

An Interview with Gen Mark A. Welsh III Twentieth USAF Chief of Staff

SSQ: *General Welsh, what top challenges do you expect to encounter during your term as chief?*

General Welsh: Rather than challenges, I see great opportunities for our Air Force, the foremost being the sharing of our Air Force story with the public, with the Congress, with industry, with our sister services, and our coalition partners. Telling our story is also important when it comes to motivating the force. We've been at war for 20-plus years now—through Northern and Southern Watch, Allied Force, and deployments to and from Southwest Asia over the last 10 years, along with everyone else. Our Airmen are doing amazing things! They move people and cargo around the world. They conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations in every combatant commander's AOR. They fly lifesaving aeromedical evacuation missions to get wounded warriors off the battlefield and back home for treatment and care. They're on the ground leading convoys, clearing improvised explosive devices, and calling in airstrikes. They resupply ground forces with tactical airdrops. They provide nuclear deterrence for the nation. They deliver space-based communication, navigation, and missile defense warning. They're fighting shoulder-to-shoulder on the battlefield with their Army, Navy, and Marine Corps teammates. They patrol the skies above them, ready to respond when needed most. And they make it all look easy—sometimes too easy. In reality, it's pretty tough to do. Our Airmen are not overstressed, but they are tired, and their families are tired. Part of my job is to tell our story so people understand the skill, the determination, and the resources that it takes for the Air Force to make these capabilities available to the combatant commanders.

The future security environment represents another opportunity for the Air Force. Although the US military must prepare to operate in every domain on, under, or above our planet, I believe the air, space, and cyber domains are likely to be those most contested in the future. The Air Force brings unique expertise to each of these domains, and we

will preserve and fortify those areas where we are most mature, while also exploring and influencing those areas where we are less mature.

For the next five years, the Air Force will not see a lot of new aircraft and equipment. It will take a while for much-needed modernization to appear. But Airmen must know their contributions matter—that what they do makes a difference. So I think for my tenure as Chief, the job is going to be to communicate clearly, motivate as much as I can, and make sure Airmen understand just how good they are, and how proud they should be of themselves and what they represent. If I can do that, they'll take care of everything else.

SSQ: *Do you have a list of priorities you feel must be addressed within the next year, and what are your longer-term priorities?*

General Welsh: Upfront, we have some work to do to rebuild trust and credibility with the Congress. I met with several senators during my confirmation process, and each one mentioned they were concerned about communication and transparency between the Congress and the Defense Department, and specifically with the Air Force. The *perception* is that the Air Force does not tell the whole story—that it does not offer full disclosure. That's no way to do business; it's certainly not our intent or our practice as we see it; and it is clearly something Secretary Michael Donley and I must address. There is absolutely no question that the Congress and the Air Force are both focused on doing what's best for the nation. So we will work harder to ensure timely, open, and transparent communication with the Congress. This won't be a one-time effort; it will be a consistent long-term effort to strengthen and maintain the relationship of trust that we must have with the Hill.

The second focus item is the active-reserve component mix within the Air Force. Our 2013 budget arrived on Capitol Hill and basically ran into a brick wall, principally because of concerns with adjustments made to our active-reserve component mix. This led many people to believe there is a problem with Total Force integration in our Air Force. Nothing could be further from the truth. The *process* that led us to submit the 2013 budget proposal can be improved. We will fix it and move forward together to craft the Total Force that best balances requirements, capabilities, risk, and cost on behalf of our nation's defense and our states' requirements for disaster response.

Out where the Air Force operates, you can't tell a Guardsman from a Reservist from an active duty Airman. The Total Force is still seamless and strong in the US Air Force. But, the Airmen who are on the front end of our business, the ones who are fighting side-by-side doing incredible work

every day, are looking over their shoulder at us wondering, “What are you guys doing back there?” And so we have to figure out how we can improve the coordination and communication process inside the Beltway and with the state governors and adjutants general to make sure everybody has input to, and fully understands, the intent and the approach of our future force structure and resource planning efforts.

Longer term, we must figure out a way to modernize our Air Force. The health of our aircraft fleet has been a lingering problem, and we’ve been lucky that our equipment has survived well beyond expected service lives and that our great Airmen continue to keep the aging fleet operating. Twenty-plus years of full-time activity in multiple war zones have aged equipment faster than we originally planned. We are flying airplanes at a much higher rate, and this has caused our fleet to age dramatically. There’s no secret about that. We’ve taken great care of the fleet, and it’s still getting the job done. But it won’t last forever.

