

## **A Fireside Chat with Alex Wagner**

**March 12, 2024**

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Welcome to Air & Space Warfighters in Action. I'm Doug Raaberg, Executive Vice President of your Air & Space Forces Association. Thank you to the hundreds of people joining us online this morning as we talk with Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, Mr. Alex Wagner. Mr. Wagner oversees the Air & Space Force's most valued asset, its nearly 700,000 Airmen and Guardians. I'm looking forward to talking more about how the department is recruiting and retaining the best and brightest, developing its people for great-power competition, and making sure our Airmen, Guardians and their families are well taken care of. But first, I want to give special thanks to our sponsors listed on the screen. Because of them AFA's Warfighters in Action series is possible. We can't thank you enough for your continued support. Alex, thanks a lot for coming here this morning.

**Alex Wagner:**

Hey.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

We have a lot to talk about.

**Alex Wagner:**

Doug, I'm so excited to be here. Thanks for having me.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

This is wonderful. Well, we have almost 500 online who are watching. So let's start off with the first question.

**Alex Wagner:**

Hit me.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Obviously the President's budget was released yesterday and we're facing an Air Force that's smaller than it's ever been. We obviously saw that the Space Force even took a little bit of cut in there, but the just-released 2025 budget also cuts another 10,000 active Guard and Reserve. So let me start with a straightforward question. Do you still need to rightsize the force?

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, what I'll tell you is that our budget is aligned with our strategy and when I look at the Air Force and the Space Force, I see two cutting edge tech-savvy forces that are employing tech-savvy Americans and our platforms are evolving in technology. And so that force is rightsized and the future of that force over the fight up will be rightsized to adapt to the platforms that we need to compete, deter, and if necessary, defeat in this coming great-power competition that the Secretary and our two Chiefs have been talking about.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

So you have been actively involved in all the analysis for great-power competition, I think particularly in the area of people. Can you touch on that and where do you rethink the use of manpower based on that?

**Alex Wagner:**

So we are in a competition not only with a dynamic private sector for talent, but also with our allies and our pure competitors. That competition for talent means that we've got to ensure that our force is ready to go on day one and it's caused us to think about how we've evolved from a force that was optimized for a counter violent extremism fight in the Middle East over the last 20 years, and what the future looks like in leveraging that talent and leveraging that technological prowess that our force has.

Before I came in here today, I was looking at some statistics. Nearly 80% of our Airmen in years one through four have some college education, nearly 80%. This is an educated, talented force and we need to make sure we get them the platforms and the technology that unlocks that talent because it's the talent, in my view, that is our strategic advantage versus our pure competitors. I mean, when I look at why Russia is struggling on the battlefield against Ukraine or I look at some of the challenges the PLA is having. What I see is an American military and an Air & Space Force, in particular, that is leveraging the diverse talent to the American people and putting that directly into action.

And so when we think about this great-power competition fight and we structured our efforts, our question was how do we make sure we're retaining the right people? How are we leveraging their expertise, particularly in technology areas in the right area, and then further, how do we get to the place where people see a future for themselves in this force? And it's not a one size fits all, and so that manifests itself in a variety of different ways. One was bringing back warrant officers and that's not for everyone, right? Now we're going to be laser focused on cyber and IT fields and then we're expanding our technical track for officers beyond cyber and putting into place a new technical track for enlisted Airmen. And so we've got a pathway to make sure we're retaining the expertise and growing it that we need, while making sure we have a strategically aware force both in officers and enlisted about the coming threats.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Boy, you've touched on a lot of topics and I know you and I are going to kind of touch on it along... Obviously the enlisted force, which you're getting to really deeply understand even more, is highly technical and as you indicated, it's a professional force unlike our other adversaries out there, especially on the battlefield. So in the analysis, when you hear today's headline, we've cut 10,000, what's the real plan for downrange and in the future to make sure that we retain that talent and make sure that we grow that talent, especially when it comes to the challenge of great-power competition?

**Alex Wagner:**

When I think about collaborative combat aircraft or the next generation air dominance, I'm thinking about sophisticated weapons platforms that are challenging to employ and complex to maintain. That's the kind of force we need. People are comfortable with technology both in the Air Force but also in the Space Force and that comfort level with technology means that they grow up digital natives. I want a force that is comfortable and confident employing technology, understanding technology so then they can take advantage of that technology to be better posed to deter in the fight that's yet to come.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

You think about the nuclear enterprise, it kind of spans kind of the Cold War old technologies, and yet we're looking at the modernization of the nuclear force of tomorrow. So what you just said resonates very clearly. It's going to be more technical, more capable. So let's kind of step into the plans to expand Education and Training Command and renaming it, naming it to Airman Development Command. Why is that move so important?

