

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

A LOOK INTO SOCOM

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A LOOK INTO SOCOM

MR. WAJSGRAS: As president of Raytheon's intelligence, information, and services business, it's a privilege and honour for me to introduce General Joseph Votel to the Aspen Security Forum.

As a company that closely supports the mission of the United States Special Operations Command, we at Raytheon are well aware that General Votel approaches his position as commander with the same dedication, passion, and problem solving leadership style that he's exhibited throughout his entire military career. That brand of problem solving was very evident when General Votel was tapped to address what was called the number one threat to coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan; roadside bombs and IEDs.

As commander of the United States Army's Counter Improvised Explosive Device Task Force, General Votel's work became the foundation for the entire DOD strategy to defeat the threat. And as the JSOC's role expanded to deal with terrorist threats outside of the regional theatres of Iraq and Afghanistan, it's no wonder that President Obama and the Pentagon turned to General Votel.

SOCOM has the challenge of combating the threats posed by terrorist cells around the world. It's a mission that requires speed and agility, precise combat capability and close coordination with the intelligence community.

It's a mission that's as critical as it is far reaching. General Votel has said that quote, "More soft soldiers are deployed to more locations in the world, conducting more operations than at the height of the Afghani and Iraqi conflicts."

I would like to share with you one of the leaders at Raytheon, who served with General Votel, told me that he personifies one of George Washington's more well-known mottos, "deeds not words."

That attribute will become crystal clear today as General Votel shares with us the challenges we face in

addressing terrorism worldwide. And there's no better person than Catherine Herridge to moderate that discussion, given her role in covering the intelligence community for Fox News.

So with that Catherine, I'll turn it over to you.

MS. HERRIDGE: Thank you for the gracious introduction.

(Applause)

MS. HERRIDGE: Good morning. Just a word of thanks to Walter Isaacson for his vision, Clark Kent Ervin and his team for their flawless execution, and for all of you being here this morning and being invested in our nation's security. And General Votel is someone who is in a military family, thank you for your 35 years of service and for leading the 69,000 members of the special operations community.

(Applause)

MS. HERRIDGE: I'd like to begin with some of the news. There is a new deal between the United States and Turkey for the use of the base at Incirlik. What is this going to mean from a military standpoint?

MR. VOTEL: Thanks, thanks. And it's great to be here. Thanks for the invitation.

I think what it means -- I think it means at the operational and tactical levels can provide us some additional flexibility and agility in addressing this enemy ISIS that we're dealing within both Iraq and particularly in Syria here, with this base right here.

I think it also means that Turkey has taken another step forward in being more committed to helping us with this fight. And I think that's a very, very important partnership for us, they're obviously a very critical partner in the region here. But I think as a military guy I think it really provides us great

operational flexibility.

MS. HERRIDGE: Okay. I want to pick up on a threat from yesterday. Where are you on the women in combat issue, and what do you think things look like at the end of this review?

MR. VOTEL: Yeah, thanks. I appreciate that.

(Laughter)

MR. VOTEL: So like -- SOCOM, like all the services has been looking at this issue for quite some time here. We've gone through a pretty deliberate process, we've done a lot of surveys of the force here to understand what the impacts might be and we certainly looked at all of our standards, and we've been working closely with the marine corps and the army and the other services to an extent at the various programs and activities that are going on to gathering information about this, so we can make really informed recommendations to the secretary of defence.

So we're on track with all of that. And so you know, by the early part of the fall here, we'll make some -- if we determine we need to seek some exceptions, we'll go to the secretary and make our case for those types of things.

I would just say this about SOCOM. SOCOM needs diversity, we need people of colour, we need men, we need women to help us solve the problems that we deal with today. In many ways SOCOM has been at the leading edge of integration of women into critical positions that find them in far forward locations.

And certainly in my experience, our use of cultural support teams where we've taken female soldiers from across a variety of specialties given them special training and put them with our strike forces in Afghanistan, really opened up about 50 percent of the population that we just could not get too as males. And so it was definitely value adding. And it's interesting to me when I look at some of the surveys of our force that

that's reflected from our people. So we need good people; men, women, people of all colours.

MS. HERRIDGE: And is the bottom line to be fair, that regardless of gender or race, the individual has to meet the requirements for that position?

MR. VOTEL: That is absolutely the bottom line. This is about meeting the standards for the tasks that the nation expects us able to do. And if people can meet the standards then we should be able to integrate them.

MS. HERRIDGE: I just want to shift gears here. One of your principal areas of focus is hybrid warfare. So let's take Russia as a case study. What is Russia up to?

