

Stenographic Transcript
Before the

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

TO CONSIDER THE NOMINATIONS OF: DR. TROY E. MEINK TO
BE SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE, MR. MICHAEL P. DUFFEY
TO BE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR ACQUISITION
AND SUSTAINMENT, MR. EMIL G. MICHAEL TO BE UNDER
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR RESEARCH AND
ENGINEERING, AND MR. KEITH M. BASS TO BE ASSISTANT
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR HEALTH AFFAIRS

Thursday, March 27, 2025

Washington, D.C.

ALDERSON COURT REPORTING
1029 VERMONT AVE, NW
10TH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, DC 20005
(202) 289-2260
www.aldersonreporting.com

1 TO CONSIDER THE NOMINATIONS OF: DR. TROY E. MEINK TO BE
2 SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE, MR. MICHAEL P. DUFFEY TO BE
3 UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR ACQUISITION AND SUSTAINMENT,
4 MR. EMIL G. MICHAEL TO BE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR
5 RESEARCH AND ENGINEERING, AND MR. KEITH M. BASS TO BE
6 ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR HEALTH AFFAIRS
7

8 Thursday, March 27, 2025
9

10 U.S. Senate

11 Committee on Armed Services

12 Washington, D.C.
13

14 The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:31 a.m. in
15 Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Roger
16 Wicker, chairman of the committee, presiding.

17 Committee Members Present: Senators Wicker
18 [presiding], Fischer, Cotton, Rounds, Ernst, Sullivan,
19 Cramer, Scott, Tuberville, Mullin, Budd, Schmitt, Banks,
20 Sheehy, Reed, Shaheen, Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Hirono,
21 Kaine, King, Warren, Peters, Duckworth, Rosen, Kelly, and
22 Slotkin.
23
24
25

1 OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DEB FISCHER, U.S. SENATOR
2 FROM NEBRASKA

3 Senator Fischer: [Presiding.] I'll be chairing the
4 hearing until Chairman Wicker joins us. He's unavoidably
5 detained right now, and we're going to move ahead with the
6 hearing.

7 The Senate Armed Services Committee meets today to
8 consider the nominations of Dr. Troy Meink to be Secretary
9 of the Air Force, Mr. Michael Duffey to be Under Secretary
10 of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, Mr. Emil Michael
11 to be Under Secretary of Defense for Research and
12 Engineering, and Mr. Keith Bass to be Assistant Secretary of
13 Defense for Health Affairs. I want to begin by welcoming
14 our witnesses and thanking them for their willingness to
15 serve our country at this important time.

16 I'd also like to welcome your families and loved ones
17 who are joining you today. Dr. Meink is joined today by his
18 wife, Jean, son, Troy, daughter, Jenna, and stepbrother,
19 Troy. Welcome to each of you. Mr. Duffey is joined by his
20 wife, Morgan, daughter Reynolds, and son, Deans. Thank you
21 for joining us on this special day.

22 Mr. Michael is joined by his wife, Julie, daughter
23 Collette, son, Cairo, and his mother and father. And quite
24 a few other family and friends. Welcome to you-all. And
25 Mr. Bass is joined by his two daughters, Kate and Erin, and

1 his brother, Kevin. We are glad that each of you can be
2 here with us today.

3 Our distinguished chairman, as I said, was unable to be
4 here at the start at the meeting, but at this time I ask
5 unanimous consent to place a copy of his opening statement
6 into the record. Without objection.

7 [The information referred to follows:]

8 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

1 Senator Fischer: With that, I turn to my colleague,
2 Ranking Member Reed, for his opening statement.

3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

1 STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE
2 ISLAND

3 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman.

4 Gentlemen, congratulations on your nominations, and
5 welcome to today's hearings. I would like to recognize your
6 family members and guests, and I know they've been a source
7 of great support to you throughout your entire lives. I
8 also like to recognize Senator Rounds and Congressman
9 Fitzgerald, who shortly will be introducing Dr. Meink and
10 Mr. Duffey.

11 Dr. Meink, you have been nominated to be Secretary of
12 the Air Force. You have served in the Air Force, both in
13 uniform and as a civilian, including senior roles at the
14 National Reconnaissance Office and as Under Secretary of the
15 Air Force for Space. If confirmed, you would lead the
16 Department of the Air Force during an important time.

17 After two decades of high operating tempo and
18 continuous overseas deployments, the readiness of the Air
19 Force has been strained. The Air Force is in the midst of
20 modernizing several critical capabilities, including the
21 bomber force, the ground-based intercontinental ballistic
22 missile force, the Advanced Battle Management System
23 Program, and several other cutting-edge efforts.

24 But modernization can only be successful if the Air
25 Force appropriately balance its legacy platforms against new

1 priorities, including UN crewed systems. Dr. Meink, I would
2 ask that you share with the committee how you would plan to
3 address these various challenges.

4 Mr. Duffey, you have been nominated to be Under
5 Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment or
6 OUSD(A&S). Your background includes time with the Office of
7 the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering,
8 as well as the Office of Management and Budget. The
9 OUSD(A&S) has a wide range of duties, including delivering
10 timely, cost-effective capabilities for the armed forces,
11 supervising all elements of the Defense Acquisition
12 Enterprise and the Defense Industrial Base, overseeing the
13 modernization of our nuclear forces, and serving as the
14 principal advisor of the Secretary on Acquisition,
15 Sustainment and Core Logistics.

16 If confirmed, streamlining and expediting the
17 acquisition process must be one of your highest priorities.
18 We need to field equipment to our warfighter as quickly
19 while also ensuring acquisitions remain on budget and
20 schedule. We must also grow the Defense Industrial Base to
21 increase our capacity to produce defense equipment and
22 enforce to more competition to drive efficiency and reduce
23 costs.

24 Although some progress is made in recent years, the
25 Defense Department's acquisition process still remains on

1 the Government Accountability Office's high-risk list. Mr.
2 Duffey, I would like to know how you would plan to address
3 these challenges.

4 Mr. Michael, you've been nominated to be Under
5 Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering. Your
6 background includes roles at technology companies such as
7 Uber, and tenure years under the Defense Department and
8 Defense Business Board. If confirmed, you'll be responsible
9 managing the Department's investments in key modernization
10 priorities such as artificial intelligence, quantum
11 computing, hypersonics, biotechnology, and microelectronics.

12 In order to maintain our technological lead over China
13 and Russia in these technological areas, you'll need to
14 advocate for investments in modernization program while the
15 Department works through many near-term development and
16 readiness issues. More broadly, you'll be charged with
17 overcoming the Pentagon's so-called "Valley of Death",
18 ensuring that the Department is able to turn research
19 innovations into real operational capabilities.

20 This will require strengthening connections between
21 research and engineering activities and the service
22 acquisition programs and defense prime contractors. It'll
23 also include investing in and protecting the people and
24 infrastructure at organizations like the Defense Labs and
25 test ranges. Mr. Michael, I would like to know your views

1 on your role regarding these challenges at this important
2 moment.

3 Finally, Mr. Bass, you've been nominated to be the
4 Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, or
5 ASD(HA). You have extensive experience in the military
6 healthcare system having served in the Navy for 20 years
7 before continuing to support the VA healthcare system as a
8 civilian. The ASD(HA) is the principal advisor of the
9 Secretary of Defense and the Under Secretary of Defense for
10 Personnel and Readiness for all of the Department's force,
11 health, protection policies, programs, and activities.

12 The ASD(HA) is also responsible for execution of the
13 Department's medical mission, including the readiness of
14 medical services and during military operations, and for
15 ensuring the health of the members of the military services
16 and their families.

17 If confirmed, you'll need to address a number of
18 pressing challenges for the Department, including the
19 modernization of the military health system, and improving
20 medical supports at the combatant commanders. Mr. Bass, I
21 hope you'll address these challenges in your testimony.

22 These are momentous challenges that I've outlined that
23 will require all of your experience and skills, but I
24 certainly want to thank you for your willingness to serve,
25 and I look forward to your testimony.

1 Thank you, Madam Chairman.

2 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Senator Reed.

3 Senator Rounds, I understand that you will be
4 introducing Dr. Meink this morning, and I recognize you for
5 your comments.

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

1 STATEMENT OF HON. MIKE ROUNDS, U.S. SENATOR FROM SOUTH
2 DAKOTA

3 Senator Rounds: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you,
4 Ranking Member Reed, and distinguished colleagues of the
5 Senate Armed Services Committee.

6 It is my honor to introduce Dr. Troy Meink, nominee to
7 be the Secretary of the Air Force. It is a role which Dr.
8 Meink is imminently qualified for after a lifetime of public
9 service in the field of national security. He's joined by
10 his wife, Jean, son, Troy, daughter, Jenna, and stepbrother,
11 Lieutenant Colonel Troy Merkel.

12 Dr. Meink hails from Lemmon, South Dakota, which is as
13 close to North Dakota as you can get without stepping over
14 the line. And he graduated from my Alma Mater, South Dakota
15 State University. That's the Jack Rabbits, by the way. Dr.
16 Meink met his wife, Jean, at SDSU. They were college
17 sweethearts.

18 An Air Force ROTC graduate, he served as a tanker
19 navigator and instructor, and then in a variety of roles
20 working on a host of critical defense and intelligence
21 programs. He is at heart, a true engineer. At SDSU, he
22 designed, and built, and then flew his own airplane, which
23 still hangs on display in the South Dakota Discovery Center
24 in my hometown, the capital of South Dakota, Pierre.

25 In his minimal spare time, Dr. Meink continues to give

1 back to his community. He has even led high school robotics
2 teams -- by the way, the same ones that have gone on to
3 defeat the People's Republic of China team in competitions.
4 Now, if he can defeat the PRC with a bunch of high school
5 students, imagine what he's going to be able to do with the
6 world's greatest air and space forces.

7 Dr. Meink's experience and professionalism are
8 precisely what we need in the Pentagon. His senior roles in
9 the Air Force and National Reconnaissance Office, including
10 as Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force for Space, have
11 prepared him for this assignment.

12 I urge you to support this very highly qualified
13 nominee to be the next Secretary of the Air Force. Thank
14 you, Madam Chair.

15 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Senator Rounds.

16 Next, we have a colleague from the House here,
17 Representative Fitzgerald who will be introducing Mr.
18 Duffey. Welcome, sir.

1 STATEMENT OF HON. SCOTT FITZGERALD, U.S. REPRESENTATIVE
2 FROM WISCONSIN'S 5TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

3 Mr. Fitzgerald: Thank you, Madam Chair, and Ranking
4 Member Reed, and members of the committee. I'm honored to
5 introduce my good friend, Michael Duffey, and support his
6 nomination to be Under Secretary of Defense for acquisition
7 and sustainment.

8 I've known Mike and his wife, Morgan, for many years
9 going back to their time in Wisconsin, and Mike is a proud
10 Wisconsinite, and a graduate of Marquette High School, and
11 the University of Wisconsin.

12 He brings a depth of experience on national security
13 technology and the federal budget that will make him a
14 tremendous asset as Under Secretary for Acquisition and
15 Sustainment. I'm confident in his previous experience
16 serving under 2 Presidents in the White House, and 7
17 Secretaries of Defense, over 14 years in the Pentagon, will
18 allow him to carry out the President's agenda.

19 Mike has been a strong advocate for the U.S. military,
20 and I know he will bring his tireless work ethic and
21 integrity to this important position. Thank you very much.

22 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Representative Fitzgerald.
23 You are welcome to depart, or to stay for the hearing, as
24 you see fit. Thank you very much.

25 Dr. Meink, welcome, sir. You are recognized for your

1 opening statement.
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

1 STATEMENT DR. TROY E. MEINK TO BE SECRETARY OF THE AIR
2 FORCE

3 Dr. Meink: Chairman Wicker, Ranking Member Reed, and
4 distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the
5 chance to appear before you today as a nominee for the
6 Secretary of the Department of the Air Force.

7 I'm honored and humbled to have this opportunity,
8 especially at such a pivotal time in our nation. I'd like
9 to thank President Trump for having the faith and confidence
10 in me to submit me for my nomination to this position. I'm
11 joined by my today by my wife, Jean, who is a retired Air
12 Force nurse, and one of the best officers I've known. We
13 met at South Dakota State University in 1985 before class
14 started. And it didn't actually get off to a great start.
15 I was already studying and she thought I was a bit of a
16 nerd. What she didn't know was I was actually studying for
17 my pilot, my private pilot's license.

18 My focus at that time was Air Force officer, pilot,
19 astronaut. It didn't exactly work out that way, but I've
20 been extremely fortunate to have her by my side since then,
21 and to serve my country in a variety of roles for 35 years.
22 I'd also like to acknowledge my son, Troy, and daughter,
23 Jenna, have both provided the greatest moments of my life.

24 We have enjoyed many activities. My favorite, perhaps
25 not their favorite was coaching them and their teammates in

1 competitive robotics. I've also had my stepbrother here,
2 Army Lieutenant Colonel Troy Merkel, who also served
3 multiple tours in the Middle East. Finally, I'd like to
4 thank my father, my mother, my sister, and other members of
5 my family who could not be here today.

6 I'd like to briefly talk about the reasons I'm honored
7 and excited about the opportunity to continue my service as
8 a Secretary of the Department of the Air Force. At my 35
9 years of service, the first were spent as an Air Force
10 navigator, serving a significant portion of that time
11 overseas.

12 My first deployment came as I was pulled off of
13 strategic nuclear alert and sent to support conventional
14 operations in the first Gulf War, where I flew over 100
15 missions. This rapid shift in mission, the readiness,
16 training, and flexibility required left a lasting impression
17 on me. I believe the flexibility is even more critical
18 today.

19 Following my active-duty time, I transitioned to the
20 Air Force Reserves, spending 4 more years supporting the
21 National Air Intelligence Center and the Ballistic and
22 Missile Defense Organization. I also became an Air Force
23 civil servant focusing on building and operating some of the
24 most advanced weapons systems for the Department of Defense
25 and the intelligence community.

1 It included multiple positions as a researcher, program
2 manager, the Director of Communications Programs and Policy
3 at the Pentagon, Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force for
4 Space, the Assistant Director of National Intelligence for
5 Systems and Resources Analysis, and currently, as a
6 Principal Deputy Director of the National Reconnaissance
7 Office.

8 A big part of these jobs was understanding the threat
9 that I was building systems to have to support against this
10 quickly-evolving threat. And these threats have shaped my
11 perspective. I believe the challenges we faced are
12 threefold.