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, it's more than just putting a new coat of paint and changing some signs outside an installation. Centralizing all of these Title X accession sources and our training will help us have more of a focus on Unity of Mission. I talked about how we had been optimized for a counter-violent extremism fight historically over the last 20 years. What that meant was that we deployed not wings, but individual UTCs. So the vice chief often likes to note that there was... one UTC could be a dog handler, a dog and a dog food, and we'd pick and patch a number of different people often who had never even met before and put them onto an installation. When I'm thinking about what makes a strong force, I'm thinking about building teams and in the Air Force and Space Force and in the DoD we are stronger because we are teams of teams. I want a team that knows each other, knows how to work with each other because in complex environments you need to build that trust and that team is actually stronger than any of the individuals that comprise that team.

So that's what Airman Development Command is going to do. It's going to reconceive of this single source with a focus at every level from basic training through PhDs and all the things in between how we're developing our Airmen and Guardians with a focus on the future.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Yeah, you mentioned that unit type code, that UTC, that packet that we could never really get our hands wrapped around in terms of deployment stuff. So what's the transition going to look like as you talk about bringing these folks on in a different way, and I'm thinking of the multi-capable Guardian, the multi-capable Airman. How's that transition going to look?

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force has called it mission-ready, understanding that multi-capability is a key component of what it means to be mission-ready. You've got to understand what the mission is, you've got to have the training that's correlated to the mission. It's incumbent on us to build a strategy to make sure our strategy is aligned with that mission, and then in the people space help ensure that everybody in the force understands why we're doing this and where we're going. I think if they understand why and where they'll be bought into the what, and that's what we're building out right now. What does it look like today and tomorrow?

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

So it seems like the, we'll call it the horizontal, is all that technical capability from just the basics to the PhD level stuff and yet the vertical is changing. And when I say vertical, I'm thinking of the officers, the enlisted. Now we're bringing in the warrant and gradually transitioning to that. So first of all, simply, why is expanding these tech tracks and reintroducing warrant officers since we've had them such an integral part of the department's plan reorganization?

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, I think it's in some cases and in some career fields, essentially the missing link. One of the most perishable talents is our cyber talent, and that is the biggest limiting factor in terms of our retention because there's so much private sector opportunity. Now, there are certain things you can do in the Air Force that you can't do anywhere else, and so we've got to create a career path for people that offers a little more compensation, but really focus and stability that our general enlisted development track had not offered before. We also want to be able to attract people with no prior service and to have them see a place where they can come in where it is not building the next Chief or Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. Everything doesn't need to be on that path. And so that's the gap that warrant officers fill. But right now the focus is specific to cyber and IT fields because those are the ones that are perishable and those are the ones that will help us sharpen our edge of the spear.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

I'm probably going to answer the question before I even ask it, but I think in terms of a very high-powered skilled individual at Oracle and you decide to make them a warrant officer, so are you going to really see the impact immediately or downrange if you are able to get somebody on board like that?

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, we're not training everybody organically with talent but without skills. So to be able to currently leverage in this first class of warrant officers, the talent already resident in our enlisted force, and then open up opportunity for people like that engineer from Oracle to reconsider a different path of military service that wouldn't have to look like the way that we currently have enlisted or officer tracks, which are building strategic leaders, enterprise leaders, having more specific focus, providing perhaps a little more geographic stability. That could be attractive to people who had otherwise never thought that they could see themselves in our force.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Can you give us some insights? So when you sat with the Secretary and the entire team, it almost sounded like you had to clean sheet to think this through in terms of being able to recruit that talent, retain that talent, maintain it so that it actually meets the strategy of tomorrow.

**Alex Wagner:**

Yep. The Secretary challenged all of us and said, "What do we need to do to put ourselves in a position to meet the growing threats and the competition, particularly from the people's Republic of China?" And talent plays an outsized role in that. And so this reorganization isn't, as I said before, it's not about a new coat of paint, it's not about new name tapes. It's about how we're organized and how we build that strategy to meet this threat. We were optimized for what we were trying to do previously, which was this fight in the Middle East. And in order to do that, what we had to do is we had to look for efficiencies to be able to deploy our forces, to be able to man bases that other services were able to operate out of as well as ourselves.

But that's no longer the mission. And so as we're looking at different island chains in the Pacific, as we're looking on having smaller forces and more mobile forces and ultimately more employable forces, we had to shift the strategy and that strategic shift is going to necessarily require us to look at things differently and that includes the people space.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

So let's go to the leadership and the command level, specifically the Air Force and the Space Force officers. They're training for the future. So how do you plan to transform their leadership development and training to be able to deploy, especially in a geopolitical, sometimes not well-defined environment? So how do you plan to transform their leadership development training to match great power?

