

Fireside Chat: Reoptimizing for Great Power Competition

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Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Well, good morning. What an incredible day, thanks to all of you, and an incredible now three days. I think we're sending a strong signal around the world about what we, Airmen and Guardians and our industry partners are really all about. So we couldn't be more thankful for the leadership that goes back a few years. Secretary Frank Kendall is a warrior statesman in so many ways. As we present the final event of the 2024 AFA Warfare Symposium and we welcome our 26th Secretary of the Air Force, the Honorable Frank Kendall, we're going to spend a few minutes today talking about, and reiterate, just what we've been talking about the past few days in re-optimizing for global power competition.

This is by far, thanks to all of you, the largest ever AFA Warfare Symposium, with nearly 20,000 people registered. I would argue it's also one of the most important, we're at a pivotal point in our history. "It's a time of consequence", as General Allvin has said, and Mr. Secretary, as you have said, we're out of time. We must re-optimize now for great power competition. Let me start with the first question, the secretary and I have been listening, and our staffs and you all have been talking, no surprise. To start off, Mr. Secretary, Airmen and Guardians are still, understandably, wrapping their brains around exactly what all this change means for them. In their view, what do you think are the changes that our Airmen and Guardians will feel the most and what changes will be most apparent to them?

Frank Kendall:

It's a great question, Orville. Before I start, I do want to thank you for all of your service, both at AFA and in uniform. You've been a terrific leader. I think this is your last thing in this stage like this you're going to do at AFA, so let's give Orville a big round of applause. I also want to thank the other members of the senior leadership team of the department. You've got Honorable Jones here, General Saltzman, General Allvin, this is a terrific team. You guys are all so lucky to have those leaders leading the department, so give them a round of applause too please.

Now, let me take your question. We rule out a lot of things. What you see going forward is that the Undersecretary will take a leadership role in the secretariat for the changes that she talked about. Chief Saltzman and Chief Allvin will take leadership roles in the two services in implementing all the things in the services. On that list, there are a lot of things that are going to affect us down, I think, at the unit level. It won't happen overnight, but I think it's going to happen reasonably quickly. We're going to orient our operational units on being ready for the fight we might have to be in at any time. And the leaders associated with commanding those large organizations, all the way down to the wing squadron level, are going to be tasked with, and you don't need to wait for somebody to tell you what to do about this. This was in my letter from a few months ago. Start thinking now about what do we need to do to be more ready, and do it. You don't need to wait for that. The conflict can happen at any time. We need to be as ready as we possibly can.

But you're going to see a greater focus on readiness for the kind of fight we might be in. We're going to be making some changes to how units are set up so that all the things that units need to be able to deploy, if they're deploying units that they have and that those people can train together. For the units that fight, are employed in place, we're going to do the same sort of thing. We're also going to look at our garrisons and make sure that our bases are set up as was described by mostly General Allvin. So those are the things we're going to be doing that I think are going to have an impact. You're going to see opportunities open up for career paths, enlisted tech tracks and warrant officers and so on for a small

subset of the force. And in general I think you're going to see your training oriented more on the things you're going to need to be effective in a great part of competition.

So all of those are things that I think are going to touch the force. The reorgs will affect some people. We're going to try to do those without disruption. We're setting up some new units, but the core capabilities that'll be for part of those units are generally in place already, and so we'll be doing some things there. We're going to minimize people having to move and we're going to try to minimize costs, but we're going to move out pretty quickly on all of those as well. So buckle your seatbelt, don't sit still, go ahead, move forward. Don't wait for guidance on this. As Orville said, as we've all said over and over, we don't have any time to waste.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Well, thank you sir. Another question that popped up and we've discussed this at length in small group and large group sessions, China has the aim to be able to take Taiwan one way or the other by 2027. Is there possibly a risk that restructuring, this restructuring focus we have, could cost us readiness in the near term?

Frank Kendall:

I'm sorry, if there's a risk of what? That we're not going to be-

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

It could cost us readiness in the near term, the-

Frank Kendall:

I don't think so. I think we can maintain our current readiness while we're doing this transition. I don't see any fundamental impact on what I'll call the fighting force, if you will, elements of the department. There shouldn't be. I mean that's certainly not the intent. And the goal is to as quickly as possible get to a better posture. And I think when we make these changes hopefully we'll make them quickly, and then the units that will be setting up the way we will be configuring units will happen fairly quickly.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Thanks sir. General Saltzman is also introducing Space Futures command. How is that similar or different from Army Futures command?

