



REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM

RESTORING DETERRENCE WITH PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH

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Recruitment and Readiness: Restoring Confidence in the U.S. Military

Moderator:

- Mr. Leo Shane, POLITICO

Panelists:

- Senator Jim Banks, U.S. Senate, Indiana
- Representative Jimmy Panetta, U.S. House of Representatives, California, 19th District
- General Eric Smith, Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps
- The Honorable Anthony Tata, U.S. Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness

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Leo Shane:

Welcome to the Distinguished Panelists here. Let me do a quick introduction before we get started. We've got Senator Banks right here, Representative Panetta. We've got the Marine Corps Commandant General Smith over here, and Undersecretary for Personnel and Readiness. Anthony Tata. So thank you all for being here. Just a quick reminder to everyone here and everybody watching online if you have some questions. They've given me a fancy iPad here to try and check in and see. So if you've got anything, please feel free to send it to us and we will try and get it in. And I do want to call up, we've got a slide to start off with here, and I think it's a good place for us to begin. So if you guys could call up the first slide, my panelists can see it down here. This is from the Reagan Defense Survey.

This is the reported trust and confidence in the military, and we've seen some decline, some leveling off in recent years. We talked about this in the first panel a little bit, but I think it's an interesting part to start because we have seen an improvement in recruiting

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in the last year after some challenges. The question that I keep coming back to is, is it sustainable improvement?

So Mr. Undersecretary, let's start with you. Talk to us about where you think things stand, not just in terms of the success we've seen in the last cycle or two with recruiting, but also in terms of getting us on a footing where we think that this can last, that this isn't just a onetime blip or a onetime success.

Anthony Tata:

Well, thank you and I want to thank everybody here. This is a mission that starts at the top with the President, his focus on peace through strength and the Secretary's focus on warrior ethos and those things that unify us as opposed to those things that divide us. With our friends in the Senate and the House and the passing of the 10% raise 14.5% for E-4 and below, and then part of that compensation that's bigger with commissary and basic allowance for housing and subsistence and those kinds of things. The compensation for men and women in the services is very competitive with the civilian sector. So when our recruiters go out there, they're on a pretty level playing field, but only about half of our 17, 18, 19 year olds in the country are even aware of a military option. They're not even aware.

So that's why the expansion of Junior ROTC and those types of programs become so important. I was a superintendent of a very large school district in North Carolina. [We] added JROTC programs, and it changes the culture, not only of the high school, but of the community and the awareness and the propensity to serve increases. And so when we look at the sustainability, the Secretary has set up a recruiting task force that is chaired by Sean Parnell, the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs and myself. And we are working through legislative proposals such as increasing JROTC and other types of things that we want to work with the Senate and House on to increase and sustain the momentum that we have right now. And we've got tremendous momentum. And what we're seeing in the outbriefs from basic training is that men and women are joining in record numbers now because they love the message of focusing on warrior ethos and those things that are a common purpose and focused leadership and allowing us to focus on those things that unite us as opposed to divide us.

Leo Shane:

So on that point, when you're talking about the message, when you're talking about that calling, we are looking at these numbers where we're seeing at least a leveling off or some concern. Now, the military has never recruited everyone in the country. Obviously it's just a segment. But does it worry you to see over a 10-year period any sort of decline in faith in the military or confidence in the military? Because that speaks to the

heart of whether or not you're going to be able to get those folks in the door and whether or not they're going to think about that message.

Anthony Tata:

So when I was a young officer in the 82nd or 101st airborne, the public view of the military was in the seventies or eighties. And so these numbers are quite disturbing to me and it's upon us to rebuild that trust through leadership and taking care of the men and women that raise their right hand to serve in our country. So it starts with good leadership and penetrates all the way down to the machine gunner in the foxhole. And that message has to be unity of purpose, unity of command, good leadership, warrior ethos.

Leo Shane:

Okay. General, I wanted to ask you, because we've seen some fluctuation in the recruiting, seen some difficulties with recruiting in the other services. I know you want to brag about the Marine Corps not having as many issues, but talk to us about how the Marine Corps approaches recruiting and what's different why you've been able to consistently hit your marks.