**Alex Wagner:**

I'm so glad you asked because it gives me an opportunity to talk about the Space Force. The Space Force largely is comprised of former Airmen, both enlisted and officer corps, but we also pulled in from the Navy and the Army. And satellite communications, one of the most interesting aspects is that those that we brought in from the Navy are largely civilians. Those that we brought in from the Army are actually largely enlisted, and those from the Air Force historically have been officers. So the Space Force is looking at its force mix and we've got to balance that out in a way that makes sense to build a stronger force into the future and a growing force into the future.

But the Space Force also said, I don't need acquisition folks that don't understand cyber or are unrelated to our operations and because of its small size, the Space Force is re-looking, its officer development. So instead of joining in a specific career field and growing only within that career field, initially Space Force officers are going to get experience in intelligence, in acquisition, in operations across the range of specialties, in cyber, so everyone can effectively be multi-capable and leverage the power of each of those different disciplines before selecting a specific field.

It kind of reminds me of when I started college and we weren't required to have a specific path until our junior year. I think we're going to try to bring that same spirit of ingenuity and expertise by creating a broad basic course to the Space Force, and I think it'll make it a much more savvy and effective, ultimately, force.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Well, it's really helped the Space Force to have that rich opportunity to partake from the other services. Now they're Guardians and they're in place and some insights on General Saltzman's approach to integrated Mission DELTAs, so just your first observations, how has that helped that integrated Mission DELTA construct?

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, from the people space, what I can tell you is, there is... the Guardian spirit is more than a document, right? When I talk to Guardians in the field, there is an esprit de corps that's growing and that they're excited about and the American people are excited about learning more about their mission. I think we have moved on and beyond the time where people didn't understand why we needed a Space Force. I think when you read some of the news reports in the last few weeks about some of the counter space challenges and the vulnerability of our satellites, given what the press has been saying about Russian actions in that space, it highlights to the American people just how critical satellites are, not only to their modern way of life, but to the department's modern way of war. And so I think the Space Force is doing a really effective job in not only helping the American people understand their mission, but helping their force create a sense of team. I mean it's everything from the big things like you mentioned to Deltas to smaller things.

How do we create a healthy force that's financially sustainable over the long term? One of the greatest challenges we've got right now is healthcare and the vast majority of Guardians aren't in the field. They're not planning to go to space anytime soon and operate in that environment. They're sitting in static locations, often manning computer terminals. So how do you make sure that they're healthy?

Well, I'm a part of the holistic health assessment, which is a new way to look at fitness, and I can tell you from wearing this on my wrist for a couple of months now I can see how it works. Thinking about how well you're sleeping, understanding how many steps you're doing a day, mapping where in your runs you're succeeding and where you're falling off and how you're growing in your fitness.

And then gamifying. It has a ton of appeal, not only to this current uprising generation, but to those who are competitive and competitive with each other and competitive with ourselves. This gamification of fitness I think will help people think more about fitness rather than the one time or maybe two times a year, you're asked to do a physical fitness test and ultimately that's about a healthier force. I think we've got upwards of 90% of Guardians that have volunteered to be a part of this two-year holistic health assessment. And I'm really excited not only what it means for the Space Force, but what it could mean for fitness throughout the Joint Force going forward, because ultimately the goal is a healthier force, a fit force, and reduced healthcare costs over the long term. So we can focus that money right at the pointy edge of the spear.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Well, as the line of effort for amplifying the Guardian spirit continues, truly it is important for those war fighters from the Space Force to be fit for the fight. That's so important. When you pointed your fit watch out, the first thing that came to mind was they have to keep and maintain and make sure that connectivity to, through, and from space is there for the war fighter and the combatant commanders. So that kind of shifts to the next question, next area, and that is America's knowledge that we have a Space Force, that we have an Air Force that has to be prepared for great-power competition, but yet there doesn't seem to be a propensity to serve out there. Can you address that?

**Alex Wagner:**

Yeah. Well, the framing of the question is one I've heard very often, and it's, "What's wrong with those people that don't understand us?" And that strikes me in a way that is personal because I grew up in Los Angeles, went to college in Rhode Island, and then I moved to Washington DC. I'd never met anybody in the military. I finished law school here in DC and I still had never met anyone in the military. It was only when I moved to Seattle and there were Airmen stationed out at Joint Base Lewis-McChord who lived in Seattle in the same communities that I was a part of that I began to develop some of those friendships. It's not what's wrong with the American people. This is a deliberate result of 20 years of war where the only focus has been on those who are in the military and those that love them and the communities that surround military bases.

And so we haven't done a great job of telling our story beyond those folks who understand it. 30 years ago when I was in high school, 40% of Americans had a parent that served. 40%. Now of course, that was largely because we were a conscription force, including through the Vietnam era, but 51 years ago was the dawn of the all-volunteer force. And so its implications mean that today less than 13% have a parent that served. This unfamiliarity has had real impacts. We've had 20+ years of war in the Middle East, yet most Americans don't know that we're at war unless it impacts them or their loved ones. And so some of the things that I'm trying to do is to tell our story to an American people that is open to hearing it but just has never been... we haven't brought it to them. We haven't packaged it to them in a way that they can understand.

