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### **Remarks to Airmen and Women (Langley, VA)**

*As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Langley Air Force Base, Virginia, Monday, June 09, 2008*

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Thank you for the introduction, and for coming here at such short notice. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.

This is my first visit to Langley Air Force base and Air Combat Command, and, frankly, I wish I were here under happier circumstances.

By now, you all know about my decision to accept the resignations of Secretary Wynne and General Moseley.

A few hours ago, I announced their successors.

I have asked the President to nominate Michael Donley as Secretary of the Air Force and to appoint him as acting Secretary of the Air Force. Mr. Donley is currently the Department's director of Administration and Management – in effect the “mayor of the Pentagon” overseeing DoD's vast headquarters apparatus. He is a former Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Financial Management, and was acting Secretary for several months in 1993. In addition to work in the private and nonprofit sector, Mike has been a staffer with the Senate Armed Services Committee and on the National Security Council. He is a former paratrooper who served in the Army's 18th Airborne Corps and Special Forces.

I've asked the President to nominate General Norton Schwartz, who currently leads the U.S. Transportation Command, to be the next Air Force Chief of Staff. At TRANSCOM, General Schwartz has done a superb job of overseeing the herculean task of moving personnel and materiel to the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters. His 35-year career has included more than 4,000 flying hours, several special operations assignments and commands, and service as Director of the Joint Staff. General Schwartz's unique set of experiences and accomplishments make him the right officer at this time to lead the Air Force.

I have asked the President to nominate General Duncan McNabb, the current Vice Chief, to take General Schwartz's place at Transportation Command. As you know, General McNabb has spent most of his three-plus decades in the Air Force in the areas of lift, refueling, and logistics – making him an ideal candidate to assume the helm of TRANSCOM.

Finally, I've asked the President to nominate Lieutenant General William Fraser, III to become the next Air Force Vice Chief. General Fraser is currently the Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In that role he is the Chairman's chief liaison and advisor on international relations and political-military matters. In addition to his numerous flying and command assignments in the bomber community, General Fraser has extensive wartime, contingency, and humanitarian relief operational experience.

There has been no shortage of speculation why I made this change in leadership. And, in particular, whether there were any reasons beyond those that I cited last week – specifically, the leadership failures associated with the control of nuclear weapons and equipment.

Today and tomorrow, I am visiting three of our most important Air Force bases to address this and related issues head on. First, to explain to you in person my decision in more detail. Second, to thank you for what you do every day to support the war effort and defend America's freedom and security. And finally, to hear from you and answer your questions. I have made it a point to encourage principled, respectful dissent in the ranks of the military – and also to engage troops at every level, from the lowest ranks to the highest. So I look forward to your comments any questions – unvarnished and straight from the shoulder. So be thinking about questions to ask me.

I should start by noting that the Air Force is my service, although I was a very junior officer, deeply dependent on the Master Sergeant in my office. I served as a second lieutenant in the Strategic Air Command in 1967 at Whiteman Air Force Base when it had 150 Minuteman missiles – my first introduction to the extraordinary men and women of this service. That was in the middle of the Cold War, when a potential nuclear exchange was the greatest threat facing the United States – and the world. The protection and safety of our

nuclear arsenal was the most important mission of the military, particularly the Air Force. That arsenal was vital to winning the Cold War.

That stewardship remains our most sensitive mission. The mere existence of weapons with such destructive power alters the international landscape – and rightfully brings much scrutiny to bear on how they are handled.

And so, it is important to establish up front that, were it not for the findings of Admiral Donald's report regarding systemic problems and weaknesses in our nuclear weapons program, the leadership changes would not have taken place.

Our policy is clear: We will ensure the complete physical control of nuclear weapons, and we will properly handle their associated components at all times. It is a tremendous responsibility – one we must not and will never take lightly.

To be sure, the investigation did not find anything that would affect the health and safety of the public or our men and women in uniform, or call into question the safety, security, and reliability of our nuclear arsenal, or place at risk the integrity of the nation's nuclear deterrent forces.

In that light, you might ask, "What's the fuss?" The harsh reality is that the Donald Report documents a serious decline over at least a decade in the Air Force's nuclear mission focus and performance, resulting in a degradation of the authority, standards of excellence, and technical competence of the Air Force's nuclear mission.

