

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

ASPEN SECURITY FORUM

And the Army Goes Rolling Along

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Guy Swan:

Well, first of all, thank you folks for hanging in here on Saturday morning. Once again, you're the hardcore. The people that are focused on what we're talking about. My name is Guy Swan. I'm the vice president at the Association of the United States Army and a proud member of the Aspen Institute Homeland Security Group.

The United States Army, a national institution older than the republic itself, dating from 1775, celebrated its 243rd birthday last month. Your army is a force of 1.4 million regular army, Army National Guard, and Army Reserve volunteer soldiers, department of Army civilians and their families.

With over a 180 thousand soldiers deployed forward or forward stationed or otherwise supporting US operations in 140 countries and with a presence in virtually every hometown in America, the United States Army is truly a global force.

Now, in its 17th year of sustained overseas operations, including extended combat operations, counter insurgency operations and now security force assistance missions, the US Army has been asked to do more over a longer period of time than any time in its long history.

In the homeland, America's army is the principle military force, providing robust and sustained timely support when called to a host of federal agencies and partners. Especially in the Department of Homeland Security as well as at the state and local level.

Today the Army faces challenges, however, not unlike building an airplane in flight, as it continues to sustain operations around the world while increasing its readiness for the inevitable but as yet unknown future operations, which may be at the higher end of the spectrum of conflict.

All of this is occurring during a period of unprecedented, and I might and innovative, organizational and institutional reform in the Army. All with their eye toward putting the most professional, best led, best equipped land force into the field. And to give America's sons and daughters every advantage possible to fight and win on our behalf.

It's a pretty heavy lift, as you can imagine, and of course, in any organization, the most successful organizations, that the top ingredient is leadership. And today that is the case as we have the Secretary of the Army. The doctor ... Doctor Mark T. Esper, the top civilian leader in the Army, as our guests.

Dr. Esper brings a remarkably wide array of skills and experiences to this position. He's been a soldier with the unique distinction of serving in all three components of the US Army. He was a regular army officer in Operation Desert Storm with 101st Airborne Division. He's been in the Virginia and DC National Guard and finally, he retired out of the Army Reserve in 2007. On Capitol Hill,

Dr. Esper served as a national security advisor to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and later to Senator Chuck Hagel. He's been a professional staff member on the House Armed Services Committee and on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In the Pentagon, he served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Negotiation Policy and as an Army staff planner. In the private sector, he was a senior executive at the Raytheon Company for seven years before answering the call last November to return to the army as it's senior civilian official.

Secretary Esper is a proud Westpoint graduate in the great class of 1986 ... courage never quits ... along with his classmate, Secretary of state, Mike Pompeo. He holds a master in public administration from the Kennedy School at Harvard and a PHD in public policy from George Washington University.

To moderate today's discussion, we have an equally skilled professional and a true defense and security expert in her own right. All of you know Catherine Herridge, the award winning Chief Intelligence Correspondent for Fox News. What you may not know is that she is a charter member of this [inaudible 00:04:37] symposium, having served as a moderator for all nine iterations of the Aspen Security Forum.

Before I turn the floor over to Catherine, let me close with a personal note. As a career Army officer and soldier for life, parent of a young officer, and as a citizen, I've never been prouder of my Army and your Army than I am today. And with that, would you please join me in a warm welcome for the 23 Army Secretary, Mark Esper and Catherine Herridge. Go Army. Beat Navy.

Catherine Herri:

Well, good morning. Thank you Guy for the kind introduction. I'd like to take a moment and recognize the hard work of the Aspen Institute. Clark and Irvine, Rob Walker, their team, John Hogan, Deb Cunningham. This has been an extremely successful event. Every year I find it hard to imagine that the next year will be even more thought provoking, but that's been true again today. So thank you very much.

Our topic this morning is the Army and the future vision and this is one of the most transformative events for the Army since 1973. And what's astonishing to me is that the vision for the Army is on a single piece of paper, back and front, drafted by the Secretary. And what I know as a reporter is that it tells me that there's a real vision, but I think more importantly that there is a clarity of vision. So I'd like to thank all of you for joining us in person or remotely, the Secretary and I are going to have a conversation, a wide ranging conversation for 45 minutes and then we're going to open it up to your questions and we'll begin with a few brief remarks from the secretary.

Mark Esper: Well, good. Thank you, Catherine. Thank you for that introduction. I would also like to thank Aspen for hosting this wonderful forum and for the introduction by Guy Swan. Thank you for that as well. Beat navy.

Let me just say a few things upfront. First of all, the army is at a strategic inflection point. One that requires bold, big change, and so with that I want to reassure or assure you all of three things. First of all, the army is ready to today to deploy, fight, and win, anytime, anywhere against any foe. Second, I believe we have the vision, the leadership, the initiatives, everything we need in place to make sure we are able to accomplish that mission in years ahead. In decades ahead. And third, the renaissance, if you will, is underway today across a number of fronts, to make sure that we implement that vision and are ready to fight those future fights. And I know we can talk about any one of those thread today, but I just want to lay that out for you up front in terms of what my assessment is of where we are and where we're going. Thank you.

Catherine Herri: Okay. So one of the big themes at the conference this year has been Russia and one of the touchstones for the vision is the concept of near peer competitors. So let's begin with Russia. How does the US army sort of rack and stack against the Russians?

Mark Esper: Well, first of all, it's important to note that the national defense strategy that was published earlier this year that tells us in the future we're going to need to be prepared for high intensity conflict and that we should look at strategic competitors such as China and Russia as the ones to pace ourselves against. So in that regard, I will say, as I just mentioned, we're ready for any type of threat today. And that readiness that we bring to the table, that lethality, it helps us ensure that we can assure our allies today and also deter any type of Russian bad behavior.

In the meantime, as we implement our vision, we want to make sure that we can, across a number of fronts, ensure we have overmatch in a number of areas to make sure that we are capable of dealing with Russia and eventually China over that longer period of time.

Catherine Herri: And in terms of Russia with the overmatch, is the view that if we have dominance, which we have now over Russia, that it also gives us an edge for those countries that rely on Russia, like Iran, either for equipment training and strategy?

Mark Esper: It does. If you look at what we've identified as six modernization priorities, and in each of those six, we're confident that if we can extend our overmatch in those areas, it will give us a clear advantage on the modern battlefield. And not just against Russia, but also against any other proxies, any countries that may buy their types of goods and materials. Iran comes to mind as an example. So we're confident if we can meet and address that pacing threat in the near term

we'll be quite capable of accomplishing our mission on any other type of battlefield.

Catherine Herri: As we all know with competition, it's important to have the skill advantage, but it's also important to understand your adversaries weaknesses and how to exploit those weaknesses. So looking at Russia, what would you identify as the weaknesses and ways in which the US Army it can exploit those weaknesses?