MR. VOTEL: Yeah, so, what we've been seeing -- it's a great question, what Russia is up to there.

(Laughter)

MR. VOTEL: I don't know. I wish I had a little crystal ball, but. So what we're seeing I think in Eastern Europe and what Russia is doing is I think as Catherine referred to this, this hybrid approach to warfare.

And when we talk about a hybrid approach to warfare, what we're talking about is state and non-state actors who are mixing military and non-military capabilities to create a coercive effect. And I think that's what Russia is essentially doing.

So they're using information operations, they're using manipulation of media, they're using social media, they're using their own military capabilities, they're using ethnic Russian populations in some of these countries, they're using surrogates that they bring in, and they are making use of some of their own state institutions I believe, to help perpetrate this idea of coercion and pressure on their neighbours along their periphery to kind of meet their particular objectives.

MS. HERRIDGE: Are they using the church to that end?

MR. VOTEL: Well, I think I've -- I have already seen some information in regards to that. They -- I think they use some of their state industries to do this, to put economic pressure on their partners along their borders. And I do believe they may make use of their church as well.

MS. HERRIDGE: Okay, so to what end is the intent to divide NATO?

MR. VOTEL: Well, I think the intent is to create a situation where NATO can't continue to thrive and you know, put the alliance up on the edge of the Russian empire if you will. So I don't think -- you know again, I don't have any unique insights into Mr. Putin. But I don't think he appreciates what NATO does. I don't think he likes -- and historically what NATO did after the kind of the break up of the Soviet Union in expanding and taking on more members and going from 16 to 26 members to include members that are right up on his border.

And so I think he sees that potentially as a threat to him. And so I think what he -- what he -- what they are attempting to do is create these frozen conflicts and create situations that are very, very difficult to resolve along their border and in doing that stalemate a lot of things and kind of hold the status quo.

MS. HERRIDGE: So what are you doing to aid these countries who are really up against this Russian threat?

MR. VOTEL: Well, exactly. So you know, within SOF, SOCOM, you know, for us you know, hybrid warfare is a form of unconventional warfare. And unconventional warfare is really kind of one of the key expertise areas for special operations force, that's why we would develop SF, Green Berets and others during the Vietnam to do that type of thing. So that involves helping people resist.

And there's a variety of things that we can do.

We can certainly work with our partners to help develop --

MS. HERRIDGE: What are you doing on the ground?

MR. VOTEL: Right. So what we do is we work with our partners to help develop their capabilities. We help our embassies with some of their messaging activities that they're doing out there to make sure that truthful information is getting out there to the populations. We use our civil affairs capability to help connect governments to their populations and strengthen those relationships, and in hoping -- in doing that reduce those vulnerabilities of populations out there who may be vulnerable to this type of pressure that they get from outside countries.

MS. HERRIDGE: In the last six months, Russia has negotiated significant nuclear energy deals with three traditional US allies; Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. In your opinion, is this evidence that Russia seeks to expand its influence in the Middle East and could we be seeing the beginning of a nuclear arms race there?

MR. VOTEL: Yeah, I'm probably not the right guy to really comment too much on the specifics of that type of thing. I'm aware of some of that, but I don't really know many of the details. And it's not an area that I'm really paying real close attention to.

But I would just say this; I think that Russia is looking to challenge us wherever they can. And so this is an example of some of the areas in which they will do it.

MS. HERRIDGE: You have described the current threat environment as highly complex, Russia is an example of that. Delineate that for us, what does it mean?

MR. VOTEL: Yeah. So I think -- as I talk to our people and we talk about the environment in which we're employing our SOF forces, you know, from all the services, I do try to emphasize the fact that we're in an extraordinary complex environment.

As Catherine mentioned I've been around for 35 years looking at this, and I just from my perspective I think it's about as -- is about as challenging as an environment that we have. So we're dealing with terrorism like we see in Iraq and Syria emanating here, we're -- and we sometimes being manifested on the streets of our country by people who are inspired or direct it or whatever verb you want to choose there as a result of that.

We see Russia being very coercive against allies and in some cases NATO allies of us, and so that's an aspect of it. You know, we see the flow of foreign fighters moving from 80 plus countries converging into the Middle East. And all of that is being accelerated by this concept of hyper connectivity out here that exists, where people can talk very quickly, they use the Internet, they use social media to move things, and they recruit that way, they inform that way, they report on the things that they're doing, we can see some of that, some of it we can't see.