13 First, near peer competitors, such as China, are
14 evolving faster than we are in some cases, which will
15 eventually result in the U.S. losing our technological
16 advantage. Secondly, some competitors such as Russia, are
17 fielding highly escalatory asymmetric capabilities. And
18 third, our homeland is increasingly put on the defensive
19 from threats such as cyberattack, unmanned aerial systems,
20 and illegal activities at the border, including illicit drug
21 trafficking.

22 If confirmed, my priority will be to organize training,
23 equip the Department of the Air Force, the head lethality
24 needed to deter all potential aggressors, and if necessary,
25 when in conflict.

1 First, the Department is building and operating some of
2 the most complex systems ever fielded, both air and space.
3 We need the right number of guardians, but we also need the
4 needed skills, training, support, and focus to deliver and
5 operate those systems.

6 Secondly, we need to innovate faster. I spent the last
7 decade increasing competition and expanding the industry
8 base, which has significantly accelerated delivery of
9 capability and at a lower cost. I intend to bring that same
10 drive for innovation to the Department.

11 Finally, we need to streamline the acquisition and
12 budget process with appropriate fiscal controls. I've
13 helped lead my current organization to 16 clean financial
14 audits, which I believe is a record in the National Security
15 Enterprise.

16 Throughout my career, I've demonstrated my commitment
17 to the protection and defense of our nation. If confirmed,
18 I intend to bring what I've learned to this position and to
19 the Department to deliver on the President's goal of
20 achieving peace through strength.

21 Should I be fortunate enough to get this job, I look
22 forward to working with this committee, this Congress, to
23 ensure the airmen and guardians are equipped to secure the
24 nation. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

25 [The prepared statement of Dr. Meink follows:]

[COMMITTEE INSERT]

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

1 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Dr. Meink.

2 Mr. Duffey, welcome. You're recognized for your
3 opening statement.

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

1 STATEMENT OF MR. MICHAEL P. DUFFEY, TO BE UNDER
2 SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR ACQUISITION AND SUSTAINMENT

3 Mr. Duffey: Thank you, Madam Chair Fischer, Ranking
4 Member Reed, and distinguished members of the committee.
5 Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to appear
6 before you today, and for your consideration of my
7 nomination to serve as the Under Secretary of Defense for
8 Acquisition and Sustainment.

9 I want to thank Representative Fitzgerald for his
10 generous introduction, and thanking President Trump, vice-
11 President Vance, and Secretary Hegseth for honoring me with
12 this nomination. I'm grateful for and humbled by the trust
13 they have placed in me to lead the Department's efforts to
14 rebuild our military and revitalize our Defense Industrial
15 Base.

16 I pledge to them and to this committee that, if
17 confirmed, I will work tirelessly to provide much needed
18 military capabilities to our warfighters today, and arm
19 tomorrow's forces with the capabilities they need to prevail
20 in future conflict.

21 I also want to thank my wife, Morgan, our children,
22 Reynolds and Deans, and my father and mother, Joseph and
23 Patricia for supporting my nomination and my service to the
24 nation. The love and support you provide me every day
25 inspire me to serve my country to make it better and

1 stronger for you and future generations.

2 President Trump received a mandate from the American
3 people to make America strong again. Secretary Hegseth has
4 affirmed that his three priorities to achieve this mandate
5 are to restore the warrior ethos to the Pentagon, rebuild
6 our military, and reestablish deterrence.

7 If confirmed, I would assume responsibility to
8 implement President Trump's mandate and Secretary Hegseth
9 priorities by providing the military with the capabilities
10 and force structure necessary to deter our adversaries, and
11 if necessary, prevail in conflict.

12 America's ability to protect our interests requires a
13 military force structure with the capability and capacity to
14 deter, and if necessary, to defeat our adversaries. This
15 will require the Department to modernize how it manages the
16 integration of requirements, budgeting, and acquisition
17 processes, aligning incentives to deliver results.

18 We must deepen our understanding of the strength and
19 vulnerabilities within our Defense Industrial Base, and seek
20 to revitalize through reindustrialization, increased
21 investment, flexible contracting, enhanced workforce
22 recruitment and training, and increased competition.

23 As our nation knows from our historic victory in World
24 War II, future conflicts will be won on the factory floor as
25 much as the field of battle. Our ability to deliver the

1 most cutting-edge weapons and replenish equipment and
2 systems lost or expended in battle with speed and
3 proficiency is increasingly a differentiating factor on the
4 battlefield.

5 Therefore, we must outpace our adversaries and our
6 ability to supply our military with decisive advantage while
7 maintaining a focus on building an industrial based capacity
8 to replenish those forces as needed. An American Defense
9 Industrial Base that is sufficiently agile and responsive to
10 the emergent needs will act as a powerful deterrent to our
11 adversaries who may be counting on winning a war of
12 attrition in a protracted future conflict.

13 I thank this committee, and in particular, Chairman
14 Wicker, for your leadership in advancing acquisition reform
15 initiatives for the Department of Defense through the
16 proposed FORGED Act. If confirmed, I look forward to
17 partnering with the committee members and staff to improve
18 how the Pentagon acquires weapons with a focus on four
19 primary goals.

20 First, to dramatically accelerate delivery of lethality
21 to our warfighters. Secondly, driving a laser focus on
22 increasing the speed, performance, and affordability of our
23 acquisition system. Third, strengthening the Defense
24 Industrial Base by reducing barriers to entry, increasing
25 competition, and incentivizing increased investment from new

entrants, non-trationals and traditional vendors alike.
And, finally, incorporating 21st century business systems
and management practices to better manage and acquire
cutting edge military capabilities.

If confirmed, I will be accountable to President Trump,
Secretary Hegseth, this committee, the Congress, and the
American taxpayers to diligently and urgently invest and
resource our military arsenal.

Thank you for your time today and for your
consideration of my nomination. I look forward to your
questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Duffey follows:]

[COMMITTEE INSERT]

1 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Duffey.

2 Mr. Michael, welcome. You are recognized for your
3 opening statement, please.

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

1 STATEMENT OF MR. EMIL G. MICHAEL, TO BE UNDER SECRETARY
2 OF DEFENSE FOR RESEARCH AND ENGINEERING

3 Mr. Michael: Thank you. Senator Fischer, Rankin
4 Member Reed, and the distinguished members of the committee,
5 it is the honor of a lifetime to be here today, seeking your
6 advice and consent for me to be the nominee for the Under
7 Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering. I'm
8 grateful to President Trump for entrusting me with his
9 important nomination, and hope to make him, Secretary
10 Hegseth, and the country, proud of the work I do, if
11 confirmed by the Senate.

12 Nowhere, but in the United States of America, could a
13 first-generation immigrant, whose small Christian family
14 left an increasingly hostile country to religious
15 minorities, like myself, and my family from Egypt, be
16 sitting in front of you today seeking to join and leading
17 the defense of our nation. It's an even a greater gift than
18 my 85-year-old father and 77-year-old mother are able to
19 witness this moment after a lifetime of hard work, struggle,
20 and devotion to the goal that my sister and I have a chance
21 at a better life than they did.

22 I want to thank my friends and family who've come from
23 all over the country; my sister, my in-laws, my business
24 partners, my friends for grade school from who have been
25 with me for 40 years, and helped make me the man I am today.

1 Most importantly, my wife Julie, and our son, Cairo, who's
2 one years old -- and not sure how long he is going to make
3 it through this hearing, and my daughter, Colette, who's
4 five years old. They're really my American Dream, and they
5 support me in everything that makes me who I am.

6 Part of that American Dream was getting a world-class
7 education from the public school system in New Rochelle, New
8 York, which wants me into some of the best higher education
9 systems in the world with much risk for my ability to cover
10 my student loans.

11 After those expensive colleges, I became an
12 entrepreneur, where I helped build and grow four companies
13 while coaching dozens of other entrepreneurs to build on new
14 ideas, often against entrenched interests, big companies,
15 and things that very difficult for them to dream.

16 The most important company I was part of was Uber.
17 Today, Uber's a verb, it's a noun, and it's an indispensable
18 lifeline for hundreds of millions of people. By embracing
19 technological innovation at speed, Uber reduced drunk
20 driving deaths by half, paid its drivers over \$200 billion,
21 doing the most flexible work they could possibly find, and
22 allowed people of every background to get around safely. We
23 did this by proving to consumers and drivers that there was
24 something better than the unreliable and expensive service
25 that the taxi cartels had profited off for decades.

1 Just before building Uber, I had the privilege of
2 working as a special assistant for Secretary of Defense,
3 Robert Gates. From him, I learned how to make things happen
4 fast in the Pentagon, notably the MRAP Program and the Joint
5 IED defeat programs.

6 I also learned how to reform the Pentagon as a lead on
7 the Tail-To-Tooth budget initiative, which changed what was
8 an unsustainable trajectory of tail growth at the time, at
9 the expense of our warfighters. After that, I served on the
10 Defense Business Board and brought better ideas for
11 technology practices to the Defense Department.

12 All of this experience has culminated my desire to
13 serve as the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and
14 Engineering, which is the Department's Chief Technology
15 Officer. If confirmed, I bring my decades of experience in
16 the technology industry and management of large complex
17 global organizations to ensure that the United States has
18 the most technologically sophisticated defense systems in
19 history.

20 The central element necessary for all this is
21 innovation at speed. Innovation means increasing the
22 Department's willingness to take risk while having the
23 discipline to stop the projects that are failing.
24 Innovation means focusing our investments in science and
25 technology on only those things that are aligned on our

1 Peace through Strength mission. This must all be done at a
2 pace that is dramatically different than the Defense
3 Department has done in modern times.

4 Time must be a factor in all of our decisions as we
5 confront an increasingly sophisticated adversary in China,
6 which not only has lower labor costs, but is notorious for
7 intellectual property theft making. Its research and
8 development costs even faster and less expensive than we
9 could have imagined only a decade ago.

10 If confirmed our work to recast the relationship
11 between DOD and the emerging defense tech sector, the DOD
12 needs to for foster more robust and competitive Defense
13 Industrial Base by providing more realistic requirements,
14 inviting smaller and innovative companies with less
15 burdensome processes, becoming more agile on how and when we
16 grant contracts.

17 The private sector, too, should bear some more
18 responsibility for the risk of their own failure. A healthy
19 ecosystem will provide for weapons that are better, cheaper,
20 and faster. We've never been at a more critical time for a
21 shift in how we work to catch up where we're behind and
22 increase the gap where we're ahead.

23 We're living in a much different world than when I was
24 at the Pentagon last in 2011. Every enterprise, public or
25 private, must now be in the technology innovation business.

1 There is no other choice but to do so at full speed. The
2 United States has the technical talent, the money, and the
3 will to ensure war fighting supremacy in every scenario that
4 this new world demands.

5 I fully believe in President Trump's vision for a
6 golden dome for America. Thank you for your consideration
7 for my nomination. I look forward to hearing your questions
8 about how I can best serve our country, Secretary Hegseth,
9 and President Trump in achieving this mission. Thank you.

10 [The prepared statement of Mr. Michael follows:]

11 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

1 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Michael.

2 Mr. Bass, welcome. You are now recognized for your
3 opening statement.

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

1 STATEMENT OF MR. KEITH M. BASS, TO BE ASSISTANT
2 SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR HEALTH AFFAIRS

3 Mr. Bass: Thank you, Chairman Fischer, Ranking Member
4 Reed, and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you
5 for the opportunity to be here today. I'm deeply honored
6 and humbled to be nominated for the position of Assistant
7 Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs.

8 I'm grateful for the trust placed in me by President
9 Trump and Secretary Hegseth. I want to thank the members of
10 this committee. I have greatly appreciated the opportunity
11 to meet with many of you, to discuss ways to strengthen and
12 enhance the military health system. If confirmed, I look
13 forward to continuing these conversations and strengthening
14 our partnership to advance the mission of military medicine.

15 Before I begin, I would like to introduce and express
16 my gratitude to my family, both those here with me today and
17 those watching from afar. I'm joined by my twin brother,
18 Kevin, retired Colonel United States Army, and my two
19 daughters, Kate and Erin. Their unwavering support has been
20 instrumental in my journey, and I'm especially grateful for
21 their encouragement. I also want to recognize my wife,
22 Martha, and my parents, who cannot be here, but are watching
23 virtually.

24 I've had the honor and privilege of retiring from the
25 United States Navy after 20 years of active-duty service.

1 Throughout my enlisted and officer career, I've served
2 aboard ships in the military, medical treatment facilities,
3 both domestic and overseas at the Navy Bureau of Medicine
4 and Surgery, Central Intelligence Agency, and the White
5 House.

6 After retiring from the military, I transitioned into
7 civilian leadership roles, serving as a senior vice-
8 president for a virtual health technology company, and
9 currently, as a medical center director at the VA Healthcare
10 Center.

11 Throughout my career, I've supported humanitarian
12 missions, disaster response efforts, theater, medical
13 operations, and casualty evacuations. I've had the
14 privilege and honor of serving alongside dedicated military
15 and civilian professionals who devote their lives to
16 sustaining the readiness of our forces. I cannot be more
17 proud to call them colleagues and friends.

18 The military health system is a global leader in
19 delivering world-class care, unmatched in excellence, and
20 second to none. I'm excited about the future of military
21 medicine and the opportunity to drive innovation and improve
22 patient outcomes. By continuing to focus on modernization
23 technology, research care delivery, we can strengthen our
24 operational readiness and set new standards in casualty
25 care.

1 We must also acknowledge the complex and evolving
2 challenges facing our healthcare. Ensuring the readiness of
3 our forces, recruiting and retaining medical personnel, and
4 adapting to rapid technological advancements are all
5 pressing issues that require strategic action. If
6 confirmed, my highest priority will be ensuring the medical
7 readiness of our forces, stabilizing the military health
8 system to provide advanced care possible, both on and off
9 the battlefield.

10 A strong military health system is the cornerstone of
11 our national defense strategy, and maintaining a medically-
12 ready force requires integrated, innovative, and adaptive
13 healthcare system. If confirmed, I will work closely with
14 Congress, military leaders, healthcare professionals, and
15 our community partners to ensure force readiness. Together
16 we can build a healthcare system that not only meets today's
17 needs, but also anticipates and adapts to the challenges of
18 tomorrow.

19 I look forward to talking with you today, and welcome
20 any questions you might have.

21 [The prepared statement of Mr. Bass follows:]

22 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

23 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Bass.

24 I will now ask all of you a series of standard
25 questions this committee poses to all civilian nominees.

1 Have you adhered to applicable laws and regulations
2 governing conflicts of interest?

3 [Witnesses answer in the affirmative.]

4 Senator Fischer: Thank you. Have you assumed any
5 duties or taken any actions that would appear to presume the
6 outcome of the confirmation process?

7 [Witnesses answer in the negative.]

