



Bernie Skoch:

It's a true pleasure to introduce our next keynote. You just experienced just a taste of her wit and brilliance on the most recent panel. In a recent interview with Air & Space Forces Magazine, she said she is deliberately focused on the force of the future outlining a list of priorities from reforming special duties to digitizing the weighted Airmen promotion system to help the Air Force retain its best and brightest Airmen. Now in her third year as the highest enlisted leader in the Air Force, she advises chief of staff and the Secretary of the Air Force on issues affecting the morale, welfare, readiness, and proper utilization of more than 600,000 total force Airmen. Here please welcome the 19th Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, JoAnne Bass.

JoAnne Bass:

I see you jumping. What's going on AFA? That sounded a little weak for about 16,000 people. What's going on AFA? Look at this room. Look at this room. Look at the stand room only. By the way, there are some seats up here. If you want to sit next to General Brown y'all come right up here. No, I'm serious. There's some folks over here.

Hey, look at this room. Okay, good. Y'all come on over here. Y'all can sit right there, but if Mr. Secretary comes up, you're going to have to get on up. Okay? Oh, there he goes. There he goes. No, no, no, but the secretary wants to sit by you too. Some of y'all can come on over here. Look at this room, look at the folks to your left and to your right. The people in this room, your brothers and your sisters, you are the future. Y'all give yourselves a hand clap. Every single one of you belong in this room from our Vietnam veterans to our ROTC and Civil Air Patrol cadets, from our most junior Airmen to our most senior leaders this is a powerful room. I could not be more excited to be here, to join in this AFA experience and be honored to share the stage with the speakers that you have heard over the last few days and the panelists.

I couldn't be more excited to be here with the Secretary of the Air Force, General Saltzman, my wingman and battle buddy Toby. Toby has made a huge incredible impact on our Airmen and Guardians. Toby, you've done that in your over 30 year career, by the way, most of which you were United States Airmen, you were the right leader at the right time to stand up our Space Force and I could go on and on, but I'm going to share the really juicy stories later. To General Brown, my boss. In unprecedented times, I could not think of a better person to lead our force, to serve our Airmen and their families than you. You have been a steady hand in an environment full of turbulence, our Air Force and our nation owe you and Ms. Shereen a debt of gratitude as we wait for your confirmation to be our next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

To AFA, you represent a legacy of valor through education, advocacy and support to our Airmen and our Guardians. Thank you for making this week possible. To our industry partners, to our community, and our civic leaders. We can't thank you enough for taking time out of your day to be here with us. We can not be the force that we need without you. It will take a whole of nation approach and your work, your dedication and mostly your love for our Airmen and for our families is needed now more than ever before.

Y'all give them a hand clap and to the real MVPs here, our Airmen, our Guardians, our family members, thank you. Thank you for taking the time to be here at one of the largest professional development venues in our air force. To the folks who make it happen in our Air Force every single day behind the scenes. Many of the folks who are actually sitting in the front rows, these are the folks who don't often get the credit yet they take all the heat and they weed through the layers of bureaucracy. We see you and we know what you do for our Airmen. Those are the folks from our A1 all the way to our SG. We



know what you do. One quick shoutout since I'm talking about our two letters in the front row, I've got to highlight a man who has served for many, many years.

In fact, he enlisted in the Air Force at the age of 17. He served 22 years as a defender. He retired as a chief master sergeant and then he served another 20 years as a department of the Air Force civilian with 10 of those years as an SES. That is 42 years total folks. He has literally touched the lives of every single Airman in our air force and so y'all put your hands together for Mr. John Fedrigo if you can stand up. We won't let Chiefs cry, but John, we wish you and Gina all the very best, especially as you embark on your next best chapter in life.

All right. Okay. Why are we here? Why are we here? You heard from the secretary on Monday that we are here because we are the only thing standing between China and the realization of their 100-year goal. We are here because we are the only thing standing between freedom and tyranny. We are here because we are the only thing standing between a world we want to leave our children and a world we want to shield them from. We are here because for the past 75 years, our air dominance has remained uncontested. However, like one of my favorite books, what got us here will not get us there. In today's environment, we are not short of challenges. You've heard about them all week, especially in our war fighting domains. Air, land, sea, space, cyber, and information which all vitally contribute to the sum total of our spectrum of superiority. We are also not short of adversaries who want to upend the rules-based international order.

