

**Remarks at the Women In Aviation International Conference**  
**Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James**  
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Thank you very much for that nice introduction and thank you to the Women in Aviation International board of directors for hosting this event. I have been one of you sitting in the audience over the years from time to time at Women in Aviation. I have not been in recent years however, which is my bad, and I just want to say it is breathtaking how this organization has grown, the fantastic work that Women in Aviation is doing. I'm so honored to be included alongside Mayor Barry and [inaudible] to you on your promotion and also with us the man of aviation, Administrator Michael Wert it is always a pleasure to be with you sir. What a fantastic way to celebrate Women's History Month.

As you've heard this year's conference theme is Connect, Engage and Inspire. I want to just begin by saying there is nothing more inspirational to me than some of the hero's that we have sitting right here with us today. I'm speaking now we have with us I'm told two members of the women Air Force Service Pilots the Wasps. The first rate women fly American military aircraft forever changed the role of women in air space. Their dedicated service and record of excellence served as a gateway for future Airmen. The 25,000 women applied to the WASP pilot training program only 1,830 that were accept. The 1,074 graduates then went on to fly 60 million miles during World War II. WASPS flew at 126 bases across the U.S. where they also towed targets for gunnery training and served as instrument instructors for the eastern flying training command.

I have a Facebook page of Secretary of the Air Force and if you check it out you will see more and more about this fantastic woman named Bee Haydu. She took night classes in aviation out of high school, she lobbied Congress decades later to get the WASPS recognized

as veterans and we delivered because the WASPS were finally recognized in the year 1977. Bee I understand you're here today and I only hope I get a chance to shake your hand. Your legacy truly lives on in our Air Force today. Please would you join me in a round of applause.

Today I'm here of course representing the United States Air Force and some of you may have heard that I am the second female Service Secretary ever in American history now how cool is that? The first secretary was Dr. Sheila Widnall also Secretary to the Air Force during the 1990's. So every time I get with my colleagues in the Army and the Navy I tell them hurry up you've got some catching up to do here. I'm pleased to tell you that we made a bit of history once again just last month because you see the Senate confirmed Ms. Lisa Disbrow as the Under Secretary of the Air Force so this marks the first time ever that the two civilian positions in any service have been held at the same time by women.

Let me tell you this is a far cry from the way the Defense Department was or for that matter the way Capitol Hill was back when I knew them up close and personally in both the eighties and nineties when I worked in government the first time around. I'm reminded a story some years back when a friend of mine a name that many of you will recognize Michele Flournoy who now leads the Center for New American Security in Washington. She organized a lunch for key Pentagon Women and this was back in the 1990's. At the time I was the Assistant Secretary of Defense for reserve affairs and Michele was Deputy Assistant Secretary for policy. Of course she went on to become ultimately the Under Secretary for Policy. Back in the nineties when she organized this group of senior women in the Pentagon to have lunch in the executive dining room we didn't need a very big table because it was a pretty small group of us. We sat and fit around one small table. You should have heard the conspiracy theories that followed that. What in the world were those women doing having lunch together

and what were they talking about? My favorite rumor was that we were plotting to take over the Pentagon. Now of course today's Pentagon is quite a bit different and you could easily fill an entire room with engaging and exceptional women. Maybe not a room this big but we certainly have many, many engaging and exceptional women here at Women in Aviation. So clearly we've made a lot of progress. But I think we can all agree there is still plenty of room for improvement.

So today what I would like to do is share with you some of my thoughts as a woman leading a traditionally male dominated organization. But before I dive in I thought it might be interesting if I were to give you if you're interested that is a little bit more insight to my journey to becoming the secretary of the Air Force. You would all agree with me here in this audience if I first began by saying that I certainly didn't go into my career or my life for that matter with a well- developed plan and strategy. I had ideas and goals but anybody who tells you they go into something with an extremely developed executed step by step plan to get to where they are today, such a person is probably lying to you. Because in my experience that is not just the way it goes. In fact my story actually started with a dream that went bust and here's how it all went down.

