

STATEMENT OF
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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT

BEFORE THE
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES

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Chairwoman Stefanik, Ranking Member Langevin, and distinguished Members of this Committee, I am honored to appear before you as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD(SO/LIC)). In my short time on the job, I've been most impressed by the level of commitment demonstrated by my staff and their U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) teammates. There exists a relentless but thoughtful focus on warfighting, which is unsurprising in an enterprise led by Secretary Mattis.

I am pleased to share this opportunity with one such war fighter. General Tony Thomas has led special operations units from a Ranger platoon in Grenada to USSOCOM, founded by the Armed Services Committees 31 years ago. He is a reflection of the force he leads, from his deployment cycle to the unflinching dedication, intellectual creativity, and competitive drive that he shares with his fellow operators.

I mention competitiveness because we have a new National Defense Strategy (NDS) that defines the Secretary's strategic aims and explains my priorities, none bigger than helping General Thomas and the Service Chiefs steadily build competitive advantages across the vast spectrum of war where our Special Operations Forces (SOF) thrive. With the new NDS, we will be looking beyond USSOCOM's lead role in countering terrorism, to recognizing SOF as a critical component in all aspects of warfighting.

Our relationship with Congress is critical to building SOF's competitive advantage in core mission areas, and Congress continues to demonstrate strong support to SOF and their families. Thank you. In my statement from my confirmation hearing last July, I committed to maintaining a close relationship with Members and staff of this committee, and I look forward to using today's opportunity to build on my commitment to you.

As a Nation, we face long-term competition against revisionist and revanchist powers that are employing unconventional tactics used by rogue states, terrorists, and other non-state actors. Some may call this asymmetric warfare. But enemy tactics are only asymmetric if we respond with traditional deterrence and expenditure. The NDS calls for a new era where we compete in what Secretary Mattis calls “the contact layer” – the daily clash of national will that occurs short of traditional armed conflict - where our Special Operations Forces are today building relationships with allies and partners while reducing our enemies.

Secretary Mattis also directs the Department to, “Build a more lethal, innovative joint force, postured to execute multi-domain operations with a robust system of allies and partners.” Our Nation’s Special Operators, in many ways, already epitomize the lethal, agile force the Secretary describes, but they must evolve to match the expanding capabilities of our adversaries. From cyber mayhem to militia-enabled territorial expansion, our enemies and competitors have moved into the gaps. This means the Department of Defense (DoD) must prioritize resource investments and press forward with business reforms to ensure our Nation maintains the competitive edge in this fight.

I am committed to building on the United States’ more than three-decade investment in USSOCOM. We will do this by investing in education, training, and equipment to enhance lethality and warfighter readiness, as directed by the NDS. To increase lethality, we will rebalance resources to prioritize intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, precision strike, mobility, and cyber capabilities. In support of readiness, our Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 budget request includes modest end-strength increases from each of the Military Services to expand SOF enablers, while still meeting high standards. We need to strengthen our operator

recruitment pipelines to ensure we can meet our end-strength requirements with the most qualified personnel.

Building on our investment in SOF also requires consideration of USSOCOM's new responsibilities, assigned by the Department in the last two years: Coordinating Authority to Counter Violent Extremist Organizations and the Coordinating Authority to Counter Weapons of Mass Destruction. We must guarantee success in our investment. These are no-fail missions. We will sustain our investments to counter violent extremist organizations, with less reliance on costly platforms, and we will increase our capabilities to counter WMD with effective, forward-thinking capabilities.

I would like to thank Congress for continuing to support Title 10 U.S. Code Section 127e funding, which has grown from a modest pilot program into a \$100 million lever that has had direct effects in contested spaces. Likewise, Section 1202, enacted in the FY 2018 National Defense Authorization Act, is an example of Congress's forward-leaning investment to counter unconventional threats. However, before we utilize 1202, the Department looks forward to submitting the 1097 strategy on countering unconventional warfare. Further, Section 1022 has enabled USSOCOM to help target and disrupt ISIS's finances. I see these authorities as part of Congress's strong and continuing investment in SOF. My commitment to you is continued focus on operational and strategic returns. USSOCOM accounts for approximately 1.9 percent of the overall Defense budget, which enables a global SOF presence in 90 countries. This capital expenditure fuels the current fight. But it must also result in long-term competitive advantage over the vast spectrum of irregular warfare.

Building on our Nation's investment in SOF requires unrelenting financial stewardship. For the Department, no dollar spent is inconsequential. My team, working with USSOCOM,

will always press for efficiency. Cost savings mean further re-investment to ensure SOF is ready to fight today and in the future.