At this point I should say a word or two about Admiral Kirkland Donald. Put simply, he is just not any Navy admiral. As Director of Navy Nuclear Propulsion, Admiral Donald is the Department of Defense's most senior expert on nuclear technology and procedures. He holds a unique eight year billet dual-hatted with the Department of Energy. There have only been four such directors since Admiral Rickover created the job. Admiral Donald is better positioned than anyone – of any service, in or out of government – to evaluate this problem.

The Donald Report identified three systemic problems:

First: The Air Force does not have a clear, dedicated authority responsible for the nuclear enterprise who sets and maintains consistent, rigorous standards of operation. As a result, there was an erosion of performance standards and a lack of effective leadership oversight.

Second: The failures that led to the nose cone mis-shipment could have been prevented had the Air Force's and the Defense Logistics Agency's existing inspection and oversight programs been functioning effectively. Additional existing controls that would have been appropriate for sensitive or classified parts were not used.

Third: The investigation confirmed a decline in Air Force nuclear expertise, similar to findings in other earlier reports. Years ago, there was a well established and prestigious career path for Airmen in the nuclear field. As the overall focus of the Air Force has shifted away from this nuclear mission, it has become more difficult to retain people with sufficient expertise. The Service has not effectively compensated for this deficiency through training and active career management. Moreover, the nuclear mission has not received adequate funding for years.

The investigation also determined that the Air Force nuclear program lacked a culture of critical self-assessment. There was not an intensive inspection regime and the inspection processes that did exist tended to diminish command ownership. As a result, systemic weaknesses were less likely to be discovered and addressed.

The report makes clear that these problems and mistakes have their roots in decisions made over a period of at least 10 years. Nonetheless, many of the problems leading to the Minot and nose cone incidents have been known or should have been known. Individuals in command and leadership positions failed to recognize systemic problems, to address those problems, or – where beyond their authority to act – to call the attention of superiors to those problems. Each had leadership responsibility to identify and correct – or flag for others – the structural, procedural, and performance deficiencies identified in just a few weeks by Admiral Donald.

In summary, the investigation concluded that both the Barksdale/Minot nuclear weapons transfer incident and the Taiwan mis-shipment had a common origin: The gradual erosion of nuclear standards and a lack of effective oversight by Air Force leadership.

In short, I concluded that decisive action was required because:

1. The focus of the Air Force leadership has drifted with respect to perhaps its most sensitive mission;
2. Performance standards in that sensitive area were allowed to degrade;
3. The Air Force's stewardship and oversight of this vital mission did not identify these problems for correction; and
4. The Air Force's investigation into what went wrong did not get to root causes, requiring my personal

intervention.

As I said last Thursday, Mike Wynne is a dedicated and honorable public servant, and Buzz Moseley has given decades of courageous and devoted service to his country. They both deserve our gratitude. I deeply regret that the issues before us required the actions that I have taken.

But there is simply no room for error in this mission. Nor is there, unfortunately, any room for second chances – especially when serious questions about the safety and security of our nuclear arsenal have been raised in the minds of the American public and in the international community.

I assume that some of you, maybe most of you, disagree with my decision. I know also that these developments have created anxiety and turmoil, and will affect this organization for some time to come. However, I am confident – based on your professionalism and pride – that this will yield a service that is, from the very top to the very bottom, more reflective and more responsive to shortcomings that may arise in this or any other critical area.

During my tenure, I have emphasized to all services that accountability must reach all the way up the chain of command – and that the military as a whole must be willing to admit mistakes when they are made. That is the only way to fix them – and it is the only way to ensure that they don't recur in the future. When systemic problems are found, I believe that accountability must reach beyond NCOs and even colonels.

On that point I should say that the military – and the Air Force in particular – has a long and superb tradition of blunt, vigorous after-action reviews of specific operations, exercises, and tactics. However, I have noticed that none of the services easily accept honest criticism from, outside their branch, or scrutiny that exposes institutional shortcomings. This is something I believe must change across the military – for these critiques are often the most valuable.

I would also like to clarify what did not contribute to my decision.

It was not the “last straw” in my dealings with the Air Force leadership. We have had disagreements, to be sure. There is little use in pretending otherwise. But I have also had disagreements with the other service chiefs. Friction between the Department of Defense's civilian leadership and military services is inevitable under our system – particularly when it comes to things like procurement and personnel.

Each individual and each administration brings a different perspective and set of priorities. When differences arise, I have made it a point to listen to all sides and, on a number of occasions, I have changed my mind based on what I have heard from the senior leadership of the services.