I grew up in the great state of New Jersey that's where I spent my early years. I went onto Duke University and ultimately to Columbia University and my dream at that point was I wanted to be a member of the Foreign Service. I wanted to be a diplomat. And so the course of study that I chose to do at Duke and Columbia was all about international affairs and specifically I was very interested in Latin America. I learned Spanish, I was an exchange student and I even had in those early days' internships which directly related to Foreign Service. I received good grades in school. In short I thought I had the full package. I thought I

had everything going my way. So when I left Columbia University and I moved to Washington I applied to the Foreign Service which some of you may know has an oral and written exam and I sat back and I waited for that acceptance letter to role on in through the mail. Of course this was way before the days of email. And I waited, and I waited and I waited. And finally that letter did arrive in the mail and you probably know where I'm going with this story it was a rejection letter. It was not the acceptance letter that I was expecting and I was devastated. By this point I was 22 or 23 years old at most and I literally saw my whole life flashing before my eyes. I had spent many years pursuing this one course of study, this one dream and now it just seemed to be beyond me it was all over. I remember going to bed and crying for days. But then somehow or another there must have been some inner strength there because about after 4 days of crying it might have been on the fifth day I finally got out of bed but it might have been the rent check I hadn't paid as well. And I said I've got to have a job. I've got to knock this off and I've got to start applying elsewhere. I did want to be in government and I did want to do public policy and so I started applying everywhere else.

Now the year was 1981 and in the early 1980's the part of government that was hiring more than any other department was defense. So luckily I got a job with the Department of the Army as a civilian so that was my very first job out of school. It wasn't my passion I didn't really have exposure to defense issues, my dad had been a World War II vet but he really didn't share history with me so I really didn't have that original inspiration but I was so grateful to have a job and it was a job. So I through myself into it and then after a couple of months the most remarkable things started happening. First off it was really interesting work. I was really, really enjoying the pursuits I was involved with and I had great colleagues, people who took an interest in me people from whom I could learn. And my work really mattered. I would

pick up my morning newspaper, I would read about world defense and I could see that I had some small contribution toward that; I had purpose in my work. And I had a fantastic boss a person a man who I look back on as one of my original mentors in life so that was very, very important to me so I try to remember that and give back on that now. So all of these things were coming together for me and one door closed and another door opened for me and luckily I had enough sense where I could use a job badly enough that I stepped through that door.

And from that original failure and from that original first job with the Department of the Army I then went on to work on Capitol Hill for 10 years for the major defense committee. I was an Assistant Secretary of Defense for reserved affairs. I got out of government after 17 years and I went into the private sector. I was with United Technologies for a period but most of my time was with a company called SAIC and then the most unbelievable opportunity presented when I got called asking me if I would be interested in coming back into government to be at least a possible Secretary of the Air Force and to compete for that position.

Along the way by the way I was married I had two children I was divorced I was a single parent. I'm not remarried and I have two wonderful children who are 30 and 31 years old so for all of you who have young children in the audience watch out because they will grow up. By the way as you've heard I've had 30 years of experience in defense and in the national security arena which is pretty remarkable given that I'm only 39 years old. But anyway it all started from one colossal failure which is why I always say particularly to young people starting out be prepared to zigzag in life. Your life won't always go as you expect it to go. You will have success and you will have failure. The key thing is that you have the ability to bounce back, take new risks and from time to time reinvent yourself in life. It can be the best thing yet.

So these are the cliff notes of my story. Of course each of you is living your own

extraordinary story and I certainly would encourage you over the course of today and tomorrow to connect with each other and share your stories during the rest of the time at this conference. Now I have certainly tried to make many connections with our Airmen over the last few years that I've been privileged to hold this job and Airmen both males and females and I've done it all over the country and all over the world to include places like Iraq and Afghanistan and I certainly try to listen very closely to all of their stories. Let me tell you we have exceptional women in our Air Force. We now have two who have reached the height of Four Star General who are currently serving. We have Chief Master Sergeants who are women again relatively new but they're growing. We also women who are nuclear missile crew commanders, astronauts, they're Thunderbird pilots; we have talented lawyers and engineers. That is just scratching the service. But after engaging with our Airmen a few recurring themes convinced me that we could climb even higher and I'm determined that we're going to try.