8 Senator Fischer: Exercising our legislative and
9 oversight responsibilities makes it important that this
10 committee, its subcommittees, and other appropriate
11 committees of Congress, receive testimony, briefings,
12 reports, records, and other information from the executive
13 branch on a timely basis.

14 Do you agree, if confirmed, to appear and testify
15 before this committee when requested?

16 [Witnesses answer in the affirmative.]

17 Senator Fischer: Do you agree to provide records,
18 documents, and electronic communications in a timely manner
19 when requested by this committee, its subcommittees, or
20 other appropriate committees of Congress, and to consult
21 with the request order regarding the basis for any good
22 faith, delay, or denial in providing such records?

23 [Witnesses answer in the affirmative.]

24 Senator Fischer: Will you ensure that your staff
25 complies with deadlines established by this committee for

1 the production of records, reports, and other information,
2 and including timely responding to hearing questions for the
3 record?

4 [Witnesses answer in the affirmative.]

5 Senator Fischer: Will you cooperate in providing
6 witnesses and briefers in response to congressional
7 requests?

8 [Witnesses answer in the affirmative.]

9 Senator Fischer: Will those witnesses and briefers be
10 protected from reprisal for their testimony or briefings?

11 [Witnesses answer in the affirmative.]

12 Senator Fischer: Thank you. We will now begin with
13 our first round of questions, and I will start. These are
14 five-minute rounds.

15 Having a safe, effective, and reliable and credible
16 nuclear deterrent is the cornerstone of our national
17 defense. Currently, each leg of our nuclear triad is
18 undergoing a generational recapitalization to better align
19 with the projected threat. The Department of the Air Force
20 is responsible for two of the three legs; the land-based
21 ICBMs, and our bomber fleet.

22 Dr. Meink, in your answers to the committee's advanced
23 policy questions, you stated that, "The ground leg of the
24 nuclear triad, Minuteman III, and over time, Sentinel, are
25 foundational to strategic deterrence and defense of the

1 homeland." I agree with that. I also believe that we have
2 an opportunity following an analysis done during the Nunn-
3 McCurdy breach to incorporate lessons learned and build a
4 stronger, more enduring Sentinel program than was originally
5 proposed.

6 Dr. Meink, if confirmed, will you commit to utilizing
7 all available tools to accelerate Sentinel in placement and
8 ensure that our nation's ICBM capability does move forward?

9 Dr. Meink: Thank you, Senator. If confirmed, I will
10 do so. And I do appreciate the one-on-one conversation we
11 had on this topic. I'm looking forward to diving into the
12 results of the number security and then also, obviously,
13 work in the B-21 and the other activities from a nuclear
14 perspective, the Department supports.

15 Senator Fischer: Thank you.

16 Mr. Duffey, if confirmed as Under Secretary of
17 Acquisition and Sustainment, you will oversee all nuclear
18 modernization efforts, and serve as Chair of the Nuclear
19 Weapons Council. Can you provide us with a short summary of
20 your views on why we need such a strong nuclear deterrent?

21 Mr. Duffey: Madam Chair, thank you for the question.
22 And yes, I look forward, if confirmed, to assisting leading
23 the Department in the oversight of the nuclear modernization
24 program. Nuclear modernization, as you mentioned, is the
25 backbone of our strategic deterrent, and ensuring that we

1 have a modern, capable nuclear enterprise that not only
2 includes the B-21, which is a successful acquisition program
3 by all accounts, but the Columbia-class submarine, and the
4 Sentinel nuclear ICBM, are critical as chair of the Nuclear
5 Weapons Council.

6 I look forward to the partnership with the National
7 Nuclear Security Administration, working with this
8 committee, to ensure that we maintain the highest quality
9 systems that not only deliver the weapons, but the nuclear
10 command and control system that would be required for a safe
11 and secure deployment, if necessary. And I think it's
12 absolutely critical that we ensure that we have accelerated
13 acquisition of those capabilities. Thank you.

14 Senator Fischer: Thank you.

15 Would you agree that our triad along with "NC Three,
16 the deterrent" it provides truly is the priority of the
17 Department, and that it underpins all of our strategic
18 planning?

19 Mr. Duffey: I absolutely agree with that. Yes, ma'am.

20 Senator Fischer: Thank you.

21 Dr. Meink, I believe we're finally on a better path
22 when it comes to space programs, and I'm impressed by what
23 our guardians have achieved over the last several years.
24 But the Space Force is still a young organization, and there
25 are likely still growing pains ahead. I am encouraged that

1 the President nominated someone for this program with deep
2 expertise in the space programs.

3 Dr. Meink, what's your vision for how the Space Force
4 should grow and how it should evolve as a service?

5 Dr. Meink: Thank you for the question, Senator. Yes,
6 I've been fortunate enough to work space systems both on the
7 Air Force side, which then became the Space Force side, as
8 well as from the IC side.

9 Space is critical. This is actually one of the areas
10 that we're most challenged, I believe, from the rapidly
11 evolving threat from China and others, both the direct
12 threat to our systems as well as the threat, those systems
13 pose to our operations across the Department, in general.

14 I think the key to both acquisition and operations is
15 making sure you have the best talented workforce. These are
16 some of the most complicated systems, and if the U.S. is
17 going to maintain our advantage, which we need to do in
18 space, we need to make sure we have the right workforce.

19 The Space Force's in the process of growing. We'll
20 support that activity to make sure we have the right numbers
21 and the right skillset, and then make sure that the
22 acquisitions themselves are delivering, and that they're
23 getting into operation.

24 Senator Fischer: Can you give me a quick example of
25 what new capabilities you think Space Force should be

1 focusing on to acquire? Just quick example.

2 Dr. Meink: I think some of the space control and
3 counter space systems are critical. Senator, can't dive
4 into too many of the details, but that is probably the area
5 that we are being most stressed from a threat perspective.

6 Senator Fischer: Okay. Thank you. Senator Reed.

7 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman.

8 Mr. Duffey, in 2019, you played a central role in the
9 withholding of \$250 million in desperately needed Ukrainian
10 assistance, which passed Congress with bipartisan support.
11 And indeed, President Trump was impeached for his decisions.
12 to withhold the money. Your actions to facilitate the
13 withholding of this aid that had been authorized and
14 appropriated by your Congress, certainly contravened the
15 direction of this body and the law.

16 Can you assure us that you'll follow the law without
17 reservation rather than the wishes of the President or the
18 Secretary?

19 Mr. Duffey: Yes, Senator. I provide that assurance.
20 If I am confirmed, I would follow the law.

21 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Dr. Meink, as you
22 know, launch operations at Cape Canaveral Space Force Base
23 have become highly constrained due to the new class of ultra
24 heavy lift rockets and the amount of standoff distance that
25 they require.

1 If confirmed, will you review what options are
2 available to alleviate this constraint, which is hindering
3 competition in this particular area, and report back as
4 quickly as possible to the committee? I think one of the
5 great achievements of the last few years is the
6 privatization of Force launches, and the competitive model
7 is a good one. We'd like to see that maintained.

8 Dr. Meink: Senator, I'd be happy to. That is
9 something in my current job. One of the phrases I like to
10 say sometimes is this is kind of a good problem to have.
11 You know, historically, we had very limited access to space
12 launch that has grown across many, many companies in the
13 U.S., but that has also led to some challenges.

14 As you just articulated, it's getting very busy, very
15 crowded, and some of these larger launch vehicles do drive
16 different concerns than maybe we had to address in the past.
17 So, yes, Senator, I think it's that that capability is
18 extremely important for us to maintain our advantage in
19 space. I think to some degree what we're doing across the
20 board in launch gives the U.S. asymmetric advantage. But we
21 do need to make sure that we have the proper launch
22 infrastructure, the proper space really to continue
23 operations, and allow that both national security and
24 commercial industry to grow.

25 Senator Reed: And you'll get back to us as quickly as

1 possible with the --

2 Dr. Meink: Yes, Senator, I will.

3 Senator Reed: Thank you, sir.

4 Mr. Michael, one of the key advantages we have in our
5 industrial base is our technical workforce within the
6 military, including our acquisition professionals, our test
7 and evaluation community, our STEM personnel, our
8 laboratories. They're vital. In fact, I think we'll find
9 that that is going to be the pathway to more efficiency and
10 more productivity as we enhance this workforce.

11 But we're now in a situation where many of these
12 individuals are being dismissed without any cause. They're
13 being encouraged to leave, and many of them have the skills
14 to walk out the door and get a lot more money in the private
15 sector. What can and will you do to reverse this trend, to
16 build up on our workforce rather than to haphazardly dismiss
17 it?

18 Mr. Michael: So, Ranking Member Reed, I think that we
19 all agree that technological innovation is the way forward
20 for the Defense Department and almost every dimension. And
21 we have some story labs like DARPA and other places that
22 ought to be fortified as opposed to degraded in any way.

23 And I think part of that is ensuring that it remains an
24 honored profession because people join these labs and these
25 affiliated scientific organizations with the DOD because

1 they care about the mission. And we have to honor that.
2 And I think we would, can attract more people and retain
3 people if we celebrate their accomplishments more.

4 And also, if we focus them on missions that are going
5 to be important and realized. And that's why I mentioned, I
6 think focusing them on those missions and honoring their
7 successes will attract and retain more of them. And I've
8 done that in the private industry for decades, really
9 focusing on getting engineers, keeping them, rewarding them
10 to produce great things. And that's what I intend to do in
11 this role if confirmed.

12 Senator Reed: Well, that's encouraging. Again,
13 though, you're looking at a situation now where people have
14 been dismissed, not based on their talents, but they are in
15 a preparation age status, and they can be dismissed. And I
16 hope you can reverse that policy. Thank you.

17 And my time is expiring. Mr. Bass, I'll have a
18 question for the record. Thank you.

19 [The information referred to follows:]

20 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

21

22

23

24

25

1 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Senator Reed. Senator
2 Cotton, you are recognized.

3 Senator Cotton: Thank you.

4 Dr. Meink, I want to return to Senator Fischer's line
5 of questioning about nuclear modernization. The Air Force
6 is responsible for two of the three legs of the nuclear
7 triad, as she said. Sometimes the funding for that which is
8 known as the "pass through" counts against, you might say,
9 the top line for the Air Force and internal budget battles.

10 I personally worry that Air Force can't execute all of
11 its tasks when it comes to its traditional, conventional
12 task, while also executing nuclear modernization of our
13 missiles and our long-range bombers. Do you agree that we
14 need to take a new look at the top line for the Air Force,
15 and especially to account for that nuclear pass through to
16 ensure that Air Force has the budget necessary to perform
17 all of its vital tasks?

18 Dr. Meink: Yes. Senator, thank you for the question,
19 and thanks for the opportunity to talk a little bit offline.
20 The Air Force is kind of a unique position almost in its
21 history. We are in the process of modernizing pretty much
22 across all the five core mission areas. The tri nuclear
23 deterrence is a huge part of that.

24 As you just kind of mentioned, those systems are pretty
25 expensive. One of the first things I plan to do is take a

1 holistic look at all the modernization and all the readiness
2 bills that we have coming. And then, I will put together
3 and advocate for what resources I think are necessary to
4 execute all of those missions. And then, working both
5 within the administration and with Congress, which I've
6 found throughout my time working national security, a good
7 relationship with Congress was critical.

8 So, if confirmed, I'll be back here walking through
9 what I think we need to do.

10 Senator Cotton: Thank you.

11 And, I'm sure, in the internal budget battle, as you
12 remind everyone, it's not just my top line. I've got this
13 big, big slug of nuclear modernization here as well.

14 Dr. Meink: Yes, Senator. There are a couple slugs in
15 there that --

16 Senator Cotton: Okay. Thank you. Another thing that
17 worries me is retaining our troops, especially in the Air
18 Force, retaining fighter pilots. We're nearly 1,800 pilots
19 short. I believe, these days, for every 4 jobs requiring a
20 fighter pilot, we just fill 3 of them. I have my thoughts
21 on some of the factors driving this, in part, due to some
22 round tables that Senator and King and I have held over the
23 years with pilots.

24 For instance, I think we can always probably do a
25 little bit better job of paying our pilots, but I don't

1 think you're ever going to pay them enough compared to what
2 commercial airlines will pay them or private companies.
3 People join the Air Force to fly fighter pilots because they
4 want to fly high-performance jets in defense of our nation.

5 And we need to do a better job of getting them more
6 time in the cockpit training here than in down range. I
7 think it's one big factor. There are other factors as well.
8 But could you give me your thoughts on that? And also, just
9 a commitment that you're going to look carefully at that.

10 Dr. Meink: Yeah, I'll commit. I'm going to look
11 carefully at that. And, Senator, I think your discussion
12 about, I see that as kind of a quality of life pay that only
13 goes so far. We need to make sure, not just with pilots,
14 but across our highly skilled areas within our workforce,
15 that they have the opportunity to do what they've been
16 trained, what they love to do. I think that could be a
17 bigger impact on maintaining some of these highly technical
18 skill sets like pilots and others, letting them do what they
19 were trained to do.

20 Yeah, I've been around since I was a navigator. We've
21 always struggled with maintaining pilot levels. It is much
22 larger than just the funding. And, Senator, not to
23 necessarily ask something of you, but if you have other
24 opinions, if I'm confirmed, I'd love to sit down and talk to
25 you about it.

1 Senator Cotton: And thank you. Just one more question
2 for you, Dr. Meink. Ebbing Air International Guard Base and
3 Fort Smith is now the home of the international fighter
4 training mission for the F-35. It's going to grow from four
5 aircraft today to 48 fighter aircraft in the next three
6 years. That's twice as fast as the normal for standard F-35
7 mission.

8 The Air Force has worked well with our state, and local
9 partners, and Senator Boozman's office, Congressman Womack's
10 office, and mine. Can I get your commitment that will
11 continue to work well as we go through this very fast, but
12 so far, a very successful bed down to ensure that Ebbing has
13 the resources it needs?

14 Dr. Meink: Absolutely, Senator.

15 Senator Cotton: Mr. Bass, first off, I want to
16 apologize, and I missed our meeting yesterday. I hate to
17 stand up a Wonder Boy from Arkansas Tech University right
18 across the river from Dale, Arkansas. But glad to see you
19 today, and congratulations on your nomination. I continue
20 to hear that the MHS Genesis program is causing problems for
21 recruiting and converting recruits into new troopers. Not
22 just airmen, but soldiers, sailors, marines and so forth.

23 Obviously, we want to work efficiently with medical
24 records, and we don't want to bring in people who are going
25 to be washed out because of serious medical conditions six

1 months after basic training. But we've discovered a lot of
2 things, I think, in past days.

