

Stenographic Transcript
Before the

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

Thursday, May 4, 2017

Washington, D.C.

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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.

Present: Senators McCain [presiding], Inhofe, Wicker, Fischer, Cotton, Rounds, Ernst, Tillis, Sullivan, Perdue, Cruz, Reed, Nelson, McCaskill, Shaheen, Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Donnelly, Hirono, Kaine, King, Heinrich, Warren, and Peters.

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

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

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

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

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

24 For the last 15 years, special operations forces have
25 been heavily engaged in the fight against global terrorist

1 groups. As a result, SOCOM's budget has emphasized
2 optimizing and sustaining counterterrorism capabilities.
3 This is unlikely to change anytime soon. The United States
4 will remain engaged in global counterterrorism operations of
5 varying scope and intensity for the foreseeable future, and
6 special operations forces will continue to play a vital
7 role.

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

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

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

25 The challenges posed by militarily advanced great

1 powers will require the development and employment of new
2 technologies and capabilities. It also warrants a serious
3 review of the need for additional special operations force
4 structure.

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

14 This is not sustainable, and this is not right.

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

21 Lastly and most importantly, I expect our witnesses to
22 provide the committee with an update on the overall health
23 of the force and what is being done to mitigate the impact
24 to our operators and their families. Fifteen years of
25 continuous combat operations in back-to-back deployments

1 have placed enormous strain on the force, challenging
2 readiness, resilience, and retention.

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

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

8 Senator Reed?

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

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

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

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

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

22 SOCOM is unique within the Department of Defense as the
23 only functional combatant command with service-like
24 responsibilities for the training, equipping, organization,
25 and readiness of special operations forces.

1 When Congress created SOCOM, it also established the
2 position of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special
3 Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, or ASD/SOLIC, to be
4 the service secretary-like civilian tasked with day-to-day
5 advocacy and oversight of special operations forces. For
6 many reasons, including competing responsibility for other
7 policy matters, the ASD/SOLIC has not adequately fulfilled
8 the mandate to date.

9 The National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year
10 2017 sought to address this issue with a number of reforms
11 designed to optimize the partnership between the Commander
12 of SOCOM and the ASD/SOLIC for the benefit of special
13 operations forces. For that reason, we are pleased to have
14 Ms. Whelan, the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense SOLIC,
15 testifying today in the service secretary-like role
16 envisioned by last year's reforms.

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

21 Our special operations forces remain heavily engaged in
22 the fight against ISIS, Al Qaeda, and other violent
23 extremist organizations, sometimes directly, but more often
24 in support of local partner forces on the ground, as we have
25 seen most prominently in Iraq and Syria. I hope both of you

1 will give us your assessment of what, if anything, we can do
2 to accelerate progress in defeating these groups.

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

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

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

20 Given the demand for special operation forces across
21 these various mission sets, we must always remain mindful of
22 the already high operational tempo faced by our special
23 operators and their families. SOCOM has sought to mitigate
24 the stress of these repeated demanding deployments through
25 the Preservation of the Force and Family Initiative. I look

1 forward to an update on the lessons learned from this
2 initiative and SOCOM's plans going forward.

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

7 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 Chairman McCain: Ms. Whelan?

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1 STATEMENT OF THERESA M. WHELAN, ACTING ASSISTANT
2 SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS/LOW-INTENSITY
3 CONFLICT

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

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

21 Today, I will focus on three topics: winning the
22 current fight and defeating emerging threats, building on
23 the foundations of Section 922 ASD/SOLIC authorities, and
24 continuing to hone the edge of SOF personnel and
25 capabilities.

1 SOF is a vanguard force in countering emerging threats
2 at the leading edge of the modern security landscape. In
3 the last 15 years, we encountered a networked enemy, we
4 flattened our organizations and accelerated our targeting
5 cycles, and we built a network to defeat them. We now face
6 advanced transregional threats that demand greater levels of
7 coordination and collaboration, and we are redoubling our
8 focus on building relationships and international and
9 interagency partners.

