

Thomas Ayres
Opening Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Reed, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. And thank you to those members who were able to meet with me prior to this hearing.

I would like to thank President Trump for nominating me, and Secretary Mattis and Secretary Wilson for their confidence in recommending me, for the opportunity to serve again in the Department of Defense.

I have been blessed to have been surrounded by role-models of military service my entire life and it only seemed natural for me to take the oath at the age of 17, and to remain subject to that oath for over 37 years. My father, my biggest role model, enlisted in the Army, earned combat infantry badges in both Korea and Vietnam, and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel. My mother served in her own way, raising my brother and I in places like Panama, Fort Leonard Wood and Fort Polk, and then supported my oldest brother as he enlisted and also served in Vietnam. My mother's brothers, my uncles though both born in Italy, served in the United State Navy during World War II.

Speaking of military families, I am joined today by my wife and our three children. Our daughter Quinn recently graduated college, and is working here on Capitol Hill. Our son Matthew is a sophomore in college and Finn is a senior in high school. They are young adults of character, and I could not be more proud of them. In fact, their strength of character developed over frequent moves and numerous deployments is largely attributable to my wife, Mary. She is herself an Army veteran and the daughter of a career Navy pilot who flew combat missions in Korea and Vietnam. Mary is truly a rock, and I am thankful for all her support that allowed me to follow a path of service.

Despite that former Army life, if confirmed, I would be honored and humbled to join the ranks of the United States Air Force. Besides having worked with, and in one case directly for, superb Air Force Judge Advocates throughout my military career, I know first-hand the importance of our Air Force as a truly dominant force. In May 2002, I flew into Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, awed by the skill of the pilots as they accomplished an in-flight refueling, and in black-out conditions, cork-screwed in from 30,000 feet to reach that distant base. Many on this committee I know have experienced that same flight. Less than a year later, I was equally impressed in Kuwait attending daily briefings on the Shock and Awe

air campaign. Serving as a Staff Judge Advocate, when our Division Headquarters' convoy crossed the berm into Iraq, I was riding with the Division's Air Liaison Officer (or ALO), an Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, in an Air Force HWMM-V, driven by an Air Force Technical Sergeant. And most of the Rules of Engagement advice I provided to commanders during that and later deployments was given in relation to the use of Air Force ordnance. I have no doubt I appreciate the gravity of the work done by the Air Force, and the importance of the United States Air Force remaining the world's dominant Force in the sky.

Further, I recognize the complexity of the current global environment and the dangers and requirements facing our Armed Forces today. The Air Force in particular faces enormous challenges. The Air Force must always be ready to fly, fight and win... in the sky, in space and in cyber. For 26 years, the Air Force has conducted continuous combat operations, resulting in a growing toll on Airmen, their readiness and their equipment. Past efforts to downsize combat experienced pilots, skilled technicians and airframes unfortunately intersected with an increasing need for air, space and cyber power. As the Chief of Staff of the Air Force says, "Air and Space superiority are not American birthrights." Near-peer competitors in particular are investing heavily in advancing the sophistication of their air, space and cyber operations.

In the midst of these national security concerns, I understand the Air Force concurrently faces some very difficult legal issues. The Air Force remains fully engaged in the critically important and on-going effort to end sexual harassment, sexual assault and retaliation. While progress has been made, even more can be done to gain and maintain the trust of every Airman - and every citizen - the prospective mothers and fathers of future Airmen. The legal challenges of course go beyond the issue of sexual assault, to include implementing changing personnel programs, confronting environmental concerns, addressing and defining the norms for cyber and space operations, and the meeting the urgent need to improve the efficiency and flexibility of acquisition processes. The complexity of these issues seems daunting. Yet, I would be humbled to serve the Secretary of the Air Force and join the incredibly professional team of the Office of General Counsel, and The Judge Advocate General of the Air Force, both civilian and uniformed attorneys, paralegals, and support staff, to meet these challenges.

If confirmed, I commit to meeting these, and every other issue, in a principled manner, with renewed enthusiasm and determination to discover innovative solutions, and with transparency to this committee as we move forward.

Thank you for considering my nomination and I look forward to your questions.