen on all those many travels, a few recurring themes convinced me that, you know, that we had made progress, but we could climb higher. We could do better. So let me now step back and just say, all you have to do is take a look around the world today and know that you're looking at a resurgent Russia or what's happening in the South China Sea or ISIL in the Middle East, where even when they're able to radicalize people far from their shores in the Middle East, you can see just how complicated the world has become. And I am convinced, in order to tackle these many missions that we have on our plate, we must ensure that we build the most innovative and skilled team possible. And that means people from diverse backgrounds, experiences, demographics, and perspectives.

You see, we believe, I believe, that maintaining ourselves as the world's greatest Air Force, we have to look at ways to promote people based on performance and talent. We need to expand and expand programs that allow individuals, perhaps, to pause their careers and then return later with new skills and expertise. And then we have to, of course, draw from the most diverse talent pool possible.

So I came in with certain beliefs. My travels have strengthened those beliefs. But, really, the bottom line is when I was brand new, I stepped back and I tried to investigate just how were we doing on diversity in

our Air Force. And my conclusion in those early days was not bad, pretty good, but we can do better. Let's see if we can do better.

So, for example, let's just go over a few statistics. Today's Air Force leads the DoD with the highest percentage of women in service. That's a good thing. (Applause) But we're in the middle of the pot when it comes to racial and ethnic diversity. So that's the not as good thing. Our junior enlistment force is actually quite diverse. But as we go up in our ranks, the percentage of females and minorities in senior noncommissioned officer ranks goes down. Ditto, same story on the officer and civilian side of the house.

In fact, women in our Air Force, attrit the Air Force, at twice the rate of men when they reach the mid-career point. The same basic story exists in specific specialties. For example, while minorities comprise about 20 percent of our officer corps, they make up only 10 percent of the pilots in our Air Force. Similarly, females make up about 20 percent of our officer corps but only 5 percent of the pilots. Now, we have many, many career areas in our Air Force, being a pilot is not the be-all and end-all. But for heaven sakes, we're the United States Air Force, being a pilot means quite a bit. And if you look at the upper echelons of the Air Force, most of the senior jobs are held by pilots.

Now, I could go on, but I think you've got the picture. And by the way, this is not just about how we look in traditional diversely categories of gender and race. Diversity, to me, is a much wider prospective. It's background, it's experience, it's skills. All of this is paramount when it comes to innovation and the capability to perform in an increasingly uncertain geopolitical order.

So what to do about all this. Well, I got together with General Welsh, our chief of staff, and in order to communicate first off to our force, just how important diversity and inclusion are, the Chief and I released two memos to the Air Force last year. The first memo attempted to lay out the case as why diversity and inclusion are important to our future. Much the case that I have just given you today. And then the second memo outlined some of what we intended to do about it, specific initiatives that we laid out, which were designed to help us advance the ball. And by the way, in addition to those, what were the original nine initiatives, there have been some few -- additional ones lately and in particular coming from the secretary of defense.

So to lead with purpose, I try to look at what I call the three Ps. And let me explain what I mean to you

about the three Ps. So the three Ps to me are:

Number one is policy. So sometimes policies are just flat out outdated. They have run their course or maybe they're based on false logic. But, basically, sometimes you run across rules that inhibit progress and, therefore, we need to continuously reevaluate. And this goes, by the way, for any organization in my opinion.

The second P is process. So perhaps you have a good policy in place, but the actual implementation approach is flawed. And this could lead to unintended consequences. So, once again, we have to ensure that we're monitoring and tracking progress to see if the processes are actually meeting the policy objectives that are laid out.

And then the final P stands for people. And this is where, in any organization, personal bias can creep in to our organizations. And these biases can be conscious, or even more importantly, they can be unconscious. We all have them to a certain degree. And they can undermine the most well-meaning of organizations if we're not careful.

So those are the three Ps. And let me now start with policy.

Earlier, I mentioned airmen and their stories. And again and again, as I traveled, I heard concerns surrounding the issues of deployment and family, deployment and family. And in fact, deployment family issues rate among the top reasons why our female airmen were parting the Air Force at the twice the rate of men as they reached that midcareer point. So we examined some of our policies, and we changed a few of them pretty much right off the bat.

The first thing we did was we extended the post-pregnancy deployment deferent. It used to be six months, it's now 12 months. And then we turn right around, and we did the same thing for our physical fitness test. It used to be six months after giving birth, you go through your PT test again. Now, it's 12 months. To use that seemed like reasonable accommodations on policy that was fairly easy to do.

We also launched Career Intermission program, which is designed to retain high quality airmen by giving them the flexibility to transfer from active to the reserve component from anywhere from one to three years to meet personal or professional needs. And the idea is after that, we might call a sabbatical, they would come back to us without losing their place in line for promotion. Now, this new policy is open to both men and

women, but we're watching it to see, particularly, if it helps women deal with the sometimes difficult choice between family and career. And by the way, other services are also implementing this as a pilot program. And the secretary of defense, through Force of the Future, is requesting that this be made permanent.

