UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

Thursday, May 4, 2017

U.S. Senate
Committee on Armed Services
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:30 a.m. in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John McCain, chairman of the committee, presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN MCCAIN, U.S. SENATOR FROM ARIZONA

Chairman McCain: Good morning. The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on the posture of the U.S. Special Operations Command, known as SOCOM.

I would like to welcome Ms. Theresa Whelan, who is representing the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, and General Tony Thomas, the Commander of SOCOM. I thank our witnesses for appearing before the committee and for their many years of dedicated service to the Nation.

The purpose of today's hearing is to hear directly from the senior civilian and military leaders responsible for ensuring our special operations forces are trained, equipped, and ready to confront what is the most complex and daunting set of national security challenges our Nation has faced since the Second World War.

In response to the increasing threats, our combatant commanders around the world have developed a seemingly insatiable demand for the unique capabilities of our special operators. That is especially true in the fight against terrorism.

For the last 15 years, special operations forces have been heavily engaged in the fight against global terrorist
groups. As a result, SOCOM's budget has emphasized optimizing and sustaining counterterrorism capabilities. This is unlikely to change anytime soon. The United States will remain engaged in global counterterrorism operations of varying scope and intensity for the foreseeable future, and special operations forces will continue to play a vital role.

But we must be careful never to equate special operations with counterterrorism. Special operations forces must be prepared to perform a variety of other critical missions beyond counterterrorism, missions that will continue to grow in scale and importance, and demand more from our special operations forces.

China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are becoming more aggressive in challenging U.S. interests and partners through the use of asymmetric means that often fall below the threshold of conventional conflict. The ability of our special operators to conduct low-visibility special warfare operations in politically sensitive environments make them uniquely suited to counter the malign activities of our adversaries in this domain.

Put simply, special operations forces have an indispensable role to play in great power competitions and global counterproliferation.

The challenges posed by militarily advanced great
powers will require the development and employment of new
technologies and capabilities. It also warrants a serious
review of the need for additional special operations force
structure.

However, posturing a force to effectively operate in
this domain will not be possible until we in Congress step
up and repeal the misguided and disastrous defense spending
caps and forthcoming defense budget cuts required by law in
the Budget Control Act. Persistent budgetary uncertainty
undermines the ability of our military leaders to plan and
forces them to choose between near-term readiness to support
ongoing operations and optimizing the force and its
capabilities to address emerging and future requirements.

This is not sustainable, and this is not right.

I look to our witnesses to explain how SOCOM is
attempting to balance the need to support ongoing
operational warfighting requirements while also ensuring
that the force is prepared to deal with emerging threats, as
well as describe in detail where budget shortfalls are
forcing you to accept risk.

Lastly and most importantly, I expect our witnesses to
provide the committee with an update on the overall health
of the force and what is being done to mitigate the impact
to our operators and their families. Fifteen years of
continuous combat operations in back-to-back deployments
have placed enormous strain on the force, challenging
readiness, resilience, and retention.

We owe our operators and their families who have given
so much in defense of our Nation the support that they
deserve.

Again, I thank our witnesses for being with us today
and look forward to their testimony.

Senator Reed?
STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE ISLAND

Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Let me also join you in thanking our witnesses for appearing today to discuss the United States Special Operations Command and the readiness of our special operations forces. You are both ably leading your respective organizations through a period of both high operational tempo and also significant transition.

The United States Special Operations Command, or SOCOM, recently celebrated the 30th anniversary of its establishment by Congress. Those 30 years, and particularly the last 15, have been characterized by great successes, including the operation that killed Osama bin Laden. SOCOM’s history also includes tragedies that resulted in the loss of brave special operators.

Fortunately, our special operations forces have learned from each of these events and have emerged as a stronger and more capable force.

General Thomas, the high quality of men and women you lead today are a testament to that lineage.

SOCOM is unique within the Department of Defense as the only functional combatant command with service-like responsibilities for the training, equipping, organization, and readiness of special operations forces.
When Congress created SOCOM, it also established the position of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, or ASD/SOLIC, to be the service secretary-like civilian tasked with day-to-day advocacy and oversight of special operations forces. For many reasons, including competing responsibility for other policy matters, the ASD/SOLIC has not adequately fulfilled the mandate to date.

The National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 2017 sought to address this issue with a number of reforms designed to optimize the partnership between the Commander of SOCOM and the ASD/SOLIC for the benefit of special operations forces. For that reason, we are pleased to have Ms. Whelan, the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense SOLIC, testifying today in the service secretary-like role envisioned by last year's reforms.

We look forward to receiving an update from both of you as to the progress you have made toward achieving the goals of last year's bill and what we expect over the next several years.

Our special operations forces remain heavily engaged in the fight against ISIS, Al Qaeda, and other violent extremist organizations, sometimes directly, but more often in support of local partner forces on the ground, as we have seen most prominently in Iraq and Syria. I hope both of you
will give us your assessment of what, if anything, we can do
to accelerate progress in defeating these groups.

While the last 15 years of special operations
deployments have been primarily focused on countering
violent extremist groups, there is growing realization that
special operations forces, and the unique skillsets that
they possess, may be called upon for other missions as well.

General Thomas, you and many in your community have
sought to characterize this so-called gray zone of
competition short of direct military conflict. We saw such
tactics most notably as part of Russia's eventual illegal
annexation of Crimea, and should expect more such challenges
as adversaries pursue efforts against the United States and
other countries.

I hope that you will provide the committee with your
views on the suitability of special operations to direct
gray zone challenges today and what changes in special
operations capabilities and authorities, many of which were
designed to confront the terrorist threat, may be necessary.

Given the demand for special operation forces across
these various mission sets, we must always remain mindful of
the already high operational tempo faced by our special
operators and their families. SOCOM has sought to mitigate
the stress of these repeated demanding deployments through
the Preservation of the Force and Family Initiative. I look
forward to an update on the lessons learned from this
initiative and SOCOM's plans going forward.

General Thomas and Ms. Whelan, I hope you will pass
along the committee's admiration and thanks to our special
operators and their families for the tremendous sacrifices
they make in support of our national security.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Ms. Whelan?
STATEMENT OF THERESA M. WHelan, ACTING ASSISTANT
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS/LOW-INTENSITY
CONFLICT

Ms. Whelan: Thank you, Senator. Chairman McCain, Senator Reed, and distinguished members of the committee, I am honored to appear before you today in my capacity as the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. I am pleased to share the table with General Tony Thomas, who has served at the forefront of the special operations forces at all levels of command. Our entire SOLIC team is proud to partner with him and his command in forging the future of DOD special operations.

I would like to thank you and your predecessors for the foresight to create SOLIC and USSOCOM 30 years ago, and for your commitment to maintaining that vision over the last 3 decades. We are grateful for this committee's strong support for special operations, as evidenced by the resources, authorities, and depth of understanding you provide in your oversight. Our military is stronger and more capable due to your efforts.

Today, I will focus on three topics: winning the current fight and defeating emerging threats, building on the foundations of Section 922 ASD/SOLIC authorities, and continuing to hone the edge of SOF personnel and capabilities.
SOF is a vanguard force in countering emerging threats at the leading edge of the modern security landscape. In the last 15 years, we encountered a networked enemy, we flattened our organizations and accelerated our targeting cycles, and we built a network to defeat them. We now face advanced transregional threats that demand greater levels of coordination and collaboration, and we are redoubling our focus on building relationships and international and interagency partners.

Today, SOLIC provides advocacy for the special operations budget, which is approximately 1.8 percent of our defense budget in 2017. And we directly manage over $2 billion in various budgets that support counterterrorism and counternarcotics efforts.

The 3 decades-long partnership between SOCOM and SOLIC has generated a force capable of dealing with emerging threats and a force that is able to translate those gains across the department. We will win the fight against VEOs and protect our citizens, vital interests, allies, and partners.

This requires a long-term strategic approach that combats terrorists, disrupts terrorist networks, discredits extremist ideologies, and diminishes factors that contribute to recruitment and radicalization.

Sustained funding and flexible legislative authorities
have been instrumental to those efforts. I want to thank the committee for establishing Section 127(e), formerly known as Section 1208, as a permanent authority. The maturation of this program has provided our warfighters a powerful tool to employ to support our allies, attack our enemies, and protect our force, and it is a great example of interagency synergy enabled by strong congressional support and oversight.

Congressional support for countering threat finance and transnational organized crime is also crucial to our efforts. Terrorists, insurgents, and other threat networks depend upon illicit revenue streams and criminal facilitators for logistics support, money laundering, or obtaining weapons and fraudulent documents.

Thank you also for codifying the responsibilities of ASD/SOLIC's important oversight role, comprised of the complementary tasks of monitoring and advocacy in the fiscal year 2017 NDAA.

USSOCOM has made dramatic advances during wartime in response to urgent battlefield demands, gains that require an institutional foundation to endure. The service secretary-like authorities in Section 922 serve as a strategic linchpin ensuring that we lock in these hard-won gains.

These authorities have empowered the Special Operations
Policy Oversight Council, which we have used over the past year to resolve base infrastructure and casualty evacuation issues among SOCOM and the services. Ultimately, these gains can be leveraged across the entire force with SOF best practices in technology and talent management serving as templates for the department in addressing emerging challenges.

A key part of SOLIC's role is to advance the state-of-the-art in concepts, technologies, and strategies for both humans and hardware. Our Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office leads this effort with SOLIC developing cutting-edge technologies for SOF, the interagency, and law enforcement.

The SOF Truths state that humans are more important than hardware. As we continue to provide agile and innovative capabilities, we must also continue to build and sustain an elite work force suited to the unique and diverse demands of 21st century warfare.

We will also continue to work closely with Congress to ensure that we have the right policies, agile authorities, and necessary resources to employ SOF effectively. I thank Congress for its continuing support of our men and women in uniform, and their families, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Whelan follows:]
Chairman McCain: General Thomas?
STATEMENT OF GENERAL RAYMOND A. THOMAS III, USA, 
COMMANDER, UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

General Thomas: Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am especially grateful to be here today with Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Whelan in a session dedicated exclusively to special operations as it provides us the opportunity to discuss in detail the unique requirements, capabilities, and challenges associated with your United States Special Operations Command.

This body legislated us into existence a little over 30 years ago to act as a unique Department of Defense organization, a dual-hatted, service-like entity responsible for the manning, training, and equipping of special operations forces, as well as a globally focused, functional combatant command.