And so I think what makes the environment complex from my perspective is not only the multiple amounts of different threats out there that -- you know, run from state to non-state actors, but the fact that we -- it makes it very, very difficult to predict and understand what might happen next. So we make decisions by where we're putting our forces and where we're going to prioritise our efforts. I think it makes it that much more difficult for us.

MS. HERRIDGE: This brings me to the next point, part of your focus is alignment and synchronisation of resources. So how in this environment are you deciding who gets what and where?

MR. VOTEL: Yeah. So you know, what Catherine is referring to is you know, as the SOCOM commander, I have a couple of key responsibilities. One of them is what she outlined right there, that one is basically providing SOF capability out to our geographic combatant commanders. In this regard, what we try to do is we -- part of my responsibility is to synchronise our SOF

efforts.

The key thing that SOCOM brings to the table is that we are -- we think of ourselves as a global force. We support the geographic combatant commanders, but we are not bound by the artificial boundaries that normally define the regional areas in which they operate. So what we try to do is we try to operate across those boundaries. Our adversaries certainly do, they don't recognise any of that, so we have to be looking trans-regionally, we have to be looking across the boundaries at these threats.

And so what we try do to do is synchronise that, and what I do is I look at the priorities that our geographic combatant commanders have, I look at the guidance we get out of the Department of Defence, I look at our capabilities. And what we try to do is make determinations on where we -- where our resources can best be applied now to help create some effects.

And what that requires is we put more effort in some areas than we do in others, and it's a constant balance back and forth. So something we have to always watch and look at all the time.

MS. HERRIDGE: So where have you taken the majority of your resources right now if you (inaudible)?

MR. VOTEL: Well, clearly, I think a lot of our resources are focused in Iraq and in the Middle East, in Syria for right now. That's really where our head has been. We are -- I think we are increasing our focus on Eastern Europe at this time. At the same time we continue to provide some level of support on South America for Columbia and the other interests that we have down there. And then of course we're engaged out in the Pacific with a lot of our partners, reassuring them and working those relationships and maintaining our presence out there. So, a constant balance for us.

MS. HERRIDGE: I'm getting into classified information. What are you doing on the ground in Syria?

MR. VOTEL: We're not doing anything on the

ground in Syria. Nice try though.

(Laughter)

MS. HERRIDGE: I'm here to try.

MR. VOTEL: Yeah. Well, as you know we are training some new Syrian forces, and I think that's obviously been on the news. This is a pretty aggressive and challenging effort for us to bring people out and bring them up to a standard of training and capability and then reinsert them.

We're very early on in the process. And you know, the numbers are not great. I have had had some opportunity to go look at that. I feel very confident of the system that we have in place. And I feel very confident that as we continue to invest in this area and continue with time that this will ultimately be successful for us.

MS. HERRIDGE: Okay. Taking the regional view, how many countries does ISIS now have a meaningful presence?

MR. VOTEL: Well, again, I'm not sure exactly how many. We know that -- I think the way you have to think about ISIS is the way they kind of describe themselves. They describe themselves as a caliphate. And so when you go back and look at what the caliphate represented for them it really is -- it is a broad region and it extends from Spain down into north and West Africa and all the way across to the subcontinent here and then kind of you know, up into portions of Europe here.

So I think what they're trying to do is they're looking for opportunities where there is ungoverned spaces, where there is not control, where there is not the presence of you know, western power or a legitimate authority and where there are vulnerable populations. I think they're taking advantage of that.

So you know, what we've seen is as pressure has been applied on them in the Middle East -- you know you

apply pressure there and a bulge comes out some place else and then you see it in Libya, you know, we see it in Afghanistan, we certainly see the elements like Boko Haram an extraordinarily violent organization who you know, pledges allegiance to them and now becomes kind of a ISIS of West Africa.

So you know, I think you see it in a variety of areas. I don't know if they have a plan -- I don't have insight that tells me what their specific plan is, country by country but I think what they're trying to do is essentially establish that caliphate by looking for vulnerable opportunities that they can exploit.

MS. HERRIDGE: What level of coordination is there between ISIS in Iraq and Syria and ISIS in Libya?

MR. VOTEL: Yeah, I don't know if we know the exact extent of that. I mean to me it would be clear there is some level of it. I think it's fairly well established that there have been some that have left you know, the Middle East and gone to Libya, that would imply there's some level of coordination or some kind of knowledge at least. But again I don't know if we know exactly how much of that is back and forth. I know they do all subscribe to the same ideology and so that's -- that does seem to serve as a unifying function for them.