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

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

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

25 Sustained funding and flexible legislative authorities

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

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

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

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

25 These authorities have empowered the Special Operations

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

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

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

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

25 [The prepared statement of Ms. Whelan follows:]

1 Chairman McCain: General Thomas?
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1 STATEMENT OF GENERAL RAYMOND A. THOMAS III, USA,
2 COMMANDER, UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

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

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

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

24 As we carry out both of these roles today, special
25 operations forces are more relevant than ever to the current

1 and enduring threats facing our Nation. We have been at the
2 forefront of national security operations for the past 3
3 decades, to include continuous combat over the past 15.5
4 years. This is historic period has been the backdrop for
5 some of our greatest successes, as well as the source of our
6 greatest challenge, which is the sustained readiness of this
7 magnificent force.

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

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

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

23 My current priorities for the command fall into three
24 broad categories. First, we must win the current fight,
25 which consists of carrying out assigned missions running the

1 gamut from defeating Islamic extremism, both Sunni and Shia,
2 to countering Russian aggression, to preparing for
3 contingencies in Korea, as well as various security
4 operations to defend the homeland. Second, we must continue
5 to transform our enterprise to remain relevant in the
6 rapidly changing security environment. Finally, we must
7 take care of our people and their families as they form the
8 foundation upon which our force is built.

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

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

22 This focus is also occurring during a period of
23 unprecedented recapitalization of substantive parts of our
24 warfighting capability, to include the conversion of our
25 entire C-130 fleet to J model C-130s, as well as other major

1 platforms. We are extremely thankful to the services for
2 enabling this transformation of the force, as it sets us on
3 the path for success for decades to come.

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

10 Thank you.

11 [The prepared statement of General Thomas follows:]

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1 Chairman McCain: Thank you, General.

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

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

13 Chairman McCain: So what does that do to morale?

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

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

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

22 Chairman McCain: So how can you plan, in this
23 budgetary environment, when we lurch from crisis to crisis?

24 I guess I am a little redundant here, but when I look
25 at this map of where all of your people are, spread all over

1 the world, it seems to me at least we owe them some kind of
2 predictability.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

25 Chairman McCain: Has the European Reassurance

1 Initiative had a positive impact?

2 General Thomas: It has, Chairman.

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

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

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

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

23 General Thomas: Chairman, I understood the commander's
24 assessment of stalemate as an opportunity to change the
25 strategy.

1 Chairman McCain: But that opportunity, if the present
2 status quo prevails, then there is no end to it. In other
3 words, what do you think needs to be done to end a
4 stalemate?

5 General Thomas: Chairman, I think that General
6 Nicholson and the Secretary are pursuing new initiatives to
7 --

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

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

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

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

24 Chairman McCain: Does that mean, in your view,
25 additional troops commitment?

1 General Thomas: Chairman, additional troops are being
2 considered, changes to the ROE --

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

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

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

10 General Thomas: I do.

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

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

15 Chairman McCain: Right.

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

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

21 General Thomas: With that ratio I just described, they
22 are about a 1-to-1, so 6 months or so deployed, if that is
23 the rotation, 6 months back. That is the worst case. In
24 the best case, we have been able to establish a balance of
25 1-to-3, so for every 6 months deployed --

1 Chairman McCain: Isn't it a significant strain to have
2 half your time deployed? Doesn't that put a lot of strain
3 on the individuals and their families?

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

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

10 Chairman McCain: I thank you, General.

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

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

16 Ms. Whelan?

17 Ms. Whelan: Thanks for the question, Senator.

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

25 We have also gained a separate seat for SOLIC on the

1 Deputy Secretary's SAP Oversight Council. SOCOM has a
2 number of special access programs that we previously had not
3 been able to manage independently.

4 Further, within the department, we have established a
5 tiger team to cross departmentwide in order to determine
6 other areas in which ASD/SOLIC needs to gain additional
7 authorities and abilities within the department to represent
8 SOCOM and have a seat at the table.

9 One other recent accomplishment is I think we will have
10 a seat for SOCOM in the upcoming defense strategy
11 development process.