In fulfilling the first role, which continues to be our primary function, I believe we have consistently provided the world's best special operations forces to the geographic combatant commanders. However, it is in the second role, as a globally focused combatant command, where SOCOM has evolved the most.

As we carry out both of these roles today, special operations forces are more relevant than ever to the current
and enduring threats facing our Nation. We have been at the
forefront of national security operations for the past 3
decades, to include continuous combat over the past 15.5
years. This is historic period has been the backdrop for
some of our greatest successes, as well as the source of our
greatest challenge, which is the sustained readiness of this
magnificent force.

We are thankful for the resources you have provided not
only to operate this force but also to perform the critical
sustainment efforts that underpin our most precious resource
-- our people.

Last month was particularly difficult for the United
States Special Operations Command, losing its 407th hero,
Staff Sergeant De Alencar, a father of five, in a firefight
in the Nangarhar Province of Afghanistan while operating
alongside his Afghan partners. Then last week, we lost
Ranger Sergeants Thomas and Rogers, our 408th and 409th
casualties, respectively.

This comes on the heels of 16 other combat fatalities
since I assumed command a year ago. It is a stark reminder
that we are a command at war and will remain so for the
foreseeable future.

My current priorities for the command fall into three
broad categories. First, we must win the current fight,
which consists of carrying out assigned missions running the
gamut from defeating Islamic extremism, both Sunni and Shia, to countering Russian aggression, to preparing for contingencies in Korea, as well as various security operations to defend the homeland. Second, we must continue to transform our enterprise to remain relevant in the rapidly changing security environment. Finally, we must take care of our people and their families as they form the foundation upon which our force is built.

My first year in command has seen us focused on these priorities as we transform the way the Department of Defense looks at many of the national military strategy challenges in our role as the coordinating authority for countering transregional threats. More recently, we have also poured significant resources into defining our role as the department's synchronizer for countering weapons of mass destruction.

Both of these substantive roles are additive to the current missions, where approximately 8,000 special operations forces are deployed in over 80 countries, working with international, interagency, and DOD partners in support of the geographic combatant commanders' priorities.

This focus is also occurring during a period of unprecedented recapitalization of substantive parts of our warfighting capability, to include the conversion of our entire C-130 fleet to J model C-130s, as well as other major
platforms. We are extremely thankful to the services for enabling this transformation of the force, as it sets us on the path for success for decades to come.

We are equally grateful for the support of Congress for the required resourcing that, in turn, has produced a SOCOM which is relevant to all the current and enduring threats facing the Nation. We appreciate your continued oversight and advocacy for your United States Special Operations Command, and I look forward to your questions today.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of General Thomas follows:]
Chairman McCain: Thank you, General.

General, how are the spending caps under the Budget Control Act impacting the readiness and capabilities of special operations forces?

General Thomas: Chairman, that has been a consistent challenge over the last couple years as two of the things that we would endeavor to control in terms of predictability, and that is the deployment tempo and the resourcing of our force. Resourcing has not been very predictable over the last several years, and the potential for continued cuts undermines both our readiness and our modernization going forward.

Chairman McCain: So what does that do to morale?

General Thomas: Chairman, indirectly, I think, obviously, it affects the morale of our servicemembers who are concerned about the support of the Nation and this body.

Chairman McCain: When it is not predictable as to where and when they will be required because of budget constraints. True?

General Thomas: Chairman, it is true. Yes, there is a ripple.

Chairman McCain: So how can you plan, in this budgetary environment, when we lurch from crisis to crisis? I guess I am a little redundant here, but when I look at this map of where all of your people are, spread all over
the world, it seems to me at least we owe them some kind of predictability.

Let me ask, what is your assessment? Do you know when we will see an updated counter-ISIS strategy from the administration?

General Thomas: Chairman, we are currently working on updating that strategy.

Chairman McCain: What is your assessment of Russia's malign activities aimed at destabilizing Eastern Europe and our NATO allies?

General Thomas: Chairman, as I think you know, we are supporting General Scaparrotti's efforts to both discern and determine the nature of Russian aggression, as well as to compete short of conflict in the various countries where it occurs.

Chairman McCain: And have you seen the Russia malign activities increase, decrease, or stay the same?

General Thomas: Chairman, I would assess they are a steady state of aggressive activities.

Chairman McCain: And how do you think we deter that?

General Thomas: Chairman, I think by, with, and through our allies is the primary approach. I think we have great support and great opportunity there, and we are continuing to enhance that approach.

Chairman McCain: Has the European Reassurance
Initiative had a positive impact?

General Thomas: It has, Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Do you think we are in a "stalemate" in Afghanistan, as General Nicholson testified before this committee, in light particularly of recent successful, at least in their view, Taliban attacks, including the killing of over 100 Afghans at a base?

General Thomas: Chairman, I am aware of General Nicholson's description of the current status of the fight as a stalemate. I recently returned from visiting Afghanistan where you know our special operations forces play a key role with our associated forces.

It is, admittedly, a very tough fight, and we are beginning yet another fighting season. I would offer, though that, in terms of stalemate, the one objective we had for why we went there in the first place that we have accomplished over the last 15.5 years is the avoidance of another attack from that area. That certainly is an accomplishment and something that we need to reinforce going forward.

Chairman McCain: But if you have a "stalemate," that means that it does not end, doesn't it?

General Thomas: Chairman, I understood the commander's assessment of stalemate as an opportunity to change the strategy.
Chairman McCain: But that opportunity, if the present status quo prevails, then there is no end to it. In other words, what do you think needs to be done to end a stalemate?

General Thomas: Chairman, I think that General Nicholson and the Secretary are pursuing new initiatives to --

Chairman McCain: What do you think is needed, General Thomas?

General Thomas: Chairman, we are integral to the discussion on what is needed going forward. Again, I am supporting the commander there, and supporting our Secretary of Defense in terms of the strategy --

Chairman McCain: You know, you testified before this committee that you would give your opinion, if it is requested by this committee. I will ask you again. What do you think needs to be done in Afghanistan to end a stalemate?

General Thomas: Chairman, I think the critical factor is the commitment, the commitment to some enduring state that has not been described effectively in the past. I think the new strategy is going to establish that definition of what --

Chairman McCain: Does that mean, in your view, additional troops commitment?
General Thomas: Chairman, additional troops are being considered, changes to the ROE --

Chairman McCain: In your opinion, do you think it requires additional troops?

General Thomas: Chairman, right now, I think we have an adequate number of my troops, special operations forces, on the ground.

Chairman McCain: Of your troops, you think you have enough?

General Thomas: I do.

Chairman McCain: And how often do your average individuals under your command serve overseas?

General Thomas: Chairman, I believe what you are getting at is the deployment tempo for folks.

Chairman McCain: Right.

General Thomas: It varies across our force. In some cases, various parts of our force, various components are in a 1-to-1.2 worst-case deployment.

Chairman McCain: Meaning how many months deployed versus how many months back in the United States?

General Thomas: With that ratio I just described, they are about a 1-to-1, so 6 months or so deployed, if that is the rotation, 6 months back. That is the worst case. In the best case, we have been able to establish a balance of 1-to-3, so for every 6 months deployed --
Chairman McCain: Isn't it a significant strain to have half your time deployed? Doesn't that put a lot of strain on the individuals and their families?

General Thomas: Chairman, that worst case is actually less than the DOD's desired rate, and we are endeavoring to get that back in balance.

Again, that is not our entire formation. That is only parts of our formation. But it is unsustainable, to your point.

Chairman McCain: I thank you, General.

Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

To both Ms. Whelan and General Thomas, do you believe that both SOCOM and SOLIC have an adequate seat at the table when discussions are made about budget acquisition and other issues impacting your force, vis-a-vis the other services?

Ms. Whelan?

Ms. Whelan: Thanks for the question, Senator.

Actually, I think that the recent language in the NDAA in Section 922 has significantly improved the ability of ASD/SOLIC to gain a seat at the table. And to that point, specifically, we recently used that language to justify getting a separate seat for ASD/SOLIC on the Deputy Secretary's management action group, which previously SOLIC did not have.

We have also gained a separate seat for SOLIC on the
Deputy Secretary's SAP Oversight Council. SOCOM has a number of special access programs that we previously had not been able to manage independently. Further, within the department, we have established a tiger team to cross departmentwide in order to determine other areas in which ASD/SOLIC needs to gain additional authorities and abilities within the department to represent SOCOM and have a seat at the table. One other recent accomplishment is I think we will have a seat for SOCOM in the upcoming defense strategy development process.

Senator Reed: General Thomas, any comments?

General Thomas: Senator, I would reinforce Theresa's points. We very much embrace the recent language that reinforces ASD/SOLIC's role as a service-like entity. We are well-represented at all of the appropriate venues. It sometimes takes reminding that we are unique in that case, because we are seen as either one or the other, and we sometimes have to remind folks that we are both, a service-like entity and a combatant command.

But you have empowered us to be at the table for all those venues, and we are adequately represented. Thank you.

Senator Reed: Secretary Whelan, are there any responsibilities you have that you feel might be more effectively and efficiently carried out by another entity?
You have a broad range of responsibilities. Is there anything that should be repositioned?

Ms. Whelan: Within ASD/SOLIC, I think that there is consistency, actually, across the portfolio in terms of the types of activities that the Assistant Secretary is responsible for. In terms of the Assistant Secretary's role in providing policy oversight, all of the activities that ASD/SOLIC has purview over are in some way related to either the employment of SOF forces or the environments in which SOF forces operate. Whether they be SOF MISO capabilities, civil affair capabilities, foreign internal defense capabilities, training capabilities, and, of course, counterterrorism capabilities, the portfolio is consistent in that context.

Senator Reed: My understanding, and correct me if I am inaccurate, is that you also have responsibility for information warfare?

Ms. Whelan: Yes, Senator, information warfare does fall under the purview of ASD/SOLIC.

Senator Reed: But you do not have responsibility for cyber operations. And as we know, cyber operations and information warfare, on the other side, our adversaries seem to be one, merged together, with each day.

Ms. Whelan: Correct, Senator. It is a seam. There are a lot of seams, as you all know, within our
organizational structure, and it is difficult. If you
eliminate one seam, you will create another. So it is kind
of a difficult balance to strike.