Eric Smith:

Yeah, our motto is you joined us, we didn't join you. You stepped up to the plate. You said you wanted to be a Marine. I don't think you can make it, but if you're willing to try, jump up on a pull-up bar. Let's see how fast you can run three miles. Let's see how many pull-ups you can do.

The other thing we do is we professionalized our recruiting force. We've got professional career recruiters. That is their MOS, that's their specialty. We don't have many of them, but we have one at each recruiting substation and we send our best and our brightest to recruiting duty. I'm a recruiter. My son's a recruiter, General [Roger] Turner's a recruiter. General Glynn is a recruiter. Most of our general officers, or at least a third or about half of them have recruiting experience. And we value that recruiting experience. We put a lot of faith into it.

We have a selection board. And when you're screened as a Officer Selection Officer or you're screened as a recruiting station commanding officer or a district commander, that's a feather in your cap and it bodes well for you for your career. So I think that is kind of our secret sauce is we value recruiting. We spend our best and our brightest. We reward them, but we also hold them accountable. If you miss your recruiting mission for two months in a row, we're going to relieve you. Doesn't mean we're going to crush you, but we're going to relieve you.

Leo Shane:

I wonder if you could just go a little deeper into that professional recruiting force. What are you teaching? What are you emphasizing with them? What are you doing that's different than the other services just in terms of the message or the training that those folks are getting?

Eric Smith:

Well, I wouldn't speak to what the other services do or don't do. I would only speak to what we do. We have a professional recruiting course that we run out of San Diego, MCRD, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, where we teach you professional selling skills. We teach you how to deal with rejection, we teach you how to go out there, how to speak publicly, how to be comfortable working in a high school environment. We screen those recruiters heavily and we run you through a course that teaches you how to get somebody to the MEPS, Military Entrance Processing Sites, how to screen an applicant to make sure that you're not trying to qualify the unqualified. Somebody who's had asthma after the age of 12, unqualified. So just move on. We just try to teach you that, try to teach you how to deal with rejection and frankly, how to carry yourself, how to speak publicly, how to speak with confidence and make sure you're physically fit because again, you're representing the Marine Corps, they're trying to emulate you, so you got to look the part. You got to be a Marine.

Leo Shane:

How long is that course? Is that a heavy lift? Is that several months or is this like a couple weeks?

Eric Smith:

No, it's about eight weeks long. So it's two months.

Leo Shane:

So an investment, but not something that takes somebody completely out of the mix for a year.

Eric Smith:

No, it doesn't take you out for a year. And we send our OSOs, our Officer Selection Officers to a thing called OSOC, the Officer Selection Officer Course. That's a two week course where we teach them everything they need to know about how to be an OSO, how to be an Officer Selection Officer.

Leo Shane:

Okay. My members of Congress here don't want to leave you out of this. We've had quite a bit of focus on recruiting retention issues on Capitol Hill in recent years. The Undersecretary mentioned the big junior enlisted pay raise last year, which I know was a major selling point. What are we looking at next? Because yes, the recruiting is going well, but we've also seen the cyclical issues of, economy gets good, recruiting gets worse. There's ups and downs, there are political influences that come into all of this with different, different administrations coming in and out. How do you maintain that and what are you looking at right now from a legislative standpoint? So Congressman Panetta, let's start with you.

Jimmy Panetta:

Well, I think it's interesting because you see this decline starting in 2018 and going till 2021. I mean obviously there were issues with what we're dealing with right now, not just coming out of the 20-year war on terror, but then also COVID especially. And I think to the General's point, when we had COVID that really limited what our recruiters could do, and this accessibility was huge. And I'm not just talking about schools, I'm talking about the communities. And I've talked to a number of recruiters prior to this and they talked about how, "Hey man, we would go to bowling alleys, we'd go to the stores, we'd get in there," and during COVID, that was very, very difficult. So I think that was a big part of why you saw that drop. And then also our politics and how divided they were and continue to be when it comes to the withdrawal from Afghanistan, be it through wokeism on the right and imperialism on the left.

And so I think we looked at it not just through patriotism, but through pragmatism. And that that's why you've seen this increase in pay consistently since 2023, which I believe has led to the uptick in numbers or at least played a big part in it. You had what, 4.6% raise in 2023, 5.2% raise in 2024. This year, one of the largest 14.5% including for our junior enlisted. That's huge. And then going into this year's NDAA, we're looking at I think 3.6%. So I think that's played a big part of it.