12 Senator Reed: General Thomas, any comments?

13 General Thomas: Senator, I would reinforce Theresa's
14 points. We very much embrace the recent language that
15 reinforces ASD/SOLIC's role as a service-like entity. We
16 are well-represented at all of the appropriate venues.

17 It sometimes takes reminding that we are unique in that
18 case, because we are seen as either one or the other, and we
19 sometimes have to remind folks that we are both, a service-
20 like entity and a combatant command.

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

23 Senator Reed: Secretary Whelan, are there any
24 responsibilities you have that you feel might be more
25 effectively and efficiently carried out by another entity?

1 You have a broad range of responsibilities. Is there
2 anything that should be repositioned?

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

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

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

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

24 Ms. Whelan: Correct, Senator. It is a seam. There
25 are a lot of seams, as you all know, within our

1 organizational structure, and it is difficult. If you
2 eliminate one seam, you will create another. So it is kind
3 of a difficult balance to strike.

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

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

14 Senator Reed: Thank you.

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

23 General Thomas, your comments?

24 And I have no time.

25 General Thomas: Senator, we are actively pursuing both

1 the authorities and the resources that would enable more
2 enhanced unconventional warfare operations. Again, we are
3 very appreciative of what 1208 does for us, and that is
4 actually -- I mean, it is very -- kind of enthusiastic. Its
5 similar authority, similar resourcing might be advantageous
6 for the force and for the Nation for unconventional warfare
7 purposes, and I look forward to having that continuing
8 discussion with you and others.

9 Senator Reed: Thank you.

10 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

11 Chairman McCain: Senator Inhofe?

12 Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

24 And this surprises me, because AFRICOM did not even
25 come online until the first of 2008, and yet, if you go back

1 to 2006, the deployments to Africa have increased by more
2 than 1,600 percent. It went from 1 percent to 17 percent in
3 terms of deployments outside the United States. That is
4 huge. That is a lot of increase in activity.

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

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

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

24 Senator Inhofe: I do not think anyone anticipated back
25 in 2008 or even in the years since then that the activity

1 would increase as it has there, so I am interested in
2 following through with that.

3 On the idea of what you guys are in a position to
4 handle right now, most of the deployed SOCOM forces, 55
5 percent, went to the Middle East. Next was Africa, that was
6 17 percent. Then Europe, 13 percent, and 9 percent.

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

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

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

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

25 Now, to me, that seems a little inconsistent with being

1 adequately staffed. You went on to talk about as or more
2 challenged as a conventional force by the problem of
3 suicide, other problems in the ranks that come with what I
4 consider to be over-deployed.

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

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

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

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

21 I would have to thank all of you as well for providing
22 us the tools that we did not have a decade ago to build in
23 resiliency for our force in terms of our Preservation of the
24 Force and Family, and also for our ability to care for our
25 warriors in the event of mishaps, injuries, et cetera. We

1 did not have that capability. You helped us gain it over
2 time, and that is a critical part of how we sustain
3 ourselves.

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

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

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

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

20 Senator Inhofe: Thank you very much.

21 Chairman McCain: Senator Hirono?

22 Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

23 I want to thank both of our witnesses for your service.
24 And, in particular, I would like to thank the men and women
25 that you lead in our armed services, both in the military

1 and in the civilian side, and, of course, particularly the
2 Special Ops Command in the Pacific arena who provide great
3 support to the Asia-Pacific region.

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

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

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

18 Ms. Whelan: Thanks for the question, Senator.
19 Absolutely not.

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

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

25 Senator Hirono: General Thomas?

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

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

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

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

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

18 Senator Hirono: What were they the result of?

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

22 Senator Hirono: I see.

23 General Thomas, in your testimony, you identify SOFWERX
24 as a SOCOM initiative to support agile acquisition with
25 appropriate venues. This is an open collaboration facility

1 in Florida that has been in operation for over a year and
2 has successfully brought hundreds of nontraditional partners
3 together to work on your most challenging problems. I think
4 that is a really good idea, although we have a lot of
5 innovators and idea folks all over the country, also in
6 Hawaii.