One of the things that we have done, though, is SOLIC
recently put out a strategy for operating in the information
environment. This strategy impacts the entire department,
to include the cyber warriors in the department. So we have
an integrated interdepartmental approach to implementing
that strategy.

Right now, we are going through a capabilities-based
assessment of that strategy to determine where we have
additional needs and where we have seams that we need to fix
in order to operate effectively.

Senator Reed: Thank you.

Just a final and very quick question. As the chairman
has noted, we have threats that are not strictly
counterterrorism today with this gray area of operations.
Section 1208, which I think has been very useful, as you
have described it, is focused more on counterterrorism. Is
there anything we have to do to give you that same degree of
authority with respect to these gray areas in unconventional
warfare rather than counterterrorism?

General Thomas, your comments?

And I have no time.

General Thomas: Senator, we are actively pursuing both
the authorities and the resources that would enable more
enhanced unconventional warfare operations. Again, we are
very appreciative of what 1208 does for us, and that is
actually -- I mean, it is very -- kind of enthusiastic. Its
similar authority, similar resourcing might be advantageous
for the force and for the Nation for unconventional warfare
purposes, and I look forward to having that continuing
discussion with you and others.

Senator Reed: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Inhofe?

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I do want to pursue this a little bit, in terms of your
response to the chairman's question in terms of the adequacy
of the force.

But I want to first mention your activity in Africa,
which really surprised me. I can remember when we first
brought AFRICOM along, and we started paying attention to
what is going on over there, the potential threats there,
the terrorism that is infiltrating the countries. So I know
you have been active over there. I have talked to a lot of
the African leaders. Very complimentary on some of the
results that we are getting.

And this surprises me, because AFRICOM did not even
come online until the first of 2008, and yet, if you go back
to 2006, the deployments to Africa have increased by more than 1,600 percent. It went from 1 percent to 17 percent in terms of deployments outside the United States. That is huge. That is a lot of increase in activity.

In addition to combating terrorism and the expanding network of violent extremism organizations, General Thomas, what impact, what can you elaborate on, on your activities in Africa? It is an inordinate increase, in terms of percentage, when you realize that some 17 percent of all deployments are actually affecting Africa.

General Thomas: Senator, I would actually attribute that to our adversaries' activities. The migration of ISIS and Al Qaeda to Africa, to ungoverned spaces over the preceding decade has been palpable. You know the specific locations. I probably, in an open session, should not get into the details of where and what. But we have endeavored to move where they have tried to establish new provinces, new areas of influence, in support of General Waldhauser and AFRICOM.

So that transition over time has really been driven by adversarial action. But I think the good news is that we have had the ability to move those locations and attempt to defeat and disrupt them where they try to reside.

Senator Inhofe: I do not think anyone anticipated back in 2008 or even in the years since then that the activity
would increase as it has there, so I am interested in following through with that.

On the idea of what you guys are in a position to handle right now, most of the deployed SOCOM forces, 55 percent, went to the Middle East. Next was Africa, that was 17 percent. Then Europe, 13 percent, and 9 percent.

Now, when you look at the optempo that was involved over there, in your written testimony, you acknowledge that adversary powers are increasingly turning toward unconventional warfare to pursue their objectives.

But maybe I misunderstood you when you responded to the question of the chairman, that you are adequately staffed to carry on these functions. Is that not an accurate recollection I am having?

General Thomas: Senator, we are adequately staffed to maintain the current tempo, the current distribution of special operations forces. It is a strain. It is certainly not an easy burden, but we are adequately resourced.

Senator Inhofe: I am looking for the quote that we had. Yes, this would have been from the House committee yesterday. I cannot find it right now, but there were quotes that -- here it is right here. You said most special operations forces units are employed to their sustainable limit.

Now, to me, that seems a little inconsistent with being
adequately staffed. You went on to talk about as or more challenged as a conventional force by the problem of suicide, other problems in the ranks that come with what I consider to be over-deployed.

What are some of the problems that you are facing that give you the indication that maybe you are not adequately staffed?

General Thomas: Senator, again, we can sustain the current rate of deployment. It is something we scrutinize every day.

You mentioned, the chairman mentioned early on, that there is a large demand signal from our geographic combatant commanders to do the things they have to do. As a service, one of our roles, we aim to meet their requirements. As a global combatant command, we also attempt to synchronize special operations activity to the greatest efficacy possible. I think we are doing that, to the degree we can.

There are challenges on the force. You mentioned certainly some of the more dire symptoms. We address them directly every day. That is large focal point for us.

I would have to thank all of you as well for providing us the tools that we did not have a decade ago to build in resiliency for our force in terms of our Preservation of the Force and Family, and also for our ability to care for our warriors in the event of mishaps, injuries, et cetera. We
did not have that capability. You helped us gain it over time, and that is a critical part of how we sustain ourselves.

Senator Inhofe: Well, as one member of this committee, I look at some of the results, some of the problems that you have, and I have to question as to whether or not it is adequately staffed.

One short question, I know my time has expired, but you can do this for the record, if you like, Ms. Whelan, there is some confusion, as I mentioned to you earlier, in the words that you use when you are talking about adversary powers increasing, turning toward unconventional warfare. You said, "exquisite integration across multiple components of not only the Defense Department, also the United States Government, as a key challenge to confronting growing threat."

You might, for the record, since my time has expired, elaborate a little bit on that. Would you do that?

Ms. Whelan: Yes, Senator. We would be happy to.

Senator Inhofe: Thank you very much.

Chairman McCain: Senator Hirono?

Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank both of our witnesses for your service. And, in particular, I would like to thank the men and women that you lead in our armed services, both in the military
and in the civilian side, and, of course, particularly the Special Ops Command in the Pacific arena who provide great support to the Asia-Pacific region.

Secretary Whelan, guidelines for the use of force were established by President Obama in the 2013 Presidential Policy Guidance. The rules include the requirement for a "near certainty" that the terrorist target was present and that no civilians would be injured or killed.

There is no legal requirement that President Obama's successors adhere to the same rules. President Trump has recently directed you to advise him on any recommended changes to the rules of engagement, and there were reports that there were a large number of civilian casualties after the raid in Yemen recently.

Have the rules of engagement requirement of near certainty that no civilian casualties will result been modified for special ops missions?

Ms. Whelan: Thanks for the question, Senator.

Absolutely not.

Senator Hirono: Are there differences in the steps a conventional force would take versus special operations to prevent collateral civilian loss of life during missions?

Ms. Whelan: Senator, I will let General Thomas answer that question.

Senator Hirono: General Thomas?
General Thomas: Senator, no is the answer. We both adhere to the Law of Armed Conflict. There are different techniques in terms of how we develop targets, but the same absolute standard applies.

Senator Hirono: So these rules of engagement that require near certainty that your target is there and that you will minimize collateral damage, that was applied in the Yemen case?

Ms. Whelan: Yes, the rules of engagement were not changed for the Yemen case.

Senator Hirono: And although there was a high number, we were told maybe 200 or so civilian casualties, that did not result in a review of what happened there?

Ms. Whelan: There have been extensive reviews of what happened, after-action reports, and lessons learned, but the casualties were not a result of a change in the rules of engagement.

Senator Hirono: What were they the result of?

Ms. Whelan: They were a result of operational circumstances that the forces on the ground found themselves in.

Senator Hirono: I see.

General Thomas, in your testimony, you identify SOFWERX as a SOCOM initiative to support agile acquisition with appropriate venues. This is an open collaboration facility
in Florida that has been in operation for over a year and
has successfully brought hundreds of nontraditional partners
together to work on your most challenging problems. I think
that is a really good idea, although we have a lot of
innovators and idea folks all over the country, also in
Hawaii.

How do you search for ideas, collaborators, and
solutions outside of your SOFWERX construct?

General Thomas: Senator, you actually teased out the
bigger part of the problem. I have the luxury of commanding
70,000 of the best, most creative problem solvers in the
world. How I marry them up with the absolute innovation
that is everywhere in terms of industrial approaches is the
real challenge.

But SOFWERX is one way we are doing that, where we are
compressing the space between academia, innovators,
businessmen, and our operators in the pursuit of very
specific problems. So you might imagine the whole gamut of
issues that we are endeavoring to accomplish there that are
enabling our force. But we are able to do that and go into
rapid fielding and accelerated fielding of capabilities that
enable our force.

So a relatively new initiative, SOFWERX, about 1.5
years old, but also already paying some huge dividends for
us.
Senator Hirono: So based on your experience so far with SOFWERX, would you recommend that something like this, maybe a physical location for PACOM or other commands?

General Thomas: Senator, the Defense Department is actually endeavoring to do this at a number of different locations. Secretary Carter certainly invested in the valley. There are other initiatives around the United States, tapping into the various laboratories and academic facilities.

I cannot speak to where the department is going in terms of the Pacific and where we might invest out there, but I am sure we are interested in wherever we can tap into that kind of innovative capability.

Senator Hirono: I hope you all will take a look at spreading the opportunity around, because there are a lot of small businesses all over the country who could provide the kind of innovation that you are seeking.

The Pentagon has acknowledged more than 100 U.S. special operation forces operating with Iraqi units in and around the Mosul with upwards of 600 more playing a support role in staging bases farther from the frontlines.

This is for General Thomas. Can you comment on the seemingly ever-increasing use of special operation forces? Do you think we are relying too heavily on special ops?

General Thomas: First and foremost, we are not a
panacea. We are not the ultimate solution for every problem. You will not hear that coming from us. That has been misconstrued in some media circles. Everything we are doing is in concert with conventional forces, with our allies, completely integrated.

I just visited Mosul. I was there about 3 weeks ago. Mosul was my hometown for 15 months, from 2007 to 2008, so I am very familiar with how daunting that challenge is.

In that area, you have a mix of conventional forces. I met with a brigade commander from the Army who was there. We had our special operations forces and our forces all integrated with the Iraqis, who are doing the majority of the fighting and incurring most of the casualties there. So it is an absolute blend of all of our forces, and I think the right mix.

Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Wicker?

Senator Wicker: Thank you both.

Let's talk about collaboration with your international counterparts. Which one of you would like to discuss the extent to which we collaborate with our international allies? General?