Generally the military is the most trusted institution in our public life, but it's also one of the least familiar institutions. And so that's part of our mission to define and refine what our message is, why we matter and what we're doing aligned with where the American people are and where we think we, as a country, need to go together. I know that sounds like high lofty language, but it really motivates me

both in my personal engagements but also in making sure that we don't have a false narrative about what we're doing here in the department.

I could tell you, I will probably get to this, and I'm probably skipping ahead, but every time I open up a newspaper, I read the clips online, Air & Space Force Magazine, I see, "Recruiting Crisis." The last time before fiscal year '23, the Air Force failed to meet his regular enlisted recruiting numbers was 1999. What was happening in 1999? It was the height of the dot-com boom. Fast-forward 24 years, 25 years, we've had a hangover from COVID, which meant that our recruiters were unable to access high schools and places where young people congregate in a way that they typically did. We've had record low unemployment and we've had incredibly high wage growth, which means the private sector is hiring and offering all sorts of incentives. And so now as I mentioned earlier, we're in this competition for talent and companies are now offering education benefits similar to ours. They're offering bonuses and incentives and generous healthcare plans similar to ours.

And so we've got to now not only compete with a limited pool, but now we're competing with the private sector that's trying to take advantage of some of the talent that we know that we need in our force. So all of these movements and this lack of familiarity led to a one-year challenge in recruiting. I'm going to emphasize that it was a one-year challenge. We took a number of steps over the last 12, 15 months, and I can say that right now we're cautiously optimistic that the Air Force enlisted recruiting numbers will be at our goal for fiscal year '24, and I think we're firmly back on track.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

I'm glad you mentioned that because the Air & Space Forces Association realized that we have to be equally a part of your team, the One Team, One Fight concept, so we formed a task force led by retired Lieutenant General Sue Campbell, working with General Amrhein and the recruiting team. What else can the military service organizations, the veteran service organizations, and perhaps organizations that need to learn the military, how can they help you in this One Team, One Fight for recruiting?

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, very often people are clustered around military installations, but when I look at JROTC, when I look at ROTC, we've got people wearing uniforms carrying on the spirit of what we do and that focus on mission all over the country. And so I'd encourage members of AFA, military-affiliated people who aren't living in close proximity to installations or large military communities to engage in those high schools, to work with those ROTC cadets. Every time I go to an ROTC unit, I always challenge them. I say, "You've got to do more than just community service and be visible. You've got to engage your fellow classmates to help them understand why you're doing this, what the mission is, what motivates you and what you're going to get and where you're going to go."

And I think that we don't do enough of that because it feels very personal. Every single person that wears the uniform, or in the case of JROTC, is thinking about becoming more involved as a citizen in public life and engaged with government has to be a brand ambassador for our values, for our mission and for the opportunity. And I think those who are familiar with the military can help amplify that in a really effective way by better engaging in places in the country that we're just not located anymore, particularly after BRAC.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

So back to the analysis that you've been conducting for almost a year plus, is GPC, the great-power competition reoptimization helping in your efforts to recruit and retain? Has that given you a different vector, so to speak?

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, we just launched it in February at the Warfighter Symposium.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Thank you.

**Alex Wagner:**

So this is, I think, we're still in the channeling what's new and why it matters out to the force first. One of the biggest challenges is having our force understand why these changes are coming. And I think in general, people are skeptical of change, but receptive to leadership. And when you see the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, the Chief of Space Operations, and the Secretary of the Air Force all operating from exactly the same page, it says, this isn't an initiative that's going to last one year or two, but it's going to last throughout their terms. And hopefully what it can do is it can realign us both, not only in our messaging, but also in our resourcing and our budgets over one FIEP, two FIEPs, and beyond, to be more effective and to use those resources in a way that deters and ultimately denies, and if necessary, defeats what we need to do and where we need to be.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

What would you tell your industry partners, because in the end, they're just as integral to getting the message out? Because as we know industry, lots of companies really strongly believe in hiring the veterans, and so now they're embedded in industry and we can't just rely on, let, the CEO of United Airlines, Scott Kirby to carry the message for you. Or you look at Hilton Worldwide and Chris Nassetta, but rather they truly believe in the veterans out there. But what would be your message to industry and how would you get them involved in this?

**Alex Wagner:**

I used to work in a previous job with the chief human resource officers of the aerospace and defense industry, and they are in the same competition for talent with Silicon Valley that we are in general with the private sector.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Right. Yeah.