Moreover, while I'm talking about the secretary of defense, he recently extended maternity leave from 6 to 12 weeks for military personnel. And there is more to follow for increased flexibility for adoptive parents, for the dads when it comes to maternity leave and, also, maternity leave for our civilian personnel if Congress approves some requested changes in the law. So those elements require Congressional action. But maternity leave for our uniformed women was within our policy [inaudible] that he's done it. Again, all of that is part of Force of the Future.

And, finally, everybody by now is aware that all the previously closed positions to women in the military are now open for those who qualify for these very demanding career areas. So for us in the Air Force that opens about 4000 positions in the special operations world, but if you look across the military, it's about 213,000 new positions are now open to qualified women. So all of that is a little bit about the first P of policy.

Now, let's move on to process. One process that we felt required some change was the method by which we measure ROTC cadets before pilot training. So hold with me on this one, this gets a little tricky. By way of background, in order to fly in our Air Force, candidates have to meet certain standing and sitting height requirements. And we based these requirements on the most restrictive aircraft cockpits. This standard is designed to ensure that a candidate can be qualified in every single one of our Air Force aircraft.

But what has happened over time if someone was too short to qualify for all aircraft but could nonetheless qualify for some of the aircraft. Well, it turns out there's been a waiver process in existence for a long time. If you didn't meet all of those stringent height requirements. But it was only those people at our Air Force Academy that had consistent access to this waiver process. It involves certain measurement equipment and certain training personnel to take the measurements available at the Air Force Academy and not very easy to come by anywhere else. And what that meant was that was eliminating about a third of our female cadets and about the same number of African-American cadets who were coming to us via the ROTC program, specifically.

So this is an example to me of having a good policy, right? You have to be able to fit in the cockpits, and for that you need certain measurements. But the implementation was flawed because we didn't have equal access and not everybody could get this access to the waiver process. So once again, it was a pretty easy change. We changed the process by establishing additional opportunities for ROTC cadets to obtain the appropriate height waivers to maximize our talent base. We move those special measurement tools and so on to the ROTC training camp, which takes place in the summer. And, now, more people can have an opportunity to peak.

Sometimes the process can hinder diversity and inclusion on the civilian side too. Case in point, the hiring process for civilian airmen, which by the way, that's another thing we recently changed. So the old process allowed for a single hiring manager, who, by the way, frequently, not always, but frequently was a white male, retired officer, to make the sole decision on hiring. And guess what, we tend to hire people who looked like ourselves and who have similar backgrounds to ourselves. So we changed that policy fairly recently. Now, we have panels that consist of at least three individuals including some civilians with no prior military service, and we're looking for diversity in those panels across the board. And it's our hope that over time these panels will still highlight the best qualified candidates to us but will also increase diversity in our higher civilian ranks. That idea, by the way, is the best practice for an industry, which we've now adopted in to our Air Force.

So that's a few processes that we've taken action to change. Now, let's talk people and [inaudible] that we recognize and eliminate biases. And in my opinion, this starts and really ends with mentorship and also with education.

In the summer of 2015, we launched a program in the Air Force called MyVector. And think of MyVector as the Match.com of mentoring of the United States Air Force. So, literally, it's a computer-based system where people who want mentorship, and believe me, thousands of people now have signed up for this. You go online, you sign up, you put in what you're interested in, the type of mentor that you're looking for. And then, similarly, we have people who are willing to do the mentoring. They go online. They list their profile. Here's my background. Here's what I know about. Here's what I can provide advice on, and they are

then matched, so that people who wouldn't otherwise perhaps have access to one another can connect and can have some that mentoring. So I'm mentoring, for example, five airmen through MyVector. Many of our senior leaders are following suit. And, again, there are thousands of people who are now participating in this. My mentees; I have some men, some women, some civilians, some military. It's open to all. But mentoring is something that our airmen certainly reported to me they wanted more of across the board.

We mentioned lean in circles. Those already existed in the Department of Defense, but our secretary of defense has gotten behind it and partnered with Sheryl Sandberg. And so, more of these lean in circles are standing up across the board. For example, I lead two of them, so I participate in two new ones at headquarters Air Force. A mixture of men and women. We have enlisted. We have officers. But these are circles to be another form of mentoring, where we get together and we talk in a relaxed atmosphere about professional issues. It can be personal issues as well, but we work through and help provide each other advice.

So these are the types of mentoring and education things that we're trying to do more of in the Air Force.

Before I wrap up, I did say I was going to tell my top 10 lessons learned in life. So I would like to segue in to that and then open it up for discussion from all of you. But, again, these are 10 things that I have learned throughout my, both personal and professional life that have been of great value to me, and I offer them in the hopes that perhaps there's a nugget or two there for you.