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

9 General Thomas: Senator, you actually teased out the
10 bigger part of the problem. I have the luxury of commanding
11 70,000 of the best, most creative problem solvers in the
12 world. How I marry them up with the absolute innovation
13 that is everywhere in terms of industrial approaches is the
14 real challenge.

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

23 So a relatively new initiative, SOFWERX, about 1.5
24 years old, but also already paying some huge dividends for
25 us.

1 Senator Hirono: So based on your experience so far
2 with SOFWERX, would you recommend that something like this,
3 maybe a physical location for PACOM or other commands?

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

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

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

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

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

25 General Thomas: First and foremost, we are not a

1 panacea. We are not the ultimate solution for every
2 problem. You will not hear that coming from us. That has
3 been misconstrued in some media circles. Everything we are
4 doing is in concert with conventional forces, with our
5 allies, completely integrated.

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

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

16 Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

17 Chairman McCain: Senator Wicker?

18 Senator Wicker: Thank you both.

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

23 General Thomas: Senator, in a word, extensively. At
24 almost every part of our formation, you will see where we
25 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.

1 General Thomas: A phenomenal relationship, yes,
2 Senator.

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

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

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

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

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

24 So, again, two phenomenal aspects of our portfolio that
25 are important to everything that we are doing.

1 Senator Wicker: So we are continuing to do a lot of
2 significant work in riverine environments.

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

6 Senator Wicker: Where does that apply?

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

10 Senator Wicker: Okay. And let me just say, to follow
11 up on the chairman's line of questioning about Afghanistan,
12 I just think it is very important for you to know, and for
13 everyone listening to know, that we need to move beyond
14 anything that puts us at a stalemate in Afghanistan.

15 This is an important fight that we need to win, and
16 there is every reason that we should be able to do that. We
17 have a populace in Afghanistan who supports our presence
18 there. The overwhelming majority of the ethnic groups, of
19 the tribes, appreciate what we stand for and look to the
20 United States for leadership.

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

25 Ms. Whelan?

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

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

12 Chairman McCain: Senator Heinrich?

13 Senator Heinrich: Thank you, Chairman.

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

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

22 The high operational tempo was one of the things we
23 touched on. One of the things you mentioned to me that
24 really stuck in my head are the numbers. You also indicated
25 that now somewhere between 28 percent and 30 percent of your

1 funding is now from war supplemental, or OCO funding, versus
2 7 percent across the other military services.

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

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

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

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

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

24 Senator Heinrich: If your overall budget were held
25 flat, would you rather have that in base budget or would you

1 rather see it over in the OCO?

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

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

19 General Thomas: Senator, I think this committee is
20 very aware that ISR is a significant portion of our
21 portfolio, to the tune of about one-fifth of our investment
22 strategy on any given annual basis. It runs the gamut from
23 tactical ISR all the way to high-end ISR that our Air Force
24 component produces, which is the best in the world. It is
25 better than anything on the planet.

1 Cannon plays a critical role in terms of the basing and
2 training of that ISR capability, both manned and unmanned.
3 And then the range complex there allows us to work it every
4 night. So, again, state-of-the-art ISR capability produced
5 by our Air Force and others that we leverage on a consistent
6 basis.

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

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

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

25 Senator Heinrich: Do you feel good about Air Force's

1 willingness to get in that game as well?

2 General Thomas: I do. We have a phenomenal
3 relationship with General Goldfein and the Air Force.

4 We have actual annual service talks with all the
5 services to talk through how we can crush through our
6 combined equities, and the relationship with our sister
7 services is phenomenal. I have no concerns.

8 Senator Heinrich: My time has expired here, but I also
9 want to express a willingness to work with you on the 1208-
10 like issues with regard to unconventional warfare.

11 So thank you all for being here today.

12 Chairman McCain: Senator Ernst?

13 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

22 General Thomas, during your confirmation hearing, we
23 spoke about SOCOM's Preservation of the Force and Family,
24 POTFF, initiatives. As you know, I am glad to see that
25 SOCOM has done a lot in those areas to help our special

1 operations warriors and their family members. The wounded
2 warriors especially is an interest of mine. I would
3 encourage everybody on this committee to take a look at
4 those programs and learn more about them.

