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Fireside Chat with **Christine Wormuth**

Christine Wormuth, 25th Secretary of the Army, U.S. Army

Moderator: **Courtney Kube**, NBC News Correspondent, NBC News

Courtney Kube

Good morning, everyone. I am really so honored to be here this morning with the Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth. I think this is going to be a fascinating panel. And I hope everyone here enjoys it. She's been the Secretary of the Army since May of 2021. But before that, she spent a quarter of a decade in, I think that's a fascinating way to put it.

Christine Wormuth

Don't say it

Courtney Kube

I know. I know. I mean, let me rephrase that she spent more than 20 years serving in national defense and military jobs in and out of government, including Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and Senior Director for defense at the National Security Council, just to name a couple of her jobs. So Secretary Wormuth I want to start with something that's touched the Army family this week has made a lot of news and this is this US soldier who took off and ran across the DMZ in Korea, Travis King, what is his status right now?

Christine Wormuth

Well, I think you know, not very much is known about his status. I think you know, he's being held by the North Koreans obviously, you know, he was taken into custody when he ran across at Panmunjom, and, you know, the Department of Defense, the State Department, the White House, were using UN channels have been reaching out to the DPRK to get information about his status and to work with them to try to, you know, bring him back obviously, to the United States, but at this time, I don't think very much is known and I don't think that we have successfully made contact with the North Korean authorities.

Courtney Kube

Is he is he AWOL, is he a deserter?

Christine Wormuth

Well, you know, I'm not sure what we would call him what what we certainly know is he did, he did willfully, essentially, you know, run across into North Korean territory, as has been reported, private King was, you know, coming back to the United States and was was going to basically, you know, be he had assaulted an individual in South Korea and had been in custody of the South Korean government and was going to come back to the United States and face the consequences in the army. And, and I'm sure

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that he was grappling with that. I mean, we obviously don't know exactly what was in his mind. But he essentially sort of, you know, slipped away as he was supposed to be getting on a flight to come back to the United States and then went on a tour and did what he did. So it's a little unclear, but certainly our priority is to want to bring him home, regardless of the fact that there's misconduct you know, we want to get him back to the United States.

Courtney Kube

So he would have faced he did face this disciplinary action in Korea. He spent in South Korea evidence he spent several weeks in a Korean prison, he would have faced some additional disciplinary action and potentially jail time back in the US as well.

Christine Wormuth

He absolutely would have faced additional consequences. I mean, whether there would be jail time, I think remains to be seen, but he would have he would have he would have certainly come before the United States Army to handle his misconduct.

Courtney Kube

Now that it's been a couple of days. Is there any indication? I mean, he seems to have made this conscious decision even if he's gonna potentially go to jail and military jail in the US, he seems to have made this conscious decision to go to North Korea and probably go to jail there instead. Is there any indication that he's a sympathizer to the North Korean regime?

Christine Wormuth

From what I know, I don't I don't think we have any information that points to that clearly yet. Frankly, I don't want to speculate. I don't think people knew what was in his mind. You know, he is a young young soldier. He was facing consequences. You know, I imagine he had a lot of negative feelings about the time he had sort of, you know, working in the local South Korean jail. He may not have been thinking clearly, frankly, but we just don't know. And I don't want to speculate further.

Courtney Kube

What do you think this mean? I mean, the nation is sort of captivated by the story right now because it's just so bizarre. You have a young soldier who really runs across into North Korean hands, but when you take a step back and look at it what do you think the implications are for the army, by his actions?

Christine Wormuth

Well, I think this is a very unusual situation. I mean, we haven't had a deserter. You know, we haven't had a soldier go into North Korea for many, many years. I'm not sure that it has, frankly, you know, significant consequences for the army as an institution. I think what we want to do is get that soldier back into our custody. You know, I worry about him, frankly, you know, I know everyone here remembers what happened when Otto Warmbier was, you know, taken into custody by the North Koreans and I think treated brutally, obviously. You know, it makes me very, very concerned that private king is in the hands

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of the North Korean authorities, you know, I worry about how they may treat him. So want to get him back.