You see it's my observation in life that when women are not fully recognized across the board for their full potential it usually is because it is one of three reasons and I'm going to cause these reasons the three P's. And that can be applied equally to government and to industry. The first P stands for policies. Sometimes policies are outdated. Sometimes they're based on false logic. These are rules that inhibit progress and should be continually reevaluated by all organizations. The second P stands for process. Perhaps the policies are pretty good but their implementation may be flawed and this may lead to unintended consequences so we have to ensure that we monitor and track progress to see if processes are actually needing the policy objectives that we see. And the third and final P stands for people. You see when people are involved you always have the possibility of a person bias creeping into our organizations. These biases can be conscience or frequently they can be

unconscious but they can undermine even the most well-meaning of organizations. To best illustrate these three P's let me share a few stories on how I've tried to connect with our Airmen, how we've engaged with them and listened to their concerns and how our Airmen inspire me to try to take some action to improve diversity and inclusion in our service.

All you have to do is look around the world today and look what is going on in the Middle East, in Russia, a very dangerous place and you'll see just how conquest the world is. To tackle these missions we have to ensure that we have an innovated and skillful team in the Air Force. We need smart young people who come at problems from varying perspectives who we can count on to solve those problems and ultimately we can count on to stick with us and grow in our Air Force. We need to recruit from the best of America's diversity in terms of experience, gender, race, ethnicity, background and training. And then we have to provide an inclusive and rewarding and sufficiently flexible environment where we can retain the best of that talent. So I stepped back early in my tenure to investigate how we were doing on diversity and inclusion in our Air Force and the bottom line that I came to was we were doing okay but not good enough we could do better. Let me give you facts and figures. Today's Air Force leads the Department of Defense highest percentage of women in the service that's the good news but we're in the middle of the pack for racial and ethnic diversity that's the not so good news. Our enlistment force is pretty diverse but as we go up through the ranks the percent of females and minorities in the Senior Non Commissioned Officer ranks goes down. The same by the way holds true for officers and civilians. In fact women attrit at twice the rate of men during mid-career so are women in uniform. The same is true of specific specialties. For example while minorities comprise of approximately 22 percent of the officer corps they make up only 12 percent of higher career fields. Similarly females make up 20 percent of our officer

corps but only 5 percent are pilots. Now being a pilot is not the only career field in the Air Force but let's face it we're the Air Force so being a pilot is an important job. We're seeing similar trends with our civilian ranks with women and minorities making up less than 30 percent of our civilian work force. I could go on and on but I think you get the picture. By the way this is not just about how we look at traditional diversity categories of race and gender I want to say again this is about diversity of background and experience and skill. These are all paramount when it comes to innovation and the capability to perform and perform well in an increasingly uncertain political environment. Now in order to inspire the action of the Air Force to kick start this effort the Chief of Staff General Welsh and I had to communicate to the Force just how important diversity and inclusion are. So last year we released two memos to the entire group of the United States Air Force. The first one described in his and my words why diversity and inclusion are so vital just as I've tried to explain to you all this morning. The second memo activated nine initiatives to help us in this arena and by the way since that time we've added a few more as well as some actions that have been recently directed by our Secretary of Defense. So the bulk of my remarks will focus on how we inspire and change in our organization and you'll see the three P's come into play.

So let's start with the first P which is policy. Earlier I mentioned connecting and engaging with our Airmen and listening to their stories. Well as I've traveled around again and again I've heard concerns surrounding deployments and families. In fact one of the family issues rated among the top reasons why our female Airmen departed the Air Force at twice the rate of men between four and seven years of service. So this inspired me you might say to look at changing our policies. First we extended first pregnancy deployment which had been six months it is today twelve months and we made the same change with respect to our



physical fitness test requirement. It used to be six months after birth now it is twelve months after birth, reasonable accommodations to provide a little bit more time. We also launched the career intermission program which is designed to retain high quality Airmen by giving them the flexibility to transfer from the active duty to the reserve component for one to three years to meet personal and professional goals and afterwards they can come back to us without losing their place in line for promotion, that's the key part. We believe this new policy will help both men and women but I hope it will particularly help women who often face that difficult choice between career and family. Moreover the Secretary of Defense recently extended maternity from six to twelve weeks for all military personnel and there is more to follow by the way. We're hoping to extend paternity leave as well. That one however requires congressional change and so we're working with Congress to change that law. Finally we are now opening all previously closed positions to women in the military which will open roughly 4000 new jobs in the Air Force and 213,000 jobs across all the services. If I may say so it's about time. If there is anyone who thinks that women haven't been already serving in very dangerous and in combat situations for years and years simply hasn't been paying attention. At the Air Force women will now be able to serve as battlefield Airmen. This means that we'll see female combat controllers. Eventually these are those who open and control air fields in locations and we'll see women able to serve in the pararescue career field. We'll also have women eventually as TACP's. These are the individuals who embed with the Army and who call in what's called closed air support at the front edge of battle. These are just three of the six total career fields that are opening. Believe me these are physically and mentally demanding jobs and they are not for everyone. That's why our standards have been validated to the time in the real world scenarios that battlefield Airmen may encounter during their missions. Contrary to

some naysayer's say we are not going to lower these standards so put simply the standards will be applied equally to men and women going forward in the future.