MS. HERRIDGE: But looking at the description you've just given us about how this organization has now in affect expanded its reach outside of Iraq and Syria, it seems hard to even argue that our policy is an effective containment policy?

MR. VOTEL: Well again, I -- you know I'm not the person making the policy here. It's our job to implement the decisions that are given to us.

I think what I would say is that as we see with most terrorist organizations that these are long term -- long term challenges for us. You know I would focus you on Columbia for a moment here and look at what Columbia has dealt with for a number of years with the FARC, greater than 50 years with the FARC and the ELN. And it's

gone back and forth and you know, through the use of kinetic action and military action, you know now they're at a point where there are actually some negotiations ongoing. But it's taken a long time to get there.

And so you know, I don't think there's any one strategy that we're going to apply that is immediately going to change this. I think it is about taking a long term approach, understanding what's happening, making smart decisions and continuing to apply pressure, whether that's military pressure, diplomatic pressure, informational pressure against the violent extremists.

MS. HERRIDGE: Baghdadi is very enigmatic. Is there anything that you have learnt that you can share with us about how he is running this operation?

MR. VOTEL: I don't know that I have any more insights that I would -- I think I could share here. I mean, I think you know -- I think of what he's trying to be resilient. I think he's trying to develop some level of follow on leadership so that in the event something happens to him that somebody will be able to carry on. So I'm not sure I could really offer you much more beyond that.

MS. HERRIDGE: Okay. In these nations where ISIS is seeking to take hold, these are nations where often there is no government for us to partner with. I'm thinking specifically about Libya, so how do you attack that as a problem set?

MR. VOTEL: How we start developing partner capacity in place where there aren't?

MS. HERRIDGE: Right.

MR. VOTEL: Well, this a pretty interesting question there and thanks for asking it. You know, this is like a key piece for us. You know, one of the comparative advantages I think that SOCOM brings and SOF brings is our ability to reach out and work with others, whether they're people in our government or whether they're other partners out there, international partners

we have.

And so when you -- in places where there isn't legitimate government there isn't some kind of entity that you can plug into. What we have to do is we have to get people on the ground, sometimes some may -- perhaps in the intelligence community or our own folks and understand what's going on, understand what kind of the lay of the land is.

And then once you understand that and you identify people that might be possible to help you then you can reach out and you can start establishing relationships within. And then as you begin to develop trusted relationships then you can bring more capability to bear to help build their capacity.

You know, I think a good example of this is Somalia. You know, this is again a country that has been racked for a long time with significant problems. And Al-Shabaab has been the terrorist organization there that has been most prominent.

But you know, as we have reached out and started to build some relationships before there was a new Somali president and a congress and a constitution -- a parliament I should say, before that we started to develop those relationships, we started to develop some indigenous capability. As that began to grow then we looked to work with AMISOM, the African union coalition element that's on the ground there. So we've gone from a very, very small foot print to a little bit larger foot print, but it's still pretty small where we've been able to develop relationships.

And you know in the course of that we've seen Somalia -- Somalia establish a presidency, we've seen them establish a parliament, we've seen them establish a constitution. So they're moving in the right direction, its taken time. Its Somalia, I would remind you of that. So it's going to take a long time, but that's I think how you get about this. Staying persistent with it, staying engaged with it, working through the problems, recognizing there's going to be ups and downs and then keep pushing

forward.

MS. HERRIDGE: Is that one of the lessons of your military experiences that we need to keep the pressure on these organizations? I'm thinking about our lessons from AQI in Iraq, al Qaeda in 2002 we thought we had wiped out the leadership in Yemen only for them to reconstitute seven years later.

MR. VOTEL: I think it absolutely is. I think we clearly recognize most of these groups do have some ability to regenerate themselves even if it takes a little bit of time they try to reinvent themselves.

You know you look at an organization like Al-Shabaab for example, where they're actually controlling terrain. Once that was -- you know, that was taken away from them, they've now kind of reorganized themselves much more as what we think of as a terrorist organization. Its perpetrating attacks here and there and you know going into Kenya and other neighboring nations in the area and threatening them. So they tried to change their nature of what they're doing. And what that requires is it does require us to continue to provide pressure on them.

MS. HERRIDGE: In the long term?

MR. VOTEL: In the long term. Yeah, absolutely.

MS. HERRIDGE: Before we move on from ISIS it would be remiss of me not to ask you some questions about the American hostages. Based on our reporting at Fox News, there was very specific intelligence in mid to late May of 2014 about the location of the 8 western hostages in Raqqa, Syria. It was highly detailed as to a building, even a layout based on the human intelligence sourcing. Why did it take six weeks to act to try and rescue these people?