3 Let's just be honest, your recruiter would've told you
4 to live out at MEPS when you went there. You know that you
5 had a broken arm when you played junior high football and
6 then went on to play four more years of senior high
7 football. And it gets recorded now, and you have to go
8 through a bunch of rigamarole. In the meantime, you get a
9 better job doing something else.

10 Can you take a look at how Genesis is operating to make
11 sure that we catch the serious problems we need to without
12 deterring and delaying young men and women who are eager to
13 sign up and serve in our military?

14 Mr. Bass: Thank you, Senator. Go Razorbacks. And I
15 will commit to taking a look at the assess standards. You
16 know, a good problem to have is that we have too much
17 information in our medical health record. You know, we'll,
18 we'll take that. But we also need to take a look at our
19 session policies. And I commit to working that and working
20 with your office.

21 Senator Cotton: Thank you.

22 Mr. Bass: Yes, sir.

23 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Senator Cotton. Senator
24 Shaheen, you are recognized.

25 Senator Shaheen: Thank you, Madam Chair, and

1 congratulations to each of our nominees and your families.
2 Welcome this morning. Thank you for your willingness to
3 continue to serve the country.

4 Mr. Bass, I want to follow-up on a concern that I have
5 based on your record at the CIA. I've been very concerned
6 about directed energy attacks on our service members, our
7 diplomats, and our intelligence community abroad. I have
8 personally interviewed and worked with a number of those
9 victims over the years from the time of the first attacks in
10 China and Cuba.

11 The Department of Defense has been offering critical
12 care at Walter Reed for the victims across the interagency.
13 However, many in the intelligence community, I think, are
14 doing a disservice to these victims by continuing to deny
15 that this is a real issue, and to fail to look for
16 attribution for who's responsible.

17 Now, I understand that there are reports from your time
18 at the CIA that suggest you didn't take seriously the
19 reports of those anomalous health incidents. Can you speak
20 to why you were skeptical, and what your position would be
21 if you were confirmed for this new role?

22 Mr. Bass: Thank you, Senator. And thank you for your
23 commitment to this effort. I reject the premise that I
24 wasn't -- I did not take AHI seriously. All individuals
25 that are affected by AHI, regardless, should be treated with

1 dignity, and respect, and they should be afforded
2 healthcare.

3 The issue that we had to resolve was these individuals
4 wanted to go to Walter Reed. We needed to really streamline
5 the process for getting secretary designee because, at that
6 time, the processes and the policies were not in place to
7 get them to the NICO. I think we were using NIH at the
8 time. So, we pulled together all the subject matter
9 experts.

10 My understanding now is that DOD has significantly
11 expedited that process. And these individuals, not just at
12 the agency, ma'am, it was at all the federal agencies, we
13 wanted to make sure these individuals got the healthcare
14 that they deserve regardless of source.

15 Whether we knew what the source was or not, they should
16 have gotten healthcare. And we worked to do that. And I
17 think given time, we did get those individuals into the
18 healthcare they deserve.

19 Senator Shaheen: So, do you commit that, if confirmed,
20 the Defense Health Agency will continue to play a critical
21 role in care and treatment for those who have been victims
22 of AHI.

23 Mr. Bass: Senator, 100 percent, I commit to that.

24 Senator Shaheen: Thank you.

25 I'd like to ask the other three of you, who I'm sorry,

1 I missed the opening statements that everybody provided, and
2 the questions that I've heard, you've all talked about the
3 need for additional resources at the Department level. And
4 how do you square that with the current commitment of this
5 administration and Secretary Hegseth to reduce funding for
6 the Department of Defense by 8 percent a year over the next
7 five years? Mr. Duffey?

8 Mr. Duffey: Senator, thank you for the question. I
9 believe that the media reporting on that is inaccurate. I
10 do not believe that it's Secretary's intent to cut the
11 budget 8 percent, but rather he directed the services to
12 relook at a budget that had been prepared by the prior
13 administration with a focus on 8 percent of the resources of
14 that prior budget, and reallocate that towards this
15 administration's priorities.

16 Senator Shaheen: So, would you agree that if you -- or
17 can you tell this committee that if you disagree with the
18 directive for the Secretary of Defense or the administration
19 about what they tell you should do with our nuclear program,
20 that if you think it's incorrect, and that it will affect
21 the ability of that program to operate successfully in the
22 future, that you would say that to them and share that
23 standup to those people directing you to do something that
24 you think you should not be doing?

25 Mr. Duffey: Well, Senator, I would take my

1 responsibility seriously to advocate for the resources that
2 I believe are required to resource our forces with the
3 capabilities they need in order to prevail in conflict.

4 Senator Shaheen: Thank you, Dr. Meink, on the resource
5 question?

6 Dr. Meink: Absolutely, Senator. I will always
7 advocate for the resources. I think I need to meet the
8 requirements that I've been given, and I've had a bit of a
9 history of doing that. I will continue to do that, Senator.

10 Senator Shaheen: And Mr. Michael?

11 Mr. Michael: Senator Shaheen, of course. I think the
12 first thing a new leader does when they come into an
13 organization is look at what their mission is and what they
14 do. They have the resources to accomplish it or not. And
15 every new administration gets their own agenda. And so,
16 that'd be one of the first order of business when you get
17 into a job like this; would be to assess that and make sure
18 that you have the right resources.

19 Senator Shaheen: Thank you.

20 Chairman Wicker: [Presiding.] Thank you very much,
21 Senator Shaheen. Senator Kramer.

22 Senator Cramer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

23 Just on that last point, I think what you're going to
24 find out is you don't have enough resources, but that's just
25 my pre-judgment. I think it's great, Dr. Meink, that you

1 are surrounded by the research and development guy, and the
2 acquisition guy, and you're all talking about modernization.
3 And that's what I want to talk about. But first, I want to
4 know, in Lemmon, South Dakota, "as close to North Dakota as
5 you can possibly be," to quote my colleague from South
6 Dakota, was your area code 605 or 701? Because Lemon is
7 known to have both.

8 Dr. Meink: Yeah, it's not just close. Actually, part
9 of the town is in North Dakota. I was 605, so.

10 Senator Cramer: That's fine.

11 So, Dr. Meink, it gets harder from there. I'm told
12 that the Air Force is considering canceling solicitations
13 for this transport layer on SDA's Tranche 2 and 3, and
14 instead using Star Shield, which is of course, an existing
15 SpaceX capability.

16 One of the purposes that specific purposes of SDA as
17 per the founding document is to, "Expand our Space war
18 fighting capability, and foster growth in the U.S. space,
19 industrial base." And I'm told that cutting these bids for
20 these transport layers means maybe 8 or more small mid-size
21 companies would not be allowed to bid. Is this a good idea?
22 I mean, do you think cutting opportunities like this could
23 hurt the innovators in the industrial base and the potential
24 going forward?

25 Dr. Meink: Senator, thanks for that question. You

1 know, one of the things that I pushed for, particularly over
2 the last 10 years is expand competition and expand the
3 industry base. That ends up almost always with the best
4 result, both from a capability and cost to the government.
5 I'm not familiar with those discussions going on within the
6 Pentagon. If confirmed, I look forward to diving into that
7 and assessing where they're going and what they're
8 recommending. But I've not seen those recommendations at
9 this point.

10 Senator Cramer: Well, I look forward to that. I look
11 forward to digging into that and finding out the answers,
12 and I'm hopefully changing course if that is, in fact, the
13 case going on with SDA, the founding document, which was
14 written in March of 2019, said, "We cannot match the pace
15 our adversaries are setting if we remain bound by legacy
16 methods and culture."

17 I have been told so many times by people seeking and
18 that have positions like you're all seeking that that's
19 their commitment to, and I have yet to really see anybody
20 put that to practice. So, as you were a member of NRO at
21 the time, I believe, and were probably part of that culture,
22 why do you think the statement was needed in 2019? And do
23 you think the statement is relevant today? And if not, why?

24 Dr. Meink: So, Senator, I think that sort of thinking
25 is always required, right? We always have to look at how

1 we're operating, how we're executing. As technology
2 changes, as different threats change, we have to be flexible
3 and adaptable enough.

4 We have made, I believe, significant improvements in
5 how we are acquiring systems. I would argue that at that
6 point in time, there were probably no programs that were
7 moving faster than the Chinese. That is not the case now.
8 But we still have a long way to give, Senator, and I think
9 you pointed a couple of those out.

10 Senator Cramer: Thank you for that. I think, well,
11 while I have time, I'm going to switch over to you, Mr.
12 Bass, and talk about something that's really near and dear
13 to my heart.

14 Coming from a rural state, very rural area with some
15 really important bases in our country, and our world, and
16 certainly to me, I championed some legislation in the NDAA,
17 the 2025 NDAA, about rural healthcare and access.
18 Specifically, to mental health services.

19 But I was told that that Defense Health Agency was
20 against it. So, the committee staff wouldn't put it in the
21 bill without a vote of the members. I brought the amendment
22 to the committee, it passed on a voice vote. And here's the
23 point. It has to do with TRICARE reimbursement for
24 healthcare services that don't meet the very specific
25 accreditation. Not a better accreditation, just an

1 accreditation.

2 That greatly reduces access to healthcare. To mental
3 healthcare. The reason this became important to me is
4 because I know of two airmen who sought mental health care,
5 grand folks, and were denied by TRICARE, who are no longer
6 with us because they ultimately chose to take their own
7 lives all because of this one accreditation.

8 That wasn't -- I don't know what would've happened had
9 they been able to get the care that was available to them.
10 But the bill that we passed, that's part of the NDAA. It
11 basically says if access in the state fails to meet
12 standards for more than 12 months consecutive, then we have
13 to look at something different.

14 Now it's under review. The first part of the bill is a
15 one-year review. My experience, and my experience is far
16 too often that in a year we have to ask somebody where the
17 review is, and they'll try to get it to us in four months.
18 Would you just please, please, please, please commit to the
19 men and women of the military that we'll look into this
20 right away. That, in that a year, from the enactment of the
21 law, I don't have to wait four more months for the
22 conclusion?

23 Mr. Bass: Thank you, Senator. And the mental health
24 access for our service members and our total force has to be
25 a priority. And I will commit to working with you on that.

1 Senator Cramer: Thank you for that.

2 Mr. Bass: Yes, sir.

3 Senator Cramer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 Chairman Wicker: Thank you, Senator Cramer. Senator
5 King.

6 Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

7 Mr. Duffey, it's appropriate that you and Dr. Meink are
8 sitting together because I think there's such a close
9 correlation between the work that you're doing. Technology
10 wins wars. The side that has the newer technology generally
11 prevails. Genghis Khan and the stirrup, the longbow at the
12 Battle of Agincourt, the tank in World War I, the atomic
13 weapon in World War II.

14 My concern is that we have missed two of the major
15 technologies of the 21st century. And this isn't a
16 criticism of the current administration. It goes back
17 probably 10 or 15 years; hypersonics and directed energy.
18 And we've got to catch up. And the budget, the prior
19 administration cut the budget for directed energy in half,
20 which to me just doesn't make sense. We're spending \$2 or
21 \$3 million per missile to knock those \$20,000 drones out in
22 the Red Sea. Directed energy certainly ought to be an
23 answer.

24 And I know that there's work going on, but it should be
25 accelerated. My request is that you try to think ahead and

1 think about acquiring the next technology, not just what
2 we've always done. My most hated words in the English
3 language are, "We've never done it that way before." I hope
4 you'll subscribe to a philosophy of trying to look to the
5 future. Your thoughts?

6 Mr. Duffey: Senator, thank you for the question. I'm
7 thrilled to not only be sitting next to Dr. Meink, but Mr.
8 Michael, who will be at the cutting edge of the next
9 generation of technologies. And I look forward to a
10 partnership with both these gentlemen on how do we advance
11 that technology? How do we leapfrog our adversaries'
12 capabilities there? And then I see my responsibility is how
13 do we accelerate getting that hand in the hands of the
14 warfighter?

15 Senator King: And one way to do that is smaller
16 businesses. We've had testimony to this committee by
17 smaller businesses that they've just given up on the
18 Pentagon acquisition process. Too complex, too much red
19 tape, too long. And I just hope that in your
20 administration, you don't turn away from fostering small
21 businesses where a lot of the innovation takes place.

22 Mr. Duffey: I agree with that, Senator. And I'd like
23 to recognize and appreciate the leadership's Chairman
24 Wicker's provided in the FORGED Act, which I think takes a
25 bold step of proposing the rescission of 285 provisions of

1 law that are no longer relevant. I think that's a great
2 step forward. How do we remove those burdens that we place
3 on business that want to deliver value to the Pentagon?

4 Senator King: I appreciate that.

5 Mr. Michael, research is crucial. Same argument that I
6 just made about the importance of new technology. I hope we
7 don't lose touch with our universities, which are huge
8 assets in terms of research, as well as the private sector
9 research capability. Is it your intention to maintain
10 support for research across the board, whether it's private
11 sector, government, or university?

12 Mr. Michael: Certainly. Senator, it's obvious to me,
13 and I'll give you an example. The AI industry, the private
14 sector, is investing hundreds of billions of dollars per
15 year in that which dwarfs orders of magnitude, the amount
16 we're spending in DOD. And we should be leveraging that in
17 some way. And, certainly, in the university settings,
18 they're also innovating in quantum computing and lots of
19 other areas that we need to be drawing from and pulling in
20 faster into the DOD and into Mr. Duffey's acquisition
21 programs so that we can get those things in sooner from both
22 of those types of organizations.

23 Senator King: Thank you.

24 Mr. Bass, I'm running short of time, but I want to be
25 sure that one of your priorities is brain health. The

1 signature issue from the war on terror has been problems
2 with blast over pressure and brain health long-term effects.
3 And I hope that's something you'll pay significant attention
4 to.

5 There are ongoing studies in the Department, but I want
6 to also emphasize that implementation of the results of
7 those studies is important. I hope that you'll commit to me
8 that brain health is something that you'll attend to in this
9 position. I think it's one of the most important maladies
10 affecting our troops.

11 Mr. Bass: Thank you, Senator, for your commitment to
12 this issue. DOD is a leader in this space, and I will
13 commit to you that we will continue to look at ways and
14 devote research to this issue and making sure that we
15 continue to make progress.

16 Senator King: Thank you.

17 Just in a few seconds, none is so devout as the
18 convert. I was not enthusiastic about the creation of the
19 Space Force under the leadership of Senator Cramer. I now
20 admit I was wrong. And I used AI a few minutes ago to
21 determine that this budget of the Space Force is 3.5 percent
22 of the total budget of the Defense Department.