**Alex Wagner:**

I often say if I had a magic wand and I could fix one thing about the personnel enterprise, the DOD personnel enterprise, it would be the persistent challenge of spouse employment. There are initiatives that are going on, whether it's through the Chamber of Commerce's Hiring Our Heroes and others that are designed to offer fellowships to spouses. And these six-month fellowships from a number of private sector companies have actually resulted in over 80% full-time jobs. But it's not organized in a way that is structured today to meet the challenge and the need. And what I mean by that is that our system, our personnel system, our movement, our compensation is all designed for a family that is 50, 75 years old and not a modern family of today.

And spouse employment to me isn't just about economic security. It's about a sense of worth. It's about a sense of having pride in what you can do and what you can contribute and having the private sector be more deliberate about looking at the talents that military spouses have and offering them flexibility to



work in different locations across these companies or work from home and the office. I mean, one of the benefits of the pandemic has been that we've better understood that telework can work, right? It's not a lack of work. It's leveraging people being able to work when they're available and succeeding in getting the same results. And so I'd ask the private sector from a talent perspective to invest more in military families and particularly flexibility for spouses because that talent is there. It's just underutilized.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

You have just touched on a very key point. That's the forces and the families, because you mentioned how the spouses can equally be the recruiter, they can be the ones that retain the members and so forth. So I think we're touching on another constituent, the strongest constituent that's important to our military. Can you address just how you see the forces and the families integral to great-power competition?

**Alex Wagner:**

So no matter what the threat is out there, no matter what professional opportunity people have in the Air Force and the Space Force, if their kids aren't in the right school, or they don't have adequate childcare, they're not going to be focused as they need to be, as I need them to be, on the mission. And so that's why in the last two years, we've had a persistent dedicated effort in coordination with the Secretary of Defense's team to make sure that we're able to recover from a national childcare shortage on Department of Air Force installations. And we've put in place a number of key initiatives. We've offered staffing incentives, bonuses for hiring and retention. We've worked with the office of the Secretary of Defense for direct hire authority.

Last year, maybe it was two years ago at this point, Secretary of Defense said as a new initiative, services should offer a minimum of 50% discount on child care at one of your facilities if you bring your own child. And I thought that was a great incentive. And so I went back to our team and I said, "This may work, but I'm not willing to wait to see. So let's offer 100%. Can we afford it?" And it turned out we could. Well, guess what? In June of '22, our child care facilities across the DAF were staffed at about 65%. Again, national child care shortage coming out of COVID.

As of December, we were up to 81% because of all of these initiatives. Now that's not even across the board. There are some places that are particularly struggling, but even in some hard-to-fill slots like Eielson in Alaska, those numbers are trending upward. What that means is we've been able to reduce our waiting lists by one-third, which means that people are able to get the gold standard of child care, which is what we offer. We offer... I mean everybody wants in our child development centers because of the level of competence that the providers have and the level of care, and it's not just the direct care providers.

We even extended that discount for bringing your own child at 25% for the chefs, for the admin, and for the janitors, so they could see themselves as part of the same team we're incentivizing. And I think that has created, as I said before, a team approach where people want to bring their children to convenient child care, high quality child care, that lets them focus on their mission. So that's one part.

Spouse employment's another critical part. And then education, and I know a number of the folks listening today are well aware of our scorecards. Those scorecards, we're the only service to do scorecards where we rank every Department of Air Force installation based on a number of objective factors related to education, spouse licensure, benefits and requirements, and we're even expanding into healthcare. What that does is it gets the attention of local communities and says, how can we make improvements in those communities that will have an impact on a better quality of life for those service members and their dependents, but also helps track how they're doing, not objectively, but relative to

other DAF installations because you might be red on this scorecard and you want to go to green, but red doesn't mean bad, it just means relatively the lower third.

So we're trying to incentivize communities to do more and be really creative in how they execute those solutions and work with local mayors, city council members and business leaders to join forces to create a team to support our team.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

I imagine you've spent a lot of time trying to meet new people, get some insights and everything else, and I think one particular area you mentioned to me the other day was your outreach to the Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, we've obviously just seen a change over. Talk to us about that.

**Alex Wagner:**

Listen, I sit and I work in the Pentagon and there are layers and layers and layers of bureaucracy between me and those Airmen just graduating from BMT, those first term Airmen who are in tech school going to their units and throughout the force. And I can't help but smile when I think about this because the most fun I've had and the most valuable insights have been seeing the Air Force and the Space Force through the eyes of our senior enlisted leaders, whether it's Chief Bass, going back to where she was the command chief before becoming CMSAF down at Keesler. And I went down there with her and saw how that community embraced her from the very beginning to driving 90 minutes from Grand Forks, North Dakota, all the way up to the border at Cavalier Space Force Station with then Chief Towberman and him saying, "Alex, I want you to look out and see how much nothing there is for this hour and a half drive to better understand some of the challenges that those Guardians are facing and the Airmen that support them."