General Thomas: Senator, in a word, extensively. At almost every part of our formation, you will see where we are endeavoring to bring everyone in who has a part of the
1 problem.
2 I am very appreciative that the Director of National
3 Intelligence has enabled us to crush through pre-existing
4 prohibitions for information-sharing, probably one of the
5 most powerful things that we have in this day and age, to be
6 able to share exquisite information that the United States
7 has that we may or may not be intent on acting on, but be
8 able to share that with our allies and enable them to act.
9 But that is at almost every point of our formation,
10 where that level of collaboration is ongoing right now. So
11 "exquisite" is the best way I can describe the extent of the
12 collaboration, and getting better every day.
13 Senator Wicker: Is there anything else you need in the
14 next NDAA to help you there? Do you have what you need?
15 General Thomas: Senator, I believe we certainly have
16 no restrictions that I can mention to you nor that I can
17 specify to right now. So we feel very enabled there.
18 As I mentioned, the intelligence community is finding
19 ways to enable us more every day, certainly with the
20 concerns of safeguarding methods and sources and things like
21 that, but with a lean toward sharing and collaborating more
22 than we have ever done before.
23 Senator Wicker: I understand you have a particularly
24 strong relationship with our neighbors to the north in
25 Canada.
General Thomas: A phenomenal relationship, yes, Senator.

Senator Wicker: What can you tell us in this non-classified setting about Exercise Vital Archer?

General Thomas: Senator, hard to go into detail about that exercise, which we recently completed, as I think you know. But it is part of a cycle, if you will, to ensure our interoperability with our neighbors, with one of our greatest partners, for a very specific mission set that is of critical interest to both Canada and us.

Senator Wicker: Let me shift then to special boats and say, first of all, that we in Mississippi are thankful and honored to have Special Boat Team 22 headquartered in our state.

Would you describe the ways in which these special boat teams contribute to different missions?

General Thomas: Senator, I recently had the privilege of running all over Stennis here about a month ago, and getting out on the water in some of those capabilities. They are integral to many of our activities around the globe. NAVSCIATTS, the institution that you have there as well, is also a critical enabler for many of our foreign allies.

So, again, two phenomenal aspects of our portfolio that are important to everything that we are doing.
Senator Wicker: So we are continuing to do a lot of significant work in riverine environments.

General Thomas: Where it applies, Senator, we certainly have that capability, and we continue to improve it.

Senator Wicker: Where does that apply?

General Thomas: Senator, on several locations around the globe that probably would be best to address in a closed hearing.

Senator Wicker: Okay. And let me just say, to follow up on the chairman's line of questioning about Afghanistan, I just think it is very important for you to know, and for everyone listening to know, that we need to move beyond anything that puts us at a stalemate in Afghanistan. This is an important fight that we need to win, and there is every reason that we should be able to do that. We have a populace in Afghanistan who supports our presence there. The overwhelming majority of the ethnic groups, of the tribes, appreciate what we stand for and look to the United States for leadership.

So to the extent that either of you, both of you, can give us correct and helpful information about how to move past what some people have described as a stalemate, to me, is very, very helpful.

Ms. Whelan?
Ms. Whelan: Senator, I think we are actually actively looking at adjustments to the approach in Afghanistan right now. I expect that these proposals will go to the President within the next week, and the intent is to do just that, to move beyond the stalemate and also to recognize that Afghanistan is a very important partner for the United States in a very tricky region. We want to maintain that partnership with Afghanistan, and we want to ensure that Afghanistan reaches its potential. So that is the objective of the strategy, sir.

Senator Wicker: That is very good to know. Thank you.

Chairman McCain: Senator Heinrich?

Senator Heinrich: Thank you, Chairman.

Thank you both for being here. And please pass along our gratitude to everyone who serves in your command. I think the work they do every day has an enormous amount of respect from all of our constituents, and we should be very grateful for that.

General Thomas, yesterday, I want to thank you for just sitting down with me in my office. You and I discussed a number of things.

The high operational tempo was one of the things we touched on. One of the things you mentioned to me that really stuck in my head are the numbers. You also indicated that now somewhere between 28 percent and 30 percent of your
funding is now from war supplemental, or OCO funding, versus
7 percent across the other military services.

I was hoping you could talk a little bit about what
that means in terms of that budgetary overreliance on OCO
and how that impacts your ability to plan and execute your
mission.

General Thomas: Senator, thanks for the question and
thanks for the opportunity to discuss a number of issues
with you in more detail yesterday.

I mentioned the two things that I look to that
pressurize us most are unpredictable deptempo, and certainly
there are aspects of that are affecting our force, and
resourcing, the predictability or not of resourcing, which
has been challenging over time.

We are monitoring very closely the budget discussions.
We are integral to all those budget discussions.
Truthfully, I am somewhat sanguine that we will get the
resources required to continue to pursue the tempo and the
effects that we are producing right now.

You pointed out my one concern is that we have trended
to be much, much more dependent on operational contingency
funds than anybody else in DOD. So the current budget would
push us --

Senator Heinrich: If your overall budget were held
flat, would you rather have that in base budget or would you
rather see it over in the OCO?

General Thomas: Senator, I hope that we will be able
to get consideration to move that into the base over time.
Again, I have talked with Secretary Mattis, so I do not want
to appear inconsistent. The department is not pushing that
as aggressively for the remainder of the other services
because they are only leveraged to OCO to about a 7 percent
degree. We are 30 percent or near 30 percent right now. So
that is some risk that we certainly would like to mitigate
over time.

Senator Heinrich: One of the other things we mentioned
and talked a little bit about is the contributions out at
Cannon Air Force Base. Would you take a moment and talk a
little bit about the importance of the RPA contribution that
happens there? And do you have concerns with regard to
operational tempo? We have made huge investments in the
facility over the years because of the growing mission, but,
Obviously, the tempo has been incredible.

General Thomas: Senator, I think this committee is
very aware that ISR is a significant portion of our
portfolio, to the tune of about one-fifth of our investment
strategy on any given annual basis. It runs the gamut from
tactical ISR all the way to high-end ISR that our Air Force
component produces, which is the best in the world. It is
better than anything on the planet.
Cannon plays a critical role in terms of the basing and training of that ISR capability, both manned and unmanned. And then the range complex there allows us to work it every night. So, again, state-of-the-art ISR capability produced by our Air Force and others that we leverage on a consistent basis.

Senator Heinrich: I also want to commend SOCOM's interest in pursuing what General Goldfein described as silent sabotage with regard to directed energy. An airborne high-energy laser on a C-130 gunship could certainly deliver a number of capabilities before and during clandestine ground operations.

Do you want to share any thoughts you have on how directed energy might contribute to your future mission and how SOCOM's plans for developing that system are coming along?

General Thomas: Senator, as we discussed yesterday, we see a number of applications for high-energy weapons capabilities, so we are interested from a number of approaches. You mentioned that we have offered to base it on one of our platforms as a test basis. That was relatively easy for us to offer up and obviously gives us kind of an immediate developmental capability. So, again, very interested, not exclusively a SOCOM pursuit --

Senator Heinrich: Do you feel good about Air Force's
willingness to get in that game as well?

General Thomas: I do. We have a phenomenal relationship with General Goldfein and the Air Force. We have actual annual service talks with all the services to talk through how we can crush through our combined equities, and the relationship with our sister services is phenomenal. I have no concerns.

Senator Heinrich: My time has expired here, but I also want to express a willingness to work with you on the 1208-like issues with regard to unconventional warfare. So thank you all for being here today.

Chairman McCain: Senator Ernst?

Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To Ms. Whelan and General Thomas, thank you so much for being with us today. As a soldier and a citizen, I want to thank you very much for your relentless work on the battlefield. And as the spouse of a former SOF operator, I want to thank you for SOCOM's dedication to the health and wellness of those operators and especially the commitment that you have to those servicemembers' families. So thank you very much for being here.

General Thomas, during your confirmation hearing, we spoke about SOCOM's Preservation of the Force and Family, POTFF, initiatives. As you know, I am glad to see that SOCOM has done a lot in those areas to help our special
operations warriors and their family members. The wounded warriors especially is an interest of mine. I would encourage everybody on this committee to take a look at those programs and learn more about them.

Can you give us just a brief update on POTFF and specifically on THOR 3? I had the opportunity to do PT at a THOR 3 facility with some of your operators. It was an experience.

Can you tell us if SOCOM has the support it needs from Congress for these types of programs?

General Thomas: Senator, thanks for the question. Thanks more specifically for your personal support for this critical capability.

It is, admittedly, an awkward acronym, POTFF, Preservation of the Force and Family, but it captures the essence of what we are trying to enable, focused on both our force and, arguably, something that we talked about but did not have the resourcing before, the readiness and the preservation of our families.

It literally builds in or enables us to build in resilience prior to and in preparation for potential deployment for both our servicemembers and their family members across a broad array of approaches -- psychological, physical, spiritual -- that again has paid huge dividends for us.
You mentioned a specific aspect of that that pertains mostly to the physical maintenance and the physical recovery of our force. But over time, this committee and the Congress has enabled us to put the right infrastructure in place with the right technicians, therapists, and psychologists, et cetera, to provide state-of-the-art, as good as anything on the planet, sustainment capability for our individual operators, our individual servicemembers, and their families.

Command Sergeant Major Patrick McCauley and I go around the formation. We get nothing but rave reviews from the force. In some cases, in fact, the challenge forces in some of our most distant locations where smaller forces, they are looking for the same capability, and we are finding ways to parlay that to them as well, as opposed to just at the larger special operation installations.

Senator Ernst: Outstanding. It is a great program. Thank you, sir, for being so supportive of that.

And it is not surprising that so many of our SOF warriors, even after injury, are able to get back into that fight. While I was at THOR 3 with a dear friend of mine from Iowa, we met another one of his teammates who had also been injured. He had a near, at the hip amputation and had a prosthetic. He has been able to return to the fight because of those facilities. But he has been back to
Afghanistan a number of times.

But we also have those warriors who are not able to deploy again. So what is SOCOM doing to utilize their talents and abilities even after injury if they cannot deploy? And are there things that we should look at as Congress to enable those warriors to stay on duty?

General Thomas: Senator, you touched on one of the unique challenges that we have, that most of our servicemembers, even despite extraordinary wounds, debilitating wounds for any other human being, desire greatly to continue serving. So you highlighted one example. I can highlight dozens where we have been able to accommodate individuals to stay in the force and to continue to contribute.

You mentioned an amputee. We have amputees that are operating as operators, frontline operators, special forces, SEALs, the tip of the spear although way through all of our supporting functions.

And so again, our goal is, if they want to continue serving, we find a way to enable that. And you have given us the wherewithal, the committee has given us the wherewithal to be able to do that through our Warrior Care program.