Frank Kendall:

Well, let me contrast the three, the Air Force, Space Force, and the Army. What the Army did, and I don't want to be critical of the sister services, but I've spent 50 years of my life listening to arguments about whether requirements comes before technology or technology comes first and requirements come second. It's an irrelevant conversation. Basically the two have to work together as a team. One of our senior acquisition leaders used the phrase in some of the work he's doing, "extreme teaming". I'm a big fan of extreme teaming and I'm also a big fan of having balance between the different elements of the organization to try to get the better solutions. So requirements come from the operational world. Technology comes largely out of the acquisition technology world, and the two have got to work really closely together.

The Army, my observation from the outside is the Army tipped that balance too much towards the operational side, and you're seeing they're canceling one of their major programs now and I think

there's a relationship between those two things. The Space Force is very small, and in the Space Force side we really couldn't set up teams that were focused more on technology and teams that were focused more on operations and then asked them to work together. So the futures command of the Space Force and General Saltzman can add onto this, it's going to be an integrated organization which has that integrated perspective. And we'll bring technology and operational concepts and so on together within one organization.

On the Air Force side, we're doing it a little bit differently. We're going to have the integrated capabilities command, which will be operator led. That's going to be a very important career position for an operator, believe me. General Allvin and I have had a lot of conversations about that. That's an important job. It's going to be a three star, but it's going to be, I won't know, I don't want to get ahead of the chief, but if you're looking for a good three star job and you're a three star operator or a two star, one star operator in the Air Force, you ought have your eye on that job. That's going to be a very important job. It's going to be a very powerful job. But it's not going to have complete power over the future of the Air Force. That team will be working with the integrated development office and AFMC with the integrated capabilities office and the secretariat, and with the system centers that we talked about earlier for nuclear air and information, to try to get to the best possible solutions for the entire department, in particular for the Air Force in that case.

Again, extreme teaming. And iterative, there's a tension in this, it's a healthy tension if it's done right, and I've had 50 years of experience with this. You want the operators and the technologists working together and listening to each other. If you do things that are operator dominant, you're going to get unrealistic things that can't be executed technically. If you let the technologists do it on their own and dominate, you're going to get things that don't operationally make sense and aren't practical. So you've got to bring the two together. And it isn't a game of, "I wrote the requirement, you deliver it." Or, "Here's this cool thing, why aren't you smart enough to buy it?" It's a game of working together to figure out the best answers that are affordable, that are feasible, that operationally makes sense, and are going to give us an advantage. And we've tried to set up this structure to make that happen.

When I first came in, we started the operational imperatives. We built these teams, and I think everybody that was involved in that knows that worked really well. Having an operational and a technical lead working together to try to solve problems, apply technologies intelligently, apply operational concepts intelligently, led to some really good answers. We're going to try to do that as something we institutionalize in the entire system.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Yes sir. And building on that bill, it seems very valuable and given that you had a pretty great start as a warrior statesman, we were two super military schools, military academies about the same time. You've been very recently getting updated. Traveling around the world, AFSOC, PACAF, USAFE. So not only do you have that experience, but you're pretty current obviously in operational fluency if you will. You also have a great deal of experience in the Pentagon, which can sometimes be labeled as the frozen middle. So could you talk a little about, I know and describe your intention, certainly your motivation, your intention, to really keep the Pentagon updated across a spectrum of patriots and decision makers who may not have the benefit of that operational currency.

Frank Kendall:

It's hugely important. Life in the Pentagon tends to be a team sport and one team, one fight applies to the department of the Air Force, Air Force and Space Force, all working with others who are stakeholders, whether it's the Congress, it's the White House, it's OMB, management budget, the OSD

staff, the joint staff, combatant commanders, who are our customers ultimately for the forces we provide. You've got to keep their interests in mind and you've got to communicate with them effectively to be successful. And I learned a long time ago, I started out in the Pentagon in 1986, and very early learned that you don't get anything done on your own by forcing things through. You get things done by informing people, bringing them along, explaining to them what you're doing and why you're doing it. Getting their buy-in and getting their support. And we were hugely successful with the operational imperatives work.

One of my dilemmas of building budgets, which is one of my central jobs for the department, was how we would present our situation to the secretary and deputy secretary after we had done the operational imperatives work. We couldn't afford 85% of what we thought we needed, and we were able to only put that 15% or so into our budget. And what we decided to do, and I had good advice on this from a number of members of the team, was make the case for what we need. Just go in and say, "Here, I've done the things you asked me to do. I've kept the four structure you want me to have. I've prioritized the strategic assets, the deterrent. And I'm trying to modernize the stay up with a threat and here's all I could do. And here's all the work we did to show what we need to do to be successful. We need more money."

