



**Panel 7: CELEBRATING AND ENCOURAGING SERVICE: HOW TO BOOST
RECRUITMENT AND ENSURE READINESS**

Moderator:

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Panelists:

Hon. Gabe Camarillo, Under Secretary, U.S. Army

Sen. Kevin Cramer, U.S. Senator, North Dakota

Gen. Daniel R. Hokanson, Chief, U.S. National Guard Bureau

Mr. Karl Rove, Former Special Advisor and Deputy Chief of Staff, President George W. Bush

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Ben Kesling:

Alright, well thank you everybody for joining us, and thanks to the panelists who are here. Before we start the panel, I would like to start with a reminder that my Wall Street Journal colleague Evan Gershkovich remains detained in a Russian prison right now for doing nothing more than his job as a journalist in that country, and journalism isn't a crime, and for everybody out there who can work to get him home quickly and safely, let's think of him. So thank you. The military has a recruiting problem. I don't think that that is telling tales out of school. We can all agree on that. We've had two decades of war. There have been very public reporting on scandals about housing issues at bases, issues with suicide, PTSD, scarcity of resources, and domestic abuse issues and how we deal with those. Not to mention the effects of a pandemic.

And the all-volunteer force is at a critical juncture right now. We've had an all-volunteer force since the seventies, and there's a lot of talk about whether or not that force is in danger. Well, I want to start by asking the Army Under Secretary, Under Secretary Camarillo, about some of these recruiting issues that the Army's facing, the Army being the biggest branch that deals with recruiting. Under Secretary Camarillo, the Army missed its recruiting goal last year of 65,000, missed it by more than 10,000, a very large miss. I wonder if you can tell us what that means for the service, the fact that the Army

wasn't able to make it, and how did you change numbers for this year, and what's your target goal for this year?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

Well, first of all, it's great to be here with all of you, and thanks so much for shining a light on such an important issue for all of the Department of Defense. We always say that recruiting is an existential challenge for our warfighters and for the Army particularly, because if we can't bring in the right talent to do the missions that the Army is called upon to do, we have significant issues and problems. I'll start by just saying this, the challenges that created the current recruiting crisis, they have been many years in the making. Yes, we know that we are in a very tight labor market. We also know that there was an impact of COVID on test scores for high school graduates, rising obesity rates for example. But there are some longer-term challenges that we know that we are starting to confront. And those include, for example, the declining propensity to serve over the last couple of decades, as well as, certainly, lack of familiarity with what a military career is all about, and what opportunities it gives to America's youth as a career option.

So this all came to a head in 2022 as the Army missed its recruiting goals for the first time in several years, and we recognized very quickly that the data was showing that this was the start of a long-term trend if we didn't do something to act very quickly to arrest it. So we undertook several efforts -- also to work on physical training skills, for example, to be able to meet our requirements. And those things have helped, but we still, as you said, didn't hit our goal last year of 65,000 in the active-duty force, and primarily that was a stretch goal. We knew, we wanted to show, that the Army is smaller than we would like for it to be, and so we set a very ambitious goal in FY23. Looking ahead to FY24, we want to continue to have emphasis and give our recruiting workforce a lot of credit for improving our performance in FY23 pretty substantially over what we had done in FY22.

And we're looking at two different categories as we look at the current year that we're in. First, we want to make sure that we have some degree of soldiers that are on contract by the end of the year. So new contracts, we're looking at around 50,000 new soldiers in the active force, and we also want to include another cadre of soldiers that would be in what's called a delayed entry program. That's kind of like a savings bank which will go into the following years. That was depleted in recent years, and we want to make sure we're enhancing that. So combined with about 55,000 soldiers, we will end up having an improvement from the 50,000 that we were able to bring in our performance in FY22.

Ben Kesling:

I think that sort of begs the question, if you can't hit your target goal, do you just drop your target goal to make it more easily reached? Is that what the Army's doing?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

No, we're not. So we are still looking at the number for FY24, but if you combine the delayed entry pool number and the contracts, it would be an increase of what we achieved in FY23. So it would increase it by about 5,000 soldiers. It's still a stretch goal, but it's one that we're going to set out for ourselves.

Ben Kesling:

And again, to look back at last year, 65,000 was a stretch goal, and it wasn't met by, you missed it by almost 25%. What's to say that 50,000 is not going to be missed and it's going to drop even lower?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

I would say that we also improved our performance in FY23 by 10,000 soldiers from what we had done the prior year. So we are trending in the right direction, but we're nowhere near where we need to be, and I certainly recognize that this is, as I said earlier, a long-term challenge that the Army is facing. We're going to continue to adjust. One thing I think we have to look at is what is the Army doing about this challenge in the near term? And as I said, there's some factors that we can't control like obesity rates, but what we can control is how the Army is assigning its recruiters, what kinds of skills it's giving to its recruiting workforce, and how we're prospecting the market. So what the Army did was we announced the complete transformation of Army recruiting a couple of months ago. This is the biggest transformation since we've had the all-volunteer force in 1975.