Senator Ernst: Very good. I appreciate that very much.
I do have a few other questions. We will get to those. Just a quick yes or no, though. President Trump today is saying that he does support leaving troops in Iraq in the fight against ISIS. Is that something that you would support?

General Thomas: Senator, I support the strategy, so whatever the nature of the special operations support is required to obtain our objectives, I am supportive.

Senator Ernst: Ms. Whelan?

Ms. Whelan: Yes, actually, we are totally linked, and the strategy is based on our requirements of the generals on the ground.

Senator Ernst: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman McCain: Senator Kaine?

Senator Kaine: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses. I have a concern and a question.

On the concern side, on the SOCOM Web site, you have a SOF Truths, five of them. One of them is, most special operations require non-SOF assistance. That seems pretty obvious. I have a concern about what I worry is a sort of growing SOF myth, and that is you can do special forces and have special forces and nothing else to accomplish your goals. Even conversations in this body sometimes are, well,
we do not want to use ground troops, no boots on the ground, but it is okay to use special forces.

I sometimes think that is a little bit of not really a military calculation but kind of more of a political one, that ground troops are a little bit more notable, special forces tend to be more covert, so we can do things with special forces and not really have to be accountable for it to the public.

Am I right to worry about that?

General Thomas: Senator, I think you are right to worry about the perception. It is something that we battle all the time. There have been too many books and movies and publications that might imply that we go it alone, do it alone, and that is completely incorrect.

So, certainly, I share your concern that that is out there, but it is something that we push back on all the time. It is just not the case.

Senator Kaine: A question Senator Wicker asked you about, collaboration with international partners, I want to focus on a piece of that, the training that you do. I think one of the best parts of our DOD budget, and it is a very small part of the budget, is the training work that we do with other nations, either bringing military leaders of other nations here or doing training with countries all over the world.
Senator King and I have done some traveling and have seen U.S. special forces doing training in some tough parts in the world that are pretty impressive. Without saying anything in an open setting that you should not, talk a little bit about the scope of the training activities that our special forces are involved in with partners all over the world.

General Thomas: Senator, we are consistently trying to align ourselves with the appropriate partner forces where our national interests pertain in the interest of building their capability to the range of missions that they might be required to do.

I think we are pursuing a much more enlightened training approach, all the way through security force assistance. Where I think my fellow combatant commanders would tell you that we are probably not keeping pace is in terms of the bureaucracy that pertains to foreign military sales and things of that ilk. I know we are trying to get those to be as coherent as possible going forward. That would help us.

But I think we are doing a much better job of identifying partner forces ahead of time that need various capabilities, and we are pressing to make sure they have that capability.

Senator Kaine: And this training, when you do it, it
is not only about just shear military capacity-building. It is also about rules of war and human rights and elevating professional standards in these militaries around the world, and that is all for the good.

General Thomas: Senator, you are nailing what I think is one of the critical aspects of it. It is literally imparting our American values to them in the means of a military-to-military relationship.

Too often, in my mind, the first billpayer is that military-to-military relationship when we have missteps, and we are the first to address it. If we even get a scent of extrajudicial killings or inappropriate behavior, we address that immediately with the respective element. But we are attempting to bring their understanding of what we believe is the right way to conduct combat operations along as part of our training.

Senator Kaine: One of the most important things I think we can do is kind of be the partner of choice as other nations are looking to build capacity, and I think there is probably no area more than special forces where we are really seen as a partner of choice by nations all around the world. That is a great way to build relationships and improve capacity, compliance with rule of law.

So I commend you on that and look forward to talking about that more as we get into working on the NDAA together.
Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Sullivan?

Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Whelan, General, thanks for your testimony.

General, I appreciated the opportunity to meet with you and your team yesterday. I wanted to follow up on some of our discussions.

Obviously, we focus a lot here on ISIS and Al Qaeda and some of the other terrorist groups. But certainly, one of your most important missions is the counter-WMD mission. As the threat is growing from North Korea, Iran, it is not just a direct threat. As you know, it is a proliferation threat. And I think that is going to be an enduring mission for you and your team and the SOF Command for decades.

So in 2016, in the unified campaign plan, it was amended to transfer responsibility from STRATCOM to SOCOM for the synchronization of DOD's global counter-WMD strategy. To the extent you can discuss it in an open hearing like this, what are the things that we can do to support that critically important mission in terms of resources? How is the transfer going? And are there any other things that this committee should be aware of to help you most effectively focus and undertake that critical mission?

General Thomas: Senator, thanks for the question, and
thanks for the time yesterday as well.

As you mentioned, this is an enormous and incredibly important mission set that we accepted responsibility for in January. So January of this year was when it was officially assigned to us from the Department of Defense. We have had about 4 months to work our enhanced appreciation for all that entails. Obviously, we had studied ahead of time, but there is nothing like embracing a mission to really understand it.

We have had a chance to do our first of what is a semiannual synchronization session with all the interagency partners that are part of this problem set, all the geographic combatant commanders, our international partners, a really, really valuable session that we conduct semiannually.

We are currently now trying to confederate all the ongoing activities so that we can provide the Secretary an assessment here. I am aiming for the August timeframe to give him a comprehensive assessment of where we are in terms of the United States Government policies and objectives for countering weapons of mass destruction, where we are from a DOD approach, and relative to both our interagency and our international partners.

So, again, we are leaning into this mission as aggressively as we do most everything at SOCOM. But it is
obviously much, much bigger than us, and we are honored to have that coordinating role for the Department of Defense, and we are endeavoring to provide the best product possible for the Secretary and the department.

Senator Sullivan: As you undertake that analysis and that transfer of authority over to you, which has already happened, please make sure that this committee -- I can almost guarantee you that you would get bipartisan support for additional responsibilities or resources that you will need with regard to that critical mission, so please keep us posted.

Let me ask this, it is kind of related to Senator McCain's and Senator Kaine's question.

We seem to have, in some ways, adopted a strategy of fighting our wars now with a combination of SOCOM forces and airpower. But in your professional military opinion, what other capabilities would be beneficial to help our forces and our country bring success in places like Iraq or Syria or Afghanistan?

I know you are looking at that issue, but there is kind of this, and I think it is a theme here, you are hearing a bit of a myth that, hey, once the SOCOM men and women are on it, everything is good to go. But we know that there are a lot of other capabilities and other forces that need to bring to bear.
Specifically, what do you see as most important in terms of other capabilities, supporting or even in the lead?

General Thomas: Senator, it is kind of ironic, I am running through my brain right now 80 different countries, 8,000 special operations forces forward deployed, and I cannot think of a single circumstance where we are not dependent on another service, another supporting function out there -- not one.

So if and when it has been described as special operations forces by themselves, it is a misconception.

Now, unfortunately, in some cases, we are too prominent, too prominent because it is interesting, it is, again, the stuff of too many books and movies. But we are not doing anything by ourselves.

The good news is, as we go into a problem, as special operations goes into a problem, I consider the entirety of the DOD inventory at our disposal, and vice versa. That is, I think, the benefit of the joint force approach, that we do not feel constrained that there is nothing available in the DOD arsenal that we cannot leverage, and they look at us in the same fashion.

So, again, that is happening about anywhere I can imagine, anywhere I have been lately, without any shortcomings.

Senator Sullivan: So you are integrated, for example,
with marines who are doing artillery fire missions with you in Iraq right now?

General Thomas: I think I mentioned to you I will not get into specifics, but I just visited some marines that were shooting more 155 ammo than I can supply them right now, and they are integral to everything we are doing.

Senator Sullivan: Great. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator King?

Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Whelan, I could not help notice your former title of Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations Low-Intensity Conflict.

When I was a junior staff member in this body 40 years ago, I once called OMB for an administration witness. They gave me a title. He said I am sending you so and so, the principal deputy. I said I do not know these titles. What does that mean? The fellow gave me an answer, which if I ever write a book about Washington, it will be the title of my book. The answer was, "He is at the highest level where they still know anything."

[Laughter.]

Senator King: I just want you to know that you are at that level, and I am now above it. So I have never forgotten that.
General Thomas, there has been a lot of talk about tempo. Let me go back to the left about tempo and talk about retention, recruitment, and throughput. Do you have adequate people in the pipeline to maintain the tempo that you are at today?

General Thomas: Senator, again, something that we look at incredibly closely every day. The answer is we are having some challenges for portions of the force for recruitment. I contribute some in terms of Army special operations forces to the downsizing of the Army, partly for some internal challenges that I think we have rectified.

But in some cases, we have had some challenges. I think we are trending in the right direction now though going forward, but we had some temporary challenges over the last couple years.

Senator King: I certainly hope that you will let the committee know about those issues. And if there are recruitment and retention issues that our actions here can help to alleviate, we certainly want to do that.

General Thomas: Will do, Senator.

Senator King: Ms. Whalen, the command-and-control is an issue that is of some concern. Do you believe that we have effective command-and-control of the special operations forces?

I am concerned about interested parties, your command,
geographic combatant commanders, service components, all
receive and share information in a quick and efficient
manner. Talk to me about command-and-control.

Ms. Whelan: Certainly. I will actually also let
General Thomas comment on this as well.

But I think from our perspective, in the SOLIC
oversight role, we actually have excellent command-and-
control. In fact, I think the integration of our forces
between SOCOM and the combatant commands that they support,
the regional combatant commands --

Senator King: So if there is an action of special
operation forces in a particular geographic area, the
combatant commands are integrated, they know what is going
on.

Ms. Whelan: Actually, Senator, the way it works is
that SOCOM forces, the SOF forces actually fall under the
command of the combatant commander, the geographic combatant
commander. So the GCC is fully in charge of the operations
that take place in their AOR. For example, if you are
looking at the CENTCOM AOR right now, General Votel and his
subordinate commanders, that is the chain of command that
operates all of the forces that are in that AOR right now,
to include special operations forces.

Not necessarily for this forum, but there are some
specific elements that operate under a slightly different
chain of command, although still under General Votel's
purview but with more direct access to General Votel that
belong to General Thomas.

But there is total integration, and nothing happens in
a geographic commander's AOR that he does not know about.

Senator King: General Thomas, you are comfortable with
the structure?

General Thomas: Senator, absolutely comfortable. I
reemphasize Theresa's point. There are no special
operations in the world right now that are not under the
command-and-control of geographic combatant commander.

