

SPECIAL FEATURE

Get Back Up

Dr. Heather Wilson

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Dr. Heather Wilson served as the 24th Secretary of the Air Force. General Dave Goldfein, USAF (Ret.), served as the 21st Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force.

Introduction

Where It