And there's a couple of major movements here, and I'll just talk about a couple. The first is who we're prospecting. So if you go back to the 1970s, a little under 50%, probably about 40% of high school graduates were going on to four year college. So they were more open at that point in time to making career decisions. That number today is actually about 70,000 -- 70%, excuse me. So 70% of high school kids are going straight onto college, which leaves us fewer high school graduates to compete with in terms of trying to find people who are willing to pursue the military as a career. So we are self-limiting, in many ways, the available job market even though high school graduates form about 50% of our contracts every year. So one of the things we're going to do is expand that search. We've given ourselves a goal that in the next three to four years we want to have at least one-third of our new recruits, our new contracts, coming from the population that has had some college or gone to a two year, got an associate's degree, and has not recently come out of high school.

That's also a stretch goal, but I think it's something we can achieve. The second thing we're doing is making sure that we are transforming our recruiting workforce. We took a long time to figure out what works in the private sector. We talked to Fortune 500 companies, and the biggest difference between us and them is that they have specialized talent acquisition workforces, people who recognize skills, understand exactly where to find talent, and are constantly innovating. So we are going to create a more specialized workforce in the Army to take on these issues.

Ben Kesling:

Thanks. And you can send in questions for the panelists on the Reagan Forum app if you've got it. So feel free to send those in, I'll be looking at those. One of the long-term issues that the Army and other branches seem to face right now are some perceptions of the military. And Senator Cramer, I want to ask you about this. If you look at the cross-tabs, if you break down surveys of people, why they choose service or don't choose service, for conservative people who are thinking about joining the military, there is a concern about wokeness that is out there. Now, it's perception of -- the reality of is

another thing, but the perception of that. Senator Cramer, I wonder if you could talk to me a little bit about some of the ways in which institutional trust has been eroded in the United States, and if that's something that is affecting recruiting because young people just don't want to serve because they don't trust the institution. And I wonder if you can tell me a little bit about the partisanship and the politics of Congress where things have gone over the past few years if that contributes to an erosion of trust in American institutions.

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

Well, first of all, thank you Ben for the question and thanks for the piece that you wrote in the Journal. I thought it was very – as thorough a treatment of the topic as you could ask for, and you touched on a lot of important things. I would say with regard to the decline in institutional confidence, certainly Congress plays a role in that. All leaders do, and the one thing we're missing right now is a leader who can articulate a better vision. And here as we sit here in Ronald Reagan's Library, I don't know that we've had one for a few decades quite honestly, but certainly not one like him. I think one of the problems from a congressional standpoint is – it came up in the first panel, quite honestly, with Senator Ernst and Mark Thiessen and Representative Smith. Here we sit, as we sit between Christmas and Thanksgiving holiday, without an appropriation and without a passed NDAA. And we're looking at a point where, forgive me General, where a year-long CR is the better solution than not doing anything, because the FRA is far worse.

I mean that's a hell of a spot to be in and try to encourage people to make even a short career in the military, so that's our fault, that's Congress's fault. But on top of that, the partisanship that you talk about includes all of these things, but it includes things like having commanders coming before the Senate Armed Services Committee and having a member berate them for a military that's full of white supremacists, and then another member who will berate them for being too woke. And so, we play a role, how we talk matters. Gravitating to the lowest common denominator, rather than sharing a vision that's optimistic and providing the service with the tools, and resources, and the confidence, and the certainty that they need to plan for the long term, that's part of that erosion of the institution process, I believe.

Now, I would say this though, about the prospecting that the Secretary brought up. One thing that would help, with regard to people's perception of wokeness is that if it wasn't so woke. And when we spend more time talking about DEI as a part of the mission rather than deterring the bad guy, that's not fake. That's not the perception. That's actually happening out there. When you look at their marketing, the Army itself uses an advertising agency that's a division of Omnicom that uses – associated with NewsGuard, which uses blacklisting, and targets over \$2 million worth of advertising in Huffington Post and not in Newsmax. I mean, I think that we've got to get back to the mission, and focusing on the mission of prospecting everybody, not just certain people because of philosophy.

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

May I respond?

Ben Kesling:

Yes, please go ahead.

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

Okay. First of all, I certainly appreciate the opportunity to talk a little bit about this. I think it's always important to start with the facts. So as we face this recruiting crisis, we have done an extensive amount of surveys of 18-to-26 year olds throughout the country to understand those who are not joining the military, what are their reasons for not doing so? And we have surveyed this over the last two or three years. The consistent answers, we're talking well over 50%, aggregate on two or three factors. First is fear of physical harm. Secondly is they don't want to be far away from their family. And third, they think the military is actually going to force them to put their life on hold, and they will be derailed from a future career. That has nothing to do with the partisan or political issues that we sometimes hear about.

We actually ask that. We certainly don't ask it along partisan lines, but again, Generation Z is very different. They are not having these types of discussions. That registers, whether it's wokeness or whether it's any kind of partisanship, those factors are about 4%, consistently, year over year, in terms of things that young people listen and talk about. Certainly, I think that it's very important if we're going to succeed, because this is a national capability, we have to make sure that the military, whether it's recruiting and every aspect of it, is nonpartisan, it is apolitical, and that is ultimately the best way that we can restore confidence.

