

Robert L. Wilkie
Nomination Hearing for Under Secretary of Defense
for Personnel and Readiness
Opening Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Committee

Mr. Chairman, Senator Reed and distinguished members of the Committee on Armed Services. This is the second time I have appeared in this chair. In 2006, I was honored to be introduced by a truly great Senate leader, Trent Lott. I am equally humbled today not only by the confidence placed in me by the President and Secretary Mattis, but to be introduced by Senator Tillis.

Jesse Helms said that to truly represent North Carolina one must understand HWY 24—that is the road that connects 45% of the entire Marine Corps in the eastern part of our state to the place Senator Reed calls the “hub of the universe,” Fort Bragg. If America is called to action Marines and soldiers from North Carolina will be probably be the tip of the spear—currently they are deployed in 120 countries.

In two years in the Senate, Senator Tillis has spent weeks walking and talking with Marines and paratroopers and their families, turning those conversations into positive results for them. He exemplifies what all of us in the military world strive to be—the servant leader.

Mr. Chairman, if confirmed, I will be charged with making life easier for those men and women who carry our future on their shoulders.

I have been privileged to see this military life from many angles; as a dependent; as the son of a gravely wounded combat soldier; as an officer with a family in the military health care system and as a senior leader in the White House and the Pentagon.

My earliest memories are of massed jumps of the 82nd Airborne Division on the Normandy and Sicily drop zones at Fort Bragg and the artillery half section rolling across the old post quadrangle at Fort Sill.

I have witnessed first-hand the transition from the conscript military to the all-volunteer total force of National Guard, Reserve and active components--envisioned by the late Army Chief of Staff Creighton Abrams.

Secretary Mattis notes that lethality comes from readiness. General Milley was clear when he said his three priorities are “readiness, readiness, and readiness”. Since Desert Storm “readiness” has meant the ability to mobilize, fight and win two regional wars. Without prejudging Secretary Mattis’ strategic review—that notion of readiness is a place for P&R to start when assessing the quality of the force.

In my opinion, the Department has too often been caught up in chasing the shiny object—the new carrier or fighter. There have been few **champions for readiness** to work with this Committee. We need to get people back on the range and in the motor pools and prepare for the full spectrum of conflict—a spectrum that now includes cyber and space.

Regarding the full spectrum of conflict, the People’s Liberation Army has two entire divisions dedicated to nothing other than cyber operations against America’s military. We have faced revolutionary technical challenges before. In the 1940s, George Marshall and Hap Arnold brought into the military from the civilian sector, Americans on the cutting edge of new technologies who were immediately set to mastering: photo reconnaissance and psychological and deception operations.

We now must bring in our cyber, engineering and scientific talent—by reopening that old system of lateral accessions. Marshall and Arnold looked to Hollywood and Madison Avenue during World War II, we need to look to Route 128 and the Research Triangle.

The threshold question then is whether each decision made by the Department enhances America’s ability to deter--and if need be defeat--any enemy while keeping our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines alive

and getting them back home quickly. When they return home, we owe them and their families, the same level of care and attention.

This is not the military that Senator McCain or my father joined at the dawn of the Kennedy Administration, yet we are hamstrung by the policies and procedures in place then to run that force of multiple millions refreshed each year by tens of thousands of draftees and thousands of ROTC graduates. Today, our military is vastly different. Comprised entirely of high-quality volunteers. Seventeen percent of the force is female--many of whom are serving on the frontlines—in numbers and missions unimaginable in the days of WACs.

We rely on a twenty year up or out model for servicemen and women who are forced to leave the military in their prime. Promotion models often see the bottom performer advanced at the same pace as the front runner. Success in the information age will increasingly rely on the technical ability of our troops, yet our assignment system values breadth over depth of experience. Recruiting is stove piped and not reaching a wide audience online. Service members cannot move freely amongst active, Guard and Reserve components to meet changing circumstances in their lives.

In my father's day, few soldiers had families—today over sixty percent do. For our families, the military health system has been slow to keep up with modern medical advances for conditions like autism and other behavioral disorders as Senators Gillibrand and Tillis have pointed out. We still have military families making their medical appointments on paper.

Constant rotation-- again based on a 19th century Army model--prevents spouses from putting down roots and garnering meaningful employment. Childcare is at best uneven. The bottom line is that readiness is holistic—if the families are not happy, the soldier walks.

The all-volunteer force has performed miracles but dwell times for frontline Marine and Army infantry units are now down to 1:1.14 years and on any given day 10%-15% of the Army is medically unable to deploy. We must address those hard facts, or the force will break.

Mr. Chairman, this committee has kept faith with the finest military in the world and the solutions for many of the issues I mentioned have already begun to be put in place. If confirmed I pledge to build on your work and help keep that faith.