Courtney Kube

There's been a lot of talk at the forum the past couple of days about China. It's been one of the big topics here and for the past 20 years. or so, the Army has been at the forefront of conflict in the Middle East. But when you consider what the next potential conflict could be, for the US potentially war with China, it's very possible that the army rather than being the supported service, like happened in the middle east, could be the support ting service they could be you guys could be the ones who are focused more on logistics, everything and there's it's not a ground war. Do you agree with that, and how is the army preparing for that? Are you changing? Are you like, how are you getting ready for that eventuality?

Christine Wormuth

I do generally. Think I use that language sometimes mean supported supporting is not super accessible to folks who aren't hanging around in the Department of Defense all the time. So the way I like to talk about the role of the army in a potential conflict with China is as the linchpin force you know, a linchpin is a piece of the machine that makes the overall machine be able to work effectively. And I think if there were a war with China, which I do want to say, you know, I do not believe is inevitable, I do not believe is unavoidable. And I think we all need to be really focused on deterring that possibility. But if there were a conflict with China, the United States Army would be playing a very, very important role in terms of establishing staging bases for the Air Force for the Navy, you know, places where our fighter jets could come back and refuel our ships can come back and reload munitions, we wouldn't be responsible, I would imagine for doing a lot of the protection of those staging bases, you know, which is going to take a lot of our air and missile defense capabilities. We would be doing a lot for logistics, you know, moving supplies, fuel troops equipment all around that theater with very, very vast distances. And a lot of that is supporting you know, I we would I think be playing an offensive role. One of the things the United States Army is doing in addition to building a lot of new air and missile defense capabilities precisely for that kind of conflict. We also have been putting a lot of emphasis on developing long range precision fires so that for example, we just had a successful flight test of what we call the mid range capability, which is a ground launched either SM six or Tomahawk missile, and some of the variants can actually hit mobile targets so we will be able to sink ships from land with a mid range capability and, you know, obviously the Air Force and the Navy are going to be shooting down targets, but I think the army will be able to play its part as well.

Courtney Kube

So with capabilities like this, this longer range precision fires, you're trying to that the army is sort of finding its way into what this next conflict would be, which is going to really realistically if you're talking about some sort of conflict with China, potentially over Taiwan, it is going to be more of a standoff fight most likely.

Christine Wormuth

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Yeah, I mean, I think you see in Ukraine, obviously, you know, the fires by is really, really important. You know, that wasn't our experience in the global war on terrorism and Iraq and Afghanistan, but fires, artillery, long range fires, clearly it's going to be very relevant in the future and given the distances in the Indo PACOM theater and the the anti access capabilities the Chinese military has, we've got to be able to hit targets from very long ranges and in addition to our mid range capability, we're also developing a long range hypersonic weapon that will be able to strike targets, you know, 1000 miles away, and again, that would be very, very useful in that kind of conflict. If it were to happen.

Courtney Kube

Do you know when that's going to be fielded?

Christine Wormuth

We are hoping to get that weapon into the hands of the battery out at JBLM in Washington State probably by the end of this year.

Courtney Kube

Getting it into their hands, but then will it actually be operational or that's for more testing?

Christine Wormuth

It will be operational at that point Yes, we will live tested it. You know, it will not it will be stationed at JBLM in Washington State, but but it will be operational.

Courtney Kube

You have you've been in the job now just over two years and one of the biggest issues you've had to tackle has been recruiting. It's been a consistent problem. The Army has been struggling to make it as have the other surfaces frankly, bins have been struggling to make except for Space Force. You know, I mean, they're crushing it and recruiting right?

Christine Wormuth

Sometimes it's good to be small.

Courtney Kube

It's good to be small. Yeah, you need like 50 more people. But it has been a persistent problem for for the for the military and for the army. Are you on track to meet your recruiting goals for this year?

Christine Wormuth

We are not going to make the very ambitious I would say recruiting role that general McConville is that we set a goal of trying to recruit 65,000 great young Americans into the army this year. I've already said publicly in front of Congress that we're not going to make that goal which was always a stretch goal I want to underscore but the good news is we are going to recruit more young Americans into the army

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than we did last year. So I think by several 1000 We're going to do better than we did last year. And that's positive, but we've got more work to do. No doubt.