Ben Kesling:

I wonder if the discussion of politics and wokeness and whatnot, if looking back 70 years, the idea of having a Black man as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or a woman as the Chief of Naval Operations would've been seen as being extraordinarily woke, and it would've caused all sorts of questions, and people concerned about the direction the military is taking. And I wonder if there is a way in which those discussions right now are just the way that our country is moving, and the military reflects the society in which we live. And I wonder how much that is the case with talking about this stuff. I don't know.

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

I don't know, I mean you're right, and we're blessed to have C.Q. Brown as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We're blessed to have Lloyd Austin as the Secretary of Defense. We're blessed to have Admiral Franchetti at the helm, and be the head of -- the Chief of Naval Operations. All of that's cool, and should be a reflection of why we don't need to emphasize it so much. That it is in fact, if there's one institution that's been the beacon of diversity in the United States for 75 years, it's the military. It doesn't need a scolding, it just needs to be lifted up and championed.

Gen. Daniel Hokanson:

Ben, I would just add the military is a meritocracy. You were promoted on your capability and potential, and as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I'm very fortunate that I've had a chance to work with all of them. And I would tell you that's one thing our nation absolutely gets right. Those leaders are deserving, they're capable, they're extremely focused on taking care of the force and protecting our nation.

Ben Kesling:

General Hokanson, I wanted to ask you about your branch, the National Guard. There are a couple of services that make their recruiting numbers pretty steadily. That's the Marine Corps, the Space Force, and the National Guard. What is it about those services that allow them to make those numbers? Is there something about an identity that people know what they're signing up for? That when they walk into the recruiter's office for the National Guard, they have a great idea of what they're signing up for? Same thing maybe with Space Force and the Marine Corps? What is it about the National Guard?

Gen. Daniel Hokanson:

So it's interesting, a lot of times we have to talk to folks about the National Guard. So we were formed in 1636, the oldest military organization in the United States, and we're 20% of the entire Department of Defense, and we have both Army and Air Guard. And the unique proposition we provide is you are a citizen and a soldier at the same time. And so, you can serve your nation, and you can also have a civilian career. I know we talked earlier about students, many of our soldiers and airmen are college students, because they have the ability to go to college and then also serve at the same time. Another great advantage is if you're from Des Moines, Iowa or Medford, Oregon, and your family's there, and you want to live there, we offer you the opportunity to do all that. But the other unique thing that we provide, which is really unprecedented within the Guard, is we provide the opportunity to respond to your communities in time of need.

And I can't tell you how many times I have been. In one recent case, I was down in New Orleans after a Hurricane, and there was Guardsmen from Kansas there. And this soldier had the biggest smile on his face, and I said, "soldier, tell me about why you're so happy." He goes, "This is the first time I've been out of Kansas. I'm delivering water to people that can't get out of their homes because of the flooding." And he goes, "this is what I signed up to do. I'm making a difference, and I feel so good about what I'm able to do." And so, that's the value proposition that we bring, and I mean every day we live our motto, it's "always ready, always there." And because we're in 2,800 communities across the United States, if a disaster happens, we're already there. But then, what many folks don't realize is the sole reason we have the National Guard is to fight and win our nation's wars. And because we're manned, trained, and equipped to do arguably the most difficult task there is, you can ask us to do anything. The Governors can, within the local communities, and they will be there immediately to respond.

Ben Kesling:

Under Secretary, are there ways in which the Guard's model, with citizen soldiering, folks who have -- are able to, the term of art that you all use is permeability, that you can go back and forth between jobs. From being in uniform, to working at home, to responding to disasters, to deploying abroad. Are there ways in which the Army itself needs to think about the permeability of a person in uniform? So it's not just, "Hey, if I think about wanting to sign up, I'm going to go in and I'm stuck." That's what a lot of people think. I'm stuck in the Army until I get out and then I'm out. Is there a way to make service more palatable for younger people with that permeability like the National Guard might offer?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

I certainly think there is. One of the things that I think you're alluding to is America's youth, they're deferring career decisions later in life. As I alluded to that earlier with the statistics about how many people make career decisions at the age of 18. I certainly know that I didn't. I think today it's very hard to find an 18, 19-year-old that knows what they want to do for the next 20-30 years of their life. There are some that do, and that's fantastic. And I think we need to be able to change our proposition to reflect flexibility in that sense. Even if somebody were to join the Army for two years or five years, learn skillsets that will range a wide range of career fields, everything from being a lawyer, a doctor, to an infantryman, and giving you the skillsets to excel in other areas, I think we can do that.

That is one of the reasons that we've undertaken this transformation of our recruiting operation, because we want to professionalize and specialize our talent acquisition recruiters to be able to engage with America's youth on these terms, and also create the right incentives and the right explanation of what kind of career choices they have in the Army accordingly. But I will temper all this with one other statistic: over the last several years, once you join the Army, you tend to stay. We have had, at the same time we've had this recruiting challenge, historically high retention, it was 104% of our retention goals last year. That tells me also that we have a winning proposition and people enjoy the experience they have in service.