Mark Esper: You know, I like to look at Russia in the context of the Army's strengths and when I look across a number of factors, I feel very good about where we are. So first of all, people, I think man to man, woman to woman, we got far superior person's. They're smart, they're innovative, they're tough. They have all those types of skills and attributes that are critical in any type of battlefield.

Second, I think that in terms of our equipment, our technologies we bring to bear, I'll put my money any day of the week on American business, on our defense companies, on our innovative industries, to provide our soldiers the tools, the weapons, the equipment they need to fight and win in that future conflict.

And then, of course, we have great allies. They're capable. We have far greater number than what the Russia possesses. Sets a [inaudible 00:10:29] where I think we have a, again, another advantage and then we can go on in terms of any other number of factors. But again, when I look at the when I look at the balance of factors here on both sides, I liked the card. I like the hand we're playing right now. And I think our challenge, again, is to grow it, to expand it, to make sure that we're more lethal, more ready on those future battlefields.

Catherine Herri: If you read the army vision, what you'll see in terms of near term competitors is also China. So what does conflict looked like with China in 2028? How do you prepare the army for a potential conflict?

Mark Esper: You know, first of all, as we think about future challenges, future threats we see in the immediate near term, what's right in front of us, of course is North Korea. Over the five to 15 year period. We see Russia as as our pacing threat, if you will. So we look to them in terms of their formations, their tactics or equipment, those things that they would bring to bear against us. But the longterm threat is clearly China. That's the strategic competitor that we look to because the economic power of that country, the size, its ambitions. All those things are why we are focused and why the national defense strategy tells us to focus on the People's Republic as the longer term, the greater threat. That said, more often than not, experts will say that the future engagement with China will be in the south China Sea or somewhere in the maritime domain, and that's, that may be likely, but you never know where the conflict happen. It could be in the maritime domain, it could be in the air, it could be in the ground.

If you look across the world, particularly in Asia, most militaries, their predominant force is the ground forces. So we got to be capable to fight, again, anywhere across that region. But more importantly, I think in the near term as we develop doctrine, and I know you want to talk about doctrine, multi-domain operations. We want to make sure we can support the Air Force and Navy, our joint partners, in any type of fight. And so in a maritime flight, that may mean a employing army artillery, using hypersonic weapons at long range to either hold off a maritime threat from the PRC or to even to neutralize it. And so that's the way we're thinking about that type of threat. I'll give you a good example. It was in the news this week.

So in an exercise that was being ... occurring in the Pacific, in PAYCOM, we had a H64 Apache helicopter employing a unmanned drone forward of its location, to identify a target ship, from which it then relayed the coordinates, the data, back to an Army based rocket system as well as a naval strike force. And that Army system was enabled to launch a rocket that hit the supposed enemy vessel. That's a great example of multi-domain warfare, in terms of how we're thinking about supporting our service partners in the Air Force and Navy Marine Corps.

Catherine Herri: How long has it been since the army sunk a ship like that?

Mark Esper: I don't think I know my history well enough. War of 1812? I don't know. Revolutionary war?

Catherine Herri: But on a serious note, is that the role you see ... or a significant role that the army would play in the Pacific?

Mark Esper: Well, we have to. I think it's, again, we are a joint force. In my day I grew up under air land battle by its own definition. Air lands meant we needed to learn to fight in the air, and on the land. Today multi-domain warfare means multiple things. It's air, land, and sea. it's cyberspace. It's outer space and it's across the electronic warfare spectrum. So we have to have capabilities across all those spectrums, all those domains, and we have to train, educate, develop the leaders that can think across them and employ lethal effects to make sure that we accomplish our mission.

Catherine Herri: It's very well understood in the open source reporting that China has been extremely successful in terms of stealing intelligence and business secrets. What's the impact?

Mark Esper: Well, it means that they can get to a capability quicker than they would have otherwise. The military over the years have spent a great sum of money investing in future technology. It's doing its own research, spent a lot of time, and if they get the advantage by stealing our technology to do that quicker, that only impacts us. That closes that gap, that then we have to re extend and maintain through an extension. There's a lot of effort going into protecting our technology from cyber theft, from other types of espionage to make sure we

can, again, retain that gap, that overmatch that we need to fight and win on the battlefield. More importantly, if the enemy knows we can fight and win, it has a great deterrent effect so that we never get to a conflict in the first place.

Catherine Herri: You mentioned North Korea earlier. With so many operational commitments and modernization, which is happening in a very dynamic environment, how do you juggle a North Korea in that?

Mark Esper: Well, that's been the focus area of our efforts so far. So when we think about readiness, that's the army's number one priority right now. We think about how do I make sure that my units are fully manned, my equipment's ready to go, I have sufficient munitions and the training that we need to fight and win in that battlefield is happening. So the army's taken great effort over the past couple of years under the exceptional leadership of the Chief of Staff, General Mark Milley, to make sure we're prepared and ready to go. And I can tell you we are if worse comes to worse. But that means, again, making sure that we are ready in all those particular areas to do that. And we've put a lot of focus across all three components. Those three components now being, regular Army, National Guard, and the Reserves to do that.

I had the great privilege of coming here yesterday from Indiana where I spent time with the Indiana National Guard and they are leaning forward in terms of making sure they are ready if the balloon goes up to a to deploy and accomplish their mission. And again, everywhere I go as I visit soldiers around the world. I hear the same thing.

Catherine Herri: I don't know if I hear this in your voice, but when you talk about North Korea, sort of the weight or the gravity of that problem set, I can hear that when you talk about it.

Mark Esper: No, it is. It would be a big fight, a bloody fight. And it's one best avoided if you can and that's why we need to put a lot of effort into our diplomacy and I think what the army provides is it gives our diplomats that assurance, that confidence that the US military is standing there behind them.

My last job in the army on regular duty was to be a war planner for the Pacific Theater of Operations. So I know, well that fight from 35 years ago back to today and, again, it's a tough fight. We have great partners with the Republic of Korea and I'm sure other allies would join in such an effort, but it's important that we stand firm with regard to supporting our friends and allies in that region.

Catherine Herri: You have a phrase I've seen you use publicly, which is the best way to win a war is to prepare for ... Tell us why that rings true to you.

Mark Esper: Well, there's so many different spinoffs on that saying. But yeah, the best way to avoid a war, to prevent a war, is to be prepared to fight and win one. And I

think that's been true through the ages. President Reagan used to say peace through strength. So if you have the strength, you can maintain the peace. And I think that's the path Ron, I think Secretary of Defense Mattis really articulate that and embodies that in terms of what he's given us. In terms of his expectations of myself and a Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of the Air Force. And that is our charge, is to make sure we're ready to go to support the commander in chief or diplomats, whatever the case may be. And that's where the army's push is right now. That's today, back to the vision. We need to make sure we're ready to fight five, 10, 15 years from now.

My job as a secretary is to look out to the future. If I don't do that, who will? And so that's why I put a lot of effort into thinking, how do I get from here where we are today to 10, 15 years from now and where do I place my time, my priorities, my emphasis to make sure that we are in that spot 10 years hence.