MR. VOTEL: Well, I guess the way I would answer that, and again I'm probably not going to satisfy and give you too many details here on that, but I would just tell you is you look at this through the eyes of a military commander who is trying to put together a force to deal

with that type of situation.

What we are trying to do is were trying to get as much information as we can that ensures that we can execute an operation with a good opportunity for success. And at the same way you know, have a acceptable level of risk, not only for our self but for the hostages.

You know, going off without being well prepared or without having the right information not only jeopardizes the force, but it could potentially also jeopardize the hostages. So you know this really to me is about the art of what our business is here.

It's about balancing and looking for do I have enough information right now, do I have enough information right now and so you know -- I know it often sounds like, hey, but here's the burning bush of information right here. But I think what in my experience what I found -- and I've been involved in a number of hostages operations here -- and what I found is there rarely is one thing that tells you this is it.

Certainly human intelligence is an important aspect of that, but what we try to do is combine it with a variety of other intelligence sources and understanding of what the situation is to really give us the best chance to be successful. And so that's really what's kind of going through my mind and the mind of others as we try to look at these situations.

And you know, certainly in this particular case, you know, our efforts to try to recover them were not successful they were not at the location we went to. And you know, I want to just -- I would just mention to you that you know, beyond the families and the severe suffering they go through I would tell you the force feels exactly the same way.

MS. HERRIDGE: So when the Americans were executed what was the impact for that force?

MR. VOTEL: Well, I mean the impact is that, you know, -- that was -- we want to have those people, we want

our citizens back. That's -- that's something we would like to -- like to achieve. And in this case we were unable to accomplish that through a military means.

MS. HERRIDGE: Before we move on from that, I can just see real sadness in your eyes even discussing this. Was it like a thousand deaths to see what transpired with the western hostages?

MR. VOTEL: Listen, this is -- this is what -- you know, SOCOM -- you know the reason we have a SOCOM, a special operations command was because we failed to rescue our hostages in Iran back in 1980. We failed at a national -- at a national mission of great prestige. It was an embarrassment to our country and as a result Congress and a variety of others created this organization and the unique capabilities we have today. So we take this very seriously. We take protection of American citizens globally very seriously.

And while we don't do a lot of operations and to do that, fortunately we don't have to do a lot of operations. And when we do we want to be as successful as we can. And we always want to protect our citizens.

MR. VOTEL: Before we move on, the Abu Sayyaf raid we learned yesterday has revealed what was described as a treasure trove of information about the financial operations. What else can you share with us from that operation?

MR. VOTEL: Yeah, not a whole lot. You know, the -- I would -- what I would say is this --

MS. HERRIDGE: You say that with a smile and I like it when you do that.

(Laughter)

MR. VOTEL: What I would say is this is that you know we really benefit when we're able to put people on the ground and get information and be able to exploit you know, their technical devices there, their you know whatever papers or other stuff that we can get out or if

we can bring people out and we can talk to them, then that really helps give us a much more fulsome understanding of what's happening.

And so you know this has been a very successful technique for us for a long time as -- you know, the success that we achieved in Iraq the last time we were there and certainly in Afghanistan as we've gone after these networks, whether they're Taliban networks or al Qaeda or whatever, whatever ilk that we were focused on there I think really is largely successful by our ability to understand what they're doing what they're saying about themselves, what their intentions are. And we get a lot more of that when we actually capture somebody or we capture material than we do when we kill someone.

And so you know our object frankly when we put folks on the ground is always to try to do that and really benefit ourselves. We want to use that information, we want to analyze it, we want to get it into this wonderful intelligence community that we have and exploit it further so we can have better effects.

MS. HERRIDGE: Has that raid left ISIS off balance?

MR. VOTEL: I don't know if it's left them off balance. I think it certainly gave them a different dynamic from just strikes coming from the air or from you know maybe threats coming in from other opposition forces right there. And I think it -- I think doing those types of things, you know certainly a mix of military approaches to this is necessary here to keep the enemy off balance and provide great opportunities for ourselves.

MS. HERRIDGE: Has his wife been helpful?

MR. VOTEL: Again, I'm not going to talk too much about that.

MS. HERRIDGE: Okay. I just want to move here and maybe be a little old fashioned and take a step back and talk about al Qaeda. We've heard this week that al Qaeda in Somalia, in Syria the Khorasan and then also in

Yemen has been diminished. Is that also your assessment?

MR. VOTEL: It is my assessment, yeah.

MS. HERRIDGE: Is that a lasting state for them or is it going to require further pressure?

