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A raucous, soon-to-be-sleepy, post-lunch crowd?!

What an honor!

Thank you so very much, it is a privilege to be back here at the Global SPACE and Air Chiefs' Conference (did I get that right...I think GloSpACC may have a better sound to it, right?) Worth considering, anyway...

Notwithstanding, it is truly an honor to be among this distinguished group of colleagues...and you should all know, this will be my last public speech as the U.S. Space Force's Chief of Space Operations as I head into retirement next month. I only hope that my content today can live up to the expectations of such a finale. So much has transpired in the last four years, I've struggled to really capture the right message for today as it's difficult to focus and prioritize just the right issues for this diverse audience. In my struggle to find coherence and substance, I received

some inspiration from an unlikely source...the American poet, Robert Frost. I recently rediscovered one of his poems that got me thinking...

However, recognizing that this international audience might not be familiar with an old American poem, I hope you will indulge me for a bit of recitation. In 1915, Frost wrote:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;*

*Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference*

This last line is what was most inspirational... “Two

roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by...And that has made all the difference.” Now in my youth I read that as sage advice that I should not be afraid to take the less traveled path.

Now I’m older, and what I mean is I’m more experienced. And when I reread the poem, I was struck by the irony. You see, the title of that famous poem is “The Road NOT Taken.” The subject of the poem is the other path...not the one he took, the less traveled by path...the “Road NOT taken” was the other path. The poem’s subject, at least as the title would indicate, is about the road most traveled, the one he decided against...now this confused me, so I read the poem again, and then I found the lines which say...“though as for that, the passing there had worn them really about the same.” What?! Both paths are worn the same? So here again my age, I mean

experience, kicked in...this poem is not about taking a less traveled path...it's about decision making and being brave enough to make the decision and move forward when you are not sure exactly where that decision will lead you.

Over the last four years as we established the U.S. Space Force and worked tirelessly to meet the challenges of a contested space domain, I, and many others, have had to make countless decisions with imperfect information and uncertainty about precisely where those decisions might lead our Service. What I wouldn't give in those moments to be able to see two paths diverging and be faced with a simple choice of picking one to follow, but the strategic pathways that we need to navigate remain opaque to our best capabilities in forecasting. The complexity of problem solving and proceduralizing a new service, while attempting to characterize modern warfare that is rapidly

changing around us does not lend itself to simple path selection choices.

So, my thesis question today for this accomplished group of military leaders...Are we bold enough to make the decisions that need to be made? Do we know which decisions must be made, right or wrong? Where is forward action more important than the path itself? On the other hand, is NOT making a decision a legitimate choice for us?

And here it's wise, I think, to remember a very important line from the Frost poem. He writes, "Knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back." Meaning...once a path is chosen, it is unlikely we will ever be back in the situation with the ability to remake the decision and choose a different path. Now, I know at this point you're like, "Salty, what are you talking about? This is not space. I don't understand forests and trees and

paths. What's going on here?" It sounds like an Army manual more than anything else.

I'm simply wondering aloud ... Can we see the relevant path today? Is there a divergence (or a series of divergences) that we as military leaders must recognize? Do we have the courage of our convictions to make those decisions or is the forest too dense? Is the destination unclear, or are the paths too numerous causing us to hesitate? If the forest represents the modern battlefield and our destination is to a place of military advantage over our adversaries, do we even recognize the paths? Well, I contend that we should at least take the time to develop the relevant questions that will help us see the pathways.

For example, have we sufficiently modernized the principles of war such that they can still guide the operational art? What does mass and maneuver look like

in cyberspace? What does the high ground look like on a multi-domain modern battlefield? Against today's defenses, should we prioritize agility and decision speed over mass and firepower? Must we choose? Can we afford to hedge in all directions? Manned versus unmanned? Stand-in or stand-off? Where in warfare are we committed to artificial intelligence being used for decision making? Perhaps that's the default, in which case we must ask: where do we need to slow things down so human decision makers can apply their judgment? What are the limits to commercial systems in warfighting? Is the world so transparent now that sanctuaries are a thing of the past?

Finally, for a question more specific to the role I play, are we committed to mastering space as a warfighting domain? Now clearly, I have more questions than answers.

But the first step, I believe, is to ensure we are asking the right questions, since the right answers to the wrong questions are irrelevant.

We must also acknowledge that these are difficult questions to generate and the paths that flow from any answer will be obscured. None of us will be able to effectively peer down the path far enough to find whether the path is the right one or the wrong one, and this, I think, was ultimately Frost's message. It's not the path you choose that makes the difference...it's the fact that you chose a path that makes all the difference.

My takeaway is that a bias towards action is an operational imperative for us all. Consider this: each of you may have an opinion about whether or not space is a warfighting domain. What I can tell you with some degree of certainty, with all due respect, is that your opinion

doesn't really matter. Any more than me opining that air is not a warfighting domain...even amateur observations of the modern battlefield indicate these are warfighting domains because it is clear both air and space provide military utility. Fundamentally, battles are one side taking military actions, and the other side trying to deny them, and vice versa. Wherever these armed contests between military activities occur, that's a warfighting domain.

The modern battlefield with all its warfighting domains creates the conditions that present us with various paths to reach our objective. To get to our destination, we must navigate the forest, and therefore we must choose a path. Regardless of our opinion of the modern battlefield, we are charged with determining a path to arrive at military advantage. We must frame our choices around how best to gain military advantage. And for better or worse, the path

we choose will make all the difference.

