

STATEMENT OF PETER LEVINE
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FOR PERSONNEL AND READINESS
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
HEARING ON SENIOR CIVILIANS IN NATIONAL SECURITY POSITIONS

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Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Paul, Members of the Committee, it is a pleasure to appear before you this morning. I worked on the staff of the old Senate Governmental Affairs Committee for 8 years in the 1980s and 1990s, so I place a tremendous value on the work that you do to improve transparency, efficiency, and accountability in government operations. The views I express today are entirely my own, and should not be interpreted as reflecting any position of my employer, the Institute for Defense Analyses.

When I was appointed Acting Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness a decade ago, Secretary Carter had ambitious agenda for me: he wanted me to help him revitalize the DOD military and civilian workforces by implementing his “Force of the Future” program to attract and retain the smartest and most capable talent available. I could not have made any progress on these issues without the deep expertise, dedication and hard work of the senior career civilians in my office.

The first step that I took after being appointed was to meet with the career SES leaders in my office and to tell them how much I needed their help and looked forward to working with them. They had deep technical knowledge and decades of managerial experience on every issue that would come before me, from military recruiting and civilian hiring to National Guard duty status, and from training and education programs to retirement benefits and family assistance issues. They played two key roles in everything that I did:

- First, before I made any proposal to Secretary Carter, I made sure that I consulted with my senior managers and gave them a chance to provide input. If they had questions or concerns, I wanted to hear them. I wasn’t going to let anybody on the staff dictate policy decisions – but it was important for me to understand the implications of what I was doing before I did it. I firmly believe that our actions were more effective and more enduring as a result of this consultation. If a leader isn’t confident enough in himself or

herself to consider a range of views of views before acting, perhaps that person should not be in a leadership position at all.

- Second, after the Secretary and I had made a decision, our senior career civilians were essential to carrying it out. They were the ones who knew what documents we had to draft; what had to be included in a memo, directive, or instruction; how the documents had to be coordinated and approved; and who had to take additional steps like issuing component-specific supplemental guidance and initiating training activities. Without their hard work, the levers of the Department would not move, and a well-intended policy initiative would change nothing.

This two-step approach is consistent with the role that career civilians are expected play in the federal government: they owe political leaders their best advice, but once a decision has been made it is their duty to carry out that decision. The ability of career civil servants to provide open and candid advice without losing their jobs enables political appointees like me to benefit from the knowledge and expertise that these civilians have developed over the course of their careers, and the duty to follow orders means that our government remains responsive to the political appointees who represent our nation's elected leadership.

Some leaders and commentators have dismissed the views of career civilians and seen them as an impediment to progress. As I wrote in my book on Defense Management Reform, this approach carries significant risk:

“What the building thinks” is a phrase voiced in the Pentagon that describes the kind of concerns that can arise in opposition to proposals that have not been adequately vetted. The views of “the building” are often discounted by those who see them as nothing more than the rigid inflexibility of small-minded bureaucrats who are protecting their turf. There is no question that the Pentagon can be resistant to change, but in many cases there is good reason for the resistance. DOD officials care deeply about the mission of the Department and are naturally concerned by proposals for disruptive changes that threaten to restructure organizations, unsettle existing relationships, and reduce resources in a manner that could compromise that mission.

In some cases, it is necessary to override parochial concerns in the broader interest of the Department, but failure to engage and at least understand the motivation for the concerns is never a good option. Senior

officials can ignore what “the building thinks,” but they do so at their own peril. No matter how important these officials may think they are, the building will be around a lot longer than they will.

In one case that I am aware of, a new political leadership team became enamored of a contractor’s proposal to replace an existing business system with a new “Software as a Service” model. Senior civil servants with deep expertise argued that the expectation that this change could be carried out in six months and at minimal cost was completely unrealistic and inconsistent with the Department’s past experience. Once a decision was made, however, these career civilians carried out the direction and worked hard to implement the new system. Many years and hundreds of millions of dollars later, they are still trying.