MR. VOTEL: Well, I think it does require further pressure. You know again, I -- you know, I think they have the ability to you know, regenerate or reinvent themselves in some ways. You now, we certainly I think have had a significant impact on them. I guess I would describe it as kind of al Qaeda might be down, but they're definitely not out.

And you know, I think one of the things you learn as a military guy is you respect -- you have to respect the enemy a little bit in their ability to recover and deal with you know, things that happened to them. And so you know, we don't ever say that parts done here, we won't do it. So I think you know these are long term approaches here. And we have to continue to apply pressure against them and be prepared to apply pressure against them. I think the most moment we take our eye off them we will increase our vulnerability.

MS. HERRIDGE: In June the leader of al Qaeda in Yemen was killed yet. Ayman al-Zawahiri has been silent on this and also silent on his replacement to be the number two, the general manager within the organization. What do you make of that?

MR. VOTEL: I think to me it's a good sign. I think it's an indication that we've been very effective at isolating him. So that -- that's kind of my initial reaction. I guess my -- the concern that I would have is we just don't know what we don't know in terms of how they kind of continue to adapt and move their information around and continue to communicate among themselves. So -- I mean in general I think it's a indication that we've isolated the leadership to a great degree.

MS. HERRIDGE: Looking at the new sort of style of terrorism, we've spend a lot of time at this conference

talking about home grown, but -- it seems to me to be another evolution. And maybe the right term is we have a standing order for terrorism. And I want to just talk briefly about what we saw in Paris at Charlie Hebdo.

We had one or both brothers travel to Yemen where they received weapons training from AQAP, maybe even media training because every time they were out on the street or near a microphone they were declaring themselves as al Qaeda in Yemen or being sent by Anwar al-Awlaki. Do you see that concept as sort of the standing order to act; time, place, and method left to the individuals?

MR. VOTEL: I think we do. I think as you described, I think we're seeing it being carried on in a variety of different locations. And I think that again goes back to this discussion about the complex environment that we operate in here, where people can be enabled or inspired or directed to do things in their own homeland at places we would not normally expect. And I think it highlights, I think a number of security concerns for us.

The cyber aspect of that, the use of social media and how people are radicalized and informed through that. I think it just highlights the challenge that we have, and why we have to really stay focused on this.

MS. HERRIDGE: When President Obama came into office, he indicated very strongly that JSOC and SOCOM would almost have a blank check, when it came to what they needed for operations. Is that still the case despite sequestration?

MR. VOTEL: I would never describe it as a blanket check.

(Laughter)

MR. VOTEL: And I don't mean that because I'm not getting what I need. I mean that because the organization you just mentioned, the US SOCOM is a values-based organization. We just don't do things to do things. We operate within the law, we operate within the rules of you know, armed warfare and we do things in accordance in

support of our policy and the things that our decision makers tell us, ask us to do.

So you know, certainly SOF forces I think in -- against violent extremism and there are a variety of other areas I think play a very, very key role to that. We have one tool for that. And ultimately, you know problems like we see in Iraq and Syria aren't going to be resolved by us. We can buy space, we can buy time, we can create some conditions that allow other things to come in; diplomatic, informational, other things to come in and really have the decisive impact in terms that's why, I think we're key players into this. And we've been, I think very well supported in the things that we've been asked to do.

MS. HERRIDGE: It's been a tremendous demand for SOCOM. I mean, what is the impact on the men and women who are working?

MR. VOTEL: Thanks for that.

MS. HERRIDGE: Yeah.

MR. VOTEL: It's on a day-to-day basis, about 7,500 men and women across SOCOM are deployed to somewhere between 80 and 90 countries around the world. And that's pretty much steady state for us right now. And then on top of that there's probably another 3,800 that are forward positioned around the world, in forward locations outside of the United States and then of course a sizeable portion that every day stands ready to respond to a crisis and be ready to do things, that's a key part of it.

So we've got a sizeable part of our force everyday that's engaged in the security environment. The impact of that -- and I think where we are now as we are I think at a sustainable level, we've learned a lot over the last 14 years, we've got some good practices and process in place that help us manage the temple of our individuals and our units, so we understand making informed decisions about that.

We've done some things in how we manage the force to add predictability into it for not only for our

units, but for our families. And we have put some really good programs in place with a great support from Congress and the Department of Defense to really take care of the stress associated with deployment here. We certainly see that.

