

Talks at GS
Gina Ortiz Jones
Under Secretary of the Air Force
Vanya Kasanof, Moderator
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Gina Ortiz Jones: There is something special about a country where the daughter of somebody who came here as a domestic helper, the niece of somebody who came here as a Navy steward in one generation can go and be the Undersecretary of the Air Force.

[MUSIC INTRO]

Vanya Kasanof: Hello everyone and welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Vanya, I'm a Managing Director in our Investment Banking division. Also, a former US Marine Corps officer. And I am very pleased to welcome the honorable Gina Ortiz Jones, Undersecretary of the Air Force. As the second highest ranking civilian leader in the Air Force and Space Force, Undersecretary Jones oversees the department's 205 billion budget and directs strategy and policy development, weapons acquisition, technology investments, and human resources management. So, there's a lot of hats to wear there. But I'm also very excited to be sitting with Undersecretary Jones because she is the first woman of color and first out lesbian to serve as undersecretary of any US military branch.

In addition to being a veteran of the Iraq war, she's advised military and intelligence operations in Central and South America, US Africa command in Germany, and she served in the Libya Crisis intelligence cell. Undersecretary Jones,

welcome. It's an honor to have you.

Gina Ortiz Jones: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Vanya Kasanof: Maybe the place to start is going to be something that's on the top of everybody's head right now which is the war in Ukraine. And you have a privileged perch from which to see it. You also have an extensive background of understanding about war and conflict. We're all glued to multiple sources. What do you think the media is missing? Or what do you think a lot of the reports are missing?

Gina Ortiz Jones: As we look at what's happening there, what always comes to mind, and maybe you're struck by this as well, is the will of the Ukrainian people and the willingness to fight. And I think having served as an intelligence officer, you always look at two things. And maybe you remember this from your Marine Corps days, is if you really want to understand somebody, you've got to understand what they want to do and what they can do. Right? Intent and capability. And I think the Ukrainian people have shown us just how important intent and capability is when measuring what they can do.

I think it's also really important that we look at just how quickly our partners and allies have galvanized in the face of Russia's unprovoked attack and invasion into Ukraine, and what this means in this moment in time.

And so, when we think about NATO, I know folks mainly think about Article 5. But I always think about Article 2, which is the fact that it's an alliance rooted in our values and what we stand for and what we are committed to

protecting in the interest in international security.

So, I think it's really important. The administration has demonstrated in the course of \$2 billion in security assistance just since the start of the administration. And over a billion dollars just in the last several weeks in assistance to Ukraine that we are committed to helping them, their self defense efforts, as well as their sovereignty and their territorial integrity.

Vanya Kasanof: That will to fight is just so impressive to watch. And I look forward to the day when we can look backwards and read the profiles in courage of Zelenskyy and people like that.

Gina Ortiz Jones: Do you know what profile I want to watch? I mean, maybe you all have seen it, it's these Ukrainian grandmothers that have got these, like, Molotov cocktails ready to go. Right? It's all hands on deck. And because I think, again, they understand the moment in time that we're in and what's at stake. And it's democracy is at stake. So, I think there is going to be, to your point, a number of profiles in courage from those that are trained for this in the Ukrainian military, but even to the everyday Ukrainian citizen.

Vanya Kasanof: Yeah, so inspirational. We don't have an explicit or an overt role directly in the conflict, but obviously the Air Force has been very instrumental in maybe helping bring capabilities. And so, can you talk about what your focus is around the conflict and sort of how you guys are thinking about your role?

Gina Ortiz Jones: I'll just level set a little bit for folks so

they understand kind of what the military services are doing right now versus what the combat and command, the war fighting organizations are doing.

And so, the military services have these, it's called, organized, train, and equip. That's the mission. So, essentially, you're preparing forces so that when asked they're ready to provide those services. But in terms of kind of the day to day and figuring out what actions need to be taken and where, that's really at the combat and command level. So, General Walters with US/Europe command is in charge of that.

