

An Interview with The Honorable Deborah Lee James, Secretary of the Air Force

Q1. Secretary James, what are your top short-, mid-, and long-term priorities for the Air Force?

I have laid out three priorities for the Air Force that collectively cover each range. They are taking care of people, balancing today's readiness with tomorrow's readiness, and ensuring that we have the very best Air Force that we possibly can have, at the best value for the taxpayer.

In taking care of people, we must ensure a climate where everyone is treated with dignity and respect. There must be a focus on recruiting, retaining, and shaping the force for the near future and the long term. This includes compensating people fairly, growing leaders, and developing "diversity of thought" throughout the ranks. Family members are an integral part of the Air Force family, so developing family programs and helping maintain work-life balance are also key. As we begin to get smaller, we must balance our talent across the components—active, Guard, Reserve, and civilian.

To balance today's readiness with tomorrow's modernization, we must return Air Force readiness to higher levels, and I'm committed to doing that. We owe it to every Airman—uniformed and civilian—to have the right level of training, the right equipment, and the right supplies and support to successfully do what we ask them to do. Tomorrow's readiness means modernizing our platforms with the F-35A Lightning II, the KC-46A Pegasus, and the long-range strike bomber (LRS-B). These new platforms will provide the Air Force the capabilities to remain the best Air Force in the world.

In making every dollar count, we add value for the taxpayer by delivering the best capability at the best price tag. That means being a good steward of the taxpayers' dollars through accountability of funds and by ensuring that programs stay on budget and on schedule. It also means leveraging new ideas from our innovative Airmen to find better ways of doing business—to be more efficient, minimize redundancy, and protect our limited resources. For example, our maintainers are now using hand-

held scanner devices to track parts and reference tech orders. Having this capability not only gives the user updated information faster, but it also eliminates the need for printing, which saves money.

So everything I work on I try to keep in mind these three priorities.

Q2. The Air Force has already begun the drawdown to a “smaller but more capable” force. What do you see as the impact of this on the ability of the Air Force to support an acceptable national security risk level?

These are very challenging times, both in terms of our security environment and the declining budgets. We have done our very best to tackle these challenges head-on in a thoughtful and deliberate and a very inclusive way.

As we look to the future, we will be a smaller Air Force, but an Air Force that remains on the cutting edge of technology and with great capability to meet the nation’s needs. Growing and maintaining an Air Force—for today’s needs and tomorrow’s challenges—is of paramount importance.

In general, we cannot afford to retain more force structure than we can afford to keep ready. Our decisions to reduce capacity to gain capability means we chose to make reductions in manpower and force structure to sustain readiness and guarantee technological superiority. We support slowing the growth in military compensation to free up money to put back into our readiness accounts to further support investing in programs that will replace our aging aircraft fleets.

We chose to delay or terminate programs to protect our top-three priority programs: the F-35A, the KC-46A, and the LRS-B. And we sought cost savings in a number of ways, including reducing headquarters and putting an increased reliance on Guard and Reserve Airmen.

Although the fiscal year 2015 (FY15) budget is strategy-driven, Airmen were severely limited by the fiscal realities. For FY16 and beyond, we similarly have difficult choices to make. The bottom line is it’s about readiness and it’s about the future. It’s really not an either/or argument, because we very much need both.

The thing that I worry about most has to do with the preparedness and the readiness of the Airmen and the military at large. We want to make sure that our Airmen have the training, equipment, weapons, facilities, and installation support to successfully complete their missions and stay safe if we send them into harm’s way.

Q3. In your view, can the Air Force successfully navigate the considerable political constraints it has faced in its efforts to right-size force structure and reduce excess infrastructure? In particular, the Army recently indicated it will push for a Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) in FY17—will the Air Force join this effort?

Yes, I believe we can. We have been on the record over the past year calling for another round of BRAC.

While we have no recent excess infrastructure capacity analysis from which to draw, the DoD capacity analysis from 2004 estimated that the Air Force had 24 percent excess infrastructure. In 2005, the Air Force asked for 10 closures; however, the BRAC 2005 directed the Air Force to close only eight minor installations and conduct 63 realignments affecting 122 installations. Since then the Air Force has reduced our force structure by more than 500 aircraft and reduced our active-duty military end strength by nearly 8 percent. So, intuitively, we know we still have excess infrastructure.

In the next five years, we will cut another 500 airplanes and reduce the number of personnel by approximately 20,000 people. That is a huge impact on our Air Force as an institution. These cuts will result in more facilities that are not fully manned or installations that are not fully utilized.

Since the last BRAC round, we have worked to identify new opportunities and initiatives that enable us to maximize the impact of every dollar we spend. Our efforts to demolish excess infrastructure, recapitalize our family housing through privatization, unlock the value of underutilized resources through leasing, and reduce our energy costs have paid considerable dividends.

Since 2006, we have demolished 48.8 million square feet of aging building space that was excess to our needs, and we estimate the resultant savings at greater than \$300 million. We have demolished antiquated administrative facilities, ill-suited for today's technological age; we have eliminated aircraft operational and maintenance facilities that we no longer need based on reductions to the size of our aircraft fleet; and we have demolished old and energy-inefficient warehouse facilities no longer needed due to rapidly evolving supply chains that reduce the need for localized storage.

Despite our best efforts through these innovative programs, the Air Force continues to spend money to maintain excess infrastructure that

would be better spent recapitalizing and sustaining our weapons systems, training Airmen to improve readiness, and investing in quality-of-life needs for our Airmen and their families. To be the best stewards of the taxpayers' dollars, we need a BRAC in 2017.

Q4. The National Commission on the Structure of the Air Force recently issued its report. Have you formed any opinions about its recommendations? Was there anything in the report that surprised you?