Catherine Herri: And one of the main focuses is the future's command. Not everyone here may be familiar with the features command. Let's have an explanation and what you think the sort of short or long term objectives are.

Mark Esper: Sure. Well the major ... There are several major lines of effort, I believe, if we are to achieve our vision by the year 2028. One is personnel, we can talk about that. And another one is readiness and training. Another one is modernization of the force. And so as many of you know, who've watched the army over the years, we've had great successes when it comes to equipping our soldiers and we've had some big failures. And frankly, we can't afford to do that anymore. We can't afford to lose the time. We can't afford to spend billions of dollars and to end up with nothing. Particularly when our soldiers lives are at stake or the mission accomplishment. Part of the challenges, as we learned over the years through studies, congressional hearings and whatnot, is that a major problem is that the army's modernization enterprise is spread out across multiple commands, different reporting units, whatever the case may be. If you want to find accountability in the service when it comes to monetization, you can't. There's not one person in charge. You have to go to multiple people. And so accountability is a big challenge.

The path we set off on some time ago, and just recently implemented, was the establishment of Army Futures Command. It's the biggest organizational change in the army since 1973 when we stood up Forces Command, which provides the force, and Training and Doctrine Command which trains and educates and recruits the force. So we're going ... We have gone now from three commands, three major commands, Forces Command, Training and Doctrine Command and Army Material Command, and we've now added a fourth, Futures Command. Futures Command is simply this, it has to think about the future strategic war fighting environment. It has to then think through what type of ... what do we need to win in that environment. Conceptualize the ideas, the material, the equipment, bring it all the way forward through research development into training ... I'm sorry ... Into testing and evaluation, work with our acquisition

experts to build it and then deliver it to the field. And for once we have unity of command and unity of effort because we have one general now ... we'll have one general in charge of doing that.

And that's ... first of all, that's the one of the most significant changes we made. It attacks one of the main problems we've had in the past, with regard to accountability and third ... another major area where we've fallen short in the past is what's called the requirements process. We now have one person responsible for deciding what are the requirements we need in a particular weapon system. What are the attributes and ... he can make those trade offs so that we get to the end point much more quickly and not burn a lot of time as we have in the past. We used to take five to seven years just to figure out what we wanted to build, let alone build it. And that used to take 10 to 15. By that time, and in this era, you're falling behind a couple generations. And so we want to reduce that back down from concept to delivery within five to seven years.

Catherine Herri: And Lieutenant General John Murray. Why is he the right guy for this job?

Mark Esper: Well, he brings to bear a lot of attributes. Now he's not yet there. He has to go before the Senate and get confirmed. We have the utmost confidence that he will, but he has a great background. He's a war fighter, first of all. And infantry officer who commanded the Third Infantry Division. He's commanded in combat so he sees the world from a war fighters lens. But also he brings to bear, three years now, working on the Army staff as the G8, which means he's responsible for requirements. He knows upfront what it takes. What the army needs to build these feature capabilities. He's been involved in the requirements in the acquisition process, if you will, and beyond that, experience. I will tell you, he's a very smart and thoughtful person. He has the confidence of myself and the Chief of Staff of the Army. He's known in DC. He will be a good communicator, a good articulator of what the command will do and where it needs to be in go. We have great confidence in his leadership. As the first commander, he'll get it off on the right foot and get it headed in the right direction.

Catherine Herri: I'd like to get into some detail and granularity about the half dozen modernization objectives. First and foremost, and you touched on it earlier, is long range precision fires. What does that look like? What's the capability and what's the timeline for 1.0?

Mark Esper: Well, let me just say first, we do have six modernization priorities. They've been in place now for a year. If you're an industry, I will tell you they will not change. That's been one of the problems in the past. We tend to change our priorities, but the the Chief of Staff and the Vice Chief of Staff and the Under Secretary and I have sworn a blood oath that they will not change. If one tries to change them, we're all going to turn around and choke him down and get back on the six.

Catherine Herri: That's incentive.

Mark Esper: That is incentive. But it's important to communicate what our priorities are because it's key to industry,. Not just traditional defense industry but the non traditional industry and we can talk about that in the context of Futures Command, but also the Army. Know where we're going and why. And we focus our efforts in that direction. Not bouncing around year to year across a number of fronts.

Long range precision fires is number one. There are six of them. We can talk about the other five, but that was critical because we need to re-extend the gap between us and strategic competitors such as Russia and China, in terms of our ability to reach out and touch the enemy with indirect fire, whether it's rocket or artillery, at great distances. We have a number of initiatives underway. At least three where we have a cannon that can do that. The 155 Mobile Canon, if you will. Howitzer on the battlefield that will really return to our maneuver forces, the ability to shoot quickly at long range. But the other one, the exciting one is hyper sonics. And we're working closely with our sister services on this. But the ability to really engage enemy forces-

PART 1 OF 3 ENDS [00:24:04]

Mark Esper: ... with our sister services and us, but the ability to really engage enemy forces at hundreds of miles, if not a thousand miles. That capability is critical not only to the Army's fight, but to that multi-domain operation that we spoke about. Whether it is helping the Air Force by suppressing enemy air defenses at great distance, which allows them to achieve, help them achieve air superiority, or as I mentioned before, engaging enemy navy assets at great distances from the shore, again provides another capability that our adversaries will have to deal with. That's why it's top of the list for the Army.

Catherine Herri: So what does the Next-Generation Combat Vehicle look like?

Mark Esper: Well, we don't know yet.

Catherine Herri: Is there where robotics may come in?

Mark Esper: Yes. There are a number of areas, in terms of these six priorities, that will really require cutting-edge technologies. With regard to long-range precision fire, it's hypersonics. With regard to air missile defense, it's directed energy. With regard to the Next-Generation Combat Vehicle, for example, it's robotics and artificial intelligence.

I will steal one of the Chief of Staff of the Army's lines when he says, "We are at a point right now where technology has the potential to fundamentally change the character warfare." Not the nature of warfare, but the character of warfare, particularly with regard to AI and robotics. The key is whoever gets there first will have unmatched lethality on the battlefield for some years to go after that. What we're trying to think of, what the Army vision calls for, is that by the year

2028, we begin deploying a next-generation combat vehicle, at least a replacement for the Bradley, that employs not just advanced technologies on it, but has the ability to be operated semi-autonomously, if not fully autonomously.

What you can imagine, is on the battlefield, let's imagine a company of mechanized infantry or armor that can now deploy unmanned fighting vehicles ahead of its manned formation, with the ability, with much less concern for risk, to fix the enemy, engage the enemy, while the manned forces maneuver to seize the objective. These are critical technologies. The Army is shifting a lot of its research and technology investment monies in that direction. We have our folks who think about future warfare also working along these same lines to envision how we would fight along that. Again, whoever gets there first will have an advantage. We want to be there first, and I'll tell you, we will get there first.

