

William B. Roper Jr.
Senate Armed Services Committee Nomination Hearing – Assistant Secretary of
the Air Force for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics
Opening Statement

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, and distinguished members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today with these distinguished witnesses as the President's nominee to be the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics. I would like to thank the President, Secretary Mattis, and Secretary Wilson for their trust and confidence and, if confirmed, the tremendous opportunity to build, field, and maintain the world's premiere Air Force. I would also like to thank the Committee for considering my nomination. I know each of you cares about maintaining our military advantage in air, space, and cyberspace, so I look forward to answering your questions today.

Before making formal remarks, I would like to thank my wife, Marti, for her love and support of my career. Her own government service in the Army and Department of Homeland Security were influential in my decision to work in national security. I am continually thankful to have a partner who understands how important—and challenging—maintaining our security truly is. It is great to have her with me today. I would also like to thank my mother and father, brother, mentors, and my current team of amazing innovators. I would not be here without your investment of time in me.

I know the Committee is well aware of the problems facing our military today: capabilities developed decades ago were studied, copied, and, in many cases, exploited by our adversaries; the industrial base contracted as long-standing Defense companies merged and new start-ups often remained unconnected to our military; new commercial technologies likely to revolutionize warfare—particularly artificial intelligence and machine learning—accelerated significantly; and technologies our government must develop—like hypersonics and directed energy—slowed compared to other nations, like China. It is no wonder fundamental changes to how we design, acquire, and sustain our military are a continual focus of this Committee. I applaud your recent reforms to effect it.

For over five and a half years, I have briefed Congress on my work in the Strategic Capabilities Office, or SCO, and its innovation process intended to help turn the tide. We have worked with our Service partners to reimagine, upgrade, and incorporate commercial technology in their systems using a rapid process they have come to trust. I am truly honored the Air Force is willing to take that trust to the next level should I be confirmed.

SCO's secret is fairly simple: empowering program managers with design tradespace, prototyping, flexible contracting, and appropriate decision authorities to take the reins of the programs. Resulting organizational byproducts—speed, agility, and accountability—deliver alongside much-needed advanced systems like swarming drones, high-speed strike, hypervelocity guns, machine learning-enabled sensing, and arsenal planes. This tells me modern defense systems are too complicated, evolving, and important to be stewarded by cumbersome, paper-driven processes. It is time to increase human-driven innovation and acquisition—the kind that birthed the U-2, SR-71, F-117, and so many other amazing systems—that are the Air Force's true roots.

If confirmed as the Air Force's Senior Acquisition Executive, you can expect me to continue implementing Congressional intent by expanding this human-driven approach: delegating decisions to the lowest appropriate level; increasing rapid experimentation and prototyping for “fast failing”, early risk reduction, and keeping flawed concepts out of programs of record; and expanding use of commercial technology and practices, including designing for upgradeability and sustainment. The net result must be managing the cost of readiness and modernization of today's Air Force to sustain critical investments in game-changing technologies future Airmen will need. You have my commitment that I will work closely with Air Force, other Services, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and Congressional Leaders to achieve it.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is an honor to be considered for this position.