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

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

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

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

20 It literally builds in or enables us to build in
21 resilience prior to and in preparation for potential
22 deployment for both our servicemembers and their family
23 members across a broad array of approaches -- psychological,
24 physical, spiritual -- that again has paid huge dividends
25 for us.

1 You mentioned a specific aspect of that that pertains
2 mostly to the physical maintenance and the physical recovery
3 of our force. But over time, this committee and the
4 Congress has enabled us to put the right infrastructure in
5 place with the right technicians, therapists, and
6 psychologists, et cetera, to provide state-of-the-art, as
7 good as anything on the planet, sustainment capability for
8 our individual operators, our individual servicemembers, and
9 their families.

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

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

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

1 Afghanistan a number of times.

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

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

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

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

24 Senator Ernst: Very good. I appreciate that very
25 much.

1 I do have a few other questions. We will get to those.
2 Just a quick yes or no, though.

3 President Trump today is saying that he does support
4 leaving troops in Iraq in the fight against ISIS. Is that
5 something that you would support?

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

9 Senator Ernst: Ms. Whelan?

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

13 Senator Ernst: Thank you very much.

14 Thank you, Mr. Chair.

15 Chairman McCain: Senator Kaine?

16 Senator Kaine: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

19 On the concern side, on the SOCOM Web site, you have a
20 SOF Truths, five of them. One of them is, most special
21 operations require non-SOF assistance. That seems pretty
22 obvious. I have a concern about what I worry is a sort of
23 growing SOF myth, and that is you can do special forces and
24 have special forces and nothing else to accomplish your
25 goals. Even conversations in this body sometimes are, well,

1 we do not want to use ground troops, no boots on the ground,
2 but it is okay to use special forces.

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

9 Am I right to worry about that?

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

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

18 Senator Kaine: A question Senator Wicker asked you
19 about, collaboration with international partners, I want to
20 focus on a piece of that, the training that you do. I think
21 one of the best parts of our DOD budget, and it is a very
22 small part of the budget, is the training work that we do
23 with other nations, either bringing military leaders of
24 other nations here or doing training with countries all over
25 the world.

1 Senator King and I have done some traveling and have
2 seen U.S. special forces doing training in some tough parts
3 in the world that are pretty impressive. Without saying
4 anything in an open setting that you should not, talk a
5 little bit about the scope of the training activities that
6 our special forces are involved in with partners all over
7 the world.

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

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

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

25 Senator Kaine: And this training, when you do it, it

1 is not only about just sheer military capacity-building. It
2 is also about rules of war and human rights and elevating
3 professional standards in these militaries around the world,
4 and that is all for the good.

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

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

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

24 So I commend you on that and look forward to talking
25 about that more as we get into working on the NDAA together.

1 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2 Chairman McCain: Senator Sullivan?

3 Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 Ms. Whelan, General, thanks for your testimony.

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

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

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

25 General Thomas: Senator, thanks for the question, and

1 thanks for the time yesterday as well.

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

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

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

24 So, again, we are leaning into this mission as
25 aggressively as we do most everything at SOCOM. But it is

1 obviously much, much bigger than us, and we are honored to
2 have that coordinating role for the Department of Defense,
3 and we are endeavoring to provide the best product possible
4 for the Secretary and the department.

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

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

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

20 I know you are looking at that issue, but there is kind
21 of this, and I think it is a theme here, you are hearing a
22 bit of a myth that, hey, once the SOCOM men and women are on
23 it, everything is good to go. But we know that there are a
24 lot of other capabilities and other forces that need to
25 bring to bear.

1 Specifically, what do you see as most important in
2 terms of other capabilities, supporting or even in the lead?

3 General Thomas: Senator, it is kind of ironic, I am
4 running through my brain right now 80 different countries,
5 8,000 special operations forces forward deployed, and I
6 cannot think of a single circumstance where we are not
7 dependent on another service, another supporting function
8 out there -- not one.