Catherine Herri: The advantages being, at least from a layperson's perspective, a robotic tank is lighter, smaller, cheaper, more disposable, less risk to human capital.

Mark Esper: Absolutely. If you think about ... One of the critical factors for the Army is the ability to get to the fight strategically. If I don't have the requirement to put persons inside a vehicle, I now can reduce the size of the vehicle, because there's not a crew compartment. I can reduce the weight because I don't have to armor it up.

If you look at those two factors alone, it now increases my strategic mobility. I can move more of those on a ship or on a C-17 and get them to the battlefield quicker. As you mentioned, because I don't have people, I'm much less concerned about putting them in a risky situation. I can maybe engage deeper. I can get closer to the enemy. I can really upset the enemy's game plan, battle plan, in ways that I can't do with a manned vehicle. Think about how do you integrate that with the drones we plan on deploying, as well. It is a game-changer with regards to how you fight.

Catherine Herri: Is the concept of operating a robotic tank similar to operating a drone? It would be from a base here in the United States, or how would that work?

Mark Esper: Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that you could operate remotely from anywhere at a great distance or right behind your forward line of your own troops. Those are some of the concepts we need to work out, but what's interesting is I've dug into this, and I've visited some of our experts in Detroit, Michigan at TARDEC and TACOM. I've talked to others around about this issue.

The difference is, it's one thing to fly a drone through the air. I don't want to dismiss the technological challenges of that, but it's something else to have an unmanned vehicle navigate terrain, because now you have to figure out is that thing in front of me, is that a table or is that a bush? Is that a trench I have to go

in, and can I get back out of it? All those things that a human driver makes instantaneously, now a computer, a robot has to navigate that, and have the algorithms and the computing power to do that. That's just the first hurdle.

The second hurdle is, now I have to navigate that terrain, and I have to navigate it in a formation of blue forces, so friendly vehicles. That's challenge number two. I have to keep in mind who's on my left, right, front, and rear. Number three, I have to navigate that terrain keeping in mind where the enemy might be. How do I use the terrain as I navigate? Do I move behind a copse of trees or through a defilade position? Then the biggie. Once I've accomplished those three things, how do I navigate against an enemy force? How do I maneuver on the battlefield?

These are big challenges that an airborne aircraft doesn't have to deal with, necessarily. That's why it's going to be difficult, certainly for full autonomy. For semi-autonomy, I think we can get there. I know we can get there by 2028, but full autonomy is much more challenging.

Catherine Herri: Does artificial intelligence play a role in this?

Mark Esper: Absolutely. Our artificial intelligence, it will help enable the semi-autonomy we need in the near term, so yes. That's why we're putting a lot of effort into that, why DoD is, all the services. Again, that is one of the critical technologies that will change the character of warfare.

Catherine Herri: Being a human being, I'd like to think humans have the last word here with artificial intelligence. Where do you think that line is, where the positives of artificial intelligence end and the human has to come in?

Mark Esper: As I mentioned, I think in some ways you can have speed of decision-making. You have much less risk aversion in terms of where you would deploy a robot as compared to a human being. We see that happening now with regard to airborne surveillance, but I believe there will always be a person in the loop, if you want to make those final decisions with regard to whether you engage or not engage an adversary. I think we're quite a ways away from that, but I think that'll be key going forward.

Catherine Herri: We probably have time for maybe one more on the list. I'll give you the choice here. It's Future Vertical Lift, the networked air and missile defense, and then soldier lethality.

Mark Esper: Geez, all four? Which one?

Catherine Herri: Okay, two.

Mark Esper: I've got to go with soldier lethality, because I was an infantryman. I served a lot of time in infantry units in the 82nd and the 101st, so it's close to my heart. As

has been pointed out, in any conflict, the infantry, whether you're Marine or Army, bears the brunt of the battle. 80% of the battlefield casualties are borne by the infantry, and yet we probably put fewer dollars per person into that than we do any other system. We are putting a great deal of money now into soldier lethality. This is personal to the secretary of defense, as well. It's a passion of his. It's a passion of mine. How do we make sure our soldiers are better trained, more prepared, more lethal on the battlefield so we can reduce that rate of attrition on the battlefield, we can empower them to be much more capable?

We have a number of things underway right now. We are building a rifle that is much more capable in terms of engaging the enemy at greater distances, defeating whatever armor they may be bearing, and doing so with reducing the soldier load. That's number one.

Number two, we are developing, and I've actually used them, the secretary has used them, a new set of night-vision goggles that provides a great deal of capability on the soldier's screen. It'll be linked to the weapon to give him or her lethality on the battlefield, and again, improve the survivability but also the lethality of the soldier.

What's really neat about this is that these goggles will allow us to train in a virtual environment anyplace, anytime, anywhere. It links the soldiers within their squad. You can literally take a room like this, empty it out. You could put into that screen, in terms of their vision, an enemy battlefield, maybe a village in Afghanistan. You can go room to room, house to house, and clear that by talking with one another, getting immediate feedback, and then doing that repetition, that series over, and over, and over again. As anybody knows, the key to success, to proficiency, is repetition. We will give our soldiers great deals of repetition. You and I saw each other in the gym today. The key to success for fitness-

Catherine Herri: You were running faster than I was, though, and lifting much more. I know that.

Mark Esper: The key is repetition, getting to that gym every day.

Catherine Herri: I know. Free tip.

Mark Esper: Getting to the gym every day, and when you're there, doing as any repetitions as you can. That's what we want to give to the soldier, is to put these sets on, and go anywhere, anytime, in your barracks, in the courtyard, in the conference room. Take it with you and do repetition, after repetition, after repetition, whether it's react to contact, react to ambush, react to indirect fire, all those type of battle drills I grew up with. It really will improve the proficiency, the cohesion, the teamwork of that unit, and really give them an unmatched vantage point on the battlefield.

Catherine Herri: All of these points take us to the idea of multi-domain battlefields or conflict. How do you define that?

Mark Esper: Well, multi-domain gets back to where I said. When I entered the service after leaving the Academy in 1986, we had air-land battle, which was a great concept. Let's go back a little bit, because I mentioned upfront that we are at a strategic inflection point. It's important to look at the history. 1973, we came out of the Vietnam War, and we had just finished, what, 10 years of irregular warfare conflict. We knew that the big fight was really against the Soviets in the Fulda Gap in Germany. We knew we had to build a force that could fight high-intensity conflict. We were unsure of what our budgets might be. We were unsure of what our doctrine might be.

We had some great leaders of that time, men like General Creighton Abrams, who could see the future, and what they did was set the Army on a path, on a course that gave us the Army that beat Iraq in the Gulf War and beat Iraq again during the 2003 invasion. What did they do? They created air-land battle doctrine. They invested in the Big Five Army systems that we still use today, the Abrams, the Bradley, the Patriot, the Blackhawk, those types of systems. They gave us the National Training Center, which anybody would say has been a remarkable success in terms of our ability to train and fight on the modern battlefield. If I hadn't mentioned, they gave us the doctrine of air-land battle. A great generation of leaders, so we had a force that was prepared to defeat the Soviets in the Fulda Gap.