23 Given the role of space in any future conflict, Mr.
24 Meink, I think the Space Force deserves greater resources
25 and greater attention. The first day or two of any future

1 conflict is going to take place in space.

2 Dr. Meink: Yes, Senator, I believe that you are
3 correct; that space is going to be one of the determining
4 factors, either from a deterrence perspective because if it
5 can't be affected, it's going to be a deterrent to the
6 adversary. So, we definitely need to get that right.

7 The Space Force budget has been, to my understanding,
8 has been growing significantly since it was founded five or
9 so years ago. And I will continue to advocate for the
10 resources. And I think the Department, in general, given
11 the threatened environment in PACOM Theater, is going to
12 play a very important role in both air and space, and I will
13 advocate for the resources to do that.

14 Senator King: Well, thank you, sir. Thank you, Mr.
15 Chairman.

16 Chairman Wicker: Well said by both of you. Thank you,
17 Senator King. Senator Budd.

18 Senator Budd: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And
19 congratulations to each and every one of you for your
20 nominations and your willingness to serve. It's much
21 appreciated. Thanks to your families for being here.

22 Dr. Meink, I enjoyed our conversation a couple of weeks
23 ago. You know, the Air Force announced that Seymour Johnson
24 Air Force Base will be one of Air Force's first deployable
25 combat wings ready for deployment in Fiscal Year 2027. So,

1 what's your understanding and view of the deployable combat
2 wing concept?

3 Dr. Meink: So, Senator, thanks for the question, and
4 thanks for our discussion. I apologize we got a little off
5 topic on some of those things, but I appreciate the time.
6 So, my understanding is fairly limited with the
7 reorganization and the refocus of how they're going to
8 deploy their wings. But I am aware they're in the process
9 of attempting to transition to that kind of concept.

10 I think it holds promise. And if confirmed, I will --
11 that's one of the areas I'm going to take a look at. My
12 understanding is that the Secretary will likely ask me to
13 take a look at it, if I'm confirmed.

14 Senator Budd: Look forward to working together in that
15 regard.

16 Continuing on in a January op-ed, General Allvin, he
17 highlighted that the Air Force fleet is the smallest and
18 oldest that it's ever been, setting in part that, "We are
19 blocked from divesting aircraft and programs, ill-suited for
20 today's threat environment." So, Dr. Meink, in your
21 opinion, is the F-15 E Strike Eagle ill-suited for today's
22 threat environment?

23 Dr. Meink: So, I believe, first off, the F-15s, it's
24 kind of my favorite airplane. An F-15 air cap came to my
25 rescue when I was in the tanker in the first Gulf War, and

1 ran off a couple of Iraqi fighters. So, I'm probably a
2 little bit conflicted when it comes to the F-15. But is it
3 going to be able to operate in the highest threat
4 environments? No. Does it have value? Yes.

5 I think the question going forward will be; how long do
6 we continue, and how do we best utilize the value from the
7 fourth-generation fighters? But I think it definitely has
8 value today. Not in all environments, but it definitely has
9 value today, Senator.

10 Senator Budd: Thank you.

11 More broadly, what are your thoughts on General
12 Allvin's comments about the size and age of the Air Force
13 fleet? And is our fleet, particularly our amount of
14 tactical fighters, is it too small?

15 Dr. Meink: Senator, the thing I can speak to for sure
16 is that the fleet is aging. The 30-plus years on average.
17 Some of the platforms, some of the critical platforms are
18 significantly older than that.

19 When I was a navigator, I had never flown a KC-135 that
20 was younger than me. They're still flying today. And one
21 of the mainline air refueling platforms that the Department
22 has. So, they're definitely getting old. Still very
23 capable platform, but they're definitely aging.

24 With respect to the exact numbers, Senator, I have not
25 seen, and I'm looking forward to seeing the detailed

1 analysis that went into the projections on NGAD and the
2 other systems. My sense though is it's probably too small
3 both on the fighter and the bomber side of the house.

4 Senator Budd: Thank you for that.

5 Mr. Michael and Mr. Duffey, American deterrence relies
6 on maintaining military technological edge over our
7 adversaries. China's strategy to blunt to that edge through
8 espionage, intellectual property theft, and rapid
9 acquisition is a threat that must be addressed.

10 So, if confirmed, you both would play a major role in
11 assuring insuring that American its allies have the tools
12 needed to prevail in war, while ensuring that critical new
13 technology stays out of unfriendly hands. So, Mr. Michael,
14 as we develop and scale new technology, including in GA, or
15 next generation air dominance, AI, and quantum. How will
16 you act to ensure that the security of these American
17 innovations and their IP remain in our hands?

18 Mr. Michael: That is one of the most important things
19 that I'll have to work on. Because if you look at what's
20 happened with the Chinese capabilities with Salt Typhoon,
21 and with infiltration into some of the university programs,
22 and into our systems, that means that that adversary can
23 catch up without 80 percent of the cost because they could
24 innovate on top of our 80 percent investment. And that's
25 quite a bit of advantage they get.

1 So, protecting against their ability to steal our
2 intellectual property, our trade secrets, and us not being
3 reliant on their supply chains are two things that we have
4 to do in combination with one another to ensure that when
5 we're superior, we stay superior.

6 Senator Budd: Thank you.

7 Along those lines, Mr. Duffey, how will you ensure that
8 our acquisition system can keep up with the rate of
9 technology and innovation in the world?

10 Mr. Duffey: Well, thank you for the question, Senator.
11 It is critical that we have a robust defense industrial base
12 that can provide security to protect our intellectual
13 property, but has the robustness to ensure that we're
14 delivering the most cutting-edge capability to our forces.
15 It would be my commitment, if confirmed, into the job to
16 explore those barriers that are preventing new entrants and
17 private capital from entering the defense industrial base to
18 accelerate the production capacity of our defense industrial
19 base, and to create new innovation to get it in the hands of
20 the warfighter.

21 Senator Budd: Thank you.

22 Chairman Wicker: Thank you, Senator Budd.

23 And I hope all policy makers, House, and Senate, and
24 the executive branch, and private sector are listening to
25 the valuable testimony. Let me just follow-up, if I might,

1 Senator Hirono, before I recognize you. Doctor, you said
2 the number of years into the future that the F-15 might be
3 valuable or useful is a question. Do you have an opinion
4 about that? Could you follow-up on that question that
5 Senator Budd asked?

6 Dr. Meink: So, Senator, I thanks for the question, and
7 I appreciate the opportunity we had to speak offline. I
8 haven't seen all the detailed results of the analysis that's
9 going on or that has gone on in support of the NGA and other
10 decisions. So, I don't have the latest information.

11 I would say, though, that the fourth-generation
12 fighters are still in many environments going to be
13 effective. I think at some point in time, it becomes a
14 cost-benefit analysis as we bring on additional fifth-, and
15 potentially, sixth-generation fighters. So, I can't speak
16 to the detail, Senator, but I will look into it, and I will
17 be happy to come down and brief the Hill on what I find.

18 Chairman Wicker: And that's a valuable answer in
19 itself. Thank you very much. And, Senator Hirono, you are
20 recognized.

21 Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And welcome
22 to each of you.

23 As part of my effort to focus on the ensuring the
24 fitness of all nominees who come before any of my
25 committees, I ask the following two initial questions. And

1 we'll start with Mr. Duffey, and go right down the line.
2 First question, since you became a legal adult, have you
3 ever made unwanted requests for sexual favors or committed
4 any verbal, or physical harassment, or assault of a sexual
5 nature?

6 Mr. Duffey: Never.

7 Senator Hirono: Let's go down the line.

8 Dr. Meink: No, Senator.

9 Mr. Michael: No, Senator.

10 Mr. Bass: No.

11 Senator Hirono: Second question. Have you ever faced
12 discipline or entered into a settlement relating to this
13 kind of conduct?

14 Mr. Duffey: No.

15 Dr. Meink: No, Senator.

16 Mr. Michael: No.

17 Mr. Bass: No.

18 Senator Hirono: This is the first hearing of this
19 committee since the security breach involving Signal, and
20 involving their attack on Yemen. So, I am going to ask each
21 of you yes or no questions. And, again, we'll start with
22 Mr. Duffey. Based on your backgrounds, each of you has had
23 a security clearance. Yes, or no?

24 Mr. Duffey: Yes.

25 Dr. Meink: Yes, Senator, I have a clearance.

1 Mr. Michael: I didn't hear you say do I have or have I
2 had?

3 Senator Hirono: Have you had, if you have historic --

4 Mr. Michael: Yes.

5 Senator Hirono: Yes. So, you know what a security
6 clearance is?

7 Mr. Michael: Yes, Senator,

8 Senator Hirono: Go ahead. And each of you would agree
9 that protecting classified information is important?

10 Mr. Duffey: Yes.

11 Dr. Meink: Yes, Senator.

12 Mr. Michael: It's obligatory.

13 Senator Hirono: It's what?

14 Mr. Michael: Obligatory.

15 Senator Hirono: Yes. It's the law. Have any of you
16 discussed classified information on an unclassified device
17 or medium?

18 Mr. Duffey: No.

19 Dr. Meink: No, Senator.

20 Mr. Michael: No.

21 Mr. Bass: No, Senator.

22 Senator Hirono: I'm glad that all of you have answered
23 no, because that's pretty obvious. If you admitted that you
24 did not follow the law, that you will be admitting to
25 committing a federal crime.

1 Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask unanimous consent
2 that the record of this hearing include the March 26th
3 Atlantic article, which includes all of the Signal chat
4 attack plans for the strikes on Yemen to be included in the
5 record of this hearing.

6 Chairman Wicker: It is their objection. Without
7 objection, it is so ordered.

8 [The information referred to follows:]

9 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

1 Senator Hirono: I also joined those of my colleagues
2 who are calling for an investigation, sooner the better. I
3 think we need to counter the tendency of this administration
4 to want to sweep everything under the rug whenever things
5 get uncomfortable for them.

6 I have a question for Dr. Meink. Joint basing
7 construct between the Air Force and Navy at Joint Base Pearl
8 Harbor-Hickam has led to extensive infrastructure and
9 military construction delays, including at the Hickam Air
10 Force Base or airfield. These delays have impacted the
11 military's readiness in the Pacific and warfighter quality
12 of life. Will you commit to working with my office to
13 resolve these readiness gaps and quality of life challenges,
14 Dr. Meink?

15 Dr. Meink: Senator, I commit to working with you,
16 Hickam, and Hawaii, or in general, critical to operations
17 within INDOPACOM Theater. So, I've had an opportunity to
18 spend and operate out of there in the past. I understand
19 the importance of it, and I will commit to working with you,
20 and Congress, and with the Navy, the new Secretary of the
21 Navy, to work on those issues.

22 Senator Hirono: And, of course, I'd like to see a lot
23 more coordination between the Navy and the Air Force on the
24 needs these construction needs. So, I hope that you have
25 some plans on how you will enhance the kind of coordination

1 I'm talking about?

2 Dr. Meink: Yes, Senator, as I just mentioned, I think
3 it's going to be critically important that I work closely
4 with the Navy and the Department of Air Force, of course, to
5 do what we need to do to ensure that the infrastructure in
6 Hawaii can support INDOPACOM.

7 Senator Hirono: Thank you. I'm running out of time.
8 But, you know, the infrastructure needs and the
9 modernization needs of all of our bases are, I think,
10 critical for readiness national security. So, I do have a
11 question relating to a concern about the state of our
12 military base, again, particularly in Hawaii, and that's why
13 I'm introducing a requirement in this year's NDAA for each
14 military service to submit a 30-year, a 30-year
15 infrastructure plan modeled after the Navy's annual 30-year
16 ship building plan.

17 And this will ensure, one hopes, long-term planning,
18 resilience, investments, and the accountability for all
19 services. Would you support, Dr. Meink, a 30-year
20 infrastructure plan for the Department of the Air Force?

21 Dr. Meink: Senator, as I always have for my career, I
22 will work to answer and address any language we get from
23 Congress.

24 Senator Hirono: I think that we need a longer-term
25 plan, because what happens is when you don't have this kind

1 of a plan, then the money that go is supposed to go for
2 these kinds of modernization and improvements gets taken for
3 other purposes. And that is why I think that if we have a
4 long-term plan, that we in Congress will be able to see
5 whether you are comporting with such a plan. So, I hope
6 that you will see your way to supporting such a requirement
7 in the NDAA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 Chairman Wicker: And members are reminded that
9 suggested legislation should be submitted by Monday night,
10 next, for inclusion in the NDAA.

11 Thank you, Senator Hirono. And Senator Banks. You are
12 next.

13 Senator Banks: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

14 Dr. Meink, the President has expressed historic
15 confidence in the Air National Guard by nominating General
16 Caine to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. That's never
17 happened before; to have a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs come
18 from the National Guard. And I wonder if you could speak to
19 the importance of the Air National Guard in the overall Air
20 Force mission, and the priority of the Air National Guard,
21 and what that will look like on your watch?

22 Dr. Meink: Thank you, thank you for the question,
23 Senator. And thank you for the opportunity to speak
24 offline. Yeah, the National Guard is critically important.
25 It is a significant portion of the Department's capabilities

1 across the board from tankers to fighter aircraft. It will
2 continue to be an important part of the Department, and we
3 need to continue to support and work closely with the States
4 and with Congress to make sure that stay so.

5 Senator Banks: On that note. As you know, the Air
6 Force is shrinking. We're not buying enough planes to keep
7 the force at its current size, but that means that the Air
8 Force Reserves and the National Guard carries a greater
9 priority in the mission. How can we ensure that the Air
10 National Guard is getting its fair share of new fighter
11 aircraft?

12 Dr. Meink: So, Senator, one of the things I plan to
13 do, and again, is take a holistic look across all the
14 modernization activities to understand what we need from a
15 numbers perspective. How fast do we need to build both to
16 support the active duty and the reserve units? And then, I
17 will advocate for whatever that requirement is or whatever
18 the capability is, and whatever the resources that are
19 needed to meet the requirement both up to the administration
20 and to Congress.

21 Senator Banks: Well, I appreciate that. I look
22 forward to working with you to make sure that the Air
23 National Guard doesn't get the short end of the stick, like
24 it often does.

25 Dr. Meink, your first Air Force assignment was flying

1 KC-135 at Grissom Air Force Base in Indiana. Can you talk
2 about how important the effort is there, and why it matters,
3 not just to Indiana, but to the country and our national
4 defense?

5 Dr. Meink: Yeah. So, this is probably an area I'm a
6 little bit biased on since I started my career in tankers.
7 But it is just -- it has always been critical, both from a
8 strategic nuclear mission, as well from a conventional
9 mission.