The important thing is to have an open and respectful airing of views in good faith. When decisions are made, everyone – civilian and military – must do his or her part to see them through to success.

In that respect, both General Moseley and Secretary Wynne have always contributed valuable advice, and been willing to set aside policy differences in pursuit of the President's and my agenda. I enjoyed working with both of them, and I will certainly miss them.

Now, before taking some questions, I'd like to say a few words about the contributions of the Air Force to our nation's freedom and security. Every day, amazing Airmen and women are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Beyond that, you support all the services worldwide. In particular, the strike capabilities fielded by this command form the backbone of our strategic deterrence – a role that is even more important with our ground forces so decisively committed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since September 11th, the Air Force has flown more than one million missions – ranging from lift to medevac to close air support – including tens of thousands of sorties flown over America's skies to protect our homeland, many out of this base.

Your contributions have made a lifesaving difference to those fighting on the ground.

On average, there are 25,000 Airmen and women assigned to the Central Command AOR. The Air Force carried out 1,300 air strikes in Iraq in 2007, a three-fold increase over the previous year and 90 percent of all Coalition airstrikes in the country. The number of Predator sorties has more than doubled in the past year, though, as you know, the commanders on the ground are always pushing for more. The timely, precise, and persistent surveillance and close air support provided by the Air Force over the battlefield has saved countless American lives, the lives of innocent civilians, and left terrorists and insurgents with little room to operate.

Every month, intra-theater air lift helps take nearly 3,500 convoys and more than 8,500 people off Iraq's dangerous roads. To provide the best possible protection for our troops, the Air Force has delivered more than 2,700 MRAPs to theater – vehicles that are saving American lives and limbs every day.

Then there are the non-traditional missions when, for example, Air Force officers are leading Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Right now, more than 6,000 Airmen are performing “in-lieu-of” tasks on the ground such as detainee operations, explosives ordnance disposal, or convoy security. One tech sergeant logged more than 430,000 miles on Iraq's roads as a convoy commander. In addition to all of these duties, the U.S. Air Force has helped stand up Iraqi and Afghan air forces, basically from scratch, over the last two years.

Put simply, without your contributions in the skies, and in many cases on the ground, America's war effort

would simply grind to a halt. Little of that is widely known or appreciated. But I can assure you that I value everything you are doing in support of the nation. And every soldier and Marine on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan is profoundly grateful you overhead – watching out for them.

While most public attention on the costs of war and the strain on our forces has been focused on the Army, the reality is that our Airmen and women, and those in the other services are under strain as well. In fact, you have been forward-deployed, and at war for 17 years – since the first Gulf War. Your families have also borne this burden, and the Air Force has its own fallen heroes – often struck down while serving on the ground alongside soldiers and Marines. We know this, and are working to ease the burden. For example, I intend immediately to stop further reductions in Air Force personnel.

As I mentioned earlier, the Air Force is my service – the uniform I wore more than four decades ago. I am proud of that association – during a very different era – when this country faced a very different set of threats and adversaries.

The security challenges are now far more complex than in those days – and will become even more so in the future. When I expressed concern a few weeks ago about “Next-War-itis,” it was a concern borne of seeing too many in the Defense Department – and by no means just the Air Force – focused on and spending for future conflicts and capabilities at the expense of supporting those in the fight today. There must be focus on the wars we are in – as well as building future capabilities. It is a matter of balance. We must build out the Navy. We must modernize the Air Force, in particular your aging fighter and tanker fleets. And we must prepare the Army and Marines for full spectrum conflict. But we are damn sure going to spend and do everything necessary to win the wars we are in, to care properly for our wounded, and to restore excellence in our nuclear stewardship.

I would leave you with two final thoughts:

- Embrace accountability in all that you do – for everything in your area of responsibility. When you see failures or growing problems in other areas – outside your lane, as it is often described – throw a flag: bring them to the attention to people who can do something about it; and,
- Rededicate yourselves to the standards of excellence that have been the hallmark of the United States Air Force for more than 60 years.

I have every confidence in you, and in the Air Force that has served our counts so well. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for everything you do to protect the American people.

Now at this point, I’m going to ask the press to leave so that we can have a candid discussion inside the family of some of these issues, or any other question you might have. I know it is difficult in circumstances and venues such as this to speak up, but I encourage you to do so. As I said before, I welcome an honest exchange of views, including dissenting views.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.