Courtney Kube

So last year, if correct me if I'm wrong. The last year the goal was 60,000. This year, it's 65. Do you think you'll be close to the 60,000 goal of last year?

Christine Wormuth

I don't know. No, no, I don't think we're going to be close to 60. You know, and again, I don't want to speculate because the summer months are usually our best months in terms of recruiting. So there's still time and I want all of our recruiters around the country to kind of keep their feet on the gas. But we will do I think considerably better than the 45,000 that we recruited last year.

Courtney Kube

So I mean, this is a an intelligent audience here and there may be people who are thinking, Well, of course there's problems with recruiting, you know, the economy's doing pretty well, the unemployment is pretty low. And you know, employers all over the country are having a hard time bringing in potential employees but the the Army's issues are potentially more generational in nature in that there are people who are who don't really know the military and they don't really know the army. They don't have parents like in previous generations you had so many people had parents who served and they kind of followed them into service. So how are you addressing these issues? How is there any way to get at addressing what has really become? I mean, it's not just the generation generation which most people don't know it, there's, you know, kids aren't physically fit enough to be in and they're afraid of going in and fighting a war or and being injured or killed. So how are you addressing those issues?

Christine Wormuth

Yeah, I do think part of what we've got to do is sort of reintroduce the army to the American public. You know, again, during the years of the global war on terrorism, we kind of came back into our bases for security reasons, and we weren't as visible so we are trying to make ourselves much more visible. And I'd say we've primarily done that in two ways. One, and looking at this audience, I know you all remember the slogan be all you can be. We brought back and re energized that slogan for our new recruiting campaign. And so we debuted those ads during the March Madness. We've got some new ads that are going to be coming out in August. And that campaign I think, is resonating really, really well. Not just with folks who remember it from the late 80s Like myself, but also with young people. The other thing we're doing to really make ourselves much more visible is to partner US Army Recruiting Command with US Army Forces Command which is basically the Four star headquarters that controls all of the divisions that are here in the United States. And we basically have taken units from those divisions all around the country and sent them out into communities to do events, you know, to be there at large major sporting events or we you know, we had a big presence Miami, there was a big air land sea show that you know, featured that the Air Force and Navy but also the army. And so we're trying to do that, to really fan out across the country. We're really focused, we have a lot of good data that shows us where we need to be

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focused geographically. And so I think that is all helping us in terms of making ourselves more visible. The other thing we've done that's been very effective is we started something called The Future Soldier prep course, at a couple of the installations where we do basic training, and that's basically a tutoring program almost like a mini boot camp. For young people who don't quite score high enough on the vocational tests that you'd have to take to get into the army or who don't quite have the the right body fat range, you know, to meet our standards so that combat mini bootcamp has basically lifted up those young kids who want to serve but didn't quite meet our standards. And this has really been investing in them bringing them up to our standards so that they can ship to basic training. And that's been hugely successful. Over 95% of our graduates from that program have gone on to bootcamp. But I think there's more work to do. I think we really, you know, what lies ahead in the next few years is going to be fundamentally transforming how we recruit young Americans, you know, it's almost 70% of high school graduates these days, go on to college. That's a huge change. So a lot of kids graduating from college aren't or from high school aren't thinking about you know, getting a job because they're going to college and we have been heavily heavily focused on high schools. So I think the Army's got to diversify. We've got to get out get more on college campuses, community college campuses, you know, get into county employment offices, things like that. Get on to Glassdoor and LinkedIn and monster. And I think we also probably need to look at do we need to professionalize our recruiting force, you know, most of our recruiters are NCOs who do other things most of the time and then they come and recruit for a couple of years and they go back into the operational force. If you look at Fortune 500 companies their recruiters are specialized, that's what they do. So we need to I think looking at we need to look at some more transformational changes. I think if we're going to be successful in the next few years,

Courtney Kube

is there are you are you at all looking at are considering changing any standards like fitness standards, you know, first if people will come in for a specific job like recruiting frankly, or cyber and there's not necessarily a potential there going to be go go kicking in doors in a conflict somewhere. Are you considering changing some physical standards?