But, you know, all of our requests and support that we have filled is in support of making sure that we are shoring up and reassuring our allies, and then deterring further aggression. Right? How do we ensure that there's no mistake about our commitment to the alliance and that that commitment is ironclad? That has really been the focus on the efforts to date.

Vanya Kasanof: One of the things that has been so fascinating to watch has been our assumptions going in about the disparity between the capabilities of Russia versus Ukraine. And how Ukraine has been able to fight so effectively. And it really underscores for the US, I think, how we need to be ahead of our adversaries when it comes to technology and in all things around sort of air superiority. So, as you internalize that for your role, what's your greatest threat or greatest worry for the Air Force as you go forward?

Gina Ortiz Jones: There's a lot in that question. To your point though, I think specifically about how do we

understand the environment? Right? Having been an intelligence officer, you know it's always really important to continually check your assumptions and make sure that you're not mirror imaging. Right? Hey, I would do it this way. Are they doing it that way? Or when you try to understand their actions, right, and try to assign some motivation behind why you would do that, there are challenges with doing that. And you, frankly, can be a little bit myopic.

And so, as we think about our challenges, certainly in the near term, but also in the longer term against the pacing challenge, which is China, how do we ensure that we are making sure that we're checking our assumptions, working very closely with our partners and our allies, just as we are now in the UCOM [PH] AOR, area of responsibility? Because our partners and allies are often that check on our assumptions. They see things just a little bit differently than we do because they may be a little bit closer to it. Frankly, just physically and geographically. But also, may have different interests. And it's worth considering those as we balance what we have to do in concert, what's measured. And we think about the second and third order of consequences of these decisions.

And I think from the Department of the Air Force's perspective, obviously we're part of the Department of Defense. The Department of Defense is part of the US government. So, it's not just what we want to do, it's what we need to do in concert with our diplomatic colleagues, as well as colleagues at commerce and elsewhere, so that we bring to bear the full strength, the full power of the US government. And some of the best solutions might not be military solutions. And so, that's a critical piece of, it's

called, integrated deterrence. Maybe some of you have heard the term. Secretary Austin has talked about integrated deterrence in terms of how do we understand the integration of our own capabilities, but our integration of our capabilities across USG, but also with our partners and allies.

You know, thinking a little bit more strategically given the types of capabilities and platforms that were key to our success against violent extremist organizations in the Middle East, it's going to be a very different mix of capabilities that we need against a near-peer competitor in a very different part of the world than we've been operating. So, all the more reason to check our assumptions and make sure that we've got really strong relationships with our partners and our allies.

Vanya Kasanof: A little bit of that integrated deterrence is on display right now.

Gina Ortiz Jones: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Vanya Kasanof: You've spoken often of our posture, readiness, and pacing challenge that we face against our adversaries as they invest in all sorts of next generation weapons and systems. How are you thinking about the Air Force's pace of modernization when it comes to fielding our own next generation?

Gina Ortiz Jones: I can answer this question, but actually, all of you could answer this question if you just looked at our budget, the budget that we just rolled out a couple of days ago, our FY23 budget. I'm not going to, like, force you to do that. But I will say, right, in your own life, show me

how you spend your money and I'll show you what you care about.

And so, the real theme of the budget that we just rolled out for FY23 is transformation. And so, what does that mean? Well, every morning Secretary Kendall, who's a secretary of the Air Force, receive an intelligence briefing on the nature of the threats across the different regions, across the different domains, cyber space, more traditional, et cetera, to understand kind of what that means for us in time and in space and in what we are trying to achieve.

And so, based on how quickly some of our adversaries have been investing in their own capabilities in space, in cyber, just to name a few, it really forces you to think about the pace at which we are doing our own things, which is reflective, not only of how quickly we need to modernize in certain areas, but also as the Russia-Ukraine conflict is showing us now, you always need a little bit of capability for near-term threats, for what may happen. And so, that's really the balance that you're seeing across the Department of Defense, but certainly in the Department of the Air Force because we have so many of these capabilities that are really geared toward countering violent extremist organizations in the Middle East. Right?

So, think of the MQ-9s and think of the A-10s and things like that. It's just going to be a different set of capabilities that we need against the pacing challenge in an environment that we have not operated, in a way that we may need to in the future.