But then on the General's point, I think it's also making sure that not necessarily that we drop our standards, but that we get the potential recruits up to our standards. And that's why I obviously agree with the Marine [Corps] does. But then if you look at what the Navy and the Army are doing with this future Soldier, future Sailor Prep courses where they're taking those in who may not necessarily qualify right out of the chute and just building them up, getting their academic and their physical standards up to where they meet those military standards and getting them in, you're seeing a lot done on our part. You're seeing a lot done on the military's part as well.

Jim Banks:

A great discussion this morning between Gallagher and Smith on DEI and wokeism and some of those issues. And I think to have this conversation, we have to go back to the Biden administration, the worst recruitment crisis in the 50 years of an all-volunteer force. The Marine Corps taught us lots of lessons, but the Army was 8,000 soldiers short, the Navy was way short. And then immediately Donald Trump wins on election day and then the Navy and the Army meet their recruitment goals within months, like many months short of the targets.

There's something to learn from that. And we can talk about the DEI stuff that we talked about this morning, but there's something else that hasn't come up at all. And I think the graph in front of us points to exactly where I'm going, and that's that while it might've been a gradual decline in the confidence of the military, what happened on August 26th, 2021, 13 soldiers died at Abbey Gate in Kabul, Afghanistan. And if you put that on TV and you ask young men and women, do you want to be a part of that military?

That is when you saw the drastic decline in recruitment, not just in public confidence. Now today, 71% of Americans say they support the American military taking out these drug boats. And you ask young men and women, do you want to be a part of a military that is stopping drugs from flooding our country and killing our brothers and our sisters, our neighbors, our family members? That's a type of a military that's inspiring young people. Now, the overall picture Wall Street Journal, after the Afghanistan debacle published a poll that I go back to quite often and talk about, actually it came out in 2023. Wall Street Journal polls said that only 38% of Americans consider themselves to be patriotic. And compare that to the nineties when that was over 70% of Americans who considered themselves to be patriotic. That's the big question about how do we change that? How do we inspire the next generation to love their country in the same way that Jimmy and I did and others on this panel, to want to raise your right hand and serve this country. And I think it's the public projection of what the military stands for. Jimmy and I are both different parties—we want the military to be as apolitical as it can possibly be. How do we get it there? That's the big question that we face that can keep the recruitment and retention numbers as strong as what they are today.

Leo Shane:

But to the point that they raised on that first panel this morning, there is a swing to the other side. We are still seeing polarization within those numbers of Democrats, Democratic respondents, their faith and their confidence going down while Republicans are going up. So is there a concern that you're just trading one party for the other and we're in a perpetual cycle where as long as we've got administrations turning over every

two to four years, that's going to be what's driving any faith or any confidence in that? That doesn't feel like a very sustainable method to go forward.

Jim Banks:

I want to focus on the retention and recruitment goals, which is the single best story that's came out of the Trump-Hegseth Pentagon, and that's that it's through the roof. These guys have had a very successful run in a short period of time of fixing a recruitment crisis. So there's a larger discussion about restoring trust and confidence in the military. But the bigger story, the greater story in all of this is in a short period of time fixing something that was really broken.

Leo Shane:

So let me go back to you, Mr. Undersecretary, and talk about that. And this gets back to the original question again. Are we looking at a sustainable pattern here where there's been fundamental changes or do you feel like if this is just a reaction to Trump's election into office and a passion of supporters of his feeling like they should flock in because if it is that latter one, we've got to elect Trump president every couple of years in order to keep recruitment up, right? That doesn't feel like an actual solution to move forward.

Anthony Tata:

Well, just to piggyback on what the Senator was saying is that there's a close fight. Fix the problems in front of us right now, which seem to be happening as we take a hard look at every single service is well ahead of their fiscal year [20]26 goals already. And then take a look at the long fight. How do we instill and ingrain these changes that we're making so that they are as apolitical as possible because there is huge apolitical or bipartisan support for a well-trained and ready military.

So when I think about everything I'm hearing up here, and we all use the Marine Corps as a standard, even as an Army guy, the way forward is through this leadership from the President and the Secretary with this focus on being trained and ready and pulling the politics out of the military by taking DEI out of the military that's apoliticizing it, that's focused on those things that unite us as opposed to those things that divide us.