Moving on to process. One process requiring change was the method by which we measured ROTC cadets before pilot training. So hold with me on this one it requires a little bit of an explanation. By way of background in order to fly in our Air Force candidates must meet the standard and sitting height standards. We base these standards on the most restricted aircraft cockpits. They are designed to ensure that an individual can be qualified in all of our Air Force aircraft. But what if someone is too short for all the aircraft but can qualify for some of the aircraft? Well there has been a longstanding waiver process in place for applicants who didn't meet all of the requirements but the waiver process was only readily available to those at the Air Force Academy. So those individuals had access to the process but it turns out those who were in ROTC and the OTS program did not have similar access. That ended up about eliminating about a third of our female cadets and almost a third of our African American cadets. So this is a great example of how we had a good policy and you can appreciate you have to have fit properly in a cockpit but the implementation process what not equitable. So we changed the process by establishing additional opportunities for ROTC cadets to obtain these height waivers if they're interested to maximize our higher [inaudible]. Sometimes the process can hinder diversity inclusion on the civilian side too. Case in point here is the hiring process for civilian Airmen which we recently changed. The old process tended to allow a single hiring manager which more often than not was a white male retired officer to be the hiring authority and more often than not that type of an individual would pick someone who looked an awful lot and had similar background to his own background. So to promote diversity and inclusion in this area we directed the use of diverse civilian hiring panels for our

senior civilian positions. So these panels now consist of at least three people including civilians with no prior military service and they are designed to be diverse. Not just with regard to race, gender and ethnicity but diversity of thought, ability, background, language and culture. So diverse, civilian hiring panels are our way forward and we hope that these panels will help highlight the best candidates for the jobs while simultaneously increasing diversity in our higher civilian ranks.

Now let's talk about people and forging a culture that can be recognized and eliminate biases. That begins with mentorship and education in my opinion. I mentioned earlier I believe very, very strongly in mentorship, it is really about connecting and engaging. That's why we at the Air Force are launching a new program called My Vector. It is an online system that leverages technology to connect mentors and mentees to maintain a professional relationship. Think of it as the Match.com of mentoring. And so far so good we've had 12,000 registered profiles and more than 6,000 mentoring connections. I'm personally mentoring five Airmen, some civilian and some uniform myself through My Vector. People issues is also why we've recently partnered in DOD with Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg and her lean in initiative to launch lean in circles across the military branches. And I think of lean in circles as another form of mentorship and I'm leading two of those lean in circles myself which includes both men and women in my circles and we talk about a whole host of issues in an engaging, collaborative and honest way. Finally in addition to mentoring eliminating sexual assault remains a top people priority for me. Last October we released a five year prevention and response strategy that will guide the Air Force into developing a robust prevention model while continually culminating responsibilities today. We're adding more sexual assault response coordinators and new specialists for prevention of violence and everywhere I go to each and

every military base around the country and around the world I connect privately with our front line defenders, close the door without any leadership present and ask how are we doing at this base? What do we need to do more of what do we need to do less of? We're also moving away from a one size fits all approach to prevention and thinking hard about who needs what and when. Last month we started rolling out peer influenced training and will not stop thinking of ways to improve until we have an Air Force that is free from sexual assault an issue by the way which affects not only women but it also effects men. Now to wrap up I always talk about taking care of people as our to Air Force priority.

I hope that the changes that we made with the three P's will help our Air Force move to heights just as the WASPS did so many years ago and went through so many barriers. I would like to leave everyone assembled here today with this challenge. Please after this conference is over go back to your respective organizations and look at your three P's and see if there are things that you can do to improve diversity and inclusion and eliminate biases in your workplace. Because you see sometimes it just takes one person and that one person could be you. So thank you again for sharing this time with me. Have a great rest of the conference a wonderful women's history month.

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