There are provisions for exceptions in some scenarios.
And truthfully, the exceptions are single digits over the
course of our history where SOCOM could be the supported
commander. But day in, day out, all of our operators right
now are under the control of a geographic combatant
commander.

I have combatant command of all special operations
forces, and I apportion them to their respective geographic
combatant --

Senator King: There is always coordination with the
combatant command?

General Thomas: Always, constant, incessant. Senator,
our role for synchronizing is where these geographic
combatant commanders get to their prescribed limits. So you
might imagine, for CENTCOM, for instance, as their borders literally butt up to other geographic combatant commanders, Syria to Turkey, Yemen to Somalia, Egypt to Libya, that is where we play a critical function of synchronizing special operations activities across those respective geographic combatant commanders.

Again, they fight the forces. We provide a transregional perspective and role.

Senator King: Ms. Whelan, my time is up, but very quickly, you mentioned information warfare. What does that consist of?

Ms. Whelan: Information warfare is a complex set of functions that include some of our military information support teams, as well as some of our communications specialties. There is a whole list. I know you are short on time, Senator, if you like --

Senator King: Perhaps you could, for the record --

Ms. Whelan: Absolutely.

Senator King: -- give us a definition of what that is.

Ms. Whelan: We will take that for the record and get you the answer.

Senator King: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Cotton?

Senator Cotton: Thank you both for coming today.
General Thomas, thank you, in particular, for your service, and all the men and women underneath your command.

Over the last 8 years, there has been some tension between civilian and uniformed services over the number of flag officers that we have seen grow in all the services. The committee made an effort to reduce the number of flag officers last year.

I have heard some generals and admirals, though, say that when the civilian command authority reserve decision-making power to the highest levels, decision-making power that was once delegated to colonels and captains and, heaven forbid, even lieutenants on the battlefield in Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade, then we should expect to see an increase in the number of flag officers.

Have we begun to see in the last 4 months more delegation of operational decision-making authority back to where I suggest it belongs, in the hands of commanders who are on the frontlines?

General Thomas: Senator, the short answer is yes.

I am a little bit humored by how you described the situation in that my youngest son, who just gave up company command of the 82nd recently wrote to me and said since when did we stop letting company commanders command companies? My response to him was, Michael, that question has been asked since time immemorial. Where and how are you
restricted right now?

But I think, to your overall point, that while certain authorities had been elevated to very senior levels, I typically ask our force, are you empowered at the right level with the right ROE to do your job? And I think it is turning in that direction.

Senator Cotton: As that delegation occurs, do you think we might see a concomitant decline in the number of flag officers in the Pentagon who need to make those decisions for our company and field grade officers in the field?

General Thomas: Senator, I would tell you, truthfully, flag officers in the Pentagon are not empowered to make those decisions because they are not in the chain of command. So I think the right folks in the chain of command are being empowered to make the decisions that you certainly experienced from your time in combat. We are going back in that direction positively.

Senator Cotton: On a related note, last month, we deployed the Massive Ordnance Air Blast in Afghanistan for the first time. There was some media controversy about that, about why that bomb was deployed.

At what decision would something like that be made?

General Thomas: Senator, I think it was described that that decision was in General Nicholson's authority, so he
had the capability, he had the discretion and decision-making to deploy it.

I think you know we used it as an area denial weapon in an area that we have been having a protracted fight with ISIS and the Khorasan in Nangarhar Province in Afghanistan. So I think it was the right deployment of a weapon system that avoided a more extensive of loss of life.

I mentioned Sergeant De Alencar and our two rangers who died out in the area recently.

So, again, that decision-making authority was General Nicholson --

Senator Cotton: The commander in Afghanistan.

General Thomas: The commander on --

Senator Cotton: Not the chairman, nor the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Adviser, the President.

General Thomas: No.

Senator Cotton: And deciding what kind of ordnance to employ, would you say that is a decision for commanders in the field to make?

General Thomas: I believe it is.

Senator Cotton: And they do not need to get approval from anyone 8,000 miles away in Washington?

General Thomas: I think that could actually cause great risk to the force, if it had to go back that way.

Senator Cotton: I hope all the rest of our bombs are
overcoming the laws of their mother. Are they?

General Thomas: I think they are over their grieving.

Senator Cotton: Good.

Another question I want to raise is the relationship between special operations forces and conventional forces. By definition, special operations forces are special. They do amazing things, but they are limited in numbers and focused in mission.

Would you agree that you cannot simply flood special operations forces and expect them to be a substitute for what our conventional forces or what a broader strategy would do?

General Thomas: Senator, I agree, and, more pragmatically, we do not have the forces, the special operations forces, to do that. So it is not a viable solution.

Senator Cotton: So special operations forces are an important complement to conventional forces in a broader strategy, but they cannot be a substitute for either?

General Thomas: Agreed, Senator.

Senator Cotton: A related question, does that mean that if we expect to increase the number of special operations forces, or the mission sets that we provide them, or the operational tempo at which we deploy them, we also need to see a concomitant increase in the number of
conventional forces as well to support those missions?

General Thomas: I think that is a good assumption, Senator.

Senator Cotton: All right. Thank you.

Chairman McCain: Senator Peters?

Senator Peters: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to our witnesses here today for your insightful testimony.

General Thomas, I would like to go back to something you brought up in your testimony as well as to a question earlier from a panelist, and that is the SOFWERX effort that is undergoing right now to bring together academia and industry and some high-tech work.

As you know as well as anyone, the nature of warfare is going to change dramatically in the years ahead. Technology focus will be greater than ever. In the past, the military has always been a leader in that area and will continue to do that. But one difference is that what we are seeing now in the civilian industry is accelerating in terms of new innovations.

We have, in Michigan, TARDEC, which is the Army's tank and vehicle research lab, which is also working on the model that you have mentioned. But I was just curious, I know your effort is only about 1.5 years old now, but what would you consider the major takeaway of that effort in the last
1.5 years? Or perhaps a lesson that you have learned in that 1.5 years that is going to be instructive for entities like TARDEC and others to emulate?

General Thomas: Senator, I could probably on the record provide you a list of initiatives that have actually resulted in fielding capabilities to our forces, so some very specific dividends that have come out of that environment.

Truthfully, our director of Acquisition Technology and Logistics is leveraging that platform every day. For instance, the Counter-Unmanned Aerial System challenge that cropped up recently in Iraq and Syria, which was relatively nuanced, we were able to pour some very directed resources at that, have what he calls a collision of academia, technicians, operators, come together on that problem, among others, to really crash on it in a hurry and, more importantly, leverage off-the-shelf technologies, things that would otherwise take an inordinate amount of time to get to the field.

So if I can, I would like to provide you a list of specifics of what we have accomplished and, more importantly, what we are endeavoring to do going into the future.

Senator Peters: I appreciate that. I would also like to do a deeper dive, perhaps with some folks there to talk
specifically about some of the work that they are doing and how we can replicate that in other places, because I think this is critically important in future warfare.

As you know, and you have alluded to it in your answer there, autonomy and robotics will probably have some of the greatest potential to change how we conduct warfare.

In fact, I was struck that, last week, the Marine Corps conducted an exercise at Camp Pendleton on the future of amphibious warfare, which included using robots as the first boots on the ground, resupplying troops with drones, and even robots providing covering fire for those marines.

In general, how do you see autonomy and robotics changing battlefield tactics in some of your operations? It appears this is coming a lot quicker than folks may have anticipated.

General Thomas: Senator, I would like to think we are at the forefront or writing all the initiatives that pertain to that. As you might imagine, our mission set, especially our direct-action mission set, entails an element of risk that we are trying to mitigate for literally the number one man in a formation that could absolutely be mitigated through robotics and other kind of sensory improvements over time.

So we are pursuing that actively. I was going to ask, if your time allows, that maybe we can get you to come visit
in Tampa. We have had several visitors come in and actually provide us other opportunities to connect with academia and industry to some of the other activities that you mentioned.

Senator Peters: I would appreciate that opportunity.

What do you consider some of the main benefits and tradeoffs that we need to consider as this technology moves forward?

General Thomas: Right now, it is a practical challenge for us, because, as you might imagine, we have tried to push the application of robotics where just the agility, in terms of sensory capability, decision-making, and physical capabilities of robotics just are not there yet. But nonetheless, we are pushing in that regard. But we see some great opportunities.

Senator Peters: Great. Thank you, General. I appreciate it.

Chairman McCain: Senator Cruz?

Senator Cruz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning. Welcome. Thank you both for your service to our Nation, particularly at this perilous time.

General Thomas, in recent months, special operations forces from across the services have made the ultimate sacrifices in conflicts around the world. Most recently, a number of brave special operators lost their lives fighting ISIS in northeastern Afghanistan. The reduction in
conventional forces in Afghanistan and the closure of a
majority of combat outposts and forward operating bases in
the country has left a considerable gap in U.S. presence in
critical enemy engagement areas.

Would special operations forces in Afghanistan be
better supported if there were a greater presence of
conventional soldiers in combat outposts and forward
operating bases throughout the country?

General Thomas: Senator, I think General Nicholson and
others are looking at enhancing the capability in terms of
train, advise, assist, so more conventional forces that
would thicken the ability to advise and assist Afghan
forces. That would absolutely be to our benefit.

Right now, you mentioned the casualties that we
recently incurred. Those are accompanied operations. That
is where our special operations forces are accompanying
Afghan special operations capabilities.

Ultimately, we want to make them capable of doing it on
their own, and we are certainly making some progress there.
But I think parallel efforts to advise and assist the larger
conventional capabilities of the Afghan forces would
absolutely enhance the effort.

Senator Cruz: Do the special operations forces have
the dedicated assets and resources that they need to fight
and win, given so many competing areas of conflict around
the world? And are you ever put into a position where you are forced to choose which mission to fully support and what can be accomplished with less dedicated assets?

General Thomas: Senator, to answer your first question, I do think we have adequate resources to task. The bigger challenge, which was prefaced by the chairman at the beginning, is that, from a DOD standpoint, we are a microcosm of the DOD from a global approach, in that we are trying to provide the necessary special operations requirements to all the geographic combatant commanders at the same time with a relative prioritization.

The Secretary and the chairman are endeavoring to make sure that prioritization is as precise as it needs to be for us as service components so that we can support the effort and priority, but it is a challenge. We, like the department, are trying to do a lot of things at the same time in a challenging world, so that has some inherent friction to it.