We walked away from that conversation with another \$30 billion. So teamwork and building teams and explaining what you're doing works. The people we're dealing with want to do the right thing, but you've got to persuade them that what you want to do is in fact the right thing. And so it's a constant effort. It's one of the things that the undersecretary and I engage in constantly.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Yes sir. It seems to me integrated capabilities command has been needed for some time. Air Force systems command went away. I've said to many of my friends, if I had the Air Combat command leadership job to do over I'd have spent a lot more time at Wright-Patt. A lot more time. I didn't really appreciate in fact until I got some industry experience how important that relationship is. So I think you could probably talk a little bit more about building on the opportunity really, incredible acquisition professionals at Wright-Patt. Some pretty current war fighters, air combat command and certainly AMC and Global strike command. I think the audience would appreciate your thoughts and I kind of think I know what you're thinking, but I think it's a great move and that's integrated capabilities.

Frank Kendall:

Yeah, I think it is important for missions to have, our organizations to have clear missions. And our forces that are designed are intended to be ready to fight now and their leadership should be focused on that. I talked about this in my comments and I think the chiefs have amplified on this. We want our unit, our organizations that are about readiness to be about readiness. And we also need integrated capability. We don't need stove piped sets of individual sets of capability. We need capability that works together to achieve the overall mission. So by putting integrated combat command together as well as the other things that we're doing, we're going to have an organization that's focused on that.

We need to be aware of the fact that we're in a long-term competition, and not just that we have to have ready forces today and people that are focused on that, we have to have people that are building that pipeline. Devising, inventing, creating that set of new capabilities that we're going to field over time, and ensuring there's a robust pipeline there. And making sure the resources devoted to that are used as efficiently as possible. So that's what we're trying to set up.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Yes sir. We're shifting gears a bit, there's a lot of interest in warrant officers. And your perspective would continue I think to really inform, answer questions that are out there. The intent behind warrant officers and really what you see in your own vision for the future of what warrant officers will bring to the fight.

Frank Kendall:

Let me tell you why we need warrant officers, particularly in cyber and IT. In the last few years we've had about a hundred people leave the Air Force to go be warrant officers in another service, in those areas. That's why we need warrant officers. Somebody else made the comment this morning in a panel I listened to, that the thing that warrant officers, and it was from industry actually, but he had experience with other services. The things that warrant officers can provide you with is people who are very technically proficient and stay current all the time, that that's all they're going to do. They're the mentors and the trainers both for the young officers that come into their units and for the enlisted people in their units. And they provide tremendous technical continuity, and you don't get that unless you stay in the field and do that and do that only. I remember officers that I talked to several years ago when I was in OSD who were cyber officers who had just done three years doing something totally unrelated to cyber and were now going to go back to it.

Now I don't know about you, but if I had a doctor who was treating me who had been not doing medicine for three years and he was about to do surgery on me, I'd be a little nervous. We need continuity in some of these people and they're often people who like doing that sort of work and don't really want to do managerial or supervisory or leadership work in a different context. So I think there's a great opportunity there.

We're going to do it with cyber and IT. I know that community is embracing this and I know there's a lot of interest in other fields. As General Allvin said the other day, we're going to go get this done because the operational need there is really greatest, and we'll give it some period of time, I think it'll be up to General Allvin how long we do before, and I think I'll probably be gone by then, but, ah, maybe not. We'll see. I could do another four years. It's possible. I'd like to.

Thank you. That wasn't a lot of applause though. It was a little, I'll take it. So I don't know if it'll be a year or two years or whatever, but I think at some point we'll want to think about are there other fields that it makes sense into, but the emphasis right now is in getting cyber and IT right.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Well, in many ways keeping you around for four more years would help in one area of interest for your Air and Space Force Association and that's giving your voice, every Airman and Guardian's voice to Congress. You've talked recently about the impact of the continuing resolution and sitting here in the front row and acting Undersecretary Jones, put up a QR code. So I actually put my camera up there and I took the picture. I got the download of the incredible paper that goes by state in the impact of the continuing resolution. and I sent that out to all our board members, emeritus, chapter president, regional president, state president said, "Please, in your district, retransmit this as widely as possible." That will or will not have an impact, but we want to help. In the meantime, floor is yours and we're with you on the incredible devastating impacts, the crime really that is the continuing resolution.