And then seeing how they engage and how Airmen and Guardians interact with them. I mean, it has been such an incredible experience to be a part of their town halls and to be pulled up and sometimes into their town halls and be forced out of my comfort zone. So I can hear directly from the force, not only what they're thinking, but what our senior enlisted leaders that represent the vast majority of our force are hearing as they travel and as they're on the road. And that is not only interesting to me, but it always plays a part in how I evaluate decisions because I'm able to see it from that different perspective that I otherwise wouldn't be able to access.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Well, you are obviously, now we got the strong relationship with Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force, B-9 and Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Flosi. So okay, what do you expect to do next with those two? Where do you want to go to? Where do you want them to take you?

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, I have a trip out to Clear Space Force Station in Alaska with B-9 scheduled for the first week of April, and I probably shouldn't be saying this, but I made sure I was the first Assistant Secretary on the schedule of Chief Flosi when he came to the Pentagon for his initial orientation. And I said, "I want to do things together. I want to see the force through your eyes, help me understand what you care about, and if we can travel together, I can get better access and better insight into all of that."

So that relationship is not only one that is personally gratifying, but it is unbelievable, professionally impactful because I'm here to make a difference. None of us is in these jobs to just show up at work every day and to try. I want to see the impact of some of the things and the policies we're putting in

place and then hear from the force how they're working, right? If I can hear from the force, "We intended to do this. How's it playing out where you're stationed? Are you aware of it? Are you able to access it? Is it impactful?" That's the feedback that I need, so we can make sure we do more of the things that are working and readjust and dare I say, optimize, some of the things that we need to figure out a better way to execute.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

So I'm going to give you a prompter on this question. So first of all, going out in the field, like all commanders and all of us in the leadership roles learn so much from the field, so first of all, as you've kind of indicated reshaped, or at least your perspectives on great-power competition reoptimization, so what are some of the key things the young Airmen and young Guardians have asked that should stand out to you from those town halls?

**Alex Wagner:**

I mean, something jumps out immediately. So a year ago I went out to FE Warren with Chief Bass and she said, "Well, I'm going to do an all-call and I want you to see how this plays out." And if you've been to FE Warren, you know that there's a hanger on top of a hill. And we drove all the way up and I'm seeing these cars parked on every side of the road and we enter this hanger and it looked like a rock concert inside. There was stadium seating, there was a big platform stage that led into the crowd. And she gets up there and halfway through her speech, which she is talking about the threat. She is talking about alignment with our values. She's talking about the kinds of capabilities that Airmen need today in order to succeed in this future threat environment.

Then she calls me up. I wasn't prepared and I had to come up with some kind of funny, savvy speech to introduce myself because this is not a role that is often force-facing. So I had to help them understand who I was and how I was her partner in getting things done for them. And the first question came from an Airman basic in the audience who said... maybe it wasn't basic, but it was a very junior Airman, and asked about the impact of TikTok. And she jumped at that and she said, "This is what the most junior members of our force are focused on. How technology can lead to misinformation and how we can leverage technology to get our message out."

And it was so interesting that this is a force that is unbelievably educated. I mentioned earlier that 80% of Airmen in years one through four have some college education. If you look in the more senior grades of our senior NCOs, over 50% have a bachelor's degree or a master's degree. So this is a force that is not an alternative to education. Coming to the Air Force and the Space Force is actually a pathway to education. And that means that they're focused on the same things that we're talking about here in the Pentagon. And that's unbelievably reassuring because they understand that in order to leverage the pace and speed of technology, they're going to have to be adept and comfortable with it. And the pathway to do that is through education.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

I cannot help but think that that young Airman is not too far away from an intercontinental ballistic missile, a national treasure, probably deals with nuclear, has been ultimately trained and yet asked just a basic question about social media and its impact on the force.

**Alex Wagner:**

I mean, it was so impactful. I clearly remember it. In fact, I remember where he was standing a year later.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

That's wonderful. Well, I know I've been asking a lot of questions, but I think we better get ready to shift here a little bit to open up our audience and give them an opportunity because like I said, we have 100s online. So you may go ahead and ask a question or you may type your question in the chat, and I'll do my best to get through all of them. Or you can just raise your virtual hand. Please remember to unmute yourself when I call on you. Now, this is going to be a tough one, but we're going to go ahead and start with our Pentagon correspondent for the Air & Space Forces Magazine. I'd like to open up the microphone to Chris Gordon. Chris, are you there?

**Chris Gordon:**

Yes, I am. Thank you, sir. And two questions actually. So I'll start with-

**Alex Wagner:**

I guess he has that privilege.

**Chris Gordon:**

I will start with the first one. When you talk about the Great-Power Competition fight and the China threat, the Department of the Air Force and the DER articulate this as a high-end fight that's very different from the relatively uncontested Middle East fights, at least for the Air Force. So are Airmen and Guardians of the future going to have to accept greater risk in harm's way than in the past few decades? And if so, how will you prepare Airmen and Guardians for that?