Also, we will soon begin the transition to a peacetime Air Force. As the drawdown in Afghanistan continues, I suspect that the Air Force will probably remain there as long as any of our services. But as we reduce our footprint, we must figure out what to do with some of the capabilities we invested in for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, what do you do with the fleet of remotely piloted aircraft? How might they be used in other theaters, particularly in the nation’s rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region? What about Africa? What about the Airmen who make up the ISR enterprise? How will that key mission area adjust to a new environment? And finally, where does the Air Force best contribute in the cyber arena? These are some of my concerns.

***SSQ:** It has been said the Air Force will get smaller in the future but will be of higher quality. What do you see as the opportunities and risks associated with this kind of Air Force?*

General Welsh: Given the fiscal constraints we’re facing as a nation and in light of the new defense strategic guidance, the Air Force made some strategic choices to get smaller. These weren’t easy decisions, but they were necessary to protect our quality and readiness. Failing to reduce our size risks hollowing out the force—there just isn’t enough money in the budget to support a large force structure. To do so, you have to take money from modernization and training to pay for it. That’s horrible trade space in which to operate.

We need to reduce some of our excess capacity to provide the cost savings needed to modernize the force. A smaller force allows us to modernize

our fleet and repair or replace worn-out equipment. It also ensures our Airmen receive the training needed to be the best on the battlefield. The men and women in our Air Force are proud of what they do and how well they do it. We ask a lot of them, and they always deliver. That pride is an integral part of what makes our Air Force special . . . and successful. Airmen have been at war for 20-plus years. Ninety percent of our team has joined since the 9/11 attacks. The tempo has been tough, but they continue to serve because they're proud and they have a tremendous sense of purpose. Their families continue to support them through the multiple deployments, the missed birthdays, the missed anniversaries, and the missed holidays because they're proud of their Airmen too. But if we can't provide the equipment our Airmen need to do their jobs; if we don't give them the training they need to be the very best at what they do; if we allow frustration to take root and override that pride, they'll walk. I can't let that happen . . . we simply can't be successful without them.

SSQ: *Not long ago you mentioned innovation as important to the success of the Air Force. What areas do you think require the greatest innovative efforts today?*

General Welsh: Innovation is part of our DNA. It's in our institutional fabric. The early airpower pioneers looked at the World War I and II battlefields with a perspective of "over, not through." Today's Airmen use developing technology in new and innovative ways every single day. As I look ahead, innovation—fueled by intelligent, creative Airmen—will remain a key part of who we are and what we value as a service.

The pressures on us from a budget perspective are significant. They include those from sequestration, if it occurs, as well as the pressures from a continuing decrease of our budget, even if sequestration doesn't happen. A smaller budget means that we must find innovative ways and new tactics, techniques, and procedures to use the people, tools, and aircraft that we do have as effectively as possible. This is not a new approach. Technology allows us to do some amazing things on the battlefield, and it's a tremendous force multiplier. As a young officer, I never imagined using a bomber to provide close air support for troops on the ground. But that's exactly what we've been doing. Special Ops C-130s are carrying the small-diameter bomb, allowing them to do the same. And when you think about RPAs, I believe we have just moved out of the "Wright Flyer stage" with these systems. Over the next 20–30 years, these capabilities are going to advance, and advance rapidly. No one knows exactly what will happen next, but it's going to be exciting to watch! The only thing I'm sure of is

that our Air Force will lead the way, because nobody develops and integrates new technology into air operations on a large scale as well as we do.

The security environment will also drive the need for innovative thought and action. The growth of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) methods and strategies by potential adversaries—ballistic and cruise missiles, guided rockets, integrated air defense systems, submarines, antiship missiles, sea mines, and fast-attack boats—led us to the Air-Sea Battle concept. If you're trying to operate in the A2/AD environment, you're going to look for capabilities that increase platform ranges, link and extend sensor ranges, extend weapons envelopes, and maximize stealth. Interoperability and the ability to communicate and share data with our sister services and key allies and partners are also essential. It takes some out-of-the-box thinking. Gen Norty Schwartz described Air-Sea Battle as a “furnace for ideas.” And that's exactly what it is. The concept allows the services to study, evaluate, and pursue synchronized investment to better support the combatant commanders in an A2/AD environment, making more efficient use of the limited resources we have.

***SSQ:** Over the last year our Air Force seems to have been rocked by, and in some cases rebuked because of several controversies including the place of religion in the service, the Dover mortuary, sexual assault at Basic Military Training, and the F-22, just to name a few. How would you address our critics who may be questioning the efficacy of the Air Force?*

General Welsh: First I want to say that I'm proud to lead and serve the 690,000 Airmen who fight in our nation's Air Force. We have great people, a great mission, and a great heritage. Like many other large organizations, we've seen our share of headlines, and we continue to work through those issues to make our service better. But I don't measure the worth of our Air Force by those issues. Not one of those headlines detracts in a meaningful way from what our Air Force means to this nation. Only the Air Force gives our decision makers the capability and capacity they need for air superiority, nuclear and global strike forces, ISR, rapid global mobility, and command and control operations, all enabled by space and cyber forces. I truly believe that we are at our best providing those enduring capabilities that our nation relies on, and those are the areas where we must continue to focus.