Yet despite these challenges, it's Airmen like Senior Airman Ariel Sanchez who I had the privilege to meet at Pittsburgh Air Reserve Station. It's those folks, Airmen like him that will meet our adversaries head on, especially in the information domain. What impressed me most about Airman Sanchez is the talent that he brings with them to our force. In fact, the talent that all of our reservists bring with them to the force. Not only is Airman Sanchez a client systems technician for our Air Force, but he works in cyber as a civilian. He also comes to us with a bachelor's degree from George Mason and is currently pursuing a master's degree in IT from Virginia Tech. During his post-college job searches, he recognized a need for something different, something bigger, so he joined our Air Force Reserve. Airman Sanchez found a place where he belongs and our Air Force is better for it.

In today's operating environment, there is a huge insatiable appetite for air power, more than ever before. Our Airmen continue to deliver. You continue to deliver. You continue to be the most competitive advantage and have been nothing less than extraordinary as you accelerate change and adapt to a world that we are in, not to a world that we wish we were in. The question becomes how do we remain full throttle while shifting into higher gears and still take care of our people?

It's not lost on me that while we sit in this air-conditioned room, there is a maintainer on a flight line in 100 degree weather turning wrenches to maintain our projection of air power. There's an 18-year-old defender guarding our missile fields, securing the most responsive leg of our nuclear triad. Right now as we sit in this room, there are more than 16,000 of our Airmen, your fellow Wingmen, our brothers and sisters that are currently deployed across the globe getting after our nation's business.

Let me just share a little bit about what I've witnessed this past year. You've flown nearly 800,000 sorties, totaling 2 million hours. That's more than 5,000 hours per day. You've transported more than 700,000 passengers, 300 tons of cargo and passed almost 500 million pounds of fuel. Okay AMC. You've had a hand in eight major humanitarian efforts, floods in Pakistan, earthquakes in Turkey, typhoons in the Pacific, as well as tornadoes, wildfires, and hurricanes here at home. That's more than 20 named operations, a hundred major exercises, ongoing humanitarian relief and supporting partners and allies throughout the world and you continue to deliver air power anytime, anywhere. That's you. That's why you belong.



Although we have done a lot and we will continue to do all of these great things, the battle lines have been clearly drawn across all domains, so check this out, pay attention. Especially as it relates to this information environment that we are in. In an era marked by rapid technological advancement. Information has become the lifeblood of our society. It fuels our economies, shapes our perceptions and influences our decisions. It is in this very domain that warfare has taken on a new dimension. One that operates not only on land in the air or at sea, but also within the digital realms that connect our world and demand our unwavering attention and vigilance. Our adversaries understand the power of information and they seek to exploit it, weaponize it, and use it against us. They aim to sow discord, erode trust, and destabilize nations through the spread of disinformation and propaganda through emerging technology. That sounds pretty good, right? Thanks ChatGPT. No, I'm serious.

All right. For those who might be a little alarmed that I used ChatGPT, I only did it in those last three paragraphs really as an illustration of how fast our digital domain is changing. The fact is Airmen use AI right now. Your children use AI right now. Our adversaries are using AI right now. Our role is in the ethical and responsible development of AI. It cannot be understated. Instead of avoiding it, we probably better figure out how to educate our force about the difference between using these platforms and being used by them. We better figure out how to do this fast because our adversaries are already there. Right now, there are armies of bots, swarms of trolls, legions of sock puppets strategically manipulating the information that we see to achieve their own objectives. This is unrestricted warfare and it comes with minimal to no physical force.

Information warfare is a concept that has been used for thousands of years but has evolved rapidly in recent years. To get us to the next 75 years, we are going to have to focus beyond the physical domains of air, land, and sea. To get us to the next 75 years, we cannot underestimate the cyber and the information domains and to get us to the next 75 years, we are going to need six generation Airmen who think critically, challenge the status quo, and adapt and evolve to stay ahead.

Airmen like Tech. Sergeant Christopher Leung who I had the opportunity to meet when I was at Nellis. Sergeant Leung came into our Air force like many Airmen with a bachelor's degree and he is now pursuing his master's degree while also going to the NCO Academy. Mr. Secretary, boss, he is already thinking critically, he's challenging the status quo and he is ready to move the ball forward. Oh yeah, one more thing about Sergeant Leung. He was actually just going to serve four quick years, get his GI bill, and pay off his Honda Civic. Actually, that last part was me. He did just sign up to do four quick years, get his GI Bill. I added that last part, but I'm so glad that he decided to reenlist because it's Airman like Tech Sergeant Leung who absolutely long in our Air Force.

We share similar stories, we share similar challenges, and every single one of us passed through the same gateway together and raised our right hands to support and defend this nation. The most important thing America's moms and dads do is hand us their son or their daughter and send them to a place that they've never been to do things that they have never imagined. That is how we recruit, how we train, how we retain the talent we need absolutely matters. How we do that will take all of us, every single one of us in this room.