And then hopefully for the longer fight, whether it's a Democrat or Republican administration, we can learn the lessons from this and depoliticize recruiting, depoliticize the military, not use the military as an experimental social experimentation form, but keep it trained and ready and warrior ready. And the warrior ethos that the secretary is talking about, that's we've raised the standards. The Secretary had a speech on September 30th about the warrior ethos and he increased physical fitness standards, increased the standards for grooming and lots of other things, and then allowed for

commanders to enforce those standards by taking a look at some of the regulatory prohibitions on commanders. So we are getting after this every day under the leadership of the secretary and the president.

Leo Shane:

This might be a good time to bring up the second slide here, which speaks a little bit more to where we've got, we've got the views on encouraging military enlistment, which we've seen has gone up some in the last few years, and a number of folks especially who are discouraging. So that again, would indicate that we're on a path where maybe those influencers, maybe those folks who are having a say over where young people are going to decide to do, maybe that's headed in the right direction. You had mentioned JROTC before, I know that's been a sticking point for both Congress and the Department. What are you looking at now in terms of ways to get that in and ways to talk to some more folks? I do know the COVID years really played havoc on a lot of this.

Anthony Tata:

Well, there's really two aspects to this. There's access to high schools for our recruiters, and then there's the JRTC program. Two very different things. I know when I was superintendent of Wake County in North Carolina, within my first week of being superintendent, the Marine Corps recruiter came in, saluted me and said, "sir, I'm here to serve. I need access to all 24 year high schools". I said, "Have at it." And then I went to my Army, Navy, Air Force friends, I said, "Hey, where's your guy?" And it was like three months later that those guys came in. So Commandant, your recruiting efforts are to be applauded.

Now I have met with each of the services, each of the military departments, recruiters or cadet commands, the session commands. We're setting up a briefing for the Secretary to look at all the sessions, whether it's enlisted or officer, and they have reported out to me where they are, what the help they need, what do they need from the Department. And not a week goes by where we're not deep diving on how to help out with recruiting with the sessions, whether it's enlisted or officer fixing near term problems and setting up so that it becomes long-term sustainable through access to high school through JROTC programs and other types of things that we're going to need from the Senate and the House.

Leo Shane:

I feel like this has come up a bunch in Congress and there's not a real objection to it, and yet we still keep running into barriers. So Congressman?

Jimmy Panetta:

Yeah, Jen Kiggans, Republican from Virginia, and myself co-lead the SERVE Act, which basically says recruiters need, deserve, require time in our high schools and not just one time a year in some far off classroom. Basically high times, high traffic areas, and at a minimum of four times a year. And then if you have any students that are applying for federal aid, we're going to have access to that list. Now I'm proud to say that that language is in this year's NDAA, but there has also included that type of language for colleges as well. So once again, it really does, and the recruiter would know best. It comes down to accessibility. And when you can do that early on in high school, in universities, I think that's when we're going to have a real uptick in our recruitment.

Leo Shane:

Okay. Got a question from the audience here talking about how the military has become a family business in past years and I think this speaks to that same sort of issue. Senator, how do you expand this out? How do you get some of those folks who maybe had not considered a military career before, reach out to them, find a way to get them to maybe not enlist, but at least be open to the idea, at least learn about it and come, because I can tell you from my personal experience and from just covering this for years, there's a lot of places that it's just not even considered because there hasn't been exposure because you never knew someone who served in the military that those influencers just aren't, aren't talking about it.

Jim Banks:

This polling is interesting because if you broke it out, the single biggest source for military recruitment are children of service members. So I think 80% of military recruits come from a home of a mom or a dad who served in the military. Yet under Biden, Secretary [Christine] Wormuth, Secretary of the Army, preached about the dangers of a "warrior caste" and suggested that we should avoid recruiting from military families. And that is completely backwards. We should be embracing that as a source of recruitment. I think it's one of the reasons that recruitment is now surged in a way that it has, but across the board, Congressman Panetta and some of those efforts with his colleagues in the House, and there's so much more that we can do to tackle that issue. But at the end of the day, it's about patriotism. It's about teaching kids in schools that America is great, America is worth serving and fighting and dying for and joining the military. And at the end of the day, that's the single most important thing that we can do to maintain long-term military recruitment and save the country.