You know, the average enlisted guy in SOCOM is probably 29 years old, he's married, he has two children, he's been deployed anywhere from four to ten times and he is -- he or she are continuing to do things for us as it moves forward. And so they are very focused on the mission, they're very focused on supporting their team. So they have a tendency to not look at the stress side of the house and focus on the mission. But we have an obligation to take care of that. And so I'm very encouraged by the things that we -- my predecessors have started to put in place. And I've been able to kind of continue to support to help address that and address the stress.

We've got military family life counselors, we've got psychologists, we've got licensed social workers, we've got physical trainers, we've got others out there who are working with our people that you know, take this holistic approach; mental, physical, spiritual, emotional approach to making sure we take care of them and their families.

MS. HERRIDGE: When the army announces that 40,000 members will be cut, what's the ripple effect for you?

MR. VOTEL: Well, for us it's a concern. The army or any of the services, when they take cuts on this, we are extraordinarily dependent on their services for our support. We don't do anything by ourselves, we are very dependent on their lift, on their intelligence, on their logistics, on their basing, on their ranges, on all kinds of things and so when they start being cut it impacts us. You know, 40,000 people less out of the army reduces our recruiting pool. We're looking for good people. And so you know, we look to the pools of people that are in the services to do that. That's where our people come from.

MS. HERRIDGE: Before we open up to some questions, I'd also want to ask you about the (inaudible) issue because that is back in the news today. Members of his team have told us that this really wasn't an issue of the military, they -- we never leave anyone behind. This was an issue of him leaving them behind that he walked away. What has been the impact on the men and women of the politicization of this swap?

MR. VOTEL: Yeah, I'm not sure. I'm not sure that there has been a particularly major impact on everybody. I think what -- I would offer two things; one we don't leave anybody behind regardless of how they got in that position. We don't leave anybody behind and we try to do everything we can to bring our people back, and that's kind of sacrosanct I think, within the military ranks.

The other piece is that I put my trust in my -- in army leadership and the others that are dealing with this, that are -- you know, now as he moves forward with whether legal aspects and activities are taking place and I'm very confident that the army will deal with that effectively and will deal with the facts and will do that properly. I'm just very trustful of my service in how we approach those types of things.

MS. HERRIDGE: Okay. With that we're going to open it up for a few questions, we've got a few minutes. I see Kim (phonetic) right there.

MR. VOTEL: Yeah. Hi, Kim.

MS. DORSCH: Hi, Kim Dorsch (phonetic) Daily Beast, CNN. General Votel, we've heard from a number of speakers about both ISIS and al Qaeda in this forum. What do you consider the major threat to US interests overseas and back here, which of them?

MR. VOTEL: Well, you know, the kind of the most near term threat to us, I think the most likely thing is the impact of terrorism and whether it is effecting our interests overseas or whether its perpetrating itself in the homeland, I think that is a very, very significant

concern for us. So certainly that's upfront. And then we see that every day.

But I think as you look at the long term threat to us, I am very concerned about Russia and what that means to us. That is a country that could pose an existential threat to the United States. And so, I think we have to treat that very, very seriously. So you know, I kind of look at the threats in terms of what's most likely, what's happening right now, what do we have to deal with, but then also what do we have to be looking at long term and continuing to -- and addressing now, so we don't find that threat perpetrating itself on us down the line.

MS. HERRIDGE: So you would be very much in line with General Dunford?

MR. VOTEL: I agree with general Dunford's comment, yes.

Ms. HERRIDGE: Okay, okay. Right, down in the back I thought I saw a hand?

MR. VOTEL: Oh, ISIS or Al Qaeda? Wow, I think ISIS is certainly, you know, much more prominent right now. Their ability to communicate, their ideology, their use of social media and stuff really, I think to me poses a very significant threat to us. That said, al Qaeda, while they have a different approach to this, I think remains a very, very, significant concern for us. Thank you.

MS. HERRIDGE: Sure, over here.

MR. CHATTIS: Morning, sir, Mark Chattis (phonetic) at (inaudible). Sir, yesterday we talked a lot about messaging and counter messaging. At the same time Congress is taking your funding away from TRWI and other original web initiatives. I wonder if you could comment on your views on that and funding? Thank you.

MR. VOTEL: Thanks. I think -- yeah, and we're aware of what's happened with the Trans-Regional Web

Initiative here. And you know, I think what our approach has got to be is trying to continue to inform on all the capabilities that we can bring to bear with respect to this. You know, the Department of Defense and SOCOM in particular, have capabilities we probably aren't the ones who should be totally in charge of that, that's probably something better left to the Department of State and others here.