Our initial examination of the NCSAF report and its findings suggests a great deal of symmetry between many of the recommendations from the commission and current Air Force proposals for the way ahead.

There was agreement with three thoughts—continuum of service, more associations, and greater collaboration and integration. However, we also disagreed with the recommendation to disestablish the Air Force Reserve Command (AFRC), which is a departure from our current position on the Air Force organizational construct and would not result in substantial savings, as the roles of AFRC would need to be absorbed by nine different major commands (MAJCOM). This would lead to a less efficient Total Force organizational structure and increased costs.

In addition, the report also mentions an aggregate active component–reserve component ratio of 58 to 42, which we believe is too small of an active component number and has not been reviewed sufficiently at this time. The symbiotic relationship between the active and reserve components does not lend itself to a one-size-fits-all with an X number of active people and X number of reserve. Mission by mission, platform by platform—the right mix varies. You can total the numbers to a ratio or mix, but that number is misleading. There are areas where we can have a stronger reserve component presence, and it makes sense and it works. Vice versa, there are areas that require a stronger active component. It has to be evaluated mission set by mission set because of that symbiotic relationship between the active and reserve components.

The Air Force has worked hard to improve collaboration and cooperation between the components to strengthen and institutionalize these relationships across the Total Force. We are consulting with the commission's staff to gain further insight into their analyses and conclusions. Where we can make changes, we will make change quickly; we will not wait.

Q5. In the mid-1990's, Gen Ron Fogleman made ethics and accountability a centerpiece of Air Force core values, for good reasons and great effect. But over the last few years, we have experienced a rash of reported indiscretions and ethical failures. What do you suspect as causal, and what steps will the Air Force take to address the problems?

Starting on day one, every uniformed and civilian Airman learns about Air Force core values—*Integrity First, Service before Self, and Excellence in All We Do*.

The core values are our first principles, and they guide everything we do—on and off duty, at home, and in our battlespace of operations.

As you know, some Airmen were caught in lapses of integrity, cheating on tests or not reporting what they knew about this behavior. We can't hide from the fact that some Airmen failed to live up to our core values.

The Air Force means to turn this around by renewing the focus of every active, Guard, Reserve, and civilian Airman on *Integrity, Service, and Excellence*. You will be hearing more from your Air Force leadership asking every Airman to be a good role model and to regularly talk to fellow Airmen about our core values and how they apply all day, every day. It's important to note that the vast majority of our Airmen embody our core values and live them daily.

Q6. How would you characterize your approach to handling the tough decisions that you will face as Secretary of the Air Force?

I want to face challenges head-on, understand them, and look for opportunities to improve. I'm a firm believer in open and transparent communication with the American public and our Airmen. But 50 percent of communication is listening.

My approach has been described by others as somewhat methodical—understand the problems and opportunities, listen carefully, and then act with determination and decisiveness to fix the problems and seize the opportunities.

Over my 30-year career I have learned some lessons that have served me well as an individual contributor, leader, family member, and friend, and helped to shape my leadership style.

First, be prepared to zigzag in life. To seize new opportunities, you have to be agile and prepared to respond in alternative ways than originally planned. Second, build and value a network inside and outside the Air Force. As a leader, you don't know all the answers, but if you build

a diverse network in thought and background, it can help you navigate those tough issues and make sound decisions. Finally, you have to be upbeat. Positive thinking equals positive leadership. Things are hard these days, but if you aren't hopeful as the leader, no one else will be. But at the same time, this doesn't mean you don't say what you're thinking. Clear and direct guidance is imperative to leading any organization.

These are just a few of the lessons I have learned, but they have served me well in my career and personal life.

Q7. If you inherited the permission and ability to change three things, *carte blanche*, within the Air Force or Department of Defense, what would you change?

Sequestration, sequestration, and sequestration. If we have to go back to sequestration-level funding, we can't afford to upgrade our legacy equipment and invest in new capabilities that the Air Force needs to meet future and emerging threats. Simply put, it would be too much of a compromise for our national security.

If we do have to return to sequestration-level funding, we would retire up to 80 more aircraft, including the KC-10 tanker fleet. We would choose to defer upgrades to the Global Hawk Block 30 that are necessary to bring it to parity with the U-2. We would have to retire the Global Hawk Block 40 and slow the purchase of the F-35A. We would also only be able to provide 45 combat air patrols with our remotely piloted aircraft rather than 55. We couldn't invest in the next-generation engine program, and we would probably have to reevaluate the combat rescue helicopter and a whole host of other things.

Bottom line, sequestration-level funding is not a good deal for us, and it's not a good deal for the country.

Q8. Although it is early in your tenure, what legacy would you like to leave at the end of your tour?

The biggest honor and privilege for me in this new job is to be associated with the amazing Airmen who make up this terrific institution, the very best Air Force on the entire planet. I'm in awe at their professionalism and dedication to mission both at home and abroad.

I'm a real people person, and I know in order for the Air Force to remain the very best will be dependent on our people. I have learned over the course of my 30-plus years in government and the private sector, no

matter what you're talking about—technology, research and development, or weapon systems—you're still talking about people.

I think the crux of any problem we're facing or any solution we need to find, it always comes down to people. Even during this time of uncertainty due to force management and budget cuts, our Airmen and their families are and will remain my number one priority. That includes, but is not limited to fair compensation, growing and developing “diversity of thought” among leadership, and developing family programs while being cognizant of the work-life balance.

So if I could leave a legacy behind, it would be that I made things better for our uniformed and civilian Airmen alike. **SSQ**

Deborah Lee James
Secretary of the Air Force

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