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

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

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

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

25 Senator Sullivan: So you are integrated, for example,

1 with marines who are doing artillery fire missions with you
2 in Iraq right now?

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

7 Senator Sullivan: Great. Thank you.

8 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 Chairman McCain: Senator King?

10 Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

22 [Laughter.]

23 Senator King: I just want you to know that you are at
24 that level, and I am now above it. So I have never
25 forgotten that.

1 General Thomas, there has been a lot of talk about
2 tempo. Let me go back to the left about tempo and talk
3 about retention, recruitment, and throughput. Do you have
4 adequate people in the pipeline to maintain the tempo that
5 you are at today?

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

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

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

20 General Thomas: Will do, Senator.

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

25 I am concerned about interested parties, your command,

1 geographic combatant commanders, service components, all
2 receive and share information in a quick and efficient
3 manner. Talk to me about command-and-control.

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

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

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

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

24 Not necessarily for this forum, but there are some
25 specific elements that operate under a slightly different

1 chain of command, although still under General Votel's
2 purview but with more direct access to General Votel that
3 belong to General Thomas.

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

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

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

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

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

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

23 General Thomas: Always, constant, incessant. Senator,
24 our role for synchronizing is where these geographic
25 combatant commanders get to their prescribed limits. So you

1 might imagine, for CENTCOM, for instance, as their borders
2 literally butt up to other geographic combatant commanders,
3 Syria to Turkey, Yemen to Somalia, Egypt to Libya, that is
4 where we play a critical function of synchronizing special
5 operations activities across those respective geographic
6 combatant commanders.

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

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

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

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

18 Ms. Whelan: Absolutely.

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

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

22 Senator King: Thank you very much.

23 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

24 Chairman McCain: Senator Cotton?

25 Senator Cotton: Thank you both for coming today.

1 General Thomas, thank you, in particular, for your
2 service, and all the men and women underneath your command.

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

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

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

19 General Thomas: Senator, the short answer is yes.

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

1 restricted right now?

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

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

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

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

23 At what decision would something like that be made?

24 General Thomas: Senator, I think it was described that
25 that decision was in General Nicholson's authority, so he

1 had the capability, he had the discretion and decision-
2 making to deploy it.

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

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

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

12 Senator Cotton: The commander in Afghanistan.

13 General Thomas: The commander on --

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

16 General Thomas: No.

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

20 General Thomas: I believe it is.

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

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

25 Senator Cotton: I hope all the rest of our bombs are

1 overcoming the laws of their mother. Are they?

2 General Thomas: I think they are over their grieving.

3 Senator Cotton: Good.

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

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

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

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

20 General Thomas: Agreed, Senator.

21 Senator Cotton: A related question, does that mean
22 that if we expect to increase the number of special
23 operations forces, or the mission sets that we provide them,
24 or the operational tempo at which we deploy them, we also
25 need to see a concomitant increase in the number of

1 conventional forces as well to support those missions?

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

4 Senator Cotton: All right. Thank you.

5 Chairman McCain: Senator Peters?

6 Senator Peters: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

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

21 We have, in Michigan, TARDEC, which is the Army's tank
22 and vehicle research lab, which is also working on the model
23 that you have mentioned. But I was just curious, I know
24 your effort is only about 1.5 years old now, but what would
25 you consider the major takeaway of that effort in the last

1 1.5 years? Or perhaps a lesson that you have learned in
2 that 1.5 years that is going to be instructive for entities
3 like TARDEC and others to emulate?

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

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

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

24 Senator Peters: I appreciate that. I would also like
25 to do a deeper dive, perhaps with some folks there to talk

1 specifically about some of the work that they are doing and
2 how we can replicate that in other places, because I think
3 this is critically important in future warfare.

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

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

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

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

24 So we are pursuing that actively. I was going to ask,
25 if your time allows, that maybe we can get you to come visit

1 in Tampa. We have had several visitors come in and actually
2 provide us other opportunities to connect with academia and
3 industry to some of the other activities that you mentioned.