Ben Kesling:

I want to ask you about retention in relation to recruiting, because those are often the flip sides of the same coin when you're having Defense Department discussions. Are there ways in which retention can be a bad thing, because you're having to keep people around that might otherwise leave the service? Do you have any concerns that by boosting Army numbers, by retaining more people, you aren't keeping the cream of the crop, you're keeping some lower performers?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

Well, we account for all of those considerations as we develop our retention targets over the course of the year. Remember, we have to do talent management that is really a pyramid structure, right, over the course of most soldiers' careers. And so, when we set our retention targets over the course of the year, we understand that we have to provide the right grooming opportunities and opportunities for people to learn different skill sets and broaden their experiences within the Army. So I think we do a fairly good job of accounting for it.

Ben Kesling:

Gentlemen, what's the perception of service as a reason to join now? I think that if we think about commercials that we're seeing for recruiting, it's all the benefits that you get -- or you can go to college, you can do this, that, and the other thing. You can stay home, you can stay close to home if you're in the Guard. How has the idea of public service and service to the nation changed?

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

I would say General Hokanson actually answered that question when you talked about the mission of the Guard and why that's more appealing, because the mission's right in

front of you. You're helping your neighbors during a flood, or rescue people in a snowstorm. And I think that does resonate. And I think in many respects that might be part of what's missing. The challenge now, the Under Secretary referenced briefly the tight labor market. Well that's not an insignificant issue, but mission with a \$3 an hour difference is one thing, mission with a \$10 an hour difference is a different thing. And so, I think that gets back to me and my colleagues. We have to do more, so that the mission can resonate along with at least enough compensation to make a living.

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

And if I could just add one other point to that, I fully agree with the Senator. I think the other part we can do is explain the range of skill sets and career opportunities we have in the Army. I think a lot of times because 1% of this country's population is actively involved in its defense, the vast majority just doesn't know the range of skills that you can do in military service. You can be a lawyer, you can be a doctor, you can be a veterinarian, you can be an intelligence officer, you can be a data scientist. There's a whole range of skillsets. And so, I think we need to do, and we are doing it now, but I think we can do a better job of effectively communicating those opportunities. And it's all within the spirit of service. And here's the catch: You can tackle the most interesting, compelling and difficult challenges in the military than you will anywhere else in the private sector. That is one of our best calling cards. And you get to serve your country.

Gen. Daniel Hokanson:

Ben, if I could add, being here in the Reagan Library -- I mean, I came in under the Reagan era. And at the time, the President, he made it cool to be in the military again. It talked about educational opportunities. I was a kid from a small town. I got incredible education opportunities. I got to see the world. I got to work with the most remarkable people I'll ever meet. And it was all because at the time it was an opportunity to do something good, to make a difference. And actually it was a chance to be one of the good guys, as Reagan would say. And when I look at that era, we came in because it was really promoted at every level, that public service, whether the military or otherwise. And what it is, it made us all vested in the country. We had part of our life supporting that and being part of it. When I visit some of our state partners where they have conscript militaries, that's an interesting thing, because either you serve in the military or the government, they're vested in the future of their country. They gave -- pivot towards it. And I think if we could get more encouragement at every level for people to do some sort of public service, as we said, it's only 1% in the military, but so that they feel part of the country that we are, I think that's really important.

Ben Kesling:

Mr. Rove, is it -- can politicians find a political winner in talking up the military, or is it much more successful to either paint it on the extremes of the left or right in order to talk to the base?

Karl Rove:

Well, I think the point the General made is important. Ronald Reagan talked about the military in a way that made it attractive, and it had a grand purpose. It was "peace through strength." And he talked about it constantly. He didn't leave it just to one speech and one moment, and he continually talked about it. And I think that's, we can draw

something from the Marines. I mean one of our Wall Street Journal colleagues, this is a panel incidentally dominated by the Wall Street Journal on either end. But there's an interesting comment by one of our colleagues, Dave Phillips, who talked about the success of the Marines in recruiting. He said, because they have an intangible, timeless and elite appeal. And going back to the point of the National Guard, National Guard has appeal because -- make a real difference in people's lives.

And similarly, the most danger -- the number one issue why people say in our Reagan poll that they would discourage people from serving is it's too dangerous and not worth the risk. 21% of the sample. And yet that's what essentially the Marines are saying, come and join us because we're the elite. Put yourself at risk. So there has to be a meaning to the service. And I couldn't agree more. There's one question though, this morning we had that one slide that said, here's how unpopular the military is. Well, first of all, it was a little bit misleading, because they used only the people who said, "I have a great deal of confidence in the military." If you add together the people who say "great deal" and "some" here's how the various entities that they tested come out: The military, 78% have confidence, 20% not. Police and law enforcement, 64-36. Supreme Court, 46-52. The Presidency, 36-54. News Media 33-65, and Congress 26-71. So the military may have looked like it was declining, but a lot of those people were moving from, I have a great deal of confidence into I have some confidence in the military, and yet the numbers are still pretty darn good.