Now, as you can tell, coming to the end of my military career has made me reflective. So, if you will indulge me, I'd like to spend my remaining few minutes describing a few of my reflections more broadly. Some you have likely heard before, others perhaps not.

First, in the hyper-political environment we find ourselves in, with partisan politics creating divisions between a multitude of stakeholders, I remind myself that military institutions in our democracies, particularly military leadership, serve as the ballast in the ship. While it may feel like this ballast slows progress as the ship of state attempts to quickly move towards its goals, the ballast creates stability when the inevitable storms arise. We as military leaders in our democracies must remember our roles, think long-term, offer our military experience to

decision-makers, and do what we can to provide stability and be a calming presence.

Second, we are stronger as a team of nations than any one of us is individually. There is far too much evidence over the last 80 years or so to argue otherwise. In my experience, the team is strongest when its members have routine and continual interaction. I've never been a fan of All-star teams...bringing the best individuals together and assuming they will perform well as a team is a flawed assumption. Teamwork is built over time. It requires trust, commitment and mutual understanding forged through ongoing interaction. I believe space is the ultimate team sport because the orbits we rely on do not adhere to national boundaries. While each of us looks up from our specific parts of the globe and can individually characterize part of the space domain, together we can cover far more. God

forbid, if a conflict extends into space, none of us will be able to avoid the war zone. Unlike a combat zone in the air, land or sea, we will not be able to steer clear. Whether we want to be in the combat zone or not, orbital mechanics will put all of our space capabilities into the space war zone. We will share the consequences; therefore, we should share the responsibility for a safe, secure and stable space domain.

Third, these widespread consequences of conflict in space should make deterrence a goal for all of us. To avoid a war when possible is a common objective I have observed from every military leader I have ever encountered. We all know firsthand the consequences, and we, more than any other group, want to avoid it. It is my opinion that the best way to deter a war is to prepare for one, but as those who heard my last keynote here two years

ago may remember, I believe military leaders have a unique responsibility with regards to deterring conflict. In here I mean, a broader use of deterrence beyond nuclear war...conventional deterrence, if you will. In my estimation, we should focus on the science of warfare and not the political art of deterrence. Deterrence, as we know, plays out in the mind of our adversary. It involves a decision calculus where cost and benefits are measured. But these measurements are imprecise and assessing how best to deter involves unknowns that make it difficult to plan for. Consider this...if asked to deter a missile attack, we would have to make the adversary believe the costs of an attack outweighed the benefits. So, we'd need to know a few things to create those conditions: What does the adversary hold dear? What is the adversary willing to suffer? How is the adversary motivated? Is the adversary

driven by fear, honor, or national interests? The answers to these questions are necessary to properly deter, and nearly impossible to determine objectively.

On the other hand, what if instead of deter, we were asked to defend against a missile attack? Here the science of war has more objective answers. How many missiles? What are their ranges? Where will they launch from? What are the most likely targets? As military strategists and leaders, we should focus on this aspect of national security. Be ready to defend, if necessary, even disrupt, degrade, and destroy. If we have the capabilities to do this, it will be seen as a combat-credible force, which should create a deterrent effect. And if it doesn't...we will be prepared to effectively respond to the aggression.

Lastly, I've come to appreciate that not all challenges must be solved. Some challenges should simply be

managed. Some of the challenges we face are so complex and would require extraordinary effort, focus, and resources to solve. The most frustrating of these often tantalize us with seemingly reasonable fix actions...but inevitably those actions come up short and we extend the problem. There are many reasons for this, but my experience leads me to conclude that managing these challenges to reduce their near-term impact is probably as good as it gets. Effective interoperability between the systems across all our nations...worthy effort, unlikely we will comprehensively do this. Classification levels that don't interfere with combined operations...worthy effort, but we are unlikely to solve that completely. Weapon system acquisitions at operationally relevant speed...worthy effort, but pace of the operations that I'm seeing, we're unlikely to solve this once and for all. Don't

misunderstand me...we must continue to press hard to mitigate these challenges...continued enhancement in these areas always makes us better. However, as senior leaders we must acknowledge that the multitude of very dynamic variables means these will be enduring challenges and we must set expectations with our national leaders. A healthy respect for the complexities of these types of issues will serve everyone's interests in the long term...setting long-term interests, enduring goals, stable resourcing and continuous R&D efforts...rather than quick fixes that promise much but deliver little. The number of years of military experience in this room is impressive. We must all commit to using the credibility that comes from that experience to provide realistic expectations, stabilize decision-making processes, strengthen our partnerships, and focus on our unique roles in deterrence. After 35 years

of reflection, I believe this is the best contribution we can make to international peace and stability.

In conclusion, I would be remiss if I didn't let you all know how much I appreciate the friendship, collaboration, and mentorship I have received from this group. I appreciate how tolerant this group of mostly pilots has been with the space guy. I have committed myself and the U.S. Space Force to assisting our international partners in their development of space capabilities and expertise. I believe we have ingrained that mindset in our young Service and have developed the institutional processes to continue to enhance our collective space community. As I shift my focus to the next chapter in life, please know that I will be cheering you all on from the sidelines and I remain at your beck and call if I can ever be of assistance.

Thank you, and Semper Supra!