Senator Cruz: On a different topic, I understand that the decision regarding which combatant command would be responsible for weapons of mass destruction has been decided, and that, starting in January, it now falls under your command at the Special Operations Command.

This is obviously a critical component of our Nation's nuclear deterrent and counter-WMD programs that have a major
responsibility, including nuclear, chemical, and biological agents.

Could you please comment on how the addition of WMD responsibility has affected current and future operations?

General Thomas: Senator, I mentioned previously that we absolutely embrace the enormity of this mission. It is much, much bigger than special operations and SOCOM, so we are looking to leverage as much of the rest of the interagency community and our international partners to accomplish our government's objectives in this regard as we can.

Right now, we have the resourcing required to embrace this set, and we are in discussion for what we need going forward. I mentioned earlier that I hope to provide an assessment to our Secretary of Defense in August in terms of a comprehensive review of what we are trying to accomplish from a U.S. Government policy and strategy objective, and how well we are doing.

So, again, we look forward to providing that to the committee as well, once we brief the Secretary.

Senator Cruz: Ms. Whelan, do you have additional thoughts on the impact of WMD responsibility under SOCOM?

Ms. Whelan: Senator, thanks for the question.

I think we fully supported the decision to shift the responsibility to SOCOM. SOCOM has the capabilities on
that, we were intended to utilize to address this issue, so
I think, organizationally, it made a tremendous amount of
sense to us to move it from STRATCOM to SOCOM, so we fully
support.

Senator Cruz: Thank you very much.

Chairman McCain: Senator Warren?

Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you for being here. I just want to quickly
ask about the importance of our nonmilitary agencies and
programs to your mission.

For much of the past decade, special operations forces
have deployed around the globe 24/7, and we often think of
them as conducting raids and taking out terrorists. But I
understand that a big part of your mission is actually to
advise and assist local forces to build their own capacity.

General, how important is our State Department to that
mission?

General Thomas: Senator, the relationship to the State
Department is indescribably critical, both at the State
Department level, but I would offer, as I mentioned earlier,
we are in 80 different countries, and we look to have the
most enhanced relationships possible with every one of those
countries through our country team. If that is not the
baseline for our United States Government approach, then we
are flawed from the start.
Senator Warren: So at the national level and at the country level.

Would a reduction in funding to the State and USAID that conduct foreign assistance in diplomacy make your job easier or make your job harder?

General Thomas: Senator, as you are implying, it makes their job harder, which I think, by extension, would make our job harder. So I cannot calculate the specific cost, but I know an already strained State Department would be more pressed to do their job.

Senator Warren: Good. Thank you. That is very helpful.

The administration is seeking a significant reduction in the State Department and USAID budgets. Diplomacy and development are critical for alleviating the very conditions that contribute to the security challenges that SOCOM confronts every single day.

Now, if I can, I would like to return to a question that Senator Sullivan raised about SOCOM's responsibility as the lead organization for countering WMDs. I know that this responsibility was shifted over to you to ensure that we are paying enough attention to the nuclear proliferation threat and to ensure that we are synchronizing the WMD work with the counterterrorism mission so that we can prevent a terrorist group from ever getting a hold of a nuclear
weapon.

This mission, as I understand it, includes three lines of effort: preventing the acquisition of WMDs by foreign powers, containing and reducing WMD threats, and responding to a WMD crisis.

As I understand it, you seem pretty prepared to tackle the first of those, given your hard-won experience using intelligence to track bad actors over the past 15 years. WMD threats and responding to WMD crises are going to require some new skills here.

General, to the extent that you can in an open session, can you just say a word about what you see as the biggest challenges in taking on this new responsibility?

General Thomas: Senator, absolutely. You mentioned that we were already pre-established in various aspects of this mission set. I think to Secretary Whelan's earlier comment, I think that is what made it an almost natural fit for the mission to transition to us, that we have a pre-existing approach and process, kind of an ethos to dealing with transregional terrorism. I think there was a natural application or kind of a fungible application to the WMD set.

Going forward though, even from a first blush assessment, the biggest challenge for all of us is seeing and sensing the nature of the threat in an environment that
runs the gamut from dual-use technology, proliferation of nefarious items in the same stream as things that are for the good of industry and not of a nefarious use.

So I really see the major onus as we go forward is determining how we, both DOD and the interagency, see and assess the threat and obviously can enable operations to do what we need to do, whether it is disruption of activities or something else. So the most daunting challenge I think will be of an intelligence variety in terms of assessing the threat.

Senator Warren: Thank you. I appreciate that.

I understand that the committee has asked you to prepare a report on the resources, personnel, and authorities you are going to need to carry out this mission. I understand you are working on that. I know it will be very helpful.

General Thomas: Yes, ma'am, we are.

Senator Warren: Good. Can I ask you one last quick question? And that is, Senator Sullivan asked about what you needed from us to carry out the mission. I just wanted to see if you could say a word about what you expect to receive from Strategic Command, who is giving up this mission, in terms of personnel and funding.

General Thomas: Ma'am, we are actually still co-joined with Strategic Command for this mission set. So as they
shifted the set specifically to us, there are still a number of co-related activities that have kept us co-joined. They did transfer an entity with the Defense Threat Reduction Agency that was part and parcel of their approach that came directly to was and is integral to what we are doing now. But we are also addressing what we think are the future requirements to enhance this mission.

Senator Warren: Do you expect more transfers to occur? I am going to quit, Mr. Chairman, because I am over my time.

General Thomas: I am hopeful that within the department, not necessarily from STRATCOM, which is a busy command with a profound portfolio, but I am hopeful that within the department, that the resources that we describe will be resourced.

Senator Warren: All right. Thank you. Your job to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons is powerfully important, and we want to make sure you have the resources you need. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Rounds?

Senator Rounds: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Whelan and General Thomas, first of all, thank you for your service to our country.

In the 2014 QDR, manpower requirement for Special
Operations Command was approximately 72,000. However, this number was capped at 69,000 due to budget constraints. It is clear the world is not any safer now than it was in 2014. I would expect the current demand on your operations has not been diminished, and, if anything, it has been increased.

What is the current manpower requirement for SOCOM to meet its global requirements? Is additional force structure required?

General Thomas: Senator, I believe our stated requirement is the requirement. We are working to refine, if there is any needed growth in the future.

I am thankful, as you mentioned, that, in spite of the fact that we did not receive the growth that was prescribed and validated, that we have had tremendous support from across the department in terms of augmentees and additional units that have enabled us to continue to pursue our jobs.

So again, I am thankful that the department has reapportioned to allow us to do what they have asked us to do.

Senator Rounds: When you were not allowed or not authorized the amount requested, clearly, then, you have to take on additional risk in certain areas. Where is that risk at, at this time? Where did you have to take on additional risk?

General Thomas: Senator, again, I think, without
getting into details of specific locations and activities, there was curtailment in terms of some of our activities.

Senator Rounds: Diminished operations.

General Thomas: Diminished operations. And then, as I mentioned, in many cases, we merely went back to the department and said, while we cannot grow it or maintain it internally, might we receive additional augmentation? In almost every case, they have afforded that to us.

Senator Rounds: Recent testimony from both the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force has identified a significant difficulty in retaining qualified pilots. How is pilot retention going for special operations aviation?

General Thomas: Senator, a great question. Senator King asked the earlier question about recruitment and retention. I should have mentioned that we are experiencing similar retention challenges to the Air Force and others relative to the enticement of pilots to join industry. So it is something that is certainly affecting us right now, and we are trying to come up with creative alternatives or solutions to rectify that.

Senator Rounds: So you are indicating that you do have the same challenges as everyone else has on it and --

General Thomas: To a lesser degree, but, yes, we have that.

Senator Rounds: To a lesser degree.
General Thomas: Yes, we do.

Senator Rounds: Okay. Does USSOCOM need service-like acquisition authorities for the purposes of developing, acquiring, and sustaining special operations technology, equipment, and services?

General Thomas: Senator, we enjoy those authorities right now. Interestingly, we do not have all the authorities that the services have. They have some unique authorities. Usually folks think it is a flip on that, that special operations have unique authorities that enable us. There are actually some authorities inherent in the services that we are looking to gain over time.

Senator Rounds: Could you specify?

General Thomas: Specifically, I cannot get into the technical aspects of it.

Senator Rounds: For the record, would you provide us with that?

General Thomas: I would be glad to do that. But again, I would also emphasize that our structure with our director of AT&L working directly for me with a streamlined relationship with our program executive officer has enabled us to do some pretty extraordinary things too. So we are very well-enabled. We are looking to try to enhance and have all the tools that the services have.

Senator Rounds: Cyber capabilities are critical when
it comes to your operations as well. I suspect you would agree with that. Can you share with us right now your ability to maintain a cyber superiority with regard to the operations that your -- let me put it this way. Clearly, you have to be able to maintain cybersecurity when it comes to your operations. Can you describe for us the challenges you have, shortcomings you may have, or needs that you may have with regard to cybersecurity capabilities?

General Thomas: Senator, I would start by expressing my appreciation to CYBERCOM for the great capabilities that they have provided us, much like they have to other combatant commands, to first and foremost protect our infrastructure. Again, we have some very, very valuable resources to do that.

Similarly, we are working with them closely to enhance our offensive capabilities, the cyber capabilities that must be integral to our approach to the full spectrum of combat operations going forward. Again, I think we have endeavored to have some pretty nuanced approaches, again thanks to CYBERCOM and others who have helped enable us.

Senator Rounds: My time has expired.

Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Chairman McCain: Senator McCaskill?

Senator McCaskill: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you both for being here and preparing for this
I wanted to emphasize at the start that, according to the materials I reviewed, countering Russian aggression is the number two priority.

Is that correct, General Thomas?

General Thomas: Senator, right now, that is the number two priority, although I would tell you it is being challenged by our preparations for Korea.

Senator McCaskill: As I look at the map that we have, the only place you have more deployed other than EUCOM is, in fact, CENTCOM, correct? It is the number two deployment?

General Thomas: Yes, ma'am. That is accurate.

Senator McCaskill: You have 1,400 forces deployed to protect against Russian aggression right now?

General Thomas: Ma'am, working with our partners in the respective countries, we do.

Senator McCaskill: And in addition to that, could you ballpark how many other American military personnel are we putting on the frontlines to counter Russian aggression?