**Alex Wagner:**

I don't want to quantify the risk. What I would do is we've got to be prepared in order to have an effective deterrent for a whole range, and in many cases, a new range, of possibilities that our force is going to have to be trained and have the expertise and the experience in order to be an effective deterrent. And so, one of the things that I always think about is we always undervalue the degree to which we communicate. What you're seeing right now with the rollout of this Great-Power Competition initiative is not only some of the structural changes, but I'm really focused on how we're communicating the why to our force so that they can understand why we're asking them to take on the what. And that what is increased education, it's focused expertise, it's flexible smaller teams to solve really complex problems at the speed of relevance.

And so much of that is different than the way we were structured. And as I alluded to earlier, optimized for a counter violent extremism fight. And so while I can't articulate the degree of potential harm, what I want to ensure is that the force understands the strategy, understands the threat, and understands why we're taking the steps that we're taking. And our two best messengers are, in the Air Force, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Chief Master Sergeant in the Air Force. And in the Space Force, the Chief of Space operations and the Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force. And they are in the process of going out and speaking to the force what we unveiled at AFA. It's not going to happen overnight because it's complex and change is going to be hard, but we've got a unified team focused not only on making these changes, but helping people understand what it means for them and their families.

**Chris Gordon:**

My second question is actually-

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

I knew that was coming,

**Chris Gordon:**

Sorry, my second question is what does this re-optimization mean for Airmen, Guardians in the real world? How is it going to affect their family, what they're doing day to day? Will it be disruptive? What are you doing to make it less disruptive and an easier transition?

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, Chris, as I noted to Doug earlier, one of the benefits from this transition will be how we organize our deployable forces. And what we're doing is we're creating stronger teams that understand that they train together and that team will then deploy together. I think it'll make them more effective when it matters, but more importantly, they'll feel a part of something bigger because they'll be better connected to their teammates. And ultimately, I think a better connection makes you more effective when the time matters.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

So I have... Chris, go ahead.

**Chris Gordon:**

Thank you.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

So I have a question from way out there, but also just turns out to be a good friend that I know, but he's probably in California or somewhere in Japan, but his name is Steve Vancil and Steve says, "Do you have any vision for force development and deployment with the reserve and the Guard?" Let's talk about the full component here.

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, as you noted, my full title is Manpower and Reserve Affairs. And so what I have seen in this job is a reserve force, both the Guard and the Reserve that is completely operationally aligned to our mission and in a way that is more integrated than what I saw in my previous job working in the Department of the Army where they had more of a strategic, rather than operational, Reserve. I just got back from a trip to the South Pole and Antarctica, and little did I know, the incredible mission in one of the most remote and austere environments on the entire globe is only able to be accomplished through our Guard and Reserve. One of the weird parts of my job is I'm the DOD Executive Agent for the National Science Foundation's Polar programs both on Greenland and in Antarctica and at the South Pole.

And the only way science is able to happen through the people, through the equipment, and through the food, is on specialized planes flown and maintained by, the New York Air National Guard that have skis on the bottom so they can land not on a runway, but on an open snow field at the South Pole. And the only way, one of the ways, that all of this stuff gets from Christchurch, New Zealand, on the southern island of New Zealand to McMurdo Station on Ross Island in the middle of the Ross Ice Shelf at the edge of Antarctica is through C-17s operated by the Washington Reserves out of Louis McCord. And so this mission for the nation is enabled by our Guard and our Reserve.

One of the fun facts I found out down there is that Antarctica is the windiest and it's the driest continent. So what does that mean? It means that firefighting is a real expertise and who's got the best firefighters in the country? The Air National Guard. So I met firemen down there from the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, from the Oregon Air International Guard, from the Iowa Air National Guard that had left their families for eight weeks to go down onto the ice to often sit in a truck on our runway for 12 hours when the temperature is -30 outside to perform this mission. We have such an incredible Reserve component, whether it be in the Guard or the Reserves, and they're doing these missions that no one else can do in the entire world. And I'm so proud that this is a part of my portfolio.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Especially with the agility to go from anything from an Individual Mobilization Augmentee, Reserves, all the way to full-time, we'll call it full-time Guard or full-time Reserve. It's an incredible, it's beyond operational Reserve and strategic Reserve. It's a treasure.

**Alex Wagner:**

And that is what is just so important, how integrated they are into our total force.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

So Rob Tingle online says, "Mr. Wagner, do you believe China's tactic to reduce our great-power competition capability includes using social media to weaken our American culture from within and create division?"

