

Heather Wilson  
Senate Armed Services Committee  
Nomination Hearing – Secretary of the Air Force

Opening Statement

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am Heather Wilson, the President of the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology and the nominee to be the twenty-fourth Secretary of the Air Force.

I want to thank you, Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, and the members of this committee for taking time to meet with me before today's hearing. In our meetings, I learned more about each of your interests and concerns about the future of the Air Force. I appreciate your willingness to give me so much of your time and, should I be confirmed, I look forward to our continued conversations.

I want to thank Senator Thune and Senator Rounds for introducing me this morning, and for their support and friendship. The people of South Dakota have a reputation for being hard working, humble and kind. I have found that to be true, and they are well represented in both of you.

My nomination to this position was unexpected; I did not anticipate returning to federal service. I thoroughly enjoy being a university president, educating the next generation of engineers and scientists, and making a difference in the community in which I live.

I live a blessed life. We all do. And we have the liberty to enjoy our blessings because thousands of America's best citizens volunteer to protect the rest of us. It would be my honor to serve them to the best of my ability.

As Senators on this committee, you know well that America's vital national interests continue to be threatened. China is rapidly developing new military capabilities funded by an economy that will rival our own in within a decade. Russia has used limited conventional force in Crimea, Ukraine, and Syria to achieve its political objectives. Iran is a destabilizing force in the Middle East and beyond. The Stalinist North Korean regime is willing to starve its own people to threaten neighbors and will sell weapons to any buyer with cash. Terrorism festers in weak states that cannot preserve order.

We live in a dangerous time.

And I think we sometimes take for granted American dominance in air and space power. The last time an American military member on the ground was killed by enemy aircraft was April 15, 1953 – during the Korean War. Two legs of the nuclear triad operated by the U.S. Air Force have quietly deterred enemies and helped to keep the peace for over 70 years. And our Air Force has been continuously engaged in combat operations for 26 straight years.

But dominating the high ground is not a certain thing. And, having spent some time over the past three months getting reacquainted with national security matters after several years in higher education, there is cause for concern.

We have a mismatch between our strategic objectives and the military means we have available to deter and confront threats. The Air Force is too small for what the nation expects of it.

Since the passage of the Budget Control Act in 2011, the number of Airmen has declined significantly while the demand for air and space power has increased. Senior Air Force leaders have testified that less than 50% of the conventional air force is ready for all of the combat missions assigned to them. I have no reason to question that estimate.

With only 55 active, guard and reserve fighter squadrons and a shortfall of over 900 fighter pilots, the Air Force is unable to sustain today's fight and, at the same time, effectively train. While the Air Force has rightly made support for the counterterrorism mission and nuclear deterrent operations a priority, the Air Force is not fully ready to fight against a near-peer competitor.

While the size of the service is too small, its equipment is also aging. The average Air Force aircraft is now 27 years old. And while life extension programs and skilled maintainers have kept them in reasonably good shape, the cost of continuing to extend the life of old airplanes is very high. The next Air Force Secretary will be modernizing fighters, tankers, bombers, intelligence platforms, space capabilities, munitions and our nuclear deterrent.

If confirmed, I will work with the Secretary of Defense and the Congress to restore the readiness of the Air Force so that it can defend the vital national interests of the United States.

I will also work with Congress to address the constraints imposed by the Budget Control Act so that the Air Force can be cost effectively modernized to meet a range of threats now and in the future. Working with my colleagues in the other services and under the guidance of the Secretary of Defense, I will seek to bring business-minded reforms to the Air Force to get high quality capabilities at the best price for the taxpayer.

While, as a leader, I am values driven and mission focused, I am also people oriented.

The strength of the United States Air Force is in its people. The quality of our leaders at the squadron level will set the culture in the Air Force. Working with the Chief of Staff, I intend to bring renewed focus to the training and education of Airmen, and particularly the quality of command. If every Airman has a First Sergeant and Squadron Commander whom they trust to lead them, and do the right thing, we will continue to have the finest Air Force in the world.

Finally, the Air Force Secretary and the defense committees also have to prepare for the future. If confirmed, I will review and further develop Air Force research and development priorities to ensure we are investing in basic and applied research that will keep the Air Force ahead of adversaries for the long term.

To summarize, the Air Force is too small and not prepared for all of the threats we face as a nation.

If confirmed, I will focus on readiness, modernization, quality of command, and research for the future. To do that, I will have to work with each of you to fix the budget so that we can defend the country that we love.

On a personal note, several of you know that my roots in aviation are quite deep. My grandfather flew for the Royal Flying Corps – the predecessor to the RAF -- in the first World War. He flew sub search in the Irish sea and helped to synchronize machine guns with propeller arcs. There was no work in Scotland after the war, so he came to America. He was a barnstormer and opened airports in New England in the 1920s and 1930s. In the Second World War he flew for the United States, towing targets and ferrying parts for the Army Air Corps.

My father started flying when he was 13 and enlisted in the Air Force after high school. He was a crew chief for what, at the time, was the hottest fighter in the world – the F-84 Thunderjet. After leaving the service, he was a commercial pilot and built experimental airplanes. When I joined the Air Force at 17, I became the third generation of my family to serve. My husband, also an Air Force veteran, retired after 30 years of active, guard and reserve service.

My grandfather started flying shortly after the Wright brothers and he lived to see a man walk on the moon.

We live in a remarkable country, served by innovators and intrepid Airmen who take great risks on our behalf. I have been called back to service in a role I did not seek and did not expect. If confirmed, I will do my best to be worthy of those who serve.

I look forward to answering your questions.