General Thomas: Senator, I cannot speak specifically to the other complementary forces that are out there, other than to say that we are closely linked with them in terms of --

Senator McCaskill: Would it be thousands of American military in the countries on the western border of Russia?
General Thomas: Senator, I think you would have to discern between those assigned to Europe and additive forces. But I do not have the specific numbers.

Senator McCaskill: Okay. The point I am trying to make is, we are putting real resources out there in the military going after Russian behavior. We have determined and you have determined, and the military leadership has determined, that Russia is a problem.

I just want to emphasize that because it is frustrating to me that they try to break the backbone of democracies all over the world, and we consider it such a threat that we are putting the biggest treasure we have, which are the lives of men and women of our military, on the frontlines of this aggression, but there does not seem to be a sense of urgency about Russia. And I wanted to underline that as I began.

The other thing I want to talk to you about today is I had a chance to review the GAO report that was recently released. It is a classified report. Have you had a chance to look at that, General Thomas?

General Thomas: Senator, I am not aware of that specific GAO report. Regarding what subject, ma'am?

Senator McCaskill: Countering ISIS and its effects?

General Thomas: I have not seen that report, no, ma'am.

Senator McCaskill: I highly recommend it to you. I
think it would be very helpful to you.

Since you are the key DOD element responsible for global antiterrorism operations, several of the recommended oversight questions seem really particularly relevant to your command. For example, the problems that we are having, we have spent billions trying to train and equip the military in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Would you agree with that, General?

General Thomas: We have, Senator.

Senator McCaskill: And we continue to spend billions trying to do both of those things, correct?

General Thomas: Correct, Senator.

Senator McCaskill: And I am not sure that we are getting adequate information about how much success we have had. And I think that it would be helpful to know what steps have been taken to address the challenges to train and equip regarding the underlying factors that have caused the personnel shortages in Iraq. We continue to have insufficient numbers of soldiers even to round out units in Iraq.

I think with the amount of money we are spending, it would be great, you may not be prepared today, but since you all are so involved in the train and equip, it would be helpful for us to get more information about, what is the problem? And are we adjusting what we are doing? Or are we
just pouring in money and still having folks walk away and
still have people who we have trained and equipped show up
on the other side?

General Thomas: Senator, I can guarantee that for
every problem that you have identified, we are endeavoring
to try to rectify it. I will work with General Votel, the
CENTCOM Commander, to make sure we get you a response on the
record for the concerns that you have, ma'am.

Senator McCaskill: I know that DOD recently revised
the train and equip program in Syria. As you are well-
aware, we had a number of problems, especially the first
attempt at train and equip that was disastrous.

Could you tell us what have been the results of the
revisions that occurred in the train and equip mission in
Syria in 2016?

General Thomas: Ma'am, there are really two different
programs that I think you are referring to there. One was
the one that was certainly challenged. I think we have made
great strides. I am hesitant to get into details in an open
forum in terms of the very, very capable surrogate forces
that we are now leveraging in Syria and certainly with the
organic forces in Iraq. But we have gone --

Senator McCaskill: I learned about some of that when I
was in Jordan.

General Thomas: Very good.
Senator McCaskill: But what kind of assurances do you feel like we have now that the individuals associated with the terrorist organizations of either Syria or Iran are not benefiting from our train and equip missions?

General Thomas: In my particular lane, where our special operations are supporting CENTCOM activities, I am very comfortable that we are vetting them to the degree that we are very certain that we are not contributing to those particular threat organizations.

But, again, I will get you more for the record.

Senator McCaskill: That would be terrific.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Tillis?

Senator Tillis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Thomas, it is good to see you.

Ms. Whelan, you as well.

I was just back down at Fort Bragg a couple weeks ago. I get down there frequently, probably they are sick of seeing me. But it is such an important part of what we do globally that I want to send the message there.

I know that many of my members have asked questions about the stress on the force and optempo and a number of those things. What I would like to maybe spend my time on has more to do with the employment side and my capacity as Personnel Subcommittee chair.
I know that, in your opening testimony, you said we must continue to place the greatest emphasis on selecting, retaining, and empowering our people and sustaining them and their families.

With two-thirds of the SOCOM force married, what more do you think we need to do? And the nature of their mission is such that even the relative stress level has to be higher because there is so much that the person back stateside does not know what is going on.

What do you think we need to do to more of to provide better support for the families of our SOCOM forces?

General Thomas: Senator, I mentioned earlier to a similar question that I am very thankful to the committee that you have actually given us some tools that have allowed us to put our money where our intent is.

I think, for years, our approach to family readiness was sort of, be ready, your spouse may or may not deploy. We did not actually build in specific resilience to that eventuality, the fact that it is on the training schedule, that you folks will deploy.

We have also been able to leverage, as you might imagine, you described our operator experience, a lot of experience, a lot of repetitions downrange. Our spouses have had the same experience. We have been able to leverage their experience for how we can be more thorough in our
preparation to build in the resilience and to deal with their problems as they occur over time.

So, again, I am thankful that you have given us the means to get after this, and I think we are doing it much more comprehensively every day.

Senator Tillis: Have you given any thought, as you are looking at recruiting and retention side of things, are there any things that have arisen, other things that we should consider to help you retain our best and brightest?

And if you cannot answer that in specifics now, we would like it for the purposes of the subcommittee so they can instruct our recommendations for the NDAA.

But if you have any off the top of your head, Ms. Whelan, or you, General Thomas?

General Thomas: Senator, I do not have any specific requirements right now. We are always looking to see, if and when retention challenges come up, how we can mitigate those. But at the moment, I do not have any specific requests.

Ms. Whelan: Sir, we do not either. However, one of the issues that we will be looking at within SOLIC, and as part of the clarified responsibilities for SOLIC oversight, is this issue of retention and how we might be able to work with SOCOM to ensure that we have the resources we need.

Senator Tillis: We just want to make sure that we get
you the tools that you need, because it costs a lot of money
to get these people to the level that they can be deployed,
and we want to make sure that we focus on retention and
valuing our men and women and their families.

In my remaining time, I would like to talk a little bit
about -- I know the demand is outstripping supply in terms
of your ability to fulfill all the demands. One question
that I have is whether you believe, in some instances,
because of the nature of funding and the nature of the
conflicts we are in, if there is some amount of what your
command focuses on that the need would be better satisfied
by the service lines or others.

In other words, if we have a legitimate demand for
additional special operations, is there a component of the
demand that you are fulfilling now that could arguably be
fulfilled through some other vehicle outside of SOF?

General Thomas: Senator, I field a similar line of
questions from our Secretary of Defense consistently. We
are looking at that very aggressively.

Most recently, we completed our annual process to align
forces 2 years out, so where we think special operations
forces are required in priority relative to that of
geographic combatant commanders. So it literally produced a
one through end list of what we are doing in priority and a
plan to discuss that in detail with the Secretary in terms
of here is where we could offramp, and here is the risk or
the price to be paid in terms of either cessation of
missions or things of that like.

But we are looking at that very closely, on how we can
mitigate the pressure on the force in terms of number of
missions we are doing.

Senator Tillis: Thank you.

Chairman McCain: Senator Blumenthal has arrived.

Senator Blumenthal: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Thomas, your command now has responsibility for
countering weapons of mass destruction across all of the
combatant commands, correct?

General Thomas: Senator, we are the coordinator for
the Department of Defense. That is correct.

Senator Blumenthal: Including use of chemical agents.

General Thomas: That is correct, all elements of
weapons of mass destruction.

Senator Blumenthal: You may be familiar with a new
Human Rights Watch report this week that cites a number of
recent incidents, including the one April 4th that triggered
our missile attack, but others in December 2016 when there
were two and another in March 2017. All involved with the
use of nerve agent weaponry in Syria. Apparently, they
killed at least 159 people, they reported in the New York
Times.
And the New York Times reported, in addition, use of other chemical agents, principally chlorine, since the April 4th attack that led to our missile strike.

Are you aware of that report? And do you have information to corroborate those reports?

General Thomas: Senator, I have not seen that specific report. I am aware of all or most of those incidents. I am surprised you did not mention use of VX at the Malaysia International Airport as another egregious use of an incredibly nefarious weapons system in an open area.

Senator Blumenthal: I am sure you have information about the support or complicity of the Russians in these attacks, do you not?

General Thomas: Senator, I am aware of the nature of all those attacks and the actors involved. Again, probably in an open session, I would probably be circumspect to discuss the specifics of some of the intelligence that pertains.

Senator Blumenthal: Would you be prepared to talk about Russian involvement in these attacks in a different setting?

General Thomas: Senator, I would be glad to talk about any actors' involvement in any of these episodes.

Senator Blumenthal: I am not sure exactly how to ask this question, General, and I hope you will bear with me.
But is there a reason why the American people should not know about Russian complicity and involvement in these war crimes? They are war crimes. If the Russians are aiding and abetting them, why should the American people be denied that information?

General Thomas: Senator, I think the American public should know the extent to whoever is employing weapons of mass destruction and chemical weapons. As much as we understand who and how, that could and should be divulged to the American public.

Senator Blumenthal: So the rules about your providing us information in this setting are made by others, not by yourself, obviously, so I am not meaning any disrespect to you.

But I am absolutely perplexed as to why we should not make more widely known the involvement of Russians in war crimes, only one of them so far widely reported, that led us to launch a missile strike at the base where Russians currently are stationed. They had to know about the use of sarin in that attack on Assad's own people.

So I hope that we are able to disseminate that information more widely to the American people. And I respect your position and the rules that apply to you. But you do have information about, let's call them other actors who are aiding and abetting Bashar Assad in these criminal
attacks, murderous acts on his own people, is that correct?

General Thomas: Senator, we are focused on everyone who is inclined to use these kinds of weapons.

Senator Blumenthal: Is there any sort of defense that can be provided to the people of Syria by the United States against these types of weapons?

General Thomas: Senator, as you might imagine, the equipment required for the array of weapons that may or may not still be in the Syrian arsenal would be extensive, so I am sure it is a daunting logistics challenge to try to provide that kind of equipment.

Again, I think your first point, disrupting the use or the employment of the weapons systems is probably the most effective thing you could do.

Senator Blumenthal: General, my time has expired. I really appreciate both you and Ms. Whelan being here today and your service to our Nation and the service of every single man and woman under your command. Thank you very much.

Chairman McCain: I thank the witnesses. This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:25 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]