4 Senator Peters: I would appreciate that opportunity.

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

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

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

17 Chairman McCain: Senator Cruz?

18 Senator Cruz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

21 General Thomas, in recent months, special operations
22 forces from across the services have made the ultimate
23 sacrifices in conflicts around the world. Most recently, a
24 number of brave special operators lost their lives fighting
25 ISIS in northeastern Afghanistan. The reduction in

1 conventional forces in Afghanistan and the closure of a
2 majority of combat outposts and forward operating bases in
3 the country has left a considerable gap in U.S. presence in
4 critical enemy engagement areas.

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

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

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

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

23 Senator Cruz: Do the special operations forces have
24 the dedicated assets and resources that they need to fight
25 and win, given so many competing areas of conflict around

1 the world? And are you ever put into a position where you
2 are forced to choose which mission to fully support and what
3 can be accomplished with less dedicated assets?

4 General Thomas: Senator, to answer your first
5 question, I do think we have adequate resources to task.

6 The bigger challenge, which was prefaced by the
7 chairman at the beginning, is that, from a DOD standpoint,
8 we are a microcosm of the DOD from a global approach, in
9 that we are trying to provide the necessary special
10 operations requirements to all the geographic combatant
11 commanders at the same time with a relative prioritization.

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

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

24 This is obviously a critical component of our Nation's
25 nuclear deterrent and counter-WMD programs that have a major

1 responsibility, including nuclear, chemical, and biological
2 agents.

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

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

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

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

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

23 Ms. Whelan: Senator, thanks for the question.

24 I think we fully supported the decision to shift the
25 responsibility to SOCOM. SOCOM has the capabilities on

1 that, we were intended to utilize to address this issue, so
2 I think, organizationally, it made a tremendous amount of
3 sense to us to move it from STRATCOM to SOCOM, so we fully
4 support.

5 Senator Cruz: Thank you very much.

6 Chairman McCain: Senator Warren?

7 Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

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

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

1 Senator Warren: So at the national level and at the
2 country level.

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

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

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

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

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

1 weapon.

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

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

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

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

23 Going forward though, even from a first blush
24 assessment, the biggest challenge for all of us is seeing
25 and sensing the nature of the threat in an environment that

1 runs the gamut from dual-use technology, proliferation of
2 nefarious items in the same stream as things that are for
3 the good of industry and not of a nefarious use.

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

11 Senator Warren: Thank you. I appreciate that.

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

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

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

24 General Thomas: Ma'am, we are actually still co-joined
25 with Strategic Command for this mission set. So as they

1 shifted the set specifically to us, there are still a number
2 of co-related activities that have kept us co-joined. They
3 did transfer an entity with the Defense Threat Reduction
4 Agency that was part and parcel of their approach that came
5 directly to was and is integral to what we are doing now.
6 But we are also addressing what we think are the future
7 requirements to enhance this mission.

8 Senator Warren: Do you expect more transfers to occur?

9 I am going to quit, Mr. Chairman, because I am over my
10 time.

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

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

20 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 Chairman McCain: Senator Rounds?

22 Senator Rounds: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

25 In the 2014 QDR, manpower requirement for Special

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

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

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

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

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

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

25 General Thomas: Senator, again, I think, without

1 getting into details of specific locations and activities,
2 there was curtailment in terms of some of our activities.

3 Senator Rounds: Diminished operations.

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

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

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

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

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

25 Senator Rounds: To a lesser degree.

1 General Thomas: Yes, we do.

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

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

13 Senator Rounds: Could you specify?

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

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

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

25 Senator Rounds: Cyber capabilities are critical when

1 it comes to your operations as well. I suspect you would
2 agree with that. Can you share with us right now your
3 ability to maintain a cyber superiority with regard to the
4 operations that your -- let me put it this way. Clearly,
5 you have to be able to maintain cybersecurity when it comes
6 to your operations. Can you describe for us the challenges
7 you have, shortcomings you may have, or needs that you may
8 have with regard to cybersecurity capabilities?

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

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

21 Senator Rounds: My time has expired.

22 Mr. Chairman, thank you.

23 Chairman McCain: Senator McCaskill?

24 Senator McCaskill: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

25 Thank you both for being here and preparing for this

1 hearing today.