10 One of the reasons we were pulled off of alert and sent
11 to the Gulf War was because tankers were not only necessary
12 for the strategic mission, but they were just critical for
13 operations that were going on in the Middle East. So, yes,
14 the tanker force has been and always will be, and to some
15 degree, I think it's becoming more important given the -- in
16 the PACOM Theater, where the ranges are even longer than
17 what they are in some of the other theaters.

18 So, we need to continue -- we need to ensure that the
19 tanker force both active and reserves are able to support
20 mission.

21 Senator Banks: Does this surprise you? They're still
22 flying the same planes there that they were flying when you
23 were there?

24 Dr. Meink: I have to admit a little bit, but to some
25 degree not that I have too deep, but they had instances of

1 zero time those airplanes when I was active duty, when they
2 reengine them. So, it was almost a brand-new airplane,
3 effectively. But it is still, you know, 60-odd-years old.
4 That's still pretty old, even if you've done a lot of
5 maintenance on them.

6 Senator Banks: The Air Force refueling tankers are, on
7 average, among the oldest aircraft in the fleet. And the
8 Air Force isn't buying enough new tankers to replace the
9 ones that were retiring. The same goes for Grissom, the
10 place where, as you said, you started your career. Grissom
11 has a more than a two-mile runway, one of the longest in the
12 United States of America.

13 And as far as I can tell, the Air Force needs new
14 tankers for Grissom, which otherwise threatens to close down
15 the base. And we would lose that runway, that important
16 asset that we have. How should we be working to fix the Air
17 Force refuel or fleet?

18 Dr. Meink: Right now, you know, the new tanker is the
19 focus, right? We have to work with both within the
20 government and with the contractor to get that program on
21 track, to get the production rates up, and drive the cost
22 down so that we can afford to procure the tanker force
23 that's necessary both to expand and replace as even no great
24 airplane.

25 Senator, you're exactly right. It is getting pretty

1 old. We were going to have to replace those which means we
2 need to get the new tanker into full production.

3 Senator Banks: Well, I look forward to working with
4 you. Your background is perfect for this job. You have my
5 full support. And to each of the other three with us today,
6 I don't have time to ask questions, too, but
7 congratulations. I look forward to working with you, too.
8 I yield back.

9 Chairman Wicker: Senator Banks, in the summer of 1971,
10 I did my field training at Grissom Air Force Base, and my
11 first flight on the KC-135 was during that time at Grissom.
12 So, you're bringing back memories. And, yes, they like the
13 Buffs, they've been flying and doing well for a long time.

14 So, Senator Warren, you are next.

15 Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

16 Healthcare for our men and women in uniform is critical
17 in peacetime and even more so in wartime. Mr. Bass, if you
18 are confirmed as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health
19 Affairs, you're going to be responsible for ensuring nearly
20 10 million service members and their families receive
21 quality healthcare, including timely access to medication.

22 I am very concerned about our over-reliance on foreign
23 nations for very medications that put the health of service
24 members at risk and our national security along with it.

25 DOD spends over \$5 billion on prescription drugs each year.

1 It's a lot of money. But in November, 2023, the Defense
2 Logistics Agency released a report revealing that the supply
3 chain for a third of all drugs on the FDA's Essential
4 Medicines list is at very high risk. Why? Because the
5 ingredients from these drugs are sourced from China, or we
6 don't even know where they're sourced from.

7 So, Mr. Bass, do you agree that it is a threat to our
8 readiness and to the potential health of our service members
9 that DODs pharmaceutical supply chain relies so heavily on
10 China?

11 Mr. Bass: Thank you, Senator. And thank you again for
12 meeting with me. I do agree that it is a threat. It is a
13 vulnerability.

14 Senator Warren: So, this over reliance gives our
15 adversaries the power to restrict DODs access to drugs when
16 we need to be able to treat our men and women in uniform.
17 It also leaves us with much less visibility into the
18 practices of foreign manufacturers, which by the way,
19 routinely have quality issues that threaten both the
20 efficacy and the safety of these drugs.

21 For these reasons, the DOD report recommends boosting
22 the production of finished drugs, active pharmaceutical
23 ingredients, and other key starting materials so that we are
24 making more of this right here in the United States. Mr.
25 Bass, do you think DOD should work to onshore the critical

1 drugs the military needs, including writing contracts that
2 require manufacturers to onshore these capabilities?

3 Mr. Bass: Thank you, Senator. I do, I think that we
4 need to work with our industrial base, our private and
5 public partners, and we need to have rapid response
6 contracts, and we need to make sure that we either onshore
7 or nearshore capabilities.

8 Senator Warren: Good. I'm glad to hear you say this.
9 DOD should prioritize domestic purchasing, but there are
10 some instances where it makes sense for DOD to actually
11 produce the medication itself, like when the DOD is the sole
12 customer for that medication.

13 One example the adenovirus vaccine, which is critical
14 in preventing serious respiratory illness among service
15 members, particularly service members in basic training.
16 DOD developed the vaccine and licensed it then to private
17 industry. But because the military is basically the only
18 buyer, DOD couldn't find a commercial manufacturer for
19 nearly a decade. DOD eventually had to pay a private
20 manufacturer nearly \$100 million just to resume production.
21 And during the years that the private sector refused to
22 manufacture for DOD, there were thousands of cases of
23 adenovirus per month, and service members who actually died.

24 So, Mr. Bass, if confirmed, will you commit to
25 expanding DOD's capabilities of producing essential drugs

1 in-house to reduce risk and to secure DODs medical supply
2 chain?

3 Mr. Bass: Thank you, Senator. The health and well-
4 being of all of our military members is a priority. I'm not
5 familiar with the report, but I commit to working with you
6 and your staff.

7 Senator Warren: All right. I appreciate that, because
8 this is a serious problem. And, ultimately, these are
9 investments that will pay off. One expert estimated that
10 DOD would make its money back in three years after building
11 its own adenovirus manufacturing facility.

12 This is a longstanding bipartisan concern. I worked
13 with Senator Rubio for years on this, and last year, the
14 Senate adopted our language directing the DOD to enter into
15 contracts to domestically manufacture drugs and drug
16 components that are currently sourced overseas, and that are
17 used exclusively by the military. I want to see us get that
18 in the final version of the NDAA. There's more work to do,
19 and I look forward to working with you on this, Mr. Bass.
20 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 Chairman Wicker: Thank you very much. And Senator
22 Tuberville is next.

23 Senator Tuberville: Good morning. Thank you, Mr.
24 Chairman. Good morning, gentlemen.

25 Mr. Duffey, I just got back from Huntsville, Alabama

1 last week or so, and watched the performance of high energy
2 lasers. And Senator King had brought that up about spending
3 all these millions knocking down these drones. What's your
4 thoughts on high energy and what you've seen the progress in
5 the last few years? I've seen a lot in the last four years,
6 myself. Your thoughts?

7 Mr. Duffey: Well, Senator, thank you for the question,
8 and for the great State of Alabama's contribution to the
9 defense industrial base.

10 I agree with Senator King and with you. Directed
11 energy and high energy lasers would provide a tremendous
12 capability when we think through some of the threats that we
13 face, whether it comes to counter-UAS systems and really the
14 threat we face, whether it's from adversaries like the
15 Houthis that are able to inflict low cost kinetics at us
16 which require us to expend high cost weapon systems.

17 I think if we can get the technology where we need to
18 be with directed energy and higher energy lasers, that would
19 provide us with the capability to have very low-cost
20 response to those threats, and in the future of a
21 distributed warfare with swarms and that sort of things, I
22 think that'll be critical for us to establish that
23 capability.

24 Senator Tuberville: Thank you.

25 And the progress we've made has been small, private

1 companies. As Senator King was saying, sometimes they get
2 bought out and they move down the line, or can't make it
3 because of funding. But I think they're doing outstanding
4 job. I'd like to, when you're confirmed, come down and
5 visit and see this for yourself.

6 Mr. Duffey: I look forward to it, sir.

7 Senator Tuberville: Dr. Meink and Dr. Michael, just a
8 question for you here on the future of engineering in your
9 departments. Both of you we're going to have a tough time
10 keeping good engineers and people employed because of the
11 private companies taking our good people away out of the
12 military.

13 What's your thoughts and your plan of hopefully keeping
14 the best and the brightest in the military instead of taking
15 the private route? Either one of you or both of you.

16 Mr. Michael: I'd say it's twofold, Senator Tuberville.
17 First, we have to have some successes that are well promoted
18 inside the science and technology enterprise. If DARPA does
19 something great, we need to get it out of the labs and into
20 production fast, and that gives people motivation to want to
21 be part of one of those organizations.

22 The second thing is we should be working with private
23 industry more. If you take artificial intelligence, there's
24 a lot of money being spent, and a lot of research, and a
25 route of dollars. We shouldn't have to duplicate that in

1 every area of the government. We should be leveraging where
2 they're spending more and doing ahead. And the things we
3 have to do on the basic research side that's not profitable
4 for private industry, we've got to get it out of the labs
5 faster and into production sooner.

6 Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Dr. Meink?

7 Dr. Meink: Thanks for the question, Senator. And just
8 kind of to echo, I think it's not just money. I think it is
9 the opportunity to do advanced research, do advanced
10 engineering that has a mission outcome, right? That what
11 we've found in my current organizations, it's a very highly
12 technical workforce. We've done very well in recruiting
13 and, and retention.

14 And it goes kind of back to the quality of service I
15 mentioned a little bit earlier. Is when you bring in these
16 really skilled, talented people. Regardless of what that
17 talent is, there needs to be an opportunity for them to be
18 successful and to do what they love to do because it takes a
19 lot of work to get some of these skill sets. I think in
20 many cases, that's even more important than just pure
21 funding or pure salary.

22 Senator Tuberville: Thank you.

23 You know, we talk about machines a lot, but we don't
24 talk about people enough. And people are what's going to
25 get the job done for us. Mr. Bass, it's becoming more and

1 more common for members of our armed services to be referred
2 away from the military treatment facilities to civilian
3 providers. The consequences are enormous to the taxpayer,
4 the cost. We want to take care of our service members. How
5 do we fix this problem?

6 Mr. Bass: Thank you, Senator, and thank you again for
7 meeting with me offline. We need to take a look at medical
8 readiness as our priority, and we want to make sure we meet
9 the access to care standards for our military members. And
10 it's a delicate balance between going to the direct care
11 system, and the MTFs, and then to the private sector.

12 We need to look at and encourage healthcare and the
13 MTFs for both volume and complexity, but when necessary to
14 meet medical readiness standards. We need to also send it
15 out to the community. So, we have to look at the delicate
16 balance between the both. And if confirmed, I'll work with
17 the staff to make sure that we're meeting access standards,
18 getting healthcare for our troops and they're getting world-
19 class care.

20 Senator Tuberville: And as you and I talked about, you
21 know, cutting costs, we need to involve the 21st century of
22 AI into the things that we do between doctors, and
23 hospitals, and drug companies, and all the things that can
24 cut back costs. They're there, we just don't use them for
25 some reason. But I would hope we would get involved in

1 that. Thank you, guys.

2 Chairman Wicker: Thank you very much. Senator
3 Slotkin.

4 Senator Slotkin: I yield to Senator Rosen.

5 Senator Rosen: And I thank Senator Slotkin because I'm
6 off to Foreign Relations after this. So, thank you for
7 yielding your time. And thank you, Chairman Wicker. Thank
8 you to the witnesses for being here, for your families, for
9 your willingness to serve.

10 And, Dr. Meink, it's good to see you. Thanks for
11 meeting with me last month. And I want to say thank you to
12 Senator Banks, although he is no longer here, for bringing
13 up the importance of the National Guard because I could not
14 agree more. And Dr. Meink, as we discussed, Nevada's Air
15 National Guard's 152nd Airlift Wing in Reno flies the
16 dangerous Modular Airborne Firefighting System, easier to
17 say, MAFFS, the MAFFS mission. It flies it with its legacy
18 C-130Hs. They fly low and slow at max gross weight over
19 wildfires and mountainous terrain.

20 So, upgrading to the C-130Js would provide increased
21 power and cargo capacity for flight retardant, which equals
22 increased flight safety and firefighting capability in
23 Nevada, and, actually, throughout the Western states, which
24 is their mission every year we're plagued by devastating
25 wildfires. And just earlier this year, the 152nd Airlift

1 Wing was activated to fight those fires around Los Angeles.

2 Upgrading to the Js is also critical, because during
3 the summer months, C-130H is fully loaded with fire
4 retardant, can't even take off from Reno with a full tank of
5 fuel due to the heat and elevation. This wouldn't be a
6 problem for the C-130Js. So, it's why no other base
7 candidate has greater operational need.

8 So, Dr. Meink, the Fiscal Year 2024 Defense
9 appropriations procured 8 C-130Js, which weighed a basing
10 decision by the Secretary of the Air Force. If confirmed,
11 will you ensure that the 152nd Airlift Wing receives those
12 C-130Js? We actually were next on the list so that they can
13 more capably and safely carry out their dangerous
14 firefighting mission throughout the Western United States.

15 Dr. Meink: So, Senator, thank you for the question,
16 and thank you for the time. My Sherpa is actually a C-130J
17 pilot, so I've gotten a lot of indoctrination on importance
18 of a -130J. So, I promise to work with you, Senator. As
19 soon as I get confirmed and get an opportunity to take a
20 look at the basing laid out, I will work with the committee
21 and with you to make sure that is fully considered in those
22 decisions.

23 Senator Rosen: Yeah. Location, mission served is
24 always really important. I know we also discussed this, and
25 I see some young kids here in the audience. And so, airmen

1 stationed at Creech Air Force Base, Northwest of Las Vegas,
2 they fly the MQ-9 Reapers, the unmanned aerial system. They
3 struggle to find adequate childcare options because their
4 shift schedules are outside of normal business hours. They
5 actually go 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year
6 to support those global operations.

7 The DODs attempts to help provide in-home childcare
8 solutions for service members in regions with exceptionally
9 high demand. They've just not been successful so far. And
10 a lot of it has to do with the red tape and cumbersome
11 requirements, which essentially renders in-home childcare
12 reimbursement unavailable for many Nevada families. We
13 would be able to maybe do this within the community if we
14 could cut some of the red tape. We can serve each other.

15 So, Dr. Meink, this is so important for the needs of
16 our families, and for our mission, as well as they may be
17 based in Nevada, but they're not flying in Nevada. Maybe
18 can you commit to working with me to make this program work
19 better for our families. It's a quality of life and a
20 quality for our mission. Particularly those at Creech, they
21 really work outside those normal business hours.