Our Nation's Special Operators are the best in the world; however, they are victims of their success. We know they will succeed in any environment and against insurmountable odds. We almost take for granted that they will always be the first in, complete the mission, stand the watch, and keep us safe. They are an outstanding and unmatched force, but our Nation's demands and expectations of a high-operational tempo challenge our uniformed men and women. Given their high levels of training, specialized skills and unique capabilities, everyone on this committee is well aware that the supply of SOF is relatively inelastic. We simply lack the supply to satisfy all customers.

I agree, as I know General Thomas does, with the long-held SOF truth that humans are more important than hardware, and I admire General Thomas's work and drive with the Preservation of the Force and Family Program (POTFF). POTFF exemplifies how we can meet the requirement for sustaining force readiness, preserving unit integrity, and prolonging the careers of operators. It includes everything from sustaining peak performance and recovery from injury to supporting psychological, social, and spiritual health. From this work, we've already seen important changes. SOF suicide rates have dropped by approximately 70 percent over the past five years, data from 2013 to 2016 show a downward trend in divorce rates, and behavioral health services utilization has nearly doubled. These trends suggest the Force is getting healthier, but we must continue to do more. I look forward to partnering with General Thomas and Congress to continue to build on this important effort for the benefit of our most important asset- our people.

In addition to his work with POTFF, General Thomas is addressing sustainment by closely monitoring operations tempo and personnel tempo. He is working to make sure the Department's goal of 1:2 dwell ratio is equally realized across all SOF. This includes a careful look at where we have low-density, high-demand units, and are adjusting accordingly, as well as analysis of how time completing professional military education and maintaining competency requirements may detract from the 1:2 ratio.

The mission set drives supply and demand of SOF. As Secretary Mattis indicated in late December last year, we need to look at the line that separates conventional operating forces from SOF, and seek to take greater advantage of the "common capabilities" of our exceptional conventional forces. Although this shift will require careful consideration of the mission set for each request for forces, the spectrum can be permanently narrowed even in traditional SOF roles, as is the case with the Army's new Security Force Assistance Brigades.

As mentioned earlier, our FY 2019 budget request does include modest end-strength increase for SOF across each of the Services: however, today, we face a natural resource that is fully tapped by traditional Service recruiting. For example, only 30 percent of high schoolers meet the standards for military service. We know this pool shrinks further when we consider the demanding assessment, selection, and training pipeline for SOF. For example, the Army's FY 2018 production requirement for Special Operators is 685, officers and enlisted combined, with the expectation to fill only 470 spots as a result of the expected 29% selection rate of the 1,950 soldiers who will enter the Army's SOF assessment and selection pipeline. We face the hard truth that SOF cannot be quickly grown.

Although we will not change the requirements and standards, we can work within the Department to rethink how we recruit to sustain manpower. Therefore, we must explore

unconventional techniques and new pools to recruit the men and women who have the right stuff. Today's battlefield challenges the traditional definition of a combatant. Successfully operating in the contact layer and maintaining a presence in 90 countries around the world demands that we build a diverse force. The barrier to SOF entry is high. But the United States has always encouraged its pioneers. We need more candidates without military family histories; we need more cultural diversity; we need more women. SOF tryouts are life altering experiences, and, as we look at how we recruit and retain the best, we must message a career in SOF to attract a more diverse pool of candidates. The reward is joining an elite team where the commitment to each other is as strong as the absolute commitment to Country.

General Thomas runs a global risk-reward enterprise, and human failure is inevitable. When something happens, one of my principle responsibilities is to ensure transparency and provide you the necessary and appropriate information to perform proper oversight of Special Operations. We owe it to the families, the Department, Congress, and the American people to complete investigations with thoroughness, diligence, and timeliness. Then we must learn, change, and improve. We will take all steps necessary to protect our greatest asset – those men and women who have volunteered several times over to earn the title of Special Operators.

As requested by the House Armed Services Committee, SO/LIC and USSOCOM are preparing a briefing on the Department's assessment of the culture and accountability within SOF. To gather data for the assessment, SO/LIC and USSOCOM designed a command-wide survey with questions focused on various topics of concern. General Thomas personally encouraged the force to give frank and honest feedback. I am confident that SOF represents the best of our uniformed services, but I also think the results will provide insights to help us

prioritize placing limited resources where they are needed most. Our teams look forward to briefing your staff on the findings.