Christine Wormuth

No, we are not going to lower our standards. I think we saw from some of the years in the early 2000s. We lowered some of our standards we gave waivers for we gave what we call moral waivers. You know, we allowed it more people with some misconduct, and that came back to bite us frankly, in the backside. So general McConville and I have made a pact not to lower standards, we're going to instead invest in Americans. To meet our standards. And that's, that's gonna be our approach because frankly, you know, as we saw in the in the last 20 years of the global war on terrorism, even if you're a cyber warrior, even if you're a cook, you may find yourself in combat, you know, the frontline is very, very mutable. And so I think all of our soldiers no matter what they do have to meet some basic fundamental requirements for fitness.

Courtney Kube

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I'm impressed you said right in the backside, I would have said it in the app. And then I feel like that I wouldn't have been invited back next year. How, you know, given this concern, these can consistent chain problems. With recruiting is there any consideration of changing your force structure or changing sort of how your formations so to adjust to a smaller, overall size of the military?

Christine Wormuth

We are going to be making some changes to Army force structure and there are really two reasons for that. The first reason is we've got to bring in new capabilities to get ready for you know, again, a potential war with China or with Russia and the kinds of capabilities we need are much more high tech. There. You know, we like I said, we're going to build out our air and missile defense structure so we have to make room inside the army for those new capabilities. The second reason we've got to make changes is because frankly, as a result of the recruiting challenges we're facing, the overall size of the army is getting somewhat smaller, and I would much rather frankly see us be leaner. And meaner than to keep force structure that I can't fully man, you know, that gets us into the kind of hollow force dynamic that we saw, you know, decades and decades ago. And my judgment is that is not what is what's best for the army and I think General McConville, our outgoing Chief of Staff of the Army shares that view as does our incoming I hope when he is confirmed, eventually, General George, who will be the new Chief of Staff of the Army.

Courtney Kube

I want to ask you about that. But before I do, just quickly, when do you think the army will get back above its recruiting goals?

Christine Wormuth

I think it's going to take a few years. Frankly, you know, we are we have something called the delayed entry pool, which is sort of like the bank account of soldiers who are waiting to go to basic training. And frankly, for the last several years to make our recruiting goals The Army has kind of gone into that bank account and made withdrawals and as a result, our bank account balance is quite low. And so that, that means that you know, even without the external recruiting challenges, there's sort of a an inevitable gravitational pull downward for the next couple of years. So I think it's going to take us a little while to build back up, but I think it's really important that we do build back up because the army does a incredible amount of work all around the country or all around the world rather to defend this nation. We are really about as busy as we were. We are as busy today, almost as we were during the years of the global war on terror and so we can't afford to get too small. And that's why, you know, I think it's so important that we really need to emphasize a call to service to really talk to young Americans about why it's important to serve this country.

Courtney Kube

So you mentioned General George nominee to be the replaced or McConville, the current CI Army Chief of Staff, what happens during the Convos retirement is coming up in a couple of week. Yeah. What what

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happens because presumably general George's is going to still be stuck in this pipeline, Senator Tuberville is holding up all the nominations. What happens when General McConville retires?

Christine Wormuth

Well, General George will essentially be our Acting Chief of Staff of the Army as our vice chief. He has the authority to do a lot of the things that he would do as chief, but he's essentially going to be doing two jobs at once. And basically what's happening is our whole system is getting kind of constipated. You know for example, we have 12, or 13, three and four star generals that we've already had to extend who were planning to retire we now had to go to them and say, sorry, you know, you can leave your jobs for the next several months, and the people who were hand selected to come up and take those roles are stuck, basically. And that means that a lot of our key organizations are not going to be led by the people who we hand selected, who had all the right experiences to take over those formations. And you're the biggest thing that I really worry about in terms of the impact of Senator Tuberville is hold is that if you are a major a lieutenant colonel colonel in the United States Army, you are looking at this and saying, Do I want to is this what it means to become a general officer? Do I want to put myself or my family through all of this rigmarole through all of this uncertainty? I don't know. And as CTU Brown said at his confirmation hearing, you know, families have a vote and I really worried that we're going to have a brain and talent drain. As a result of this, you know, really unprecedented step that Senator Tuberville has chosen to take.