And so, to that point, how do we maintain air and space superiority? Secretary Kendall has identified seven, what's

called, operational imperatives. And there are numerous open-source articles on these things as he's spoken about what these mean. But just to boil it down, these are those seven things, these seven questions, that we need to answer conceptually, and then also technologically, to ensure that we can maintain air and space superiority. What we had previously over the last 30 years is going to be insufficient against the pacing challenge. So, transformation while we are balancing near and long-term modernization efforts.

So, what are some of those operational imperatives? Well, the very first one may surprise you, but it's defining what is an effective and a resilient space order of battle. And so, the Department of the Air Force, almost 700,000 folks when you also include our guard folks and our reserve folks, but that also includes our Space Force, the newest military service which is two years old. But despite their size, you know, let's be clear, space is decisive. Space superiority is decisive. Every joint operation relies on the capabilities that are provided from space.

So, you think GPS. You know, also think ATM banking. So, there's an economic security and a national security aspect to the capabilities that are provided in space, which is why it's so important that we have a resilient space architecture. And if you look at our budget, there's a significant investment in the type of architecture that helps us better with our missile warning and missile tracking capabilities.

On the Air Force side, I'll just highlight a couple of key investments there. There is a, it's called, the next generation air dominance family of systems. Sounds very

cool. It is. But this is essentially what comes after the F-35. This is our sixth-generation fighter. And when I say, though, finally of systems, that is meant to convey that it's not just about the one platform and the one person flying it. Right? Now, what are all those other uncrewed, autonomous, collaborative platforms? What capabilities can those bring? And how does this more operate as a family of systems versus just traditionally what you think of just one fighter, right? And to make sure that we've got the most capable platforms. But we're also doing so in a way that we're being good stewards of the American taxpayers' dollars. So, that's one of the ways in which we're, again, thinking creatively, not only about the technological solution, but also the concepts by which we need to best employ these capabilities.

Vanya Kasanof: The Department of Defense has always been a standard bearer for innovation. There's a defense innovation initiative now. How do you feel about that partnership? Do you feel like you're getting the resources to bear from industry? Do you feel like that dialogue could improve?

Gina Ortiz Jones: You know, any relationship is really based on what the two bring together. Right? And so, I think there are always ways in which you could improve it. I think what we're looking at within the Department of Defense and certainly Secretary Kendall is very capable to lead this discussion given his time in the Pentagon. But, you know, we've got several kinds of pipelines in terms of how we bring innovative capabilities into the department.

And it's this thing, it's called the Valley of Death though, right? Where you've got all these great ideas, but for

whatever reason, right, they don't quite make it into the hands of the war fighter. Not because it's not a good idea. But because there wasn't, for example, sufficient funding to help that company kind of bridge until they could actually get it as to where you could put it into the hands of the war fighter. So, I think there's a realization that there are some improvements in that so that we can best tap into those innovative ideas that are out in the defense industrial base.

I think what we're also looking at specific to space, though, are the number of ways in which the commercial space sector is evolving quite rapidly. And when we look at some of those capabilities, for example, space domain awareness, some of the capabilities when it comes to mitigating the effects of the debris, a lot of that has applications in the Space Force and in a military context.

And so, how can we, in the interest of time and having meaningful operational capability as quickly as possible, how might we modify those or, frankly, just incorporate them wholesale, to ensure that we have those capabilities?

Vanya Kasanof: You know, we talk all the time in business around disruption and disruption that comes from artificial intelligence, machine learning, internet of things. Clearly, that disruption is coming to warfare as well. And there's a lot out there. How do you prioritize and how do you sort through all of that noise?

Gina Ortiz Jones: It starts with what are you trying to accomplish? And what is a disruption? I always like to say, and I think it's probably from my time serving as an intelligence officer, there is no such thing as a strategic surprise. Right? There are tactical surprises. You know this

as a former Marine officer. There are tactical surprises. But there aren't strategic surprises. You just weren't asking the right questions. Right? Just because it's new to you doesn't mean it's new. Right?