Gaining and maintaining air superiority is foundational to how we fight as a joint force. The Army, and to a degree the Marine Corps, depends on us to get this right. The fact that no US military member has been killed

on the ground by an enemy combat aircraft since the Korean War reinforces this notion. Our ground troops have grown so accustomed to fighting absent enemy airstrikes that many of my joint counterparts no longer worry about hostility from above. Air superiority is not a birthright, nor is it easy to provide. Today's adversaries have been deterred from meeting us in the air largely due to our technological, operational, tactical, and training dominance. This is an advantage we must not sacrifice. If we can't provide the air superiority that guarantees American ground forces both freedom to attack and freedom from attack, then the way the US military currently fights on the ground will have to change. Air superiority is fundamental to the American way of war.

We have a team of 36,000 Airmen who are focused on the Air Force's number one priority, the nuclear mission, each and every day. They live a standard of excellence. The mission demands it. Their stewardship ensures that our nuclear arsenal—two-thirds of America's nuclear triad—is safe, secure, and able to hold targets anywhere on the planet at risk. I often hear that since the Cold War has passed, so has the nation's need for a robust nuclear deterrent and global strike force. That notion is diametrically opposed to our nation's current policy and deterrence strategy. To implement that strategy, our nuclear and global strike forces require maintenance and modernization, as with any aging capability. We can debate the size of the nuclear force, but its presence and operational surety are nonnegotiable in my book.

Nobody does ISR to the scope and scale of the United States Air Force. RPAs have proven themselves essential in developing situational awareness of the battlespace to commanders and troops on the ground. There's been a significant demand for this capability, and the Air Force has invested heavily in RPAs to support the need. The Air Force is also largely responsible for the processing, exploitation, and dissemination of intelligence data after its collection. The effects of this powerful capability are huge. From responsiveness and timeliness, to accuracy and precision, Air Force ISR provides the data, information, and connectivity to fuse and synchronize joint operations. However, Air Force ISR has largely been conducted these past 20-plus years in a permissive environment. We must plan for and invest in the future of the Air Force's incredible ISR contributions to our nation's defense. It's critically important that those contributions be possible in all scenarios, to include operations in contested battlespace.

Strategic mobility is the backbone of US military power. Airlift, aerial refueling, and contingency response groups fulfill the need to rapidly

move personnel and cargo throughout the world, to deliver humanitarian aid and a helping hand to those in need, to bring our wounded warriors home, and to deploy forces to deter enemy aggression. We launch an air-lift sortie every two minutes, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Mobility has been an Air Force core mission since its inception—it's a clear war-fighting advantage that we must not surrender. Global reach is part of who we are as an Air Force and as a nation.

Everything we do in our Air Force is enabled in some way, shape, or form by capabilities and command and control processes that incorporate assets in the space and cyber domains. From GPS positioning to weather forecasting and ISR collection and dissemination, the Air Force space mission transcends service and departmental boundaries. Our Airmen lead the Department of Defense effort to ensure the same situational awareness and freedom to operate in space that we have in the air domain. It's another mission area where modernization and technological edge must not be sacrificed, but whose effects are often behind the scenes. Air Force cyber warriors protect our command and control infrastructure and networks, ensuring that the connectivity we've come to rely upon is not hacked, spoofed, or jammed. The ability to command and control operations on a regional scale is something our combatant commanders expect from us. It's also a clear advantage we enjoy over our adversaries. Each of these areas is of growing importance to our nation, not just to our Air Force and the joint war fighters we support.

My point here is simple . . . the Air Force matters. We're not more important than any other service, but we are equally critical to the nation. More importantly, our Airmen matter. They serve with pride, living our core values of *Integrity*, *Service*, and *Excellence*. Without them and their joint teammates, there would not be air superiority, nuclear and global strike forces, persistent ISR, rapid global mobility, or the enabling capabilities that our command and control, space, and cyber assets provide. It's our people who make that all possible—people who are proud, well-trained, well-equipped, and ready. No matter what issue hits the headlines to distract us, it's important that we tell their story enough times, to enough audiences, so there is no question, confusion, or doubt about what our Airmen provide for America. Our job is to stand beside our sister services to fight and win this nation's wars. We have a track record of doing exactly that . . . and we'll remain ready to do it in the future. 