

MILITARY

A View From the Top

Heather Wilson, The University of Texas at El Paso

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: As a graduate of the Air Force Academy, how well do you think the Air Force Academy set you up for success?

Wilson: The Air Force Academy opened doors for me that I didn't even know were there. I went there as a 17-year-old kid from a family that never had someone go to college. The Academy gave me an exceptional education – a very broad education with a foundation in engineering and science but also in the liberal arts. The Academy also helped me develop as a leader. The Academy is a leadership laboratory to prepare lieutenants to take on the responsibility of leadership. So, I benefited from it tremendously. The one thing I would highlight particularly that I think is important, is the Academy's emphasis on the Honor Code and values-driven leadership. A foundation of values is central to what every leader does. Understanding what your values are and creating relationships of trust based on those values is an essential part of leadership.

The Honor Code at the Academy, is explicit and foundational. It is the core of what it means to be an Air Force officer and a leader.

Lindsay: With that in mind, how are we doing with respect to setting up our young men and women for success in leadership?

Wilson: I think the military services have more of a focus on training, education, and leadership development than almost any other element of our society. The Air Force as a whole does a good job developing leaders of character.

Lindsay: One of the goals of the commissioning sources and all of the training and education programs is to set them up for success to lead now and into the future. From the perspective that you had as a former Secretary of

Dr. Heather Wilson is the President of The University of Texas at El Paso. Previous to this position, she served as the 24th Secretary of the United States Air Force, a member of Congress, President of the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, and as an Air Force Officer. Dr. Wilson received her undergraduate degree from the United States Air Force Academy (1982) and her Master's and Ph.D. as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University. She has over 35 years of experience in higher education, government, military, and the private sector.

the Air Force, what are some of those future leadership challenges that our young men and women are going to face in the military?

Wilson: There are two big challenges the next generation will face. The first is the rise of China and the resultant shift in national power in the Pacific. The second is rapid technical change. The pace of innovation is accelerating. Young leaders are not only going to have to cope with rapid change, they are going to have to drive change. One of the things that I was concerned about as the Secretary, and more generally as an American, was a declining focus within the service on technical expertise. We remember Jimmy Doolittle for the Doolittle Raid. He was also the first Ph.D. Aeronautical Engineer to graduate from MIT. I don't know how it happened, but there are fewer Air Force officers with advanced degrees in science and technology than perhaps there were in the past. I think that limits us.

Lindsay: Limits us in the ability to stay relevant and current with technology?

Wilson: It limits our understanding of the parameters of what is technically possible. There has always been a symbiotic relationship between the industry that builds our equipment and the Air Force that uses that equipment. You need to be a savvy customer and you need to have enough people that understand the technology and the science. I worry that we may have lost our technical edge as a service.

Lindsay: How might we address that? Is that something that we need to do more on the front end or can it be addressed with more advanced degrees?

Wilson: Gen David Goldfein (current Chief of Staff of the Air Force) and I did expand the number of sponsored Master's and Ph.D. slots for Air Force officers. We created the Ph.D. Management Office

under the A1. We would have people get advanced degrees and then we weren't managing their careers as if they were highly valued assets, which they are. And this summer, the Air Force is getting feedback on new promotion categories so that we don't punish people who get advanced degrees.

Lindsay: It is a long term investment to take those officers and integrate them back with intentionality once they have that increased education and competency.

Wilson: Yes. Under the current system, Lieutenants, Captains, and Majors are often discouraged from getting advanced education. With wider promotion windows, and different categories for promotion we don't have to try to make an acquisition officer's career look like a logistics officer's career path. That opens up more opportunities to develop people so that you have really high performing teams at every level in the Air Force.

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I interviewed every 3-and 4-star job in the Air Force for two years. We always had exceptional candidates for 3-and 4-stars in operations. But we are desperately short of expertise in science, technology, engineering, research and development, and in some cases, logistics and maintenance because we don't promote or reward people in those fields.

Lindsay: Implicitly I think we value that education, but explicitly it doesn't always line up with who gets promoted and where people see growth opportunities. As someone who has directly benefitted by the

educational opportunities though advanced degrees in the Air Force, I can attest first hand to their value and developmental growth.

Speaking of your time as the Secretary, when you think back to that time, what are you most proud of?

Wilson: Probably the focus on restoring the readiness of the force to win any fight at any time. The second would be advocacy for increasing the budget of the Air Force. Dave Goldfein and I spent a lot of time trying to tell the story of an Air Force that is too small for what the Nation was asking it to do, and securing the support to restore readiness and expand the size of the force.

Lindsay: In those endeavors, were there any surprises or unique challenges with the position of Secretary that you had not anticipated?

