

Dr. Mark T. Esper

Nomination Hearing for Secretary of the Army

Opening Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Committee

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, Members of the Armed Services Committee – it is an honor and a privilege to appear before you this morning as the President’s nominee for Secretary of the Army. I want to thank the President and Secretary Mattis for this opportunity and their confidence in me.

I would like to begin by recognizing my wife, Leah, and our children – Luke, John, and Kate – who are with me today. Like many military families, they made sacrifices in support of my service in the Army.

Less than a year after we married, my wife experienced anxious days and nights during my seven month deployment with the 101st Airborne Division to the Gulf War. Later, she gave birth to our first son at an Army hospital in a foreign country while I was commanding an airborne rifle company that trained throughout Europe as part of a NATO rapid reaction force. We moved four times in five years, but she always made a home for our growing family wherever the Army sent us.

After I transitioned from active duty on the Army Staff to the Virginia Guard, she shouldered additional parenting duties during those long drill weekends, annual training, and everything in between. This would continue for several more years, during my various jobs in the Senate, the House, and as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, until my retirement from the Army Reserve in 2007.

I tell this story because of the big thanks I owe my wife for all of the support she gave me during those years, and the terrific job she did raising our children when I was gone. Her support is something I know I will lean on again should I be confirmed as the next Secretary of the Army.

I also share this story to give you a sense of my experiences in the Army. From my first day as a cadet at West Point until my retirement, I wore an Army uniform for over twenty-five years. I was privileged to serve in some of the best Active and Guard infantry units, attend the Army’s top training and leadership schools, and serve on three separate continents in defense of our country. I understand the challenges of military service, the importance of readiness, the rigors of wartime deployment, and how it all impacts our Soldiers and their families.

Throughout my military career I was fortunate to serve with America’s best – the Soldiers, NCOs, Officers, and Civilian employees of the U.S. Army whose selflessness and vigilance keep our great Nation safe. I have learned a good deal from all of them, and would not be here today were it not for many of them. Their welfare and readiness will always be my top priority.

Today’s Army is the greatest ground combat force in history. Despite this fact, the Service faces many challenges; this committee knows them well. The Army is at a critical inflection point, pivoting to address the rise of aggressive near-peer adversaries while our Soldiers fight terrorist groups abroad, as global demand for ready forces increases and fiscal pressures at home continue. The next Secretary must lead the world’s premier ground force to success in these difficult times, and ensure it is prepared for the future fights as well. My vow, if confirmed, is to leverage my values, my experiences, and all my energies to make the hard choices and address these issues.

If confirmed, my first priority will be Readiness – ensuring the Total Army is prepared to fight across the full spectrum of conflict. With the Army engaged in over 140 countries around the world, to include combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, training rotations to Europe to deter Russia, and forward deployed units in the Pacific defending against a bellicose North Korea, readiness must be our top priority.

This means recruiting and retaining the best our Nation has to offer, ensuring these young men and women are well-trained and well-led, and equipping them with the best weapons and technology available. Every unit must be prepared to deploy and accomplish its mission. These are the fundamental Title 10 duties of the Secretary of the Army, and, if confirmed, I intend to do them well.

A second priority will be Modernization – building capacity and capabilities in the longer term. This means growing the force while maintaining quality, reshaping it to be more robust and successful in all domains, and modernizing it with the best weapons and equipment available to guarantee clear overmatch in future conflicts.

For modernization to be successful, the Secretary must articulate a clear Vision, reforms championed by this Committee must be fully implemented, and the acquisition process must be greatly improved. This includes changing how requirements are set, modifying the personnel system to promote success and ensure accountability, prototyping and demonstrating systems early, and involving the private sector much more. In short, we must provide our Soldiers the tools they need to fight and win, when they need them.

Defense dollars are not where they need to be, and I know the Armed Services committees are working hard to change that. But in the meantime, the Army must exercise better stewardship of its resources. So a third priority is Efficiency. To achieve this, I intend to play a very active role in the Army's top acquisition programs, reduce bureaucracy, wring inefficiency out of Army organizations and processes, and promote an audit-ready culture that will facilitate much of this. We must free up time, money, and manpower to be utilized or invested in our top priorities.

If confirmed, I will approach my duties with the values and behaviors proven to maximize the effectiveness of any team: act with integrity; collaborate broadly; treat others with respect; encourage innovation, critical thinking and straight talk; empower people; and hold leaders accountable. These principles must be lived, promoted, and upheld day-in and day-out by leaders at every level.

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, Members of this committee, thank you for your time and consideration today. Having served on Capitol Hill, I know well the critical Article I responsibilities of the Armed Services Committees when it comes to our Nation's security and what you expect, so I look forward to working closely and continuously with the committee to ensure the United States Army is ready to deploy, fight and win on any battlefield, on any day, under any conditions, and that the Total Army family – our Soldiers, Civilians, and their loved ones at home – are well cared for.

I am grateful for your consideration of my nomination, and I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.