Frank Kendall:

It's truly devastating. I mean we're watching the drama right now in the Congress about the supplemental aid for Ukraine. And for Israel as well. These are historic times with a lot at stake on the table, both for our military and our continuous strategic competition as well as for the conflicts that are currently happening. It's impossible to overstate the importance of doing these things. The idea that we

could fail in preventing Russian aggression from succeeding I think is really almost unthinkable to me, and that we could not be as prepared as we possibly can be to meet our pacing challenges equally unthinkable. We've got to get these resources. And I lived in most of my life, we were united politically about our threats and about what we needed to do about them, and also about the value of our all alliances. NATO's been around for 75 years and it's kept the peace. It helped us win the Cold War. That was one of the most amazing historical accomplishments I think in the entirety of human history. It's enormously valuable to us, so we've got to continue to support it.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

It would be, this is, I didn't pre-brief this question with you, but I know you'll have fun answering it. So as you traveled around and you met Airmen from PACAF, USAFE. What did you learn that you didn't know before?

Frank Kendall:

I think I increased my appreciation of the high quality of our force, and the quality of the people in it and particularly our enlisted people. Jo Bass is smiling out there somewhere right now. I am not going to say anything negative about the Army, the Army has a great force as well. I served in the Army initially when we still had draftees. And when the Army was trying to recover from the devastating experience of Vietnam. And there were huge issues, as a troop leader at that time, you were a social worker, you were a cop, you were a lot of other things that you had to be. Today's force is dramatically different from the force we had then. And it's one of our greatest strengths. And I want to give a shout-out to our enlisted people in particular. The Officer Corps is very professional and I've worked with them a lot, I've gotten a greater appreciation in this position for what our enlisted people bring to the table and it's fantastic. So thank you all out there.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Well, I don't want to encourage you to pick sides, but was there a base or a mission as you traveled around the world that kind of informed you in the context of mission focus or added to your thinking on effect, that the reorganization that we're going through, re-optimization?

Frank Kendall:

What I found is I talked to wing commanders and group and squadron commanders and so on. I started asking questions about what kind of rehearsals for operations they were doing, and then I started to learn relatively recently as we did the Air Task Force set up, how we'd been sourcing our units that we were deploying, particularly in the Middle East. What I see is a lot of people who have their head in the game and want to do better, see the deficiencies we have, see the things that we could do better and are trying to make improvements. I see a lot of innovation as I go around. I can't point to any particular part of the force. I see it everywhere. I see it in the nuclear part, whether it's the bomber or the ICBM force, I see it in the mobility forces. I see it in Fighter and ISR forces. I see it in the acquisition community, which I knew better probably than some of the operational communities, and I see it wherever I go. Whether it's overseas, whether it's Alaska, whether it's Europe, the Middle East, I've been pretty much all over. I haven't got to Diego Garcia yet. That's on my list. I want to get there. And I didn't get to the South Pole. One of the guys on my staff did and I'm jealous.

But anyway, I've still got a few places to visit that I'm going to try to get to at some point. But we're a high quality organization, wherever we are, whatever we're doing. And I think we've got all the raw material we need to make the changes that we talked about and to prepare ourselves and frankly, it's all

about deterrence again. We don't want a war. And if we're really ready and the Chinese understand that, we're not going to have one.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Sure. The other thing you've led important leadership emphasis, really a national security emphasis is one team and one fight. Focused on deterring, credibly deterring and decisively defeating the threat. I often say the most lethal arm of a more capable lethal joint force is our Airmen and Guardians at the merge together. There's an industry piece of this. So for our industry partners, our industry national security counterparts, are you starting to see sort of a, in some ways a stovepipe space industry merging and talking more across the aisle, if you will, to our air breathing industry?

Frank Kendall:

There've been a lot of conversations here and in other forms about that. I made a comment during the Q&A the other day about working with industry more closely, and I think we need to do that. I got to sit on a few panels and I got to meet with several companies during the conference. And for both our traditional defense industrial based suppliers as well as a lot of new entrants that have been with us less time and don't have the same scale and scope, there's enormous intellectual capital there. And we want industry working with us to solve our problems. It goes back to the extreme teaming idea, if you will, right? Now, that has to be done with a recognition that industry does have an incentive. Industry is trying to make money. That's what corporations exist to do, but that doesn't mean they're not patriotic. That doesn't mean they don't care about the mission and what we're trying to accomplish. And it certainly doesn't mean that they don't have good ideas about how to solve our problems.