Any one of those other five entities would be happy to get 78% approval. We're in a period of polarization. We're in a period that we periodically go through where people don't have confidence in all of our institutions. And if you look back at Gallup, it's really interesting. The Gallup has been doing a longer series on confidence in the military and other institutions. When was the last time that it has been lower than it is today? 1988 and 1997. What the heck does that mean? That means we just -- 1997, we're in the midst of trying to impeach the President and the country's roiled up about politics and everything slides a little bit. 1988, we're sort of coming to the end of the Reagan years, we've got the Iran-Contra, we got controversy about what's coming next. We're in pretty good shape, the military is. So the problems in recruitment have more to do with what our Assistant Secretary had to say about trying to break through, "I haven't made a decision about what I'm going to do in my life, and I'm not certain that this is the right path to go, and I've got plenty of alternatives in the private sector, or I can go off to college for a couple of years before I figure it out." It's not the confidence in the military. It has things to do outside of that.

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

And I would add, remember, the recruitment goes up during a time of war. And it's, I suppose somewhat unfortunate that it's harder to recruit when we're not at war, but it should be a lot worse if we couldn't recruit when we are. Back to that sense of mission and service, the National Guard, you see the service in your neighborhood. Every couple of decades, you see it on the global stage, and then people step up because they see the mission.

Gen. Daniel Hokanson:

And one thing as well is if you go back to decades ago when our military was much larger, we were in more communities, but as we've downsized, we've closed a lot of installations. And when you talk about the interaction between the military and the public, now most communities, their only interaction is with National Guardsmen, because we're in every community, unless you live near a large military installation. And if you don't have that interaction to see someone in uniform, and ask them -- or have them kind of tell you their story, if you don't have that, it's a fewer and fewer number of people that have any engagement with the military. And that's something, we've got to be very careful. And the guard, we work really hard to keep our small-town armories open so that that presence is in small-town America. Because as an Oregon Guardsman, we had no active-duty installations in the state of Oregon, but as a commander of a brigade combat team in Oregon, 3,500, they came from every community in Oregon. And when we mobilized to go to Iraq, I like to say we brought the fabric of America to that war. Because these communities, they weren't near an active base, but now they're teachers, they're policemen, they're firemen, their local drug -- they were there, they actually mobilized and deployed, and then they came back to that community and they showed, look, you can do this. You can serve, you can come back the way you were, and reintegrate into your communities.

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

Tags are also very good lobbyists, but they don't --

Ben Kesling:

I've got a question from the audience, which is, "Does it matter that elites don't want to serve? ROTC seems to be all but eviscerated, and the military can be viewed as a low status career." Are you seeing that and how do you counter that?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

Yeah, so that doesn't reflect in the data that we're seeing. However, here is the thing I do want to differentiate. We survey extensively the attitudes and opinions of 18- to 26-year-olds I talked about. Left unsaid, it's all the influencers that have a role to play in influencing whether they join the military. So these are parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, school teachers, et cetera. The problem we have there is twofold. Fewer and fewer of those people have actually served in uniform, so they don't have experience to be able to convey: let me tell you what it's really like to be in the Army or in the Navy or in the Air Force or Marine Corps. I think the other factor is, that is where I think it's really important for us to make sure that we do not steer influencers away from the service by overemphasizing certain aspects of working in the military or being in the military as opposed to others.

And this is where we have to counter certain narratives. So what do I mean by that? Obviously there is a scourge of sexual assault. We have worked very hard in this administration and prior administrations to address it. There is obviously a concern of, as I said earlier, that it is not a career enhancing opportunity, because a lot of times these influencers only believe there are one or two types of careers you can do in the military. So, somehow, we need to work together to permeate and make sure that we amplify the message of what military service can be.

Ben Kesling:

The Army, and other branches, during the pandemic, I mean, because there was a general shutdown, a lot of recruiters disappeared from those personal touch points that they had, with students and also with influencers, with coaches, with principals, with teachers, et cetera. How are things going, bouncing back from that? Is the Army getting back into schools? Is the Army getting access to young people to talk to them about the military? What's the current status of that?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

We're getting back into the schools, and I give our recruiting organization a lot of credit, and I see it across the department, to do that in a more concerted way. And we're making up the ground that I think we lost during the pandemic. But what has also happened in the last 2, 3, 4, 5 years is that the demographics have shifted. So maybe where we had recruiting stations isn't necessarily the large population centers where most of the young 18- to 24-year-olds currently live. How we're engaging them also is changing. Some of them will benefit from the one-to-one touch that we will get at a high school cafeteria. Others want to interact in a very different, even a digital environment. We want to arm our recruiting workforce to touch all of these young Americans wherever they may live, whatever their career interests are, in whatever means is most effective to recruit them.

Karl Rove:

If I could add -- follow up on that for a second, the whole idea, you look at young people, they do not get their information in any way that we would consider traditional. They're getting it from TikTok, they're getting it from social media, and they're not just entertaining themselves. This is their primary source of information and news. So we got to communicate with them where they are. The other thing that I wanted to add to this is I was looking at the other end of this thing. So you've got a veteran who's coming out, and how do they reintegrate? And we have programs that the government does, and we have programs that NGOs do. One of them is the Call of Duty Endowment. They found out two things. One is that they could do it a hell of a lot cheaper. They can place somebody for basically 1/13th the cost of the government, and the way that they do it is by having veterans help veterans.