That threat fell away. The fourth-largest army in the world happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, and we beat them pretty badly in Desert Shield, Desert Storm. That's the point that we're at today. Today, as we think ahead, if we could replicate that, if we can have that type of success they had in '73, we will be overwhelmingly successful. As we look at doctrine, now we're looking at multi-domain. How do we fight not just on the air and land, but again sea, space, cyberspace, across the electronic warfare spectrum?

Two or three of those spaces were not there when I was a young lieutenant. We didn't have cyberspace, and we certainly didn't think about sinking about enemy ships. But that's where we need to go, because I think one of the virtues of the U.S. military is we fight as a joint force. We are able to create a very lethal military. Its capabilities are greater than the sum of its individual forces, by the fact that we work together, we fight together. That is the key. How do we train officers to think more flexibly, use greater judgment, innovate on the battlefield, to think about, "How can I help the Air Force? How can I support the Navy?" This is something that Secretary Wilson, and Secretary Spencer, and I talk about a great deal about. We talk about sharing technologies, sharing research all the time, to further that concept.

Catherine Herri: This is also the realm of information warfare. This is where Russia has shown itself to be very adept.

Mark Esper: They have, and it's an asymmetric capability they pursued because of the strength of our conventional forces, but we need to counter that, as well. One of the pleasant surprises that I found coming back into the Army in November, as I've made my way around the service and traveled, is to find that we are really leading the way in terms of our cyber capabilities. The army has built a Cyber Corps, a cyber MOS. We have a Cyber Center of Excellence at Fort Gordon, Georgia that I was able to visit a couple months ago. We have cyber teams across the regular Army and the National Guard that are, today, fighting bad guys in Afghanistan.

We are really moving in that area. A lot of this is a testament to some great leaders in the Army. I know we've got General Nakasone here who has led in that way. I'm really pleased where we're going with cyber. There's much more to do. It's a field we need to learn more about. Same thing with information operations. It's one area where we need to be prepared to fight and win.

Catherine Herri: Let's talk about human capital. What are your objectives for growing the Army, the timeline, and are you good where you right now on retention, or do you want to see improvements there?

Mark Esper: With regard to the vision, what we outlined is this. I believe in the coming years we need to grow the force above 500,000 soldiers with associated growth in the Guard Reserve. As we grow that force, we need to make sure that they're tough, they're physically fit, they're innovative, young men and women capable of fighting a modern, dynamic, high-intensity conflict. That's where we're trending.

When I talked upfront about a renaissance underway in the Army, I say that because there are a number of initiatives underway right now that we've done, that we've taken to make sure that we build that force. Recently, we announced that we've extended infantry on-station unit training, which means the basic training that soldiers go through plus their additional infantry training before they ever arrive to unit. We've extended that from 14 weeks to 22 weeks. Two months, we've extended it. We want to make sure that our young infantrymen coming out of Fort Benning, if you will, are the best-trained infantry recruits in the world. We're going to expand that to armor and cavalry, and hopefully eventually artillery and engineers, because what we hear from the field is we need to make sure that these soldiers are ready to go from day one, from the time they arrive in the operational units. That's one thing, a big change in the Army. It's been that way for decades.

Number two, we just recently announced that we're changing the Army Physical Fitness Test to what we call the Army Combat Fitness Test. The APFT's been in place since 1980. I grew up with it. I think many folks who served will know that it's just not a good representation or a good driver of combat fitness. This new six-event timed test has an 80% degree of certainty it will drive the combat fitness we need for our soldiers. It's a very demanding type of exam, but it's going to bring our soldiers to a new level of physical fitness and at the same

time, we believe, reduce injuries. Those are just two ways by which we're trying to build this more capable, lethal fighting force from the soldier level up.

Catherine Herri: How many of you here this morning have been in the military, have a close family member who's in the military, children, grandchildren? It's about three-quarters of the room. As someone who's in a military family, I have some skin in the game. As you know, military kids have been a real base for recruitment, but since 9/11, these kids have been through multiple deployments with their family members. As we sometimes know, deployments are no Hallmark card. Has this impacted recruitment for military families? Is it a positive, or has it been a drag on that process?

Mark Esper: You've lived through this, so I thank you for your sacrifice. My wife, we've been married 29 years. For the 21 years I was in the service, she was with me for 21 of them. I will tell you that I know well, as do any former soldiers I hear, that the families pay the biggest price. They sacrifice the most. It's the unknown that really is the driver. So, I thank you on that behalf, but yeah, my big concern, the big strategic, national concern I have is that the military is in some ways becoming a family business. It's increasingly isolated from the broader society it serves. Whenever I have the chance to swear in a new soldier, I like to tell them that, "You are the 1% defending the other 99%." It sounds great, and I really appreciate young men and women coming to serve. It's remarkable in this day and age. Hopefully, I can recruit your son.

Catherine Herri: He's been indoctrinated West Point since he could, about three or four.

Mark Esper: How old is he?

Catherine Herri: He's 13, and he can tell you more about the evolution of machine guns than maybe you ever want to know.

Mark Esper: I told Catherine I was going to come over to her house and swear him in. Delayed entry program, five years, right?

Catherine Herri: Yeah, that's right.

Mark Esper: Six years, whatever the case may be, but we'll get him onboard. But it is becoming a family business in some ways. It tells you a couple things. One is there is increasing isolation, lack of familiarity between the broader community and the military that serves them, but secondly, it tells you that the children of persons who serve really see a career that's exciting, that offers a lot of opportunity, a lot of professional growth, a lot of personal growth. These kids are fantastic. They're very resilient. I can go around the Army staff and tell you almost all of the persons serving have sons and daughters who are serving themselves, and many, it's all the children.

It's quite remarkable what you see, but again, while I applaud that and respect their service, I am concerned about the broader relationship between the military and the public, the nation it serves. I'm trying to think through how do we close that gap. How do we go out and message that, and tell folks that the Army, or any service, if you will, but the Army's a great place to serve? We'll teach you a lot of wonderful skills. We'll prepare you to be fantastic young men and women, good leaders, that whatever path you choose, you'll be successful.

Catherine Herri: If there's a better understanding or a stronger relationship for the families that are moving every two years or every three years, there may be more opportunities in the community for their spouses to work, because there's a better understanding of what the requirements are.

Mark Esper: Well, we talked about this. One of the issues that I'm really focused on are the families. It was one of the priorities I outlined when I joined, when I came back in on day one, and in particular, the hiring of our spouses. This was a personal problem my wife confronted. She couldn't get a job because private-sector employers knew that she would be moving every two or three years. In fact, I think in our first five years we were married, we moved five times.