Wilson: There were surprises every day! I had never worked in the Pentagon before so some of the processes in the Pentagon were completely new to me. The thing that I think I realized once in the job was that, in our structure of government, the Service Secretary has almost all of the authority to run the Service. The Chief of Staff has almost all of the influence. If you work together, you can get a heck of a lot done. If you are at cross purposes, neither of you can get much done. Dave Goldfein is one of the best leaders that I have ever had the opportunity to work with. That strong professional relationship between the Secretary and the Chief to advance the Air Force was one of the real joys of the job. I have tremendous respect for him and his leadership ability. We were able to work together better than any team in recent history of the Air Force. Part of it may have been that we were sworn in on the same day and at the same place at the United States Air Force Academy Field House. So, we had a strong common foundation of values. Our professional paths took different routes. He became a combatant officer and I went into public policy and higher education. But, I

think there was something about having had that early experience of professional life in the Air Force that made it very easy to work together.

Beyond the common set of values, we maintained near constant communication. There is an obligation for military officers to give their best military advice to the civilian authorities appointed above them. However, there is no obligation for the civilian authorities to ask for that advice. But if you ask for advice, it is freely given. There is almost no major decision that I made that I didn't ask Dave Goldfein what he thought. While we didn't always agree, if it was really important, we probably spent some time talking it through. It takes near constant communication and a level of trust that you build every day.

Lindsay: I would also assume having the humility to accept that counsel of those around you?

Wilson: Dave Goldfein made me a better Secretary. I think he would also say, if you ask him, that I made him a better Chief of Staff. That is evidence of a really effective executive relationship. We got to the point where we could tell each other's jokes and finish each other's sentences. But it wasn't just the two of us. The top four or five of the leadership team were quite close. If I had to be somewhere and couldn't cover something, we could look around the table and say, Gen Steve Wilson (current Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force) could you cover that one? It was that good a leadership team.

Lindsay: It is important to see such an example because we can all come up with too many examples of where there isn't effective teamwork. The ability to go back and forth and challenge one another professionally to help make the team better isn't seen often enough.

Wilson: We often disagreed but it was productive disagreement. We made each other think and we came from different perspectives. That was really useful.

There was also a respectfulness about it. We were classmates at the Academy. But in the two years we worked together, from the day I was nominated to the day I stepped down, he was so focused on the importance of the symbolism of his office, he never once called me by my first name. We are classmates. But we both had a roles to play under the Constitution and we were respectful of those roles for the Airmen that were watching us and looking to us. While we sometimes disagreed, I don't think we ever publically disagreed and we never sought to undermine each other if we did disagree. That also helped to create trust. I knew that if I was really struggling with something, frustrated with something, or couldn't understand something, I could talk it through with him.

Lindsay: Without that trust, you really can't have those types of conversations because you would be worried about motives or agendas.

Wilson: The motive of Dave Goldfein was clear. He was all about making the United States Air Force better, accomplishing the mission, and developing the next generation of Airmen. He was mission focused. As a leader, I tend to be values-driven, mission focused, and people oriented. I would say that is probably true of Dave Goldfein as well, which is probably the reason why we worked so well together.

Lindsay: What a great team and example. Switching gears a little bit. I know you have some history in academia, but why the choice to go back to being a University President after being the Secretary of the Air Force?

Wilson: I'm hoping the Airmen won't take offense at this, but the best job I have ever had was being a

University President. Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis knew when he recruited me to be the Secretary of the Air Force that eventually I wanted to go back to higher education somewhere in the West. When the University of Texas called, I listened because it's a pretty special place and is in the West where we wanted to be. Higher education matters to the future of this country and it needs great leaders too. It came a little bit earlier than perhaps I expected but the last time this college presidency turned over was 30 years ago. It doesn't happen a lot.

Lindsay: Timing certainly is important. There is one last question I wanted ask. As you think back over your career, do you have any advice for young leaders who are just starting out?

Wilson: Two things really come to mind. First, always focus on building relationships of trust and keep widening the circles of relationships of trust

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that you have as a leader. You never know when those relationships will turn up back in your life. The second would be to keep sharpening your saw. More than my generation, this generation of leaders are going to be living in a time when they have to constantly be developing themselves and learning new things. It will be a spiral of learning throughout their lives. It wasn't like that for my parent's generation. It will be different for them because the world is changing so fast. So, they have to commit themselves to always be learning.

Lindsay: That applies not only on the technical side, but as we become more connected and global, they have to think about their interactions with others as well.

Wilson: Absolutely. So, what did I spend my summer doing? I actually took a break between leaving the Air Force and arriving at the University of Texas at El Paso. I spent a month in an immersion Spanish language class in Mexico. I requalified on my airplane and studied up on atmospheric science and weather. Yesterday afternoon I went to the gym and was listening to David Brooks new book, *The Social Animal*¹, as I worked out. You have to continuously learn. For the next generation of leaders, learning must be a lifelong habit.

1 Brooks, D. (2012). *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*. Random House Incorporated.