But I think we have capabilities that can be brought to bear in this and help our diplomatic side address the counter messaging, as you've labeled it or the ideology or whatever, the informational aspect of the things we're doing. And so, I'm in favor of making use of all of the tools and authorities that are available to us. Whether they are things through the Internet, whether they are through print publications, whether it's through broadcasting, whether it's through engagements with vulnerable populations.

I think what we have to be able to do is use all of our tools. We don't want to take things out of play. I don't think -- but we have an obligation like to inform and ensure people understand why those things make a big difference for us.

MS. HERRIDGE: Another question? Yeah, right down here, please?

SPEAKER: This is Zeno (phonetic) from the Royce Phones (phonetic). We talk about a 40,000 cut in our troop level. Is this a whim of the current administration? In 18 months, we'll have a new administration will they have a different view? How would you deal with that?

MR. VOTEL: Well, you know, I guess I wouldn't describe it as a whim of the current administration. I think it's about making choices and prioritizing where we want to put our finite resources. And you know -- I mean, while I'm very, very concerned about that, I certainly have been watching what our chief of staff of the army has been saying about that. I am in agreement with him as he kind of lays out his position there. Land power is

extraordinarily important to us. And so I am concerned about these cuts here.

So I think what we have an obligation to do, as military leaders is always to continue to provide our clear, best, military advice, regardless of whether it's this administration or the next one, and continue to highlight the risks that are associated with the choices that we make.

MS. HERRIDGE: That will be a final question here, right here please. We may have time for two more. One more after this, we'll see.

MR. GIO: Good morning, General. Mike Gio (phonetic), Strategic Studies Quarterly. Your description of your building partner capacity operation sounds a lot like nation building or could be construed as nation building. Are there parts of the US government under a whole of government approach that you feel could be offering you more support in the building partner capacity?

MR. VOTEL: Yeah, I -- well, you know in that little description that I went through there, I probably did not give full credit to all the other partners that we work with, like USAID and other instruments out there that are absolutely critical to doing this. I mean, I -- right now, I think we get great support.

Our relationship with the Department of State, with the USAID from a SOCOM standpoint to our counterparts are I think, as good as it's ever been. I would say that about most of our relationships crossing our agency. So it is I think it's about getting focused on priorities and making sure that we -- when we look at our particular problems that we try to leverage the best capabilities that every part of the government can bring to that.

Certainly the part that I bring, the part the Department of State brings, the part others bring to that and making sure that we kind of pull that together in a very holistic fashion. Oftentimes, the military is not in charge of that. We shouldn't be in charge of some of that

stuff. It should be the Department of State leading those efforts.

And so you know, we work very closely with chiefs of mission around the world, supporting their objectives with our capabilities. And so I think it's important, we just kind of continue to work on those relationships and look at how we complement each other with the various different capabilities that each of us brings.

MS. HERRIDGE: I thought I saw one last question in the back, if it's still out there? Okay, yeah. And then we'll wrap it up there.

MR. DUNLAP: General, just -- Charlie Dunlap from Duke Law School, just a quick follow-up to that. In my experience seeing SOF and other military do peace time engagement and they do wonderful things and a lot of times they're the only option for the country in best. Do you have any concerns though that in a lot of these countries, the face of America becomes the military? And that the people see the only people getting things done are people in uniforms? And do you have any thoughts on how that might be addressed?

MR. VOTEL: I don't know that I have any particular concerns on that. I think I would agree with you and there are some places where that linkage is very, very, strong. It's been enduring, we've had partners that have been to school in the United States and we've had long-term military relationships with them. And so I think we are trying to continue to foster that and make it as strong as we can.

I think what we try to do, with our people we put forward is make sure they understand, the way that we do this in countries -- this isn't about a military-military relation. It's about working and supporting the ambassador and making sure that our people can communicate very clearly with the chiefs of mission, what we're doing, why we're doing it and ensuring the things we're doing are in support of their objective.

So -- and I'm pretty pleased with that. As I travel around, look at our teams out there, I always see very, very good relationships between the young kids that we have, sometimes NCOs or warrant officers or very young officers that are doing great things out there, and their ability to talk with an ambassador and explain why we're doing the things we're doing and ensure we're in sync with them, I think is pretty good.

I certainly can see where some instances where that could you know, get a little eschew. But frankly, I think we do a pretty good job of staying on top of that and making sure we are very linked in to the embassies, and making sure that that is the principle function.

MS. HERRIDGE: General Votel, I think I speak for all of us. Thank you very much for making the trip to Aspen and for giving of your time and for speaking so directly to our questions this morning. Thank you.

(Applause)

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