It's tough, but at the same token, there are things we can do within the Army, within DoD, to improve spousal hiring, because what you find ... Everywhere I go, I meet with spouses. Every post I visit, I meet with the spouses. In most cases, they want to work. They need to work. They want to contribute and stay busy. We are really doing a number of things across multiple fronts to reduce our bureaucracy, to improve spousal hiring. I appreciate what's coming out of the White House with regard to putting an emphasis on spousal hiring as well. As I talk to members of Congress everywhere I go, they understand this challenge and are more than willing to consider legislating changes also to help our spouses. They are the most overqualified and underemployed cohort in America, military spouses. I think we can do better for them.

Catherine Herri: We talked earlier about the change in the training standards. What role do you think women will play in the Army in the future? What opportunities will be open to them, and what won't be open to them?

Mark Esper: Well, everything's open to them right now, and they are performing well. I've had the chance everywhere I go to meet with some of the young women, officers and enlisted, who are serving. My first trip in the Army was to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California. Again, it's the premier training center. It gives you your best assessment. It gave me my best assessment of where we are, where we're training, and we're training against what the Russians were doing, for example, in Ukraine. Anyways, I had the chance to sit down and meet with a platoon of soldiers. It was a mixed platoon of men and women.

I'll tell you, the women are tough. They're hanging in there. They're setting the example. All they ask is that they be treated equally, they be treated fairly. They want to meet all the same standards, and they do. They're exceeding, they're excelling, and I got that message not just from the 1st Cavalry, but I got that message when I met with a unit at the 82nd Airborne. Just two weeks ago, I was at the 101st Airborne Division doing PT with the soldiers in the morning, and there was a brand new second lieutenant. She'd just graduated Ranger School, and she was doing I think her first PT with the unit. She was all after it, just excited about doing the job and doing well.

Catherine Herri: Before we open it up to your questions, I want to talk about what may be one of the most important planks of the strategy, which is leadership and character. How do you define character?

Mark Esper: You know, the bumper sticker would be, "Just do the right thing." Do the right thing. Most people know what that is. It's everything from treating everybody with dignity and respect to, for me, as I like to tell my soldiers, the leaders, "Live the Army values." We've got seven of them. They talk about selfless service, and duty, and honor, those types of things. Hold true to those. They are a bedrock of our profession of arms. They are the reasons why I think that the military is held in such high regard by the American public, maybe the single institution that really, year after year, ranks the highest with regard to how the American people view their institutions of government. It's a treasure. It's something we cannot afford to squander. It's what makes us, I think, unique in many ways. We hold ourselves to a higher standard, and I particularly hold our leaders to a higher standard as well, because commitment to those values will hold us well in the years to come in whatever situation may arise as this world gets more complex and more dangerous.

Catherine Herri: Before I open it up to questions, I have a selfish question for James, the 13-year-old. He wants to know-

Mark Esper: He can go infantry.

Catherine Herri: No. That's right. He's going tanks. [crosstalk 00:46:42].

Mark Esper: Okay, that's great. That's good, too. You've got a vote from there, from General Swan.

Catherine Herri: On a serious note, for young men and women who want to choose a career in the Army, what kinds of subjects and skills should they be building now so that they are where they need to be a decade from now?

Mark Esper: I would say two things come to mind immediately. You've got to be physically fit. That means exercising every day, repetitions, but make sure you build a sound mind and a sound body. That old Greek maxim, if you will, a sound mind

and a sound body. So first of all, physical fitness is key. It's the foundation for being a good soldier.

Secondly, I would say study a broad range of subjects. If anything, if there's an emphasis, it will be an emphasis in STEM, science, technology, engineering, and math, but study a broad range of things. We need people. We need leaders who can think, who can understand the basics behind a complex weapon system, leaders who can write and communicate. A big facet of leadership is communicating ideas, and thoughts, and persuading others about the importance of the mission and why we need to do something, so develop a broad spectrum of capabilities.

I think third would be get involved. Get involved in your community, in sports teams, in clubs, because that's where you learn the value of teamwork, where you learn the importance of leadership.

PART 2 OF 3 ENDS [00:48:04]

Mark Esper: -learn the value of teamwork, where you learn the importance of leadership as well. That's what I see. I view as critical to building young men and women of character and young future leaders for those types of things.

Catherine Herri: All right, thank you. Okay so we're gonna open it up for some questions. I see a question right here in the purple. Just give us your name, if you've served, we're interested in a couple of details, and then your question.

Mark Esper: And if it's a really hard one, I'll dodge it.

Charlie: It is, but Charlie [Dunna 00:48:31] from Duke University, retired military, served 35, almost 35 years-

Mark Esper: Thank you.

Charlie: In the Air Force.

Mark Esper: As Keith would say it's a good alternative to military service.

Charlie: Well done, well done.

Mark Esper: I can say that.

Catherine Herri: I didn't.

Charlie: And just for-

Mark Esper: I love my Air Force partner.

Catherine Herri: We can rewind.

Charlie: Hey remember, I'm a lawyer so. Just for history buffs, I think the last time Army artillery sunk a ship was in Midway during World War II. Well, there you have it.

Catherine Herri: It's been a while.

Mark Esper: We're coming back, that's all I'm going to say. Coming back.

Charlie: What I really wanted to ask you about. You talk a lot about AI. And here we have last December, Google established AI research center in Beijing. More recently, as you probably know with Probably Maven, an AI project that intended to help among other things, reduce civilian casualties, Google's pulled out of it. So what if anything can we do about that, and what message would you have for the tech industry in supporting our national defense?

Mark Esper: Well I guess what I would say is this. Is the United States military exists to defend the Constitution and our way of life. And all the freedoms that we enjoy. And one of those freedoms is the freedom to live in a market economy, to try your hand at building technology, whatever the case may be. We give them the freedom to do that. So this is really about protecting American lives, protecting our country, and doing those types of things. And you know, that's the message I would send. There's nothing nefarious here if you will. But how do we leverage the technologies that are out there to help us again, continue to build this community of democracies out there? To defend, again, our great country, our way of life. The freedoms that we enjoy. I will say, you know, so much is happening these days in the private sector. That's one reason why, a major reason why we decided to a, stand up army future's command, and b, put it in Austin, Texas. The ecosystem there of innovation, of entrepreneurialism, of high tech know-how is just exceptional.

And we want to be there on the ground working side by side with them. And I think the ability to go into a center like that, a city like that, work side by side with tech companies, with tech entrepreneurs, will help address some of those issues, those concerns that they may have.

Charlie: Thank you. A, you should come to Raleigh/Durham, but besides that, should we have some sort of [inaudible 00:51:18] type process for companies that are choosing to establish research centers in artificial intelligence and other high technologies that are extreme value for future weapons when they want to put them potentially adversary countries?

Mark Esper: I think that's a good consideration, that I know congress is considering that now. And we leave it up to them to tease that one out.