Vanya Kasanof: Right. There shouldn't be.

Gina Ortiz Jones: That's right. And so, I think it's really important that we're constantly challenging our own assumptions. But we also have, to your point earlier about how we're engaging with industry, what is that kind of two way back and forth to ensure that we fully understand the ramifications of some of these emerging technologies? How they might threaten our own capabilities, but how we might incorporate those as we, again, undergo this transformation that we need to capitalize on our most important resource, which is time.

Part of the operational imperatives, as well, is thinking through how we might better incorporate some of those into these concepts. So, it's not just technological, it's no kidding, how are we going to define this? How are we going to do that? And what currently exists that we might be able to, again, you know, insert in very quickly and provide a real meaningful capability of the war fighter?

Vanya Kasanof: I think for every organization out there, increasing diversity is important. Retaining the diversity is important. And as a barrier breaker, you're a flagbearer of that. Let's talk a little bit about how you encourage diversity in the Air Force and what are some of your thoughts around that?

Gina Ortiz Jones: Yeah. You know, shortly after Secretary

Kendall and I got there, it actually is an initiative that started before we got there, and it was the second iteration of their racial and gender disparity report. And so, the first one looked at disparities in the application of military justice for our African American service members. The second one looked at some of the disparities a little bit more broadly and looked at, also, professional military education, right, who's selected for those? You know how important it is to go to the right school at the right time. Certain career opportunities as well, who's being selected for those? Who's not? Promotion rates.

And it was interesting though because during the read out, they were briefing out the results and I thought it was really fascinating that they briefed out the results by gender. And then, separately, they briefed out the results by race and ethnicity. And as a woman of color, you're like, why wouldn't you look at those three things together, right, because that will be a very interesting picture. Because if you think those statistics are bad for either group, imagine if you're a member of both of those groups. And that's really important. This goes back to the point of having diverse folks at the table and asking the questions and make the decisions.

So, I asked that they go back, look at, literally, the exact same data, but look at those three lenses at the same time and what does that show? And I knew what it would show. And I think it was important now that we all had the same common understanding.

And what it showed is that 10 percent of the Department of the Air Force is women of color. And to not have had that, to me, was really eye opening. But as soon as we realized

we didn't have it, you know, we got it. Right? So, there's that.

But what it showed is that some of the progress that the first report showed us that women were making was actually the progress of white women. And it was masking the lack of progress of women of color. What it was also showing us when you looked at race, ethnicity, and gender at the same time, are some of the challenges. The least promoted in Department of the Air Force are Asian men. And so, again, there's a couple of biases that exist there. And so, by now having the data we can use that and really kind of level set and understand where we might have some more acute challenges.

There's also kind of like the day-to-day things that show you these barriers in plain sight. I'll call it that. A couple of months ago, I was looking, it was late one evening, and one of the coolest things I get to do is, and all the senior leaders get to do it, the top four, it's a SLEP package. And so, it's the Senior Leader Enlisted Promotion packages.

And so, what it is is these folks that are enlisted and have said, you know what, I want to be an officer. And so, I had five folks I could look at. They've all got great track records, wonderful applications. And I'm looking at one of them. And in her application, in the waiver section, she had to submit a waiver to apply because she was pregnant. And I'm like, why does somebody have to submit a waiver just--

Vanya Kasanof: How's that germane?

FEMALE VOICE:

-- To apply, right, just to apply for the program? And my

concern is, you know, when you see that, I bet somebody didn't apply because they didn't want to submit a waiver. And, potentially, if you've got that commander that's looking at these things and saying, you know what, I really want my person to be selected, do I put forward the person that needs a waiver or the person that doesn't need a waiver? Right?

So, there are all these things that have real impact on people's decisions, personally and professionally. And if we don't know why we have these policies in place or if they have any operational benefit in 2022, if they ever did, we should understand those.