So lesson learned number one is, for me, be prepared to zigzag in your life. That is because life will always throw you curve balls. I'm sure everybody in this room has already had curve balls. Probably both personally and professionally. And it's not so much what happens to you, because things are going to happen to all of us, it's what you do in the aftermath. And, certainly, I learned that in spades, right there with that very first [inaudible] that I offered to you from the state department.

So with the quick pace of change that we have in society, and this true both in government and in business, you have to be agile. And you have to be prepared to respond in different ways. Always have a plan. I'm a planner, so I'm not saying wing everything. But also be ready to shift to plan B if life intervenes and the first plan doesn't work out. And remember, plan B will be the best plan of them all.

The second lesson for me is seek out a mentor, and then when you're ready in your life, be a mentor yourself. Give back. So a lot of my story relates to great mentors, people who helped me along the way and gave me advice to open doors, who exposed me to different opportunities that perhaps, I wouldn't have been exposed to before. And it's great if your organization has an established program like we now have, MyVector. But I'll tell you, I have never in my whole life as a mentee been in an established program. All of my mentors have been informal people. And finding a mentor, by the way, I would say to you is as easy as seeing somebody that you admire who has trailed or progressed down a path that you're interested in. You could go up to that person literally and just say this is who I am, this is what I'm interested in, would you have a cup of coffee with me at some point. And you'd be surprised how many people are more than delighted to sit down for a half an hour and talk about themselves. Don't we all love to talk about our own stories and ourselves and also give advice. So I'm a big believer in just ask to have a cup of coffee.

My third lesson is build and value a network, both inside and outside your organization. So after that first situation with the defense -- with the State Department, where I was sending out resumes everywhere, I haven't sent out a resume, literally, another time in my whole life. So one thing has led to the next and has led to the next. A lot of this has to do with networking. And I said a diverse network. I believe that strongly. Don't just surround yourself with people who look and think like you. Build that diversity of opinion and thought around you because it could well pay off for you. And be sure to keep in touch with them through the years, don't just get in touch with people, you know, once every 10 years when you need a job referral. It should be -- keep in touch and value your network over time.

Fourth is build confidence because no networking, no mentoring is going to help you keep that job if you are not competent. And for me, competence is a matter of continual learning. You certainly never too old to learn, and you need to keep that going. And there are times when you may find the need to reinvent yourself in life. A totally different new skill.

Fifth lesson learned is communicate, communicate, communicate. And I know you've all heard this before. But it is absolutely critical [inaudible] go up to the leadership chain that you have good verbal skills of the written word. Being a concise and persuasive writer is also very important. But I always like to remind

people that at least 50 percent of communication is listening. Be good and active listeners because you will learn a lot. And that's a hugely important [inaudible] as you go up the leadership chain.

Number six is be a role model for the way that you want others to behave. And this is true both in the office and off duty. It's really, really important to lead by example. Because most people can smell a phony about a mile away. So don't be that way. Lead by example.

Seventh is integrity should always be your foundation. Again, both personally and professionally. And you know what that is, that's that little voice in the back of your head that leads you to do the right thing even when the right thing is hard and even when no one is looking. In the Air Force, we talk about integrity as one of our three core values, which are integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. So at the end of the day, you've got your integrity, your own good name, and the good name of your organization. So don't ever, ever squander that.

Eighth is persistence pays off. If you want to get something done in the Pentagon, in particular, or in the Department of Defense, you've got to keep at it. And by the way, relentless follow up. So even after you think you've got it done, relentless follow up is important for producing results for the long term.

The ninth lesson learned is have some balance in your life. We're all such type A sometime, don't forget to love your family, don't forget to have some hobbies, don't forget to pursue other aspects of your life and have that helping. And don't forget to pursue your own good wellbeing in flight and exercise and your health. Don't take those for granted. Have balance in your life.

And lastly, is be upbeat. Be upbeat. As leaders it may feel like things are crashing all around you and sometimes they are, and there's plenty of challenges out there. But there's also a lot of opportunities in those challenges. And so, once again, as you go up the leadership chain, part of the job is how you change those challenges into opportunities. My mother used to say nobody likes a Debbie downer. And you know, mother was right about that, nobody does. So lift up those spirits and show positive, upbeat leadership.

So these are the 10 things that I've learned. I try to keep them in mind as I approach the challenges of our large and complex Air Force. And my final thought of the day for you, it's back to the three Ps. And the question I lay before you is can one person make an impact when it comes to these three Ps. And I would

submit to you the answer is you'd better believe it, absolutely. So I would challenge you each of you, not only throughout this conference, but as you go back to your respective organizations or your positions, take a look at your three Ps; your policies, your processes, and the people, meaning the biases that maybe all of us bring to the table. And then consider advocating for the change, where appropriate, for us to include diversity and inclusion because if only -- it only takes one person to make a difference. And I absolutely believe that that one person could be each of you. And just think, if each of us in this room who were to take this one together as a team, just think of the changes that we could achieve when we [inaudible].

So I thank you very, very much for your attention today and the best of luck for the remainder of the conference and best of luck in your careers as well. Thank you. (Applause)

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