**Alex Wagner:**

I'd say that I think... my understanding is that the American military is too strong to take in a fair fight. And so I think our enemies have been intentionally sowing division in our country because the only nation that's going to beat the United States of America is the United States of America. And so if they can be successful in dividing us, they can be more successful in challenging us. And that is something that I am laser-focused on trying to prevent both by leveraging technology, but also creating a force that is representative of America, that the American people can understand and see themselves in. When we go around the world, other countries and people in those countries that were deployed and see themselves and people that look like themselves in our military, that is a strategic advantage that no other country has.

And the benefit of our military is we draw from all over and we bring together all these diverse experiences, backgrounds, talents, and then we fuse them as part of the team. The science of diversity underscores that high-performing teams comprise people with different problem-solving skills because when the challenges are as great as they are, particularly in the national security space, we can't afford to leave any of our weapon systems off the table. And I think our diversity and the sense of team that we build where the American people can see themselves in us is one of our most important strategic advantages.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Well, we have a couple online that would like to ask you a question directly. So what I'd like to do is shift over is to Rachel Cohen. Rachel, if you would unmute your mic and go ahead and please tell us where you're from again.

**Rachel Cohen:**

Hello, can you guys hear me?

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Yes, we can.

**Rachel Cohen:**

Excellent. Yeah, this is Rachel Cohen with Air Force Times. Good to see you again. So in the past few years, the Air Force has sought to give Airmen more flexibility when it comes to basing, parenting, things like that, and signing some of those waivers and working on those policies is obviously part of your job. So I'm wondering if you're looking at any additional policy changes or waivers in the coming year, if you could talk a little bit about what they are.

**Alex Wagner:**

Well, as you correctly note, we want to make sure that we're competitive and retaining a force that has the right skills and talents and the family has changed. And our focus. You opened Doug, the conversation, and said, I'm responsible for nearly 600,000 Airmen, Guardians and DAF civilians. What that doesn't include is all the dependents. And so when you add that up, I'm looking at well over 1 million people that I have to think about every day to make sure we get the maximum amount of talent and expertise out of, given the importance of the mission. Rachel, we have been assessing everything. Everything is on the table. And right now, much of that focus has been on ensuring that we don't have outdated policies with respect to accession, that were created at a time that made sense, but just hadn't kept up with the science.

One of those was our body fat percentage for new enlistees at basic training. And we had a standard that was far higher than what OSD allowed, and it excluded people we thought that, from different communities, that was not necessarily correlated to success and performance. And so we revised our standard on body fat to mirror what OSD, the Office of Secretary of Defense said, was acceptable. And then over the last year, we tracked at basic training how those people who would've otherwise been excluded from our force did. I think between fiscal year '23, fiscal year '24, or around, somewhere north of 3,500, around 4,000 people that would've otherwise been excluded. And out of all of them, just one, just one, couldn't pass the PT test. So I'm thinking about making sure our policies are aligned to a healthy force, a fit force, a capable force, a talented force, but not structured and mired in the past, but optimized for the mission that we need today.

Personnel policies. We've done some small things. On spouse employment, we've offered credits for starting a new business or moving your business. We've offered incentives for spouses to, financial incentives, to defray the cost of licenses. On PCSing, we've been looking at ways to create more geographic stability. So there are a lot of things to come. Everything is on the table. We've created a new pet reimbursement policy, frankly, to ease an increasingly expensive challenge of moving with your pet, who many people consider, and rightly so, part of the family. And again, we're not doing any of these things to make people feel good. We're doing it so they can be focused on the most important part of their job, which is the mission. And you can be focused when you know your loved ones, your dependents, and some of the most stressful part of your life, which is moving, is taken care of.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Alex, we have about 30 seconds remaining. This has been an absolutely enjoyable conversation. So quickly, what message do you want us to take home?

**Alex Wagner:**

There's much more we can all do. We've got to be brand ambassadors, those who are affiliated with the military, supportive of the military, for exactly what the Air Force and Space Force do, why it matters, and connect it to everyday people's lives so they can see themselves in us. And I am laser-focused on telling our story to audiences that have not been familiar with it, that we haven't engaged before. That's my commitment to you at home. That's my commitment to AFA, and I just ask AFA to continue this really strong, robust partnership to tell our story beyond the people who already know it, because every day that we can engage someone else is a way to strengthen our force and to strengthen the communities in which our force resides. So thanks for having me.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

Alex, thank you. And as I promised, we need to continue to amplify the messaging that you're out there. We look forward to seeing you at the Air, Space & Cyber Conference in September on the main stage.

**Alex Wagner:**

All right.

**Maj. Gen. Doug Raaberg, USAF (Ret.):**

So thank you again for joining us. To our audience online, we hope to see you April 9th for our next Warfighters in Action with Lt. Gen. Richard Moore. Scan the QR code on the screen or just go to [AFA.org](https://www.afa.org) and find the registration link under our events tab.