We must all focus on accelerating change and modernizing a force in a world that is rapidly changing. We must all explore new ideas and embrace innovation and we must all move forward together because what will get us there is a strong and empowered force and speaking about a strong and empowered force. The Secretary briefly mentioned when he spoke on Monday that he spoke at the Air Force Sergeant's Association conference a few weeks ago where our Airmen focused specifically on competition and how they can be part of the solution to the challenges we have. In fact, I want to give a big thank you to General Cotton, General Minahan, General Lyfe, and all of the speakers who came out



to pour into the over 3,000 Airmen and Guardians who will be the ones who will get us there. What will also get us there is working with our allies and our partners.

In fact, last week I was with 29 partner Nations to include the chief master sergeant of the Ukrainian Air Force. At the European Senior Enlisted Leader Summit, we were reaffirming our commitment to be stronger together to bolster our collaboration and to better integrate by design. One of the ways that we are getting after that is through initiatives like the state partnership program that, oh, by the way, has marked its 30th anniversary this year. If you are Air National Guard in this room, can you raise your hand? Thank you. Y'all give them a big hand clap.

In fact, last week while I was spending time with my partner nations, I called each of you the secret sauce. In fact, I couldn't be more inspired by all of our total force Airmen, our reservists and our guardsmen. All of you are our secret sauce. And speaking of total force, let me tell you about Tech. Sergeant Kaleolani Souza, a member of the Hawaii Air National Guard. I met Sergeant Souza in my home of record in Hawaii back last November and what was pretty cool when I was talking to her was I learned that not only does she serve as a defender in the guard, but she's also an EMT and a paramedic in her civilian capacity. Not only that, she shared with me that three of her other sisters are also members of the Hawaii Air National Guard. A big thank you, a big Mahalo to her dad for trusting the Air Force with four of his daughters.

Y'all have heard me say it before, the Air Force is family business, folks. These Airmen among countless others represent the amazing talent that belong in our air force. As Airmen, we can never forget, our nation is counting on us. Service to our nation is more than just a Honda Civic. Service to our nation requires a commitment that you do not find in everyday America. This is not Google, this is not Chick-fil-A, this is not Home Depot. Not that I don't love any of those. This is the United States Air Force and how we do anything is how we do everything. Small things matter, big things matter. Our standards matter. Like all healthy organizations, we reflect on the things that are good and we reflect on the things that we can improve. That is why I wrote the standards memo.

It is a reminder to all of us that a strong military is a disciplined and it is a uniformed military. I share with our Airmen all the time that we absolutely appreciate the talents that every single one of them brings to our force. We appreciate the uniqueness and we appreciate their individuality. However, if we are more focused on being an individual and more focused on ourselves instead of the greater good of the force, then we are probably off target. As a panelist said earlier today, air power is absolutely a team sport and we are the strongest air force in the world because we know that and because of our commitment to discipline and we can never ever allow that to erode.

The force today and the force of the future is in your hands. The future force requires Airmen at all levels to look at the air force that we have today and to ask ourselves while it is what got us here, will it be what gets us there? It requires us to cultivate the capability our adversaries covet the most. A professionalized force capable of executing the tenants of mission command. It requires Airmen who know how to build teams, operate and survive in any and all domains with our joint force allies and our coalition partners, knowing that our adversaries will not fight fair fight.

It requires Airmen who are technical experts with additional skill sets and a mindset that allows them to fight and win as agile combat teams. It requires us to look at the career fields that we have today and ask ourselves while they are what got us here, will they be what gets us there? Our nation is counting on you to be deliberate about your service and to remember that this is not just a job, this is a higher calling. Make no doubt about it. The force that we have today and the force of the future is an operational imperative, Mr. Secretary. Always remember that our strength lies in our unity, the American spirit, and the ability to grow beyond what got us here.



Again, I ask you to look around this room because the people in this room, the Airmen and the Guardians in the Air and the Space Force are who will get us there and I usually don't get emotional, but when I think about the challenges ahead and the people who will face these challenges, it gives me pause. And just like they say in the south, I feel some kind of way. I have greatly loved four things in life. My faith, my family ... I have greatly loved four things in life, my faith, my family, my country, and this Air Force.

Thank you, thank you. I told myself if I was going to cry, I was going to tell myself I was a badass. I've loved those four things, people. Our Air Force is in your hands. The oath that we take is selfless. This is more than just a job. This is our profession and this is our higher calling. Every one of us raised our right hands and every one of us would lay down our life for a set of beliefs that is greater than us. Every one of us honors a history that was before us, and every one of us is building a future of hope. Every single one of us in this room has an opportunity to share our stories, to reflect on why we serve and appreciate the richness of being part of this military family. You belong in this room. Every single one of you belongs in this Air Force. Thank you.