And they also looked at what are the skills necessary for a veteran to get reintegrated? What are the things that most likely get them a job that gives them adequate pay, at a good skill level, et cetera? Two things: one, helping writing a resume, and two, helping preparing for an interview. And both of those could be done by volunteers who had gone through that experience. I wonder if there's something on the front end that can be done, if there aren't NGOs that could be encouraged or used, in order on the front end to help people understand -- young people understand this is a great opportunity for me, and not just rely on the recruiter. You've got to have the recruiter to get the contract signed, but is there some kind of organic system that over time can be created in some locales to be supportive in the same way that we help them on the backend?

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

Well, first of all, Karl, I think we have to help them better on the backend. And we are starting to. Some of the things you've talked about, working with NGOs, working with the Veteran Service Organizations to become part of the infrastructure that literally reaches

out on behalf of the VA. That's part of the Solid Start program, and these are just in the last two, three years that some of that's been done. So you have to have something that you can point to, rather than, "oh my God." But to the point, on the front end, you're exactly right. There should be a continuum from, I don't want to say cradle, but certainly from the high school cafeteria all the way on through that's convincing and accurate and true.

Gen. Daniel Hokanson:

I agree. I think one of the opportunities here is a continuity of service. So if you serve in the active component for four or five years, people say, well, that's lost time. Well, we put our recruiters specifically at active-duty installations so that they can at least have a conversation about the option to take that military training and then come into the National Guard. And many of our communities can help them with local employment, if they want to go back to their hometown, to help them transition back. But then also they have the ability to get low-cost healthcare to help their families through that transition. And then also that time that they had on an active duty, now they can put towards a Guard retirement. And our whole goal is for every guardsman to have two retirements, to have their National Guard retirement and their civilian retirement. Because at the end of the day, we want to show the value of serving your country, and the long-term payback for you and your family.

Ben Kesling:

Under Secretary, are people who are coming into the Army, are they paying attention to that stuff? Do they care about retirement benefits? Do they care about whether or not Senator Cramer's going to help him out at the VA when they get out? Are they cognizant of those long-term benefits that they could accrue, or are those long-term benefits important to get influencers, and moms and dads, to say, "Hey, when you get out, you're going to have retirement?" What's --

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

It's a combination of both. I think that we've had a separate but related challenge to ensure that young men and women who are joining the Army, who maybe aren't the best at life skills, for example, like balancing checkbooks, managing your finances, understanding how to apply and build credit, we have programs in place to help them go through that. But that's once they're in the Army. I do think that that is a compelling conversation that we have, not only with these young Americans, but also with their parents and their influencers very, very early on in the recruiting process. And the reality is it is a very competitive market, but at the same time, we offer a lot to these young Americans who are interested in military service. There are a lot of financial incentives, even though we think that the main selling point is you get to be a part of the army. So I think we can do better on that front.

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

And that's a great point though, Ben, because while the TikTok generation might not be thinking about their VA benefits, their influencers are, their pastor is, their guidance counselors, their parents are. And so, that's back to your original point, I think the cumulative reputation, if you will, depends on all of us. Members of Congress, all these other influencers -- less so members of Congress than these other influencers --

Presidents themselves, the services themselves, the focus on mission, not on all the extra stuff, and we can all do it better.

Gen. Daniel Hokanson:

And Ben, as well as the families, they are so critically important. Because for the service member, if their family doesn't support their service, they're going to get out. But if we can relay to them the importance and the long-term benefits to them, education, not only for them, but also for their children if they have them, medical benefits and long-term retirement plans, things like that are critically important. But we also have to create an environment where the family can be stable and know that their service member is going to be taken care of, that they're compensated adequately, and that when that service member is deployed, they know their family is going to be in good hands. Those are critically important to us.

Ben Kesling:

And I wrote a feature about recruiting issues, and one thing that I was surprised to find out as I did the reporting was the number of veterans who are dissuading their friends, family members, kids from joining the service for any number of reasons. Veterans are in many ways the best recruiters because they've been there, they have a direct connection. You can believe what they're saying. And after 20 years of war, a lot of veterans who dissuade family members from joining, or family members who see their mom or dad or their grandma or grandpa who have served, they're concerned about how worn out they are, about the lasting damage that they see with them physically or et cetera. Mr. Rove, I want to ask you, 20 years of war has necessarily worn down the military in some ways. I wonder, how did you and others in the administration beginning of these most recent wars that we've had, in Iraq especially, but Iraq and Afghanistan, how did you think about the impact long-term that a long war would have on the men and women who are in service, and how did those long wars maybe leave us in a place where recruiting is more difficult because of those hardships?

Karl Rove:

Well, the last one I can't answer. I don't think you have good evidence on that one way or the other, but it was something that was a concern right from the beginning. You heard it this morning from Mark Thiessen. President Bush said, I'm going to talk about this all the time, and I'm going to demonstrate why it's important, why it's necessary for us to undertake this, and I'm going to also express our appreciation publicly, and we're also going to do it privately. And it got through the military that he was doing that, because there was not a -- after the balloon went up in Afghanistan, there was not a month go by, there was probably not a week go by, where he did not visit with somebody who was injured or a family that had a loss. And most of the time it was -- in fact, very rarely was it in front of the cameras. But word got around, and people understood that he cared about the military, and took it as a personal responsibility to comfort those who suffered a loss or suffered a grievous wound.