2 I wanted to emphasize at the start that, according to
3 the materials I reviewed, countering Russian aggression is
4 the number two priority.

5 Is that correct, General Thomas?

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

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

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

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

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

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

20 General Thomas: Senator, I cannot speak specifically
21 to the other complementary forces that are out there, other
22 than to say that we are closely linked with them in terms of
23 --

24 Senator McCaskill: Would it be thousands of American
25 military in the countries on the western border of Russia?

1 General Thomas: Senator, I think you would have to
2 discern between those assigned to Europe and additive
3 forces. But I do not have the specific numbers.

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

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

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

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

22 Senator McCaskill: Countering ISIS and its effects?

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

25 Senator McCaskill: I highly recommend it to you. I

1 think it would be very helpful to you.

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

9 General Thomas: We have, Senator.

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

12 General Thomas: Correct, Senator.

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

21 I think with the amount of money we are spending, it
22 would be great, you may not be prepared today, but since you
23 all are so involved in the train and equip, it would be
24 helpful for us to get more information about, what is the
25 problem? And are we adjusting what we are doing? Or are we

1 just pouring in money and still having folks walk away and
2 still have people who we have trained and equipped show up
3 on the other side?

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

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

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

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

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

25 General Thomas: Very good.

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

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

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

11 Senator McCaskill: That would be terrific.

12 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 Chairman McCain: Senator Tillis?

14 Senator Tillis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

15 General Thomas, it is good to see you.

16 Ms. Whelan, you as well.

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

21 I know that many of my members have asked questions
22 about the stress on the force and optempo and a number of
23 those things. What I would like to maybe spend my time on
24 has more to do with the employment side and my capacity as
25 Personnel Subcommittee chair.

1 I know that, in your opening testimony, you said we
2 must continue to place the greatest emphasis on selecting,
3 retaining, and empowering our people and sustaining them and
4 their families.

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

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

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

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

21 We have also been able to leverage, as you might
22 imagine, you described our operator experience, a lot of
23 experience, a lot of repetitions downrange. Our spouses
24 have had the same experience. We have been able to leverage
25 their experience for how we can be more thorough in our

1 preparation to build in the resilience and to deal with
2 their problems as they occur over time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

25 Senator Tillis: We just want to make sure that we get

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

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

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

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

20 Most recently, we completed our annual process to align
21 forces 2 years out, so where we think special operations
22 forces are required in priority relative to that of
23 geographic combatant commanders. So it literally produced a
24 one through end list of what we are doing in priority and a
25 plan to discuss that in detail with the Secretary in terms

1 of here is where we could offramp, and here is the risk or
2 the price to be paid in terms of either cessation of
3 missions or things of that like.

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

7 Senator Tillis: Thank you.

8 Chairman McCain: Senator Blumenthal has arrived.

9 Senator Blumenthal: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

15 Senator Blumenthal: Including use of chemical agents.

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

18 Senator Blumenthal: You may be familiar with a new
19 Human Rights Watch report this week that cites a number of
20 recent incidents, including the one April 4th that triggered
21 our missile attack, but others in December 2016 when there
22 were two and another in March 2017. All involved with the
23 use of nerve agent weaponry in Syria. Apparently, they
24 killed at least 159 people, they reported in the New York
25 Times.

1 And the New York Times reported, in addition, use of
2 other chemical agents, principally chlorine, since the April
3 4th attack that led to our missile strike.

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

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

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

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

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

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

24 Senator Blumenthal: I am not sure exactly how to ask
25 this question, General, and I hope you will bear with me.

1 But is there a reason why the American people should
2 not know about Russian complicity and involvement in these
3 war crimes? They are war crimes. If the Russians are
4 aiding and abetting them, why should the American people be
5 denied that information?

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

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

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

21 So I hope that we are able to disseminate that
22 information more widely to the American people. And I
23 respect your position and the rules that apply to you. But
24 you do have information about, let's call them other actors
25 who are aiding and abetting Bashar Assad in these criminal

1 attacks, murderous acts on his own people, is that correct?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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