Industry is populated with a lot of retired people, that gives them a lot of expertise that helps them work with us. They've got tremendous technical talent and the traditional defense industrial base gets trashed a little too much I think sometimes. There's a lot of great talent in the traditional industrial base, but there's also an enormous amount of talent in the commercial startup world, and in the world of new companies that are being formed to exploit technology opportunities. We need to bring all that members of the team together to help us make better decisions. And one of the things we started doing with the operational imperatives that we're going to continue is to give industry information about the problems we're trying to solve. Give them some of the data that they need to attack those problems, and then have them work with us to try to come up with better solutions. We're going to get much better answers if we do that.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

I think it's encouraging for industry that the department of the Air Force leadership is looking very closely at integrated kinetic and non-kinetic effects. And obviously a B-21, F-35 are a great source of kinetic capability, that's not very effective at all without the integration of space capability. There's a growing obviously GM overhead space-based GMTI and AMTI capability that I think can be merged. We think we see merged with well-established and growing air breathing reconnaissance capability that's out there with collaborative combat aircraft, for example. So could you talk about that merging a bit, as you see it, for industry as well as for Airmen and Guardians, and how we bring together space-based targeting with air breathing targeting, with kind of capabilities? Kind of three main points.

Frank Kendall:

A few years ago Bob Work was Deputy Secretary of Defense and he started an initiative he called the third offset strategy. And he was trying to, he wanted to drive a new operating concepts based on

emerging technology that would give us a substantial advantage. And the first offset strategy was tactical nuclear weapons when the Russians didn't have any nuclear weapons. The second one was what we did in the first Gulf War. Precision munitions, stealth, network capabilities, wide area surveillance operating together as a team. So Bob was looking for the next generation and we never really identified it. He focused on autonomy as being one of the things that would be a part of that. I think we are moving towards that now. I think the operational imperatives are designed to identify that and flesh it out and move us towards that. I think we're in a race, we've got to go as quickly as we can. The other guys are figuring these things out too. Trying to adopt technology more quickly.

Though I think we are becoming better positioned, but all the things we announced are designed around the underlying ideas of competitiveness and urgency. One of the central features of what we're trying to do to modernize is going to be increased reliance on space. When I did that work for Bob Work those years ago, one of the questions on my mind was, given the threats to our airborne assets and given the threats to our space assets, which way do we go for the future? It's kind of to your point earlier, overall, do we gamble on more resilient, more capable aircraft for some of these functions? For comms relays in particular and for wide area surveillance and targeting? Or do we go to space?

The answer back then was we have to go to space. We have to rely more on space-based capabilities and that's what we're doing. The MTI architectures that we're building, that we're working on with the NRO and with others, the distributed disaggregated communications architectures that SDA is leading, fielding, the missile warning architecture, SDAs and SSC are working on. The Air Force and the whole joint force is going to become more dependent on space, because we don't have any choice. Because the threat is dealing with some of our traditional means of dealing with this pretty effectively. We're not going to walk away from that entirely. We're going to have a mix of capabilities, and try to prevent, confront our adversaries with more than one problem, but space is going to be increasingly critical and I think ultimately probably decisive when you're talking about a pure conflict. I think that's where we're going to go and that's what we're starting to invest in.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Makes lots of sense sir. We're unfortunately running out of time.

Frank Kendall:

I talk to Salty sometimes about the Space Force, it provides services to the joint force that are critical for the joint force's success, and it protects the joint force against the other side's assets. Those are two really critical missions. And there are a variety of things we do that from, to, and through space, but the Space Force... Make friends with Space Force people if you haven't already, you're going to count on them going forward for your operational success.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

Well, Salty and Jennifer, that's pretty easy. So, we're with you.

Frank Kendall:

Yeah.

Lt. Gen. Bruce "Orville" Wright, USAF (Ret.):

So we're a few seconds or a minute, however long you want to take to wrap up and we look forward to hearing updates from you here, not too distant in the future. In the fall when we kick off AFA Air, Space

& Cyber Conference '24. Sir, thank you again and please, your time to wrap up a bit, and wrap up really, the biggest warfare symposium AFA has ever had. So thanks sir. And that is in for a lot of reasons, we are that big because of your leadership, so thank you.

Frank Kendall:

I want to thank the chiefs and the undersecretary. I think together we've made a great team and the chiefs and the under are all ready to lead and make these things all happen. I think we've got a good package of things that we're going to move out on. The under and I and others are going to continue to fight for the resources we need. An analogy I've been thinking about is that I do sailboat racing, I do long distance sailboat racing. And what do you need to win a sailboat race? You need a fast boat. You need the best boat you can buy. You need a well-trained, proficient crew. You need a steady hand at the helm. We've got all that and we're going to succeed. Thank you.

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