Ben Kesling:

Indeed, I've heard those anecdotes myself and reporting folks about the President visiting them, talking to them at times, and the cameras weren't around. But what I'm asking is, do you have any advice for people who are making these decisions now that

they don't overextend the military or use it in a way where 20 years down the road, some of these --

Karl Rove:

Yeah, well look, the military -- Secretary, what's the average tenure of somebody in the military?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

It varies by what MOS they're in, but we're averaging a little under 20 years.

Karl Rove:

Combat?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

I'd have to get back to you on the rates.

Karl Rove :

But less?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

Yeah.

Karl Rove :

So we've gone through probably two or three militaries, if you will, generations of military since 9/11. There was one that was in place, there was one that came in after, there was one that's come in since. And yes, so it does wear, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. But you know what? You don't get to pick the world you're in. Events intrude, as a Prime Minister of Great Britain once said, "events intrude, dear boy." And they've intruded, and we face a threat today. But there is something going on in the poll here, and I'd be interested in if there's different polling in what you see. Think about this. If a close friend or family member was considering entering the military, would you: Encourage, 51%; discourage, 33; don't know, 10. Now that was a sample done of all Americans. Is there a different attitude among those that are in the target group, the influencers, if you will, of the people that you think are most likely to join the military and therefore that you're going after?

Because this says to me there is, as Ben alluded to, there is some built up regard that, "don't join the military." Number one reason to discourage: too dangerous and not worth the risk, 21. Now, there are two different things there. There is, it's too dangerous, you might get hurt, and the not worth it, which is, and I've had this happen any number of times since Afghanistan, why did I go to Afghanistan if we threw it all away? What would've happened if we'd pulled out of South Korea? My grandfather fought in Korea, but he always considered it valuable because Korea turned into something different. We stayed there. So there are two different things here, but I'd be interested if you've got any evidence of which one is dominant and if it is a problem.

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

No, we've really focused our surveys on those 18- to 26-year-olds, not so much the influencers, because it's really hard to capture in that ambit of the population.

Karl Rove:

You know what, work that problem again, because big data will allow you to take everybody who's in your sample for 18- to 26-year-olds and chart, using public sources, who their influencers are, and do a survey among them. Because eventually, I'm in the political marketing business, and it's marketing. Okay? You want to take the people who can influence your target. I'm trying to get somebody to vote. You're trying to get somebody to enlist. There's somebody who can influence them. You get to the influencers, communicate with them. It has an influence, ultimately, on your target. And the great news is, and the bad news is, we can now tell who all those people are.

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

Right, absolutely. I agree with you. But we also know that part of that effort has to be to counter certain narratives I alluded to earlier. We do know that, for example, the rise in prevalence of sexual assault in recent years is something that gives some pause to those influencers. We also know that as these issues of partisanship have entered into the debate – we certainly don't want that creeping into the military, we want to keep the military as apolitical as possible. So I think as a team, we need to do everything we possibly can to counter these narratives and focus on what the good work is that these young men and women are doing.

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

Good news is that you have a better product to market than Karl does. So it should --

Karl Rove:

Yeah, that's because Cramer's one of my products.

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

It's your fault.

Karl Rove:

Hey, one point about that, the digital world has opened up all kinds of possibilities of tapping the influencers, and it's also reduced enormously the cost of getting to them. Rather than having to mail a piece of mail, and pay 20 cents postage and 15 cents to print it in mail service, you can now send them a text message for three and a half, 4 cents. And I don't know what, there are legal constraints on talking to influencers or targets, but if you wanted to deal with the issue of sexual assault or concerns that people might have, you've got data that can tell you who has those kinds of concerns, and you've got easy ways and cheap ways to communicate.

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

Absolutely. And that's why we're transmuting our recruiting operation, transforming it to make sure that we can use all of those available tools.

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

I would have a question about the school's access itself. So we've been talking about, once you're in the school, is it as easy as it used to be to get -- or that's another barrier that we haven't really talked about, and I don't know if it's a barrier, I'm just curious.

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

There are some pockets where we have a little bit more difficulty getting in with our recruiters. Similarly, we would like every high school in the country to administer the ASVAB, which is the math and science test that is required for accession into the military. Not all of them do. So these are issues we're working on, and we certainly could use Congress's help on some of them.

Gen. Daniel Hokanson:

Ben, if I could go back to the -- we talk about folks that have served and how they communicate their service. One of the interesting statistics we recently had, that 78% of those that came in the military either had an immediate family member, friend, or relative that was in the military. So the good news is that those that are serving and know somebody serving, they're more inclined to come in. The difficult thing is if you've not had contact with somebody like that, and if you get your perception of the military, what you see on the news or the stuff that grabs headlines, you could have potentially a negative view of it. But those that actually know service members are realizing that there's great advantages. There's incredible opportunities. And that's why you see many of our senior leaders, in fact -- soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, guardians -- at every level, that it's their families that are also following them into service, because they see the value and the importance of that.