Leo Shane:

You're not suggesting that that should be the primary. You're suggesting that we shouldn't ignore that valuable recruiting pool, but you're not suggesting that that should

be primary focus and let's not try and reach out further because again, that's not sustainable.

Jim Banks:

I'm suggesting that we shouldn't avoid it. I mean, it's outrageous that we would avoid the single biggest source of military recruitment traditionally in our country, which are the members of families who did serve. And I think that dip we saw in other polling over the years, that dip was coming from—and the number of times that I hear from moms and dads who served in the military say for the first time, I'm telling my kids not to serve that they shouldn't serve. They should go do something else. Now those numbers are going back up. That's a positive sign.

Jimmy Panetta:

And I agree with the Senator. I mean that really is the through line. There is the foundation of why people join and I believe the through line is what you can do for your country. But at the same time, the pragmatism aspect of it is what can the country do for me as well? And I think people do take that into account and that's why we've worked so hard, not just on a recruiting side and on the pay side, but as General, you and I talked about yesterday, the retention side. What else are we doing in Congress to make sure that we keep these people in the military? And I think that's a big aspect of this conversation as well, not just recruitment. How do we keep them in? And that's why you've seen the work that we did on the NDAA through education, benefits—and not just for you, but for your family members—medical benefits, housing, absolutely housing, BAH, BNA, upping those tremendously. I mean, one of the things, one of my bills that I passed and got signed into law, one of my proudest bills was the DLI act. We have the Defense Language Institute there in Monterey. We had these young men and women, the best and brightest of the enlisted top of their class, of their basic class coming in. We actually allow the DLI to now confer on them a Bachelors of Arts. While they're learning languages for our national security, they then can study and get a BA for their personal security. So it's those types of things I think help.

Jim Banks:

I'll add really quick too, to add to Congressman Panetta's list. Some polling I've seen in recent years, one of the biggest sources for military members getting out of the military is the condition of the military school options. So the focus on DoDEA [Department of Defense Education Activity] schools and improving those schools for kids as moms and dads in the military decide that they want better options for the kids to go to school. That's been a large focus of ours in this year's NDAA too.

Leo Shane:

So Commandant, I've got two members of Congress here and I've got the Undersecretary here. What else do you want? What else do you want for your recruiters in terms of, we had the large junior enlisted pay raise last year, which I know was a key selling point for both recruiting and retention. What are you looking at now in terms of tools that you would like to see or areas that you're hearing from potential recruits saying, "Ah, this is a make or break thing for me."

Eric Smith:

The only thing we really require is access to high schools. We just require access. There's a law that you have to grant recruiters access, but some school districts frankly give you access in the seventh period over in the back corner or in the lunchroom during non lunch hours. So we just need access. I mean, we're not press ganging anybody to join the Marine Corps. We're offering you an opportunity to become a Marine to earn the Title Marine. If you don't want to join it, that's fine. The recruiter's going to write you off. They're not going to call you at two o'clock in the morning and hound you into joining. We don't do that. If you say, "Hey, don't call me again", we take you off the list. I got better things to do. My recruiters are going to move on and move on to more fertile ground.

But we just need access to the high schools. We need access to high school lists. We need access to community college lists because frankly, those that start college, most don't finish. It's just a fact. They either, through financial reasons, or they just change their mind. We just want access to those lists. And for those that stay in college, if you want to earn your degree, we want to commission you as an officer. We just want access to the names so we can reach out to you and offer you the opportunity to join the Marine Corps to join the military. That's all we're asking.

Leo Shane:

Mr. Secretary, you mentioned the task force earlier. I don't know when we're—are we expecting a report on that? Are we expecting a formal presentation or is that just something you're going to be working with the members of Congress on a rolling basis?

Anthony Tata:

We provide an update monthly to the secretary. It's an internal task force. And we derive from that legislative proposals that then we will then go for, particularly for the [20]27 NDAA. We will present the legislative asks for things, such as expanded access to high schools, and all of that. And I think what we've seen here and heard here is all the tangible benefits that we can provide a match with the intangible leadership aspects that we're talking about. We've got the recruiter excellence forum coming up in a couple of weeks where we're going to talk to the best recruiters across all five services and we're

going to thank them. The Secretary's going to hand out some awards and we're going to talk about the importance of recruiting and retention. And we haven't talked much about retention here, but last year all retention goals were met and exceeded in a very strong way, similar parallel to the recruiting goals.