So, I went back to my team, and I said, "Hey, what are all of those gender-specific policies that we have on the books? Is it 80? Is it 800? I don't know. But we should probably know. And we need to figure out is it still relevant in 2022, if it was ever relevant? And how do we need to modify it? And in some of these, what do we delete? Some of them, do we keep? If you can show me that there's an operational benefit to this, then we'll keep it. Otherwise, we need to make sure that we are removing as many of these barriers as possible, especially if they have a real impact of denying us access to the full talent in the force."

So, those are the types of things that I really am thankful to be able to do in this capacity and make sure that the Department of the Air Force has the best and the brightest.

Vanya Kasanof: So, now we're going to talk about you. So, you served at a time when being open about your sexual orientation could result in discharge and a lost career.

Gina Ortiz Jones: Yeah.

Vanya Kasanof: I've read that there was a formative moment when you joined the ROTC and had to sign a disclaimer.

Gina Ortiz Jones: Yeah.

Vanya Kasanof: You know, tell us a little bit about how that made you feel and how you sort of pushed through that.

Gina Ortiz Jones: You know, so, I was raised by a single mom. And when I earned that Air Force ROTC scholarship and they said, "We're going to pay for four years of your college education and you're going to be able to serve your country," and that second part is really important because I'm a proud first-generation American. My mom came to this country over 40 years ago. And she graduated from the number one university in the Philippines. But she came here as a domestic helper. That was the opportunity that presented itself. And so, she jumped at it. Right? So many folks jump at the opportunity for the American dream. And that's what she did.

On top of that, and as important, is you know, my uncle joined the US Navy as part of the steward program, if you're familiar. And this was a special relationship between the US and the Philippines. And that allowed the US Navy to recruit Filipino men to serve in the US Navy. However, they were only restricted to a handful of opportunities like cook and supply and things like that. This was in the late '60s. But he also jumped at the opportunity, right? I'm

going to go chase the American dream. And he ended up retiring 20 years later as an electrical engineer when they removed some of those restrictions.

But our family's story of service was always ingrained in my sister and I, that we were going to give back to a country that had given us so much. That's why I served. That's why my sister serves in the Navy to this day. She's on her way to go be a drill instructor at the Navy boot camp. So, very proud of her.

But this idea of serving was always something that was ingrained in us. And so, I was very proud to earn that ROTC scholarship because it was going to allow me an opportunity to serve. But yet, to your point, I will never forget one of the very first things I had to do, even before my first class, I think, was sign this piece of paper that said I will not engage in homosexual behavior, because Don't Ask, Don't Tell applied to me even as a cadet. So, my opportunity to get an education, right, my opportunity to serve, my opportunity to die for our country if need be, all of that goes away just because at the time there weren't enough leaders with the courage, right, which is what it comes down to, the courage to say anybody ready and willing to serve their country should have the opportunity to do so.

So, yeah, you better believe when I walk into the Pentagon every day, I try to be that undersecretary that I wish I would have had when I was that young cadet and that young officer. But you know what, my experience with Don't Ask, Don't Tell has really come full circle. Because that's how it started.

You know that picture, that meme of how it's going, how it started, how it's going? How it's going? So, last year was the ten-year anniversary of the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Right? And I wanted to have something at the Pentagon. But we were still under COVID restrictions. So, I asked my team, I'm like, "Hey, let's get some folks in the Pentagon. Go find some folks that served under Don't Ask, Don't Tell. We'll get in the courtyard at the Pentagon, and we'll at least take a picture."

And so, the day comes and we're in the courtyard and I'm walking up to the group. And it's probably like 20 folks or so. And I'm looking at my team and I'm, like, these folks are kind of young. I think my team messed up. And my team says, "No, no, no. These folks wanted to be part of the picture because they joined because Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed." I mean, that will probably be one of my most-- very cool, right, the most important memories I have, having the honor to serve in this position.

But, like, what an example of when you take away policies that, frankly, convey that you don't value somebody's service, when you take that away, look at the talent that comes to serve. Right? Look at the talent that we were missing out on because of that. So, that was just a really special moment. Pretty motivating, actually.

Vanya Kasanof: Yeah. Special for them and important for the Air Force. So, were a bunch of financial types. You are a leader. You speak a lot about leadership. You speak a lot about trust in leadership. What would you say to a bunch of financial types about the importance of leadership and how to build trust?