Just as General Thomas has myriad operational capabilities, we in the SO/LIC have a wide range of policy responsibilities, ranging from peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, to countering illicit trafficking, irregular warfare, counterterrorism, and large-scale Special Operations. Albeit in a short tenure to date, I am impressed with the SO/LIC's staff's commitment to carrying out oversight responsibilities and developing policies to support USSOCOM and the Joint Force's irregular warfare competencies. I believe this work is critical to our Nation's continual success in the contact layer - where we operate short of armed conflict. I'd like to share a few examples:

- The Office of Counternarcotics and Global Threats (CN>) works hand-in-hand with USSOCOM to ensure that the Command excels in its role as the global synchronizer for DoD counter-threat finance, or CTF. This partnership aided in degrading ISIS's finances and is contributing to ISIS's defeat on the battlefield. Also, this same collaboration is supporting strikes against Taliban controlled illicit drug laboratories in Afghanistan to diminish Taliban revenue. CN> also provides DoD support to U.S. law enforcement partners' efforts to counter transnational organized crime when vital national security interests are at stake. Countering transnational organized crime is a priority for the President, and through my office, DoD is performing an appropriate supporting role.
- The Office of Stability and Humanitarian Affairs is re-writing DoD's stabilization policy, consolidating our core responsibilities to security, public order, and meeting the immediate needs of the population. The new policy will emphasize small-footprint, partner-focused stabilization activities by, with, and through local and interagency partners; and will focus on

supporting stabilization in conflict zones where our interagency partners are challenged to operate. Stabilization is a key component of all phases of major armed conflict and is a critical element of the persistent SOF-led irregular warfare fight. In Syria, for instance, DoD plays a crucial role in supporting interagency stabilization efforts – contributing to the 2018 National Defense Strategy objective of “enabling U.S. interagency counterparts to advance U.S. influence and national security interests.”

- The Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office (CTTSO) is on the frontline of identifying and developing capabilities to combat terrorism and irregular adversaries. Currently, SOF in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan are countering ISIS’ small unmanned aerial drones with systems developed by CTTSO.
- The Office of Special Operations and Combatting Terrorism works hand-in-hand with USSOCOM to implement the Secretary's Section 127e authority, supporting foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals, that act in support of operations conducted by U.S. SOF. Consisting of 21 programs across the globe, our partnership enables the Department to apply a modest portion of our annual budget to deliver critical support to willing partners resulting in decisive battlefield results in our fight to defeat ISIS and al Qa'ida.

I would also like to highlight several other initiatives I oversee that are very important to the Department. These include: ensuring that DoD does its utmost to protect civilians in conflict; applying Leahy Law to restrict training, equipment, or other assistance to foreign security forces that commit gross violations of human rights; and pressing forward with the Woman's Peace and Security Program to promote inclusion of women in national security affairs and prevent gender-based violence throughout the world. These efforts demonstrate our resolve to execute sound

military strategies that protect civilians, maintain the support of partner governments, and enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of U.S. operations.

Further, as Secretary Mattis's senior civilian advisor for irregular warfare, I co-chair the department's Irregular Warfare and Security Force Assistance Executive Steering Committee with the Director for Joint Force Development (J7) from the Joint Staff. Vice Admiral Scott and I are committed to ensuring the Joint Force as a whole sustains its hard-won competency in irregular warfare, adapts to meet rapidly evolving irregular threats, and develops more efficient and effective methodologies to expand the competitive space.

Secretary Mattis has repeatedly reminded us that we are a Department of war and that we must be prepared to deal with an increasingly complex global security situation. SO/LIC's oversight responsibilities and policy development lay the groundwork for the Department's success in the "contact layer," and guarantee that SOF and our Joint Force maintain the competitive advantage in the irregular warfare fight that the United States is currently engaged in globally, and particularly across much of the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe.

I want to end on Section 922. I view Congress as a natural partner. During my confirmation hearing, I promised to remain close to this group because of that natural partnership. There should be no surprises. The Department is reviewing implementation of Section 922 and working on how to best implement it to achieve the aims Congress articulated. General Thomas and I are partners in this effort. SO/LIC will lead this partnership, as we move forward together on implementing Section 922. Our goal is to make SOCOM a more efficient enterprise that supports the National Defense Strategy and the Secretary of Defense.

As we look forward, SOF will continue to maintain the competitive advantage in the face of intensifying pressure. In my position as the Assistant Secretary, I am committed to working

with Congress and USSOCOM to ensure we have an effective and agile structure of policies, authorities, resources, and oversight to guarantee the success, in any operating environment, of our Special Operators. We must keep sight of who we serve and be doing everything we can to ensure these brave warriors have the best training, equipment, and overall support we can possibly provide. In executing our mission, SO/LIC will continue to partner with General Thomas to prioritize our greatest asset: people. This includes widening the net to recruit our Nation's best. By establishing the balance among these objectives, we can employ SOF effectively in defense of our Nation. I thank Congress for its continuing support of our men and women in uniform and their families, and I look forward to your questions.