Catherine Herri: Okay, another question. Right down here in the front.

Alan: Secretary Esper, thanks for coming out and doing this. My name is Alan Estevez, I'm with Deloitte, former DOD official, 36 years with the department. Mike Murray's a great guy.

Mark Esper: Thank you for your service.

Alan: I want to talk about the budget. So you're fortunate to have come in at a time where the budget got plussed up, much needed plussed up. I wish I had the budget that you were operating with. But that's not guaranteed over time. So as you look to grow the force to about 500000 plus the reserves and National Guard, eventually that's going to come into, do we need to square that against modernization programs, fairly ambitious modernization programs that are much needed for the army. And your readiness structure. How are you looking to do that?

Mark Esper: Well let me state first of all, we did get good funding in '17, better funding in '18, and hopefully great funding in '19 as well. So I owe a great deal of thanks to congress in bipartisan fashion doing that. And you're right, I don't know what's going to happen in '20, '21, '22 and beyond. Most members of congress would have told us publicly and privately that don't count on more funding money being there. It could flatten out, it could taper down. My view is this. There are things I can control and I can't control. And I want to control as much of my future, the army's future as I can. So what the chief of staff and I did, began a couple months ago, three months ago or so, to get a handle on the budget, was go through our modernization budget. It's one of five or six that are out there. And we made some tough decisions to free up the money we need to ensure that even if the budget doesn't continue on a trajectory that it is, we'll be able to maintain funding for our priorities, for long range position fires, next generation combat vehicle, future vertical lift, the network, air and missile defense, and [inaudible 00:53:44].

There's a lot of money in these budgets. But you just takes a clear eyed, hard nosed approach to reprioritizing what it is. And we've done that. And we've got to go through other parts of the budget as well. But we're committed to controlling as much of our own destinies we can. That means programs, many programs will be killed. Many will be reduced in the process. But it's important, if I'm going to make sure that I put soldiers on a battlefield in the future, that they have the tools, equipment, and weapons that they need to fight and win. And that's my commitment, that's my obligation, if you will.

Catherine Herri: What was one of the tough cuts?

Mark Esper: Oh, I won't talk cuts right now.

Catherine Herri: All right. See Kim Dossier, right there please.

Kim: Secretary, can you give us any clarity on the army's policy on immigrants who've joined and are serving honorably, and joined to get U.S. citizenship? Are they having to be expelled from the force?

Mark Esper: You know, I think you're talking about the MAVNI program. Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest. This is a program that was stood up years ago. It's an OSD program, by the way. OSD program. And it has provided us important recruits coming in on a couple particular areas. But I will tell you that as I understand it, as I believe DOD has briefed it, no person has been separated or removed from the service because they're immigrants. No one. A big piece of this policy, of this approach, is making sure though that they came into the service properly, were properly vetted, and the background checks are, they passed the background checks. So that's the important piece of that. And I'll just leave it at that.

Catherine Herri: Okay, over in the corner.

Andy: Thank you. Andy Weber, Council on Strategic Risks, former DOD. I have a question. We hear a lot about North Korea's nuclear weapons, but not so much about their advanced biological weapons programs. And the army is the executive agent for biodefense. So I just wanted to ask you, what's your vision for bio defense? And where is it on your list of priorities?

Mark Esper: It's a good question. I won't speak to any threats or intelligence. But I will tell you this much. As we talk about the army vision, one of the things you want to do in terms of a vision is provide a sufficient, enough a goal out there, a future if you will, end state, but enough detail to make sure that you can achieve that aspiration. So as we wrote the army vision, and you can see it here as Catherine waved around, we broke it down in terms of manning, organizing, training, equipping, et cetera, the force. Under the organizing piece of this, we know that going forward we need to do a view things. And that is, we need to restore capabilities back to our brigade combat teams in our divisions. Across a number of fronts. These are capabilities that we used to have in, in my day in the army we used to have them in. Consider for example, artillery, engineer bridging capabilities, mobile air missile defense. Another one though is, what we used to call nuclear biological capabilities. Today I think we use the term CBRNE.

We need to put those capabilities back into the units. So that we can deal on the modern battlefield with chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, you name it. I have to put those capabilities back into the formations. Alongside EW and cyber. And so, as we talked earlier about growing the force. I told you about the need to grow above 500000. Across all three components. People say, "Why?" Well the why is because first of all, I have to fill out the units I have. I have to make sure that they're fully manned. Secondly, I have to restore capabilities that we gave up years ago. And one of them is that piece of it. The third piece is putting new capabilities into the force so I can deal with the threats we see in 2028 and beyond. Long answer, but I hope that helps.

Catherine Herri: Okay, another question just down here in the front please. Center, yes. I'm sorry. Pardon me. Just stand by, stand by one second. Thank you.

Edmond: I'm Edmond Thomas, I was an airborne infantry officer, and thank you for your service.

Mark Esper: No, thank you sir.

Edmond: You have made me feel very secure about the army's potential in the future. However, last year, or year before, we heard from General Dunsford here, and General Dunsford said that in 2000, he would have thought that our military would be superior long into the future. And then he came back and said, "But today I cannot guarantee military superiority past 2018." All you have told us was that in the future, do we have a gap, because we still have the Black Hawk, the Abrams, the Bradley, et cetera, which were 1980 developments. Do we still military superiority into the future? Do you agree or not agree with General Dunsford?

Mark Esper: I would say this. We are prepared to fight and win today. Hands down. We are prepared to fight and win today. With regard to those weapon systems, the Black Hawk, Patriot, all those we talked about. The systems I grew up with and it sounds like you served with as well. We've made great investments over the years to continually upgrade them so that they remain very capable, very cutting edge systems on the modern battlefield. The challenge is that those upgrades in some cases have reached the limit of what we can do. Case in point is a Bradley fighting vehicle. It's now achieved a weight, if you will, that makes it difficult in terms of you know, the weight it can bear on its chassis, its transmission, things like that.

It's reached a point in terms of the power capability it has to employ systems like active protective systems. So that's why when I talk about one of the six priorities, number two being next generation combat vehicle, that is the vehicle that we need to upgrade, that we need to replace now. We need to get to the next system, a system that is more capable, retains that overmatch with the Russians. And then will allow us to continue over the decades, again an upgrade program. But I can assure you we are ready to fight and win today.

Catherine Herri: Guy Swann in the front.

Guy Swan: Mr. Secretary, yesterday we had a good discussion about Europe, Russia, and of course we just had the NATO summit here recently. Could you talk about the army's posture in Europe, and I'm talking specifically about rotational forces versus the discussion about basing forces back in Europe. At least army forces.