Courtney Kube

What I don't understand is why you know you mentioned that General George Will fleet up even though you know, he won't he'll be an acting Why can't you just do that with the only ones that have to be confirmed? If I'm not mistaken? Forgive me if I'm wrong. Here are COCOMs and chiefs. Can the others just fleet up and be in an acting capacity? Tell me if I'm wrong because I don't really understand the process.

Christine Wormuth

It's very, very complicated. There are some things where if you're not confirmed, you revert back to your you can do the job as a three star but you revert back to a two star and certain contingencies. You don't get paid as a three or four star if you're not confirmed. So there are a lot of rules around that, you know that the Senate is very, you know, zealously guards. It's the role that it plays in confirming officials and it's it's very zealous about making sure that officials don't presume confirmation. So even though there are you know, we can we can fill in the holes by having acting's it's very, very complicated. And I think as we are kind of all sailing into these uncharted waters, we're finding out in lots of little ways, just how complicated is it is,

Courtney Kube

if you have people there's I mean, the military has so much redundancy, so we keep hearing this argument that this is causing a readiness issue, but it just feels like there's you you have this support staff

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will all still be in place. You can put people in an acting capacity. I don't really understand the argument that this is causing a readiness concern.

Christine Wormuth

I think like I said to me, where it's a readiness issue is you have officers you know, again, you have deputies, if you will, who are filling in and fleeting up, but those deputies don't have, you know, they're great officers, but they don't have all of the experiences that the generals that were chosen, you know, to be confirmed for these positions. So you know, if there is a crisis, for example, you have someone who is a deputy who doesn't have all those experiences, and I think that can have potentially some negative effects. But again, I think that there's a longer term readiness issue, I would argue, which is again, about that brain drain, and I will be frank, you know, I think even before this happened, a lot of colonels have been looking at how difficult it is to function in Washington DC in this hyper partisan politicized environment, and binding that not very attractive and this this hold has just taken that to a whole new level.

Courtney Kube

So you think that this this, I mean, this just to be frank that the military has been increasingly politicized every year for the last decade plus now?

Christine Wormuth

Well, I would I would put it a different way and Courtney I would say, I don't think that our military is politicized. That is not what I see. I think our military is being dragged into the political space in ways that are very unproductive. You know, we often get sort of turned into a political football, but I want to be clear that I do not see our officers becoming politicized. That is the last thing. Most officers that I work with want to happen.

Courtney Kube

What are they by bit, I mean, that the notion that some people don't want to be general officers is that they're worried about being pulled into politics. I mean, I understand what you mean that there's not some inherent effort within the Army or within the military to be more political, but they're getting dragged into it. And so I mean, is there a, do you think that's part of the reason that some people don't want to serve as general officers is because they're worried about it?

Christine Wormuth

I do think they they look at our general officers who testify in hearings and see the kind of interactions that our general officers are having each and every week and they ask themselves, do I want to be on the receiving end of that kind of interaction? You know, I know the officers in the United States Army absolutely believe in the role of Congress, its oversight role and embrace that but the kind of, you know, heated exchanges that now are commonplace. I think a lot of officers find unattractive and you know, there's a lot of I think it's starting to feel for some of our officers that it's getting pretty personal.

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Courtney Kube

Another very political issue that the military has been in the middle of with the whole senator to Tuberville hold is this is the reproductive care policies that the Pentagon is put into place. 40% of female sailor soldiers will be stationed in places with no access or severely restricted access to reproductive care going forward because of the changes. Do you have any sense of how many soldiers or dependents have been taking advantage of these new policies like IE, you, the Pentagon, the military is paying for them to travel to other states for reproductive care?

Christine Wormuth

I have not seen data on that yet. And frankly, you know, the policies are designed to really try to preserve the privacy of our soldiers as much as possible. So I think it will be a while before we really have clear data on on the number of soldiers that may be taking advantage of that policy,

Courtney Kube

Are you is it because it being tracked by money? I mean, how much money is being?