22 Dr. Meink: Yeah. Senator, I commit to work with you.
23 As I mentioned earlier, my wife is a retired Air Force
24 officer. I spent time both active in reserves and civilian.
25 And I understand the challenges, particularly in some of the

1 remote locations. We go to these remote locations for a
2 reason, but it does create challenges and red tape. Yes, we
3 will, I will. I commit to work with you on streamlining
4 that.

5 Senator Rosen: Thank you. I so appreciate that. My
6 last question really quickly is about Nevada Test and
7 Training Range, the crown jewel of the Air Force Nelli Air
8 Force Base, the Knitter --

9 Chairman Wicker: What did you say? What?

10 Senator Rosen: The Nevada Test and Training Range, the
11 Knitter. The Knitter. I'm sorry, that's what the Air Force
12 calls it. Their crown jewel. We are proud to say that
13 provides the largest air and ground military training space
14 in the Lower 48. It can never beat Alaska on that amount of
15 space, sorry. But for the evaluations of weapons systems,
16 tactics development, advanced air combat training without
17 interference from commercial aircraft.

18 So, Knitter modernization has been among the Air Force
19 top priorities to ensure that our high-end training keeps
20 pace with current and emerging threats and capabilities. We
21 were able to finally pass NDAA modernization Fiscal Year
22 2024. That's the collaboration between the Nevada
23 delegation, the Air Force, Department of Interior, other
24 local stakeholders. Almost 90 percent of Nevada's land is
25 owned or managed by the federal government in some form or

1 fashion. So, there's a lot of pieces and parts.

2 And so, we'll take this for the record, but I'm going
3 to ask what your priorities for future investments at the
4 Knitter are, and how do we envision the range evolving? But
5 in deference to everybody else who's waiting, and Senator
6 Slotkin who allowed me to get over to Foreign Services,
7 we'll take that for the record.

8 [The information referred to follows:]

9 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

1 Senator Rosen: Thank you-all for your time.

2 Chairman Wicker: Thank you very much, Senator Rosen.

3 Senator Slotkin.

4 Senator Slotkin: Thank you. Thanks for being here.

5 Congratulations.

6 I remember coming in front of this panel under Chairman
7 Levin to do a panel confirmation hearing, and I remember
8 being the target of that. And everyone else just sat there
9 very quietly and got no questions. And so, for those of you
10 having different experiences today, congratulations.

11 Chairman Wicker: I think you were you were in junior
12 high?

13 [Laughter.]

14 Senator Slotkin: I was not in junior high, but I will
15 say I got the full McCain treatment and remember it to this
16 day. So, you should be proud and happy that none of you, I
17 think, have received the McCain treatment.

18 A couple of questions for Dr. Meink. You know, in
19 Michigan, we have Selfridge Air Force Base, the only Air
20 National Guard-controlled base in the country. And we've
21 discussed this, and any good Michigander will constantly
22 bring up our interest in a replacement fighter mission for
23 our A-110s, which are phasing out in Fiscal Year 2027.

24 I know that in order to, you know, have a better shot
25 of having a fighter mission, we need more airplanes. And I

1 just want you to know that there's lots of us on this
2 committee for various reasons, who want the Air Force to
3 have more airplanes. But will you please commit to working
4 with us on a replacement mission, a fighter mission, not a
5 refuel -- we've got those in coming -- but a fighter mission
6 for Selfridge Air Force Base?

7 Dr. Meink: Senator, I commit to work with the
8 committee both on -- to make sure we have the right number
9 of platforms, and where those platforms are betted on.
10 Happy to do that.

11 Senator Slotkin: But the right number is more, right?

12 Dr. Meink: Right. Number is likely more, Senator,
13 yes.

14 Senator Slotkin: I mean, no matter what it is, it's
15 more. Okay. Good. All right. Well, looking forward to
16 working with you and love to invite you to Selfridge, and
17 have you come formally and check out what we have going on.
18 It's an amazing base, so.

19 Dr. Meink: Happy to do so, Senator.

20 Senator Slotkin: Great. Switching gears. Mr. Duffey,
21 I know you've been sitting in the Secretary of Defense's
22 front office, and I believe acting as his Deputy Chief of
23 Staff. So, really at his right hand. And you're about to
24 become the Head of Acquisition for the entire Department of
25 Defense. That's a huge job. Hugely sensitive job. We

1 don't want, you know, other countries knowing what we're
2 acquiring, and so they can defeat it.

3 The leadership of this committee has sent a very
4 standard letter to the Department of Defense acting
5 Inspector General, asking for an investigation of what has
6 happened with potentially classified information being on
7 the Signal chat. What do you think of this investigation?
8 Will you commit to participating since you were right there
9 in the right hand of Secretary Hegseth during this moment?

10 Mr. Duffey: Senator, I was not a part of the chat
11 that's in question. I defer to others on the investigation.
12 And, you know, I will continue, as I have in the past,
13 always to communicate through approved channels with
14 sensitive information.

15 Senator Slotkin: But if the acting Inspector General
16 came to you as someone who's been so closely working in the
17 front office of the Secretary, you would participate in such
18 an investigation?

19 Mr. Duffey: I would participate. I would follow
20 Department procedure if that included the investigation.

21 Senator Slotkin: And are you aware of any other Signal
22 communications that has gone on from the front office of the
23 Secretary of Defense, either him or his senior staff that
24 have involved operationally sensitive information,
25 information about specific Whitman's platforms, the timing

1 of operations, or anything having to do with senior leader
2 decision-making? Are you aware of any other Signal chains
3 that you, your staff or your boss have been on in the past
4 90 days?

5 Mr. Duffey: I'm not aware of Signal chats that contain
6 sensitive information. No.

7 Senator Slotkin: Okay. So, you can confirm with a
8 clear yes or no, you have not been on any Signal chains that
9 provide operationally sensitive or classified information?

10 Mr. Duffey: No, I have not.

11 Senator Slotkin: Okay, great. That's makes me feel
12 good. You know, we all know that our main competitor in the
13 acquisition space is China. That they have invested in
14 technology that is purposely meant to undercut our
15 advantages in a fight.

16 So, if you can sum up in a bumper sticker what you're
17 going to focus on in the acquisition world in order to shred
18 that gap that we have with them, what is that bumper
19 sticker?

20 Mr. Duffey: Thank you for the question, Senator. I
21 think two really critical metrics when it comes to measuring
22 the success of our acquisition system. One is speed, and
23 second is capacity. I think nobody beats us on performance
24 and capability, but we need to accelerate speed, and we need
25 to manage cost.

1 And so, I think the best incentive because our
2 industrial base is absolutely critical to providing this,
3 this is something that they do best. It's one of our
4 greatest national assets, is our economic power and our
5 innovation within our industrial base.

6 And so, I think, if confirmed in this job, it would be
7 a priority for me to convene leaders of industry to
8 understand what are the barriers that get in the way of
9 business, wanting to do business with the defense industrial
10 base, and ensuring that we can benefit from the incentives
11 that competition provides.

12 The more interest we have in the defense industrial
13 base, the more innovation we'll get, and I think the more
14 there will be effective incentives to provide capable
15 capability at cost and at speed.

16 Senator Slotkin: Thank you. Thank you, Chairman.

17 Chairman Wicker: A key matter that needs attention.
18 Thank you very much for the question and the answer.
19 Senator Schmitt.

20 Senator Schmitt: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 And, again, I've said this earlier today. I've been
22 asked more questions about Signal in the last two days by
23 these journalists who didn't seem to care at all that we had
24 a commander-in-chief who couldn't put two sentences together
25 for four years. So, forgive me if I'm not being caught up

1 in this faux outrage that is being demonstrated by my
2 Democrat colleagues about a Signal chat that didn't have war
3 plans.

4 It occurs to me that this is more to do about the
5 election loss, and rooting against President Trump, and
6 trying to get a scalp than it is about national security.
7 So, keep going with it. Keep going with it. Because this
8 is the failed stuff that didn't work for you before.

9 Dr. Meink, I want to draw your attention because we
10 have a President now that we'll take decisive action.
11 Clearly, the announcement of NGAD, moving forward with NGAD
12 is a real positive. Just so happens that the F-47 will be
13 built by Boeing in St. Louis, which is a big win. But I
14 think it's a big win for the country to move forward. How
15 do you see our strategic -- the Chairman and I wrote an op-
16 ed last year about doubling-down really on our air
17 superiority. It's a real important thing for us to do,
18 strategically.

19 How do you think we -- where do we stand right now?
20 How important was that decision in your mind?

21 Dr. Meink: I think it was very, very important,
22 Senator. And, again, thank you for the one-on-ones we got
23 to do. I appreciate the time. So, I think the Department
24 of the Air Force, Air Superiority Global Strike, all the
25 command and control, ISR, all the systems that the

1 Department is responsible for are becoming increasingly
2 important, particularly in a China fight when it's such a
3 high threat environment.

4 You know, the sixth-generation capability that NGs will
5 bring, as well as the B-21 and other systems, the long-range
6 munitions that we're developing, all those are going to be
7 extremely important. And probably more so almost than
8 probably since World War II with respect to the importance
9 of air superiority and aircraft, in general, Senator. So, I
10 think it's a very important decision.

11 Senator Schmitt: One of the thing that is just worth
12 mentioning, I know you've been asked a couple questions
13 about this from some other Senators on the committee, but we
14 have an Air Force Reserve fighter Wing, the 442nd, that the
15 A-10 is going away. So, these follow-on missions and the
16 critical personnel that, you know, a highly trained, and if
17 there's not a sort of a follow-on mission, you lose that
18 expertise. And it's really, really hard to get it back.

19 And so, there's been a lot of discussions that I'll
20 look forward to talking with you and others about. The F-15
21 seems to make a lot of sense there. But Dr. Meink, I also
22 want to ask you, you have a pretty unique perspective having
23 served as the Deputy Director of NRO, and been responsible
24 for procurement with commercial space capabilities. And,
25 you know, if confirmed you'll have a responsibility for

1 managing kind of the other side of that collaborative
2 partnership. From the Space Force side, how do you view the
3 role of commercial space imagery providers? And I say this,
4 NGA West is in St. Louis, a huge asset and critical to our
5 national security. How do you view that given your role,
6 your previous role?

7 Dr. Meink: So, I think commercial space, in general,
8 is going to play a continuing bigger and bigger part. And
9 what we do both from a commercial space and then also from
10 national security, imaging services are a big part of that.

11 We've made a lot of advances in my current job. We've
12 dramatically expanded the number of commercial providers.
13 It's been interesting, right, operating in that highly
14 dynamic, VC commercial space. We've learned some lessons,
15 but I think we've come out of it stronger. And I expect to
16 and hope to, if confirmed, take those lessons that I've
17 learned work in that, in the NRO, to the Department.

18 Senator Schmitt: And I guess for whoever, got one
19 question left, so whoever wants to jump in. And Dr. Meink,
20 I feel like I've been dominating the questions with you.
21 We've heard a lot about procurement reform and being more
22 nimble. You've probably been asked, and I was in and out of
23 this hearing about this before, but what are -- if there
24 were two things that we could do better. What would it be?

25 Mr. Duffey: Senator, I'll take the question. I think,

1 first of all, I think we need to really examine very closely
2 what are the regulatory burdens that we place on businesses
3 that want to do business with the federal government. I
4 think we need to be a dependable and reliable customer
5 because competition is the greatest incentive structure that
6 we can have for our industry.

7 And if we -- there's the famous spaghetti chart out
8 there that talks about post-Last Supper in the late '90s.
9 The Defense Industrial Base went from 51 primes to 5 primes,
10 which really puts -- ad our prime contractors deliver
11 tremendous capability. But I do think we deprive ourselves
12 of the benefits of competition.

13 And so, it would be my priority, if confirmed, as the
14 Under Secretary, to examine where are those opportunities
15 that we could remove the barriers to entry for both new,
16 venture-backed, or private capital-backed companies, or to
17 help companies that are already providing value, that are
18 struggling to get access to the Pentagon, to give them
19 greater access. Because I think that will just really help
20 us to identify and accelerate capability to the warfighter.

21 Senator Schmitt: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

22 Chairman Wicker: Thank you very much, Senator Schmitt.
23 Senator Kelly.

24 Senator Kelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

25 I just want to comment on some of the comments that my

1 colleague from Missouri made about the Signal chat chain
2 talking about war plans. Well, I have planned and conducted
3 strikes off of aircraft carriers, multiple strikes into
4 harm's way over Iraq and Kuwait. And I would agree with the
5 Senator from Missouri, this is not an entire war plan. What
6 this is an operational plan for very risky combat operations
7 off of an aircraft carrier. And it's not all the
8 information.

9 But the most critical information that we have in our
10 government are things like launch time off of a platform, in
11 this case of an air aircraft carrier-type of airplane F-18s,
12 MQ-9s weapons like tomahawks, time on target. It is very
13 critical information. Somebody could argue that the piece
14 of paper, it came off of the Signal chat, it did not say
15 "secret" or "top secret."

16 When you have pilots that are about to go feet dry over
17 a foreign nation within an hour or two hours, and that
18 information is being shared on a non-secure system, it puts
19 those pilots at great risk. I agree. It is not all the
20 information, but some of the most critical information that
21 you would not want to be released is what was in that Signal
22 chain.

23 So, whereas I do agree with some of what you said with
24 regards to an entire plan, sure. But the most critical
25 pieces were shared publicly on an unsecured system by the

1 Secretary of Defense.

2 So, with that, I've got some other questions about
3 maritime industry and the SHIPS for America Act, which is my
4 legislation with Senator Young of Indiana. So, Mr. Duffey
5 and Mr. Michael, one issue I've been focused on for a long
6 time is the state of our maritime industry. TRANSCOM relies
7 on U.S.-flagged vessels and American mariners to provide
8 strategic sealift. And right now, we don't have enough
9 vessels or mariners to support sustained operations
10 overseas. It's a national security issue for us.

11 We also have a hollowed-out shipyard industrial base.
12 We the United States, and the only ocean-going ships we
13 build in the United States now are Navy vessels, and that
14 means constrained supply chains and increased costs for the
15 Navy. These are all really pressing issues for our national
16 security.

17 So, Mr. Duffey first, and then Mr. Michael. One, what
18 steps would you take to ensure that our cast and forged
19 industrial shipbuilding base from forging to supply chains
20 and production are ready for competition, crisis, and
21 conflict?

22 Mr. Duffey: Senator, thank you for your concern about
23 this very important issue. I had a chance to read the GAOs
24 testimony this week with respect to shipbuilding. And one
25 of the major concerns that sort of was revealing to me and

1 reviewing that was that since 2003, we have not increased
2 the number of ships in our Navy, which is really puts us at
3 a disadvantage when maritime supremacy is absolutely
4 critical in terms of deterring our adversary and preventing
5 future conflict.