Ben Kesling:

Yeah, it's so important to note. Problems get highlighted because problems need to be fixed, but for service -- so many service members, the time after service, they see it as a time of growth, as a time of development, as a positive in their life. And that's the majority of the service members -- I talk to veterans, they see service as a positive. And I think that that often gets lost in the conversation, because again, you have problems that come across your desk. The good stuff takes care of itself. One question we have from the audience is, "why doesn't the military think of and treat departing members the way top colleges treat? After all, happy alumni are the best recruiters, and it seems that the services don't take the long view and they don't cultivate veterans like alumni." Thoughts?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

I would say, first of all, we do a lot of exactly that. I think both formally and informally. I will say that we are partnering, for example, with the VSOs, the Veteran Service organizations, to be able to find ways to really bridge that gap in communities where we don't have, for example, a military installation. And we are doing a lot more of it. I think we can improve, but certainly getting the word out is the hardest part.

Gen. Daniel Hokanson:

And Ben, that comes down to personal responsibility. Two days ago, I was with a 95-year-old gentleman that had my job two decades ago. But the point is to maintain that

connection, because we have to show them how much we valued their service. And if you go back, when I was in high school, many of my teachers were World War II veterans, and how they shared their experiences and how the community treated them really inspired me, and I think a lot of other kids, to join the military as a result. But it is true. It's -- how you treat those before you says more than just about anything else we can.

Ben Kesling:

Is there a way in which, to fix recruiting problems, that has to be done on this individual level, one person at a time? And is that to cultivate these relationships, have a veteran who is willing to go out and talk to young people. Or is it preposterous to think that you can change an entire institution by focusing on one little thing at a time?

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

I think it's everything. And again, I start out with: To fix this problem, I have to first focus on those aspects of it that I can control, and I need to get and enlist help. We've got a lot of support from Congress. I think we need really the private sector, we need the NGOs, we need others to help us out on this front. I will just have to say one other tangential, but related, issue. To fix recruiting, I absolutely am hamstrung by the current fiscal environment. And I'll just talk about this: We are waiting, for example, for congressional approval of a supplemental. We strongly would urge for approval of a yearlong appropriation. And you're probably wondering, how is that going to influence recruiting? Right now, without the supplemental for Ukraine and for support to Israel, we in the Army, in our base budget, we are funding the operations costs to deploy our soldiers to provide that deterrence and reassurance mission in NATO and in CENTCOM. That is the same budget account that I need to use in order to place media buys months in advance for marketing and advertising, to surge events for recruiters in other parts of the country. Also, the same accounts where I have to pay for recruiting incentives, like bonuses for targeted skill sets in certain MOSs. So it is having a real impact. And that is something in the near term that I just wanted to make sure that I mentioned.

Ben Kesling:

Senator, have any thoughts on that?

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

Well, I do on the supplemental piece because it's been talked about a lot today. If, say, a Commander-in-Chief or somebody, or Secretary of Defense would just say, as well as strong security at our southern border, there'd be several hundred votes.

Gen. Daniel Hokanson:

If I could just add one other point that the Under Secretary mentioned as well, is when you look at the hold on the promotions of our general officers now, those colonels are the ones that went through multiple deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their families have made incredible sacrifices over -- throughout their career, and now their promotions are being delayed, and all the younger officers are looking ahead to see how they're being treated after all the sacrifices they have made. And you look at not only that, the impact on their families, the inability to go to their next duty station on a summer where their children can start the school year, but also the financial impact to

them is significant. And if they can't recoup that, that's just lost because their promotions are being held for something that the military personnel had no influence over.

Ben Kesling:

Well, for future recruiting issues, is there any one thing that you would like to see to help recruiting? If you had one thing, quickly.

Hon. Gabe Camarillo:

It's a call to service across the country. And I go back to President Reagan when he served in office. There was, for example, the Presidential Fitness Program that promoted physical fitness in all public schools. You go jet ahead to year 2023, going into 2024, as we face a challenge of rising obesity rates in our schools, one of the things that we can do is reemphasize that call to service. The importance, as we've said on this panel, of the military and the role that it plays in defending this country, and also helping to address challenges that we can't control, like test standards and school performance, as well as physical fitness.

Ben Kesling:

Senator, quickly.

Sen. Kevin Cramer:

I'd like a President like Ronald Reagan who could win the Cold War, convince the public he should go into debt to do it, and win it decisively by identifying the adversary, inspiring the solution, and having a strategy, and communicating that every single day in a positive, cheerful manner, and win a war without firing a shot.

Ben Kesling:

General?

Gen. Daniel Hokanson:

Aside from what's been covered already, healthcare for our guardsmen. We ask them to be always ready, always there. They're there in an amount of hours when our community needs them. But for the families to know that that service member has healthcare and is always going to be taken care of, would be a huge benefit.

Ben Kesling:

Never dreamed I would say this, but Karl Rove, you have the last word.

Karl Rove:

So everything, particularly the call to service, but two micro items: Really make certain that we're communicating with them and the influencers using all the modern means of communication we can. And this idea of the Future Soldiers Program strikes me that that's a great way to go, particularly if you can draw NGOs into helping you figure out how to do that and sustain it.

Ben Kesling:

Gentlemen, thank you very much for your time.

Karl Rove:
Thank you.

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