Christine Wormuth

Yes we absolutely are able to track that. Sharon do that. I haven't seen any of that data.

Courtney Kube

Do you see I mean it I guess, not knowing exactly how many people are actually taking advantage of it. Do you see any indication that that policy will change as as Senator Tuberville or to they have up here I don't know how to pronounce his name correctly, as the Senator wants as you do you see any indication that policy could change?

Christine Wormuth

I think Secretary Austin feels strongly as to why frankly, that this policy is the right thing to do for our soldiers. You know, as you said, 40% of the women soldiers in the army are stationed in states with no or restrictive access to reproductive care and they don't get a say in that. And I know my responsibility as the Secretary of the Army is to take care of my soldiers and their families. And I see this as a retention issue. And it's not just abortion, you know, it's also access to in vitro fertilization, for example, you know, which is not widely available all around the country. And I want to make sure that my soldiers and their families have access to that kind of care as well. So I see this, and I think the Secretary does as well as taking care of our soldiers, and it's the right thing to do and I don't think we're going to change it.

Courtney Kube

We like applause. There you go. All right. I'm blown through most of the time. So does anyone have a super burning question? Okay, you had your hand up first, right there.

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Audience question 1

Thank you. So my question is this. A few weeks ago in 60 minutes, there was a report about how a \$400 barrel source of oil on the open market was \$12,000 to the to the US government. And so the question is, we spend some two and a half times what China spends on defense, some \$800 billion. Do you have a sense that that story is out of place, or do you have serious concerns that the fact that the other point of the story was at the number of independent private companies that supply? The military has shrunk over time, and so that it may not be a competitive process? Do you have concerns about this?

Christine Wormuth

One I do think that a lot of the information in that 60 Minutes story was quite dated. So you know, the days of \$800 gold plated toilets are a thing of the past.

Courtney Kube

they're like that here in Aspen though. Sorry, nothing against Aspen love.

Christine Wormuth

I do have concerns about you know, obviously the amount of competition in our in our industrial base and our defense industry. We underwent a lot of consolidation in the late 90s and early 2000s. You know, I think we in the army have done a lot to reach out to small businesses to try to make it much more possible for innovative small businesses to contract with us and provide us competitive products. And the third thing I would say is, you know, a huge part of the reason that our military is more expensive than China's military is because we pay our soldiers and take care of them. You know, they have good housing, great health care, child development centers, and China's just not doing that.

Courtney Kube

I want to do we have one minute left, I want to do a couple of questions about you are the first woman to serve as army secretary. First off it means you have a much stronger shoe game than predecessors. I'm just saying she's got sparkly shoes Secretary Esper, wore sparkly shoes you might be here in the audience. I'm told you have a Sir jar?

Christine Wormuth

I do have a sir jar. I have a mason jar on my desk and anytime an officer says yes sir. Man or woman they are supposed to put a quarter in the jar now nobody has quarters anymore. So I got some chocolates in the jar, some gummy bears in the jar. But you would be amazed at how, how many times a day everybody from a major all the way up to a four star general says yes sir to me and women do and too.

Courtney Kube

keep saying you can get a house here in Aspen in

Christine Wormuth

That's right. That's my plan. Yeah.

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Courtney Kube

I'm also told that your pop culture music movie TV buff, and that your a Lizzo fan

Christine Wormuth

huge Lizzo fan saw her perform in the anthem. She was amazing. I thought what she did with the crystal flew was awesome. That was just tremendous.

Courtney Kube

For the record. I had to Google who Lizzo was.

Christine Wormuth

Oh my god, Courtney.

Courtney Kube

I know. I know. Like you guys struck she came from shoe games and pop culture. Okay, where was that time? We're out of time. But one more question. Your husband is a retired Navy officer. You're secretary the army what's Army Navy Week game like?

Christine Wormuth

Well look he is all in for Army because as he put it, he did not go to the boat school.

Courtney Kube

Oh yeah. Well, and as I as I like to say Happy wife happy life.

Christine Wormuth

Absolutely.

Courtney Kube

Secretary Wormuth, thank you very much, appreciate your time.