Gina Ortiz Jones: Well, for the financial types, I would say, you know, there are things you can count. But not everything that counts can be counted, right? And you all know that as you're advising folks on kind of the tangibles of what's happening in an area, but what are the other things that need to be considered?

But frankly, whoever I am talking to, I think to be successful, one, as a person, I think you've got to do three things. And these are the things that have continued to motivate me and guide me.

One is, you know, be kind. Don't be a jerk. No one likes a jerk. Two, work hard. Right? Don't get outworked. That, to me, is kind of the worst critique, which is if somebody says they think you're not working that hard, so work hard. And then three, be so good, be so good they cannot ignore you.

I think in many spaces when you're still having the first or the second of, right, it really allows people to kind of question how you got there. Right? Or why you're here. But the fact that you're there is a real opportunity to show people why you are there. So, be so good they cannot ignore you. I know it's not specific to financial types, but those are the things that I think have been key to my own success and I hope key to others' success.

Vanya Kasanof: It's clear speaking with you that you have a day job to do, and you also have this real keen sense of responsibility for being a barrier breaker and being a flagbearer. And so, you know, how do you balance all of that in an incredibly busy and demanding job and manage to sort of still bring your whole self?

Gina Ortiz Jones: I think it's just not lost on me the really great opportunity that I have, not only to work with a leadership team like Secretary Kendall and then the two service chiefs that are committed to, again, making sure we're ready for the high-end fight, but making sure all of our folks can serve to their full potential.

So, it frankly makes it, I'm not going to say easy, but it is such an opportunity to work with that team that is so committed to those two very important things. And you know, Vice President Harris has said it, but I also firmly believe, you know, it's great to be the first. But it's more important that you're not the last. And so, having had my own experience and then having seen the ability given this perch to, really, with a pen, right, change some of these policies, change the realities, and change kind of how people see their opportunities with a career in the Department of the Air Force, it really humbling. It's really humbling.

So, I was saying earlier, you know you love your job when you beat your alarm. I still beat my alarm. We're like eight months into this. I'm still beating my alarm, even if I have, you know, 13 hours days. I still am excited every morning about what is possible and, frankly, the really hard work that we need to get after. But we can only do that with good people serving with us.

Vanya Kasanof: You're the first. You won't be the last. But also, it's so cool listening to your stories because there are the obvious things that you fight against. And then there's all those other policies that you're keen enough to say, "How many more of these are there? And what should we do about these?"

Gina Ortiz Jones: Oh. I will spend, and maybe financial folks do this too, I must spend, like, 75 percent of my day asking three questions. Which is why? Why not? And where's the data? Right? Where is the data that you are making that decision on, that you're basing that decision on or you're basing that assumption on? Because those, again, have real impacts on our ability to be successful. And you're communicating something implicitly, right, by even having that as a policy. So, show me the data. And then we can have a real conversation.

Vanya Kasanof: Let's talk a little bit about your family. So, you talked some about your mother and the sacrifices that she made. About your sister who's still serving. But what did your mother say when you told her that you were going to be undersecretary of the Air Force?

Gina Ortiz Jones: Yeah. She's like, "What?" I told her I was very interested in serving in this capacity. And she knows how passionate I am about national security and how passionate I am about my own experience and being able to be part of changing some of those policies. And so, she was very excited.

You know, there is something special about a country, right, where the daughter of somebody who came here as a domestic helper, the niece of somebody who came here as a Navy steward, in one generation can go and be the Undersecretary of the Air Force. Right? I don't know who said it first, but you know, there was nothing wrong with our country that cannot be fixed with what is right with our country. And so, yeah. I think it's really important that those of us who are privileged to have these positions, but

also have a lived experience that knows that there is a lot of work to be done, that we push, right, because we can. And shame on us for not pushing as much as we can.

Vanya Kasanof: Well, Undersecretary Jones, thank you, again, for being with us today. Real honor.

Gina Ortiz Jones: Thank you. Thank you.

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