6 My understanding of the challenges in the shipbuilding
7 industrial base includes workforce and supply chain. If I'm
8 confirmed into the role, it would be absolutely a priority
9 for me to work with this committee, and with you.

10 And thank you for your leadership on the SHIPS
11 legislation, because I think where we've seen success in the
12 Defense industry is where we can leverage capability in the
13 commercial industry. And I think that's one of the
14 proposals of your legislation is how do we enhance both
15 defense and commercial shipbuilding within the United
16 States?

17 Senator Kelly: And then, Mr. Michael, would you agree
18 that there are lessons that we can learn from the private
19 sector when it comes to shipbuilding best practices?

20 Mr. Michael: There are a lot of lessons learned. I
21 think the most sophisticated manufacturers today have very
22 sort of dashboard-like understanding of where their supply
23 chains are. Every supplier, they're required to build
24 something so that they can eliminate bottlenecks. They
25 could do just-in-time ordering. They know what's backlogged

1 so they can start on other processes while they wait for the
2 parts that are in short supply to come in.

3 AI can help with that, and look through and down the
4 supply chain across countries and figure out where the
5 materials are that we need and schedule labor to be
6 efficient on that. And that's done very effectively in lots
7 of industries today, that we should be borrowing that
8 technology or buying it, or building it ourselves, to do
9 that in these industries given the amount of money we spend.

10 Senator Kelly: And do you think having a vibrant
11 commercial maritime industry is going to help us build Navy
12 ships?

13 Mr. Michael: I think it can. I think the ancillary
14 technologies that are built to manage supply chains, and
15 manufacturing, and labor can be used to do the same thing in
16 the military.

17 Senator Kelly: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 Chairman Wicker: Thank you very much.

19 Mr. Michael, have you read my FORGED Act

20 Mr. Michael: Twice.

21 Chairman Wicker: Okay. Thank you very much. Senator
22 Sullivan, you're recognized.

23 Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

24 Mr. Michael, that's a good answer.

25 [Laughter.]

1 Senator Sullivan: Got you some points there. Good
2 work.

3 I want to thank all of you, all four of you, your
4 willingness to serve our country. Some of you have been
5 doing that most of your career, so it's a good, good panel,
6 and I appreciate everybody's service, and your family's
7 service, too. Families mean a lot in these kinds of jobs.
8 So, to your family members here as well, I want to thank all
9 of you.

10 Dr. Meink, I have shown you this slide here, and Mr.
11 Duffey as well.

12 Chairman Wicker: Let's put it in the record. Without
13 objection.

14 [The information referred to follows:]

15 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

1 Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My part of
2 the world in Alaska, the AOR, that's, you know, Arctic
3 Northern Pacific, we're getting a lot of action in our neck
4 of the woods with Russian "Bear" Bomber incursions into our
5 ADIZ, Russian Navy Vessels task force into our EEZ. I just
6 got a report harassing our fishermen just last month.

7 Again, joint Russian-Chinese strategic bomber task
8 force into our ADIZ, which has never happened in the history
9 of our country with armed MiG fighters and joint Russian,
10 Chinese naval task force. So, the lower 48 press doesn't
11 cover this a lot, but it is a lot of action in the great
12 State of Alaska. We are on the front lines of great power
13 competition. And so, I want to ask a few questions on that.

14 You know, Dr. Meink, we also have over 100 fifth-
15 generation fighters and F-16s, and our young men and women
16 who go do these intercept missions all the time. These are
17 tough missions. I was really glad to hear that you've done
18 these missions as a tanker navigator and flew intercept
19 missions against the Russians in the Alaska ADIZ. So, thank
20 you for that service.

21 But here's my question. We need more tankers. There's
22 no doubt about it. It's obvious. The Air Force has been
23 telling me literally for 10 years that we need more tankers.
24 It went from KC-46s -- yeah, we're going to put them up
25 there to -- oh, well now we're going to put them all CONUS.

1 I don't think that makes any sense. But that was the
2 decision. And they said, but we know we need more tankers
3 in Alaska, so we're going to move KC-135s from Kadena to
4 Alaska, then they rope a dope. That one, that was General
5 C.Q. Brown when he was chief of staff. That was previous
6 chiefs of staff of the Air Force.

7 So, finally, I wrote a rather forceful letter to
8 Secretary Kendall saying, "Hey, it's been about 10 years
9 since you guys committed to tankers in my state, which we
10 all know we need, right?" Just go do one of those. I mean,
11 you know, these guys go intercept Russian "Bear" bombers.
12 They got to tank four to five times just to get there.
13 Really tough missions that our young men and women do a
14 great job at.

15 So, Secretary Kendall, in the fall, wrote and said to
16 me, "Yes, Senator, the 4 KC-135s are coming." We had one.
17 And then I heard -- I was just home over the weekend with
18 some folks saying, actually, they moved that one back.

19 So, can I get your 110 percent commitment? These four
20 KC-135s are coming to Eielson. Our Air Force needs them.
21 It's been 10 years since the Air Force committed to me on
22 this. I'm getting a little impatient, as you can tell, but
23 this isn't a hard call. Everybody and their mother knows
24 that we need more tankers up in Alaska, given the action.
25 If we have to surge forces from the Lower 48 to INDOPACOM,

1 they're all going to fly over Alaska anyway. So, can I get
2 your commitment on that? No, head, no bob and weaving.
3 Just tell me yes.

4 Dr. Meink: So, Senator, if Secretary Kendall committed
5 to moving four tankers up there --

6 Senator Sullivan: And everybody for 10 years they've
7 been committing.

8 Dr. Meink: Then I will work to follow through on that,
9 Senator.

10 Senator Sullivan: So, that's a yes?

11 Dr. Meink: That's a yes, Senator.

12 Senator Sullivan: Great. Thank you.

13 Mr. Duffey, I want to just talk to you and Dr. Meink
14 very quickly, and we can do it in more detail. But the
15 INDOPACOM commander, the NORTHCOM commander, given this
16 action, NORTHCOM commander, was here just last week -- or
17 I'm sorry, three weeks ago, in testimony saying this is
18 going to only increase and we need the infrastructure to
19 deal with it.

20 As I just mentioned, our great airmen have to fly 1,000
21 miles just to get to the ADIZ just to intercept. So, they
22 have suggested the NORTHCOM commander more infrastructure, a
23 dead horse in Alaska, Galena, and very importantly, ADAC,
24 and an Air Force hangar with regard to tankers. Can I get
25 your commitment, work with me, both of you on those

1 infrastructure projects that the NORTHCOM and INDOPACOM
2 commander have both testified in the last month that they
3 need,

4 Mr. Duffey: Well, give me a chance to get to Alaska,
5 Senator. I will commit, yes, sir.

6 Senator Sullivan: Yeah, we know you're coming to
7 Alaska.

8 [Laughter.]

9 Senator Sullivan: Dr. Meink?

10 Dr. Meink: Yes, Senator.

11 Senator Sullivan: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 Chairman Wicker: Thank you, Senator Sullivan. Senator
13 Peters.

14 Senator Kelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

15 Dr. Meink, congratulations on your nomination to serve
16 as the Secretary of Air Force. And just want to say, I was
17 happy we had a chance to meet at length in my office, and
18 learn about a number of your priorities going forward.

19 As you know, Selfridge Air National Guard Base in
20 Michigan was selected as the home of a dozen new KC-46
21 tankers, to follow-up on Senator Sullivan's conversation.
22 And I, certainly, am grateful as you mentioned in the
23 office, your commitment to honor that decision to place
24 those KC-46s in Michigan. And I look forward to officially
25 welcoming you to visit Selfridge so you can see firsthand

1 the incredible facility that is there.

2 Similar to Senator Slotkin, who I know raised this
3 issue with you earlier, I also remain committed to securing
4 a future fighter mission for Selfridge which is set to lose,
5 as we talked about, it's A-10 squadron in Fiscal Year 2027.

6 During our meeting, we discussed the Air Force's
7 fighter force structure and prioritizing the
8 recapitalization of combat-coded fighter squadrons. As you
9 know, without recapitalization, the DOD risks losing
10 hundreds of skilled service members at a time when we are
11 already short over 1,000 fighter pilots and over 4,500
12 maintainers. Of the 25 Air National Guard Fighter Squadrons
13 in existence today, 15 do not have a recapitalization plan.
14 And being from a National Guard State, Air National Guard
15 State, that concerns me a great deal.

16 And so, my question for you, sir, is how can we ensure
17 we are taking full advantage of the expertise of our current
18 National Guard aviators and the crews that they have to
19 address this personnel shortfall that the Air Force has?

20 Dr. Meink: Again, Senator, I thank you for the
21 question, but also, I thank you for the opportunity to sit
22 down and talk with you a bit.

23 So, yeah, as I stated in the office, we for sure, the
24 KC-46 tanker, we will commit to that. In discussion
25 questions from Senator Slotkin, one of the things I will be

1 looking at across the board is the procurement plan of
2 fighters to meet the overall requirements that the
3 Department has been given, and what are the resources to get
4 to the right numbers of aircraft as we build out the F-35s.

5 And then, maintaining the fourth-generation fighters,
6 and then moving on into the NGAs program, making sure we
7 have the right numbers of platforms, and then look at where
8 we're going to put those platforms. And, Senator, if
9 confirmed, to work directly with you on where we think we're
10 going to land and have that discussion for sure.

11 Senator Kelly: Great, great.

12 We also discussed in that office meeting how
13 collaborative combat aircraft and other similar warfighting
14 autonomous capabilities can be utilized and integrated
15 alongside the KC-46s for both improved command and control.
16 These autonomous aircraft will be, as you know, crucial in
17 the Indo-Pacific given their relative low cost and the
18 versatile capabilities as well as high numbers to be able to
19 produce at scale.

20 So, my question for you, sir, is can you share your
21 plans to prioritize and improve the acquisition process for
22 autonomous capabilities to improve force mix of integrated
23 Air Force platforms, as well as weapon systems. And
24 clearly, acquisition process needs to be a whole lot
25 quicker, a whole lot more efficient. I'd love to hear your

1 plans to make that happen.

2 Dr. Meink: I can talk about improving acquisition rate
3 of innovation for all day long. I think the key is have the
4 right people running the programs, have the right set of
5 requirements, give the right authorities to the program
6 managers, and then support them through the acquisition.
7 I've done that throughout my life with significant success,
8 and I will continue to do so.

9 With respect to specific acceleration of the different
10 unmanned systems, CCAs, and other follow-on systems. I
11 haven't been given the detailed -- you know, it's part of
12 the larger NCCA, the larger enterprise solution that the
13 Department's been working on. I haven't gotten the detailed
14 briefing on all that. But that will be a focus. It's a
15 combination of not just the manpower forms, but it's the
16 CCA, and I believe there's likely other platforms that'll be
17 required.

18 And that's going to have to be a focus because that's
19 what that integration of those different type of platforms
20 with ISR and other capabilities is what's going to be
21 required to deter any aggressor and PACOM, any place else,
22 and win, if we need to. We're going to have to make sure we
23 get that right.

24 Senator Kelly: Thank you, Dr. Meink. Look forward to
25 working with you on that issue and the others that we

1 discussed in my office. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2 Chairman Wicker: Thank you, Senator Peters.

3 There is a vote on. I'm the only questioner remaining
4 in the first round. Let me go quickly. Mr. Duffey, thank
5 you for mentioning the FoRGED Act on multiple occasions.
6 With regard to things like other transaction agreements and
7 middle tier acquisition, you can go ahead with that now
8 without the enactment of additional legislation. Is that
9 correct?

10 Mr. Duffey: Yes, Mr. Chairman, that is correct. And
11 if confirmed, I would look to find ways in advance of any
12 additional legislation reforming the acquisition to ensure
13 that the department is maximizing the use of the
14 flexibilities of the Congress has already provided.

15 Chairman Wicker: That's good. And we need to do that,
16 and we are going to work with you on that. Mr. Michael, let
17 me ask about Defense Established Program to stimulate
18 competitive research, or DEPSCoR. How can we build up
19 innovation across the heartland not just in Silicon Valley
20 and Massachusetts?

21 Mr. Michael: I think there's a lot of ways. I think
22 the SBIR programs. I think the way we get our supply chains
23 unlinked from our adversaries, those kinds of technologies
24 or products, if you will, that we could do that are
25 perfectly made for more manufacturing-style capabilities and

1 software writing. And I think there are lots of good
2 universities in the center of the country that have lots of
3 manufacturing capability, training programs, and there's
4 lots of plants there that exist that maybe are not being
5 used that would be used to do component building and so on.

6 So, I think that, plus focus on universities outside of
7 the Ivy Leagues and the Coasts. There's lots of
8 universities in Indiana, and in Chicago, in Illinois,

9 Chairman Wicker: Mississippi.

10 Mr. Michael: Mississippi, perhaps, Alabama, that are
11 doing great things. And I think if we -- they specialize in
12 certain, you know, subject matter areas that we get a lot of
13 productivity out of that part of the ecosystem.

14 Chairman Wicker: Very good.

15 And then, I'll end with Mr. Bass. You have experience
16 in the Department of Veterans Affairs. Based on your
17 experiences there, what additional steps should we take at
18 the DOD to improve retention and recruitment of civilian
19 healthcare personnel?

20 Mr. Bass: Thank you, Chairman. Recruiting and
21 retaining highly qualified staff has to be a priority. We
22 are in direct competition with the civilian sector for these
23 critical skills and these specialists.

24 Chairman Wicker: It's a problem.

25 Mr. Bass: Yes, sir, absolutely. It is a problem, and

1 it's difficult to compete. We need to take a look at Title
2 38 authorities to see if we can use that to strategically
3 recruit specialists. We need to take a look at paying
4 compensation packages. We should look at training
5 opportunities to ensure that we recruit and retain these
6 folks. And we need to make sure we develop pipelines,
7 recruiting pipelines from prominent universities in
8 Mississippi, and to make sure that we have a necessary force
9 to carry out our medical mission.

10 Chairman Wicker: Rhode Island, not so much?

11 Mr. Bass: Sir, I can't comment on that.

12 Chairman Wicker: Senator Reed, we've got a vote on?

13 Senator Reed: Yes, sir.

14 Chairman Wicker: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

15 With that, I'd like to thank our witnesses. Very good
16 hearing. For the information of members, question for the
17 record will be due to the committee within two business days
18 of the conclusion of this hearing. And with that, and with
19 the thanks of the committee, we are adjourned.

20 [Whereupon, at 11:44 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]