So we're off to a good start, but we don't take it for granted. And that saying, "Fixing the roof while the sun is shining," I think is very apropos here. And very seriously, Sean Parnell and I are leading that recruiting task force with our teams and we understand that this is a barometer of the health of the nation, really. How willing are men and women ready to serve? How much do they know about the military? How aware are they of all these great benefits that Congress and the department are putting forward? How much in contact are they with our great recruiters?

From my combat days, if you get a young sergeant in front of a mayor in Afghanistan or Iraq, he's going to change the world. And so we've got to continue to set those men and women up for success as they are out in our communities telling the story of the Department and of all our great services. Space Force has already met their mission for the year two and a half months in. So there's a lot of good news out there. The secretary and the president are setting high standards and we have a very positive mission right now and a very positive message.

Leo Shane:

I want to jump to retention in a second, but since you said there are internal recommendations, if there's any news you want to break or secret want to give us something, we can keep it real quiet in here.

Anthony Tata:

My one big lesson is I never get in front of my boss.

Leo Shane:

On the retention issue. We do have a question from the crowd asking about MOSs and specialties and finding a better way to match skill sets with career paths. I know this has been a sore point for a number of years, trying to figure out the best way to not just keep folks in, but to develop their career, develop their skills, and then keep them in once they've got those critical skills.

So I don't know if there's anything that our two members of Congress are looking at right now. I don't know if this, I know this has been discussed, but let me put you on the spot and ask you to solve that problem right here, right now.

Jimmy Panetta:

Well, like I said, what are the foundational aspects of being in the military beyond the patriotic duty? What's the pragmatism aspect of it? And that really comes down to making sure that not just the individual members, but what are you doing for their families and the quality of life for these members that are in? And that's why medical education—when I first came in, the housing locally had some real issues in regards to mold that seemed to be a common theme. And when I brought it back to my armed services colleagues, including Mr. Banks, Senator Banks, that was a topic. And I got to say, each person that I speak to now in the Monterey Peninsula region, first thing I ask them is, “How's the housing?” And they say, “It's much better, much better improved upon.” So I think it's really, it's not just about the individual, not just about the military member, it's about their families and what you can do. I mean, that's why the family separation benefits, we've upped those as well through the NDAA.

Jim Banks:

When we created the Space Force, we tried to create something that was much more flexible than what we had across any of the other branches. And I think it's worked. I mean recognizing that many of the skills of the future and how fast everything is adapting with AI and the Space Force created pathways for MOS' [Military Occupational Specialty] for civilians with experience and more flexibility to enter them into service. This has been one of my, I mean Jimmy and I, you served in the Navy Reserves as well. I was a supply corps officer and when I joined the military, I never thought I was going to do it for 20 years. Never thought about retirement. I just wanted to wear a uniform and serve my country because I loved America. And what I found in my entire reserve experience is showing up once a month in my reserve duty.

It was like a large bureaucratic enterprise that was geared toward prior active military service members who were trying to get their points to get to 20 years, maybe a deployment here and there in between and check the box trainings and whatnot. It was a very frustrating experience.

But aside from deploying to Afghanistan and doing that and serving my country, it was a very frustrating and underwhelming experience. So with the Space Force, we try to create something that could welcome people, the type of civilian experience that we need with more flexibility than what we had across the other branches. I think we've learned from it, but we probably need to do more to go back in the NDAA and implement some of those changes across the other branches too.

Eric Smith:

There's a saying that you recruit the Marine, but you retain the family. So you can recruit an individual and they'll serve for four years, but in that four years, the odds are they're going to get married. And then if there's bad military housing, if there's bad military

schools, bad military healthcare, they're going to get out. And once you lose them, you'll never get 'em back. So that propensity to enlist, you got to focus on those who are propense to enlist and then you have to retain them. But that gets expensive. Now you've got a sergeant instead of a private. Sergeants make a lot more than privates. And so you can only have so many sergeants and you still need privates. But if you lose out on that sergeant, then you're in a hole. So you recruit the marine, but you retain the family.