Mark Esper: Sure. Well I'll tell you, I made my first trip back to Europe in January. And I commanded an airborne rifle company in Europe in the 90s. And so I had a lot of experience in Europe training and whatnot. One of the places I went to is the

JMRC in [inaudible 01:00:51] Germany. And one of the things I found really inspiring, really hopeful, was the fact that at, it's the European version if you will of NTC. We had allies were training together. U.S. forces underneath a Polish command with Italian artillery, English RECI units, British RECI units, whatever the case may be. Training as a multinational force. So great deal of capability, much better than what I recall during my years of service, 20, 25 years prior. I also had the chance to make it up to Poland. I traversed west to east to Poland, visit our soldiers there. And again, doing a lot of great things. Our allies in Poland and then of course in the Baltics get great reassurance for our capabilities, what we bring there, our presence.

There is that question about, well do we continue rotational forces or not? It's something that we continually look at. I will tell you that we get great training benefit out of picking up a force from the United States and moving it to Europe. Offloading it and deploying it to positions. The ability to strategically move is critical to the army's relevance. And that gives us a great opportunity to exercise those forces, something we hadn't done in years. The other thing it gives us too is until those training areas, at least in the northern part of Europe become more mature, what we typically see is as a unit leaves the NTC, and loads and ships overseas, once they get on the ground, they start seeing some degradation readiness. And by the time they're at the end of that nine month deployment, they're ready to come back and go back in the cycle. So a nine month rotation allows us to keep really high readiness force focused on the mission too. Because they're not, they don't have families around and things they need to take care of. And to really provide that reassurance that deterrence mission that we need to do over there right now.

Catherine Herri: I have a question before I go to the audience again. Because we'll have a chance for about two more. There's a panel this morning on Afghanistan and one of the main takeaways was the need for the U.S. to stay engaged. What do you think the army's role looks like in Afghanistan in the footprint?

Mark Esper: Well, again we talk about the, a lot of change underway in the army, a renaissance. I spoke to the gentleman back there about organizing, things we're doing differently. One of the things that we stood up are these security force assistance brigades. And they have the virtue of doing two things. And the first one is over there now. I was in Afghanistan two, three weeks ago and I had a chance to visit with them, three of the battalions across the country. And what they provide us are first of all, they relieve an infantry, they will relieve an infantry combat team of breaking itself up, losing a good deal of readiness that it needs for other fights. But more importantly, maybe they also provide a highly trained, well equipped group of experts in doing the train, advise, and assist mission. To help our Afghan partners do what they need to do on a modern battlefield with Afghans leading, taking on the Taliban and others. So I think that's the future with regard to Afghanistan when it comes to the army footprint and what we'll be doing. The S fabs are a great innovation. Chief of staff of the army deserves good credit for that.

Catherine Herri: One last question. And then we'll need to wrap it up. The gentleman here please. Okay, two, but quick. That's very clever.

Tom: Mr. Secretary, Tom Spoehr, former army officer and now at the Heritage Foundation as a defense researcher. You've talked about growing the army at least as big as 500000, we would agree with that assessment. We're also aware that in 2018 the army had to reduce its recruiting goals by about 4000, presumably at least because of a challenge of getting new people to sign up. How confident are you that the army and the other services will be able to continue to recruit qualified volunteers. And if you have concerns, do you think the army has the tools it needs to recruit or is this going to require more? Maybe a whole of government approach of some kind that we don't see today.

Mark Esper: Good question. First of all, we did not lower our recruiting goals. They were lowered by congress when the final national defense authorization came back, it told us we had to drop down by 2500 soldiers. So it wasn't something driven by us. Secondly, and this is just been misreported, that's why I'm, want to make sure we get it right. The second thing is we've done a great job in terms of retention. We have our highest retention levels ever. So because we're retaining more, that also brought our accessions missions down by another 1000 or 1500. That's what reduced our overall number, not some arbitrary decision. That said, in FY19 we've requested 4000 additional soldiers. I think that'll be the steady state, modest type of growth we want to see over the coming years. 4000 gives us a clear line, I can configure my training base to do that, to get that lined up. The budget, the resources I need to do that.

So I think that's fully manageable. On a recruiting front we're doing two things. First of all, we're raising standards. I've already taken some actions where I said that the army is going to raise the bar on recruitment of CAT IVs, DOD standards says no more than 4%. I've already directed no more than 2%. And there are other things in the works right now to make sure that we get high, we maintain a high quality level of our forces coming in. The recruiting challenge gets back, you know part of it is the bigger issue we talked about in terms of the increasing isolation of the military from its broader partners. But there's a whole lot more we can do in the army, and a whole lot better. So we have set into motion a number of things that will set the conditions for FY19 to make sure we meet our training goals with high quality troops. We've expanded a number of recruiters, we are upgrading our recruiting storefronts, our stations if you will. We're looking at how we move them in different parts of the country. Right, go where the kids are. Go to the big cities for example.

We're looking, right now we've initiated program where we have soldiers coming, who are currently on active duty going back to their hometowns, spending some time back to their schools talking to former classmates or people they live with to talk the army. We're seeing great success from that already. We have to revitalize our army marketing campaign. I think it's just been insufficient the past few years, so lot of work underway there. The chief and I

met with the head of what's called AMRG to discuss about this. So there are a number of things that we have to do, and even more that I can get into boring detail about. But we really need to up our game in terms of the message we send out. Where we recruit, and how we recruit, et cetera, et cetera. You know I've done my part. I've gotten Catherine's son on board, so. I've met my quota for the day. But there are a number of things we need to do, and we're working on that one. But the key is steady, modest growth to get us to achieve that vision with high quality soldiers. High quality's what we need to do what we need to do in the coming years.

Catherine Herri: And as a courtesy, that final question if you can keep it tight.

Mark Esper: And I'll be quick in my response.

Tom: I'll make it as quick as I can. Mr. Secretary, Tom Roeder with the Gazette out of Colorado Springs. What parts of space and missile command belong in a space force?

Mark Esper: Had to take that one, huh? You know, I haven't studied the issue. It's really has not been my focus. The army relies heavily on space in terms of, for example, things like precision navigation and time and those types of things. So we are a big user of space. Whoever runs space force, whatever the case will be, we'll plug in. We'll make it work.

Catherine Herri: All right, just any final thoughts?

Mark Esper: I'll just wrap up with where I began. And reassure y'all again three things. Your army, your army, is ready today to deploy, fight and win. Secondly, there is a lot of change underway in today's environment. There's big change required, and I think we have the vision, I think we have the leadership, the momentum, the initiatives underway to make sure we make that reality so that America continues to be at the forefront. And have the world's premiere fighting force. And actually I just, third I ask you just to watch the news, there's a lot of great change underway in the army. This renaissance is upon us. And a lot of exciting things to happen, and I appreciate all of your support going forward.

Catherine Herri: Secretary Esper, I would like to thank you. It's been a real privilege to work with you and your team. I'd also like to thank your wife Leah, and your kids for their service as well. And thanks to all of you who've been part of the conversation today, and thanks to Aspen. Thank you very much.

PART 3 OF 3 ENDS [01:09:19]