By contrast, I believe that there is minimal risk that career civil servants will fail to carry out a directive from their political leadership. I am aware of multiple instances over the years in which the policy decisions of an outgoing Administration have been reversed by an incoming Administration. In each case, the same set of career civilians who had carried out the old policy deferred to the Department’s new political leadership, seamlessly carrying out the new policy. In short, the risk that political appointees will fail to listen to the informed views of career civil servants (or will discourage them from offering such views) is far greater than the risk that civil servants will fail to carry out a directive from political appointees once it has been made.

The leadership and management of the Department of Defense rest on three essential pillars: the Department’s political appointees, its military leaders, and its senior career civilians.

- Political appointees represent the nation’s elected leadership and are responsible for setting the direction of the Department and making policy decisions of all kinds.
- Military leaders bring decades of military training, experience and expertise, making them uniquely qualified to guide and shape the force and manage operations of all kinds.
- Career civilians bring substantive expertise and institutional knowledge that helps frame policy discussions and keep the Department running on a day-to-day basis.

Both political appointees and military leaders rotate out of jobs quickly. The average Senate-confirmed appointee in the Department serves only about two years in office before returning to the private sector. Senior military officers spend 20- and 30-year careers in the military, but rotate through Pentagon assignments in two to four years, giving them little time to build deep expertise and familiarity with the tools needed to run the Department.

Career civilians, by contrast, frequently remain in place over a period of years, learning the ins and outs of an organization, developing deep expertise in its policies, procedures and operations, and building an understanding of how to move the gears of the Department and make things work. The stability of the civil service is a two-edged sword. On one hand, it can lead to stagnation in the senior ranks; on the other hand, it fills gaps in institutional knowledge and expertise left by the constant rotation of political appointees and military leaders, helping keep the Department on track toward its national security objectives.

Senior career civilians play a key role in administering highly complex and legislatively-mandated personnel and pay systems. They provide essential expertise and managerial skills to organizations that run training and education programs, administer travel and change of duty stations, and provide security, support, and facilities sustainment on military bases. The Department relies on their deep knowledge of problems like sexual assault, suicides, bullying and hazing, and drug abuse. They provide the backbone of efforts to ensure that Service members around the world receive the financial advice, voting assistance, and family life counseling that they need and deserve. They play key roles in running 664 hospitals and clinics, 172 schools for military children, 1,880 retail stores, and 2,390 restaurants for our men and women in uniform.

Senior DoD civilians also serve as operational enablers in the intelligence and cyber domains, and are essential to warfighter training and combat system and equipment readiness. They help manage and oversee more than \$300 billion a year in acquisition spending and run the largest and most sophisticated research and development activity in the world. They help operate depots and arsenals that maintain and recapitalize a huge inventory of the most complex and advanced fighting equipment in human history. And they are the life-blood of a logistics system that works 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to ensure that military equipment and supplies are ready when and where needed, anywhere in the world, and often with little or no notice. The Department makes a significant investment in recruiting, hiring, developing and training its senior career civilians, and this investment should not be lightly set aside.

In my experience, the vast majority of DoD civilian employees are highly motivated, hard-working, and strive to perform with excellence. This is particularly true of the Department's cadre of senior executives and other senior managers, who care deeply about our national security and understand their business in a way that few others can. I have seen new projects embraced enthusiastically by employees who work long hours without any reward beyond the challenge of the work itself and the understanding that the results they produce are important to the national security and valued by the Department's leadership.

We live in a time of deepening social, political, and cultural divides in American society, but we all have a shared interest in the security of our nation. Nobody is more committed to this shared interest than the senior civilians who devoted their careers to the Department of Defense. As one who has spent his own career working to make the Department work better, I appreciate the continuing need for change and reform. However, I firmly believe that any change agenda will be stronger and more successful in the long run if it treats the dedicated career civil servants serving in the Department as allies, not enemies.

I look forward to your questions.