Anthony Tata:

Yeah, it's a joint decision whether or not to stay, as to what the Commandant's saying. And to that extent, 20% spouse unemployment, roughly in the service right now, all the services. And we have a target this year to reduce that by 5% through increased portability, the types of licensure, portability that if you're a teacher in North Carolina and you've moved to Camp Pendleton, then how can we make it easier for you to be a teacher at Camp Pendleton? And if you're a lawyer, if you're a doctor, whatever the portability requirements are. And I've got a team taking a hard deep dive into spouse unemployment and trying to decrease those numbers.

Leo Shane:

Well, let me throw one more at you. There's a fight right now going on with the NDAA with House leadership dealing with the IVF [In vitro fertilization] issue and access to IVF services. I know this is something that lawmakers have, it's gotten through the House and Senate, but I believe it's hung up in leadership right now. Are those the kind of family issues that you've got to be looking at now if you're talking about recruiting and retention?

Anthony Tata:

Yeah, so the President's very supportive of IVF and we're supportive of growing families, and that would be my comment in regard to that.

Leo Shane:

Is that something behind the scenes here? I know this is a little bit of—I don't want to get into a whole NDAA thing, we need another several hours for this—but are those the kind of areas that you're going to have to look at next? Not just the pay raise, not just the direct. But will those become not just retention, but recruiting incentives to say, “Hey, this is going to be good for my whole family when I get down the road.”

Jim Banks:

The IVF discussion is definitely a retention discussion. I mean, when the military and the processes with TRICARE and how long that period takes, how expensive it is, is far

worse than what you would experience in the private sector, is something that we have to fix. So large bipartisan support and the President's been vocal about doing something about it as well. I can't speak to House leadership and some of those conversations because that's long in my rear view window, but I know the conversation.

Leo Shane:

You want to attack the House leadership, now you're on the Senate side, you're welcome to do that.

Eric Smith:

Speaking of the medical piece, one of the things that we're working on is the MEPS, the military engines processing sites. We have to adjust the way that they qualify and disqualify applicants because if you had asthma or ADD—well, I had ADD until Sister Mary Catherine smacked it out of me and then I didn't have it anymore. Sort of facetiously, but not really. If you have a shoulder that's impinged, okay, if you stay for 30 years, we're going to have to pay for that shoulder. But the odds are you're not going to stay for 30 years. You're going to stay for four years and get out, and then you're going to move on to civil society and you're going to get a job and get healthcare. So just because you have a shoulder that was impinged in a football injury, we want somebody in the Marine Corps—and I would say for the Army and the Navy and the Air Force, Space Force—who played high school football. We want somebody who played high school basketball, who ran high school track and they wound up dislocating the hip or getting a fracture in their tibia. That doesn't disqualify you from service. So some of it is we have to get out of disqualifying so many people at the MEPS. That's a real problem.

Jimmy Panetta:

Three quarters, I couldn't believe it when I read this stat. Three quarters of our youth ages 17 through 24 do not qualify for military service, which I think is unbelievable. One in six recruits have waivers at this point. I think to the General's point that he was making, I mean we do have to look at the waiver process and we have to make sure that it's around. But once again, that's why I appreciate the Future Soldier Sailor Prep course, just because it's bringing men and women up to the standards, not lowering our standards. And then when you do have waivers, either medical or moral types of standards, be reasonable about them. Use your common sense and don't just do a bright line because you're really going to exclude people that we need to fulfill our manpower purposes.

Anthony Tata:

So to the Commandant's point of the Medical Standards, Defense Health Agency reports under my portfolio. We took a look at 380,000 recruits this year through all of our

medical systems, did physicals on them, to recruit about 230,000-240,000. So it takes three to make two, sort of, and that's a lot of hard work on the recruiters that are out there who are "Always be closing" kind of mentality. And the machinery that has to bring in almost 400,000 to make 200,000 or 250,000. That's a lot of logistics. And we are looking at the standards and how the aperture is on what are the disqualifying medical requirements. We want to make sure that we maintain high standards and we also want to make sure that we're not excluding those that could potentially serve us well.

Leo Shane:

Listen, gentlemen, thank you so much for this. I was told that if I keep you any longer, that no one in the room gets to eat. So I'm going to let you go, but I appreciate the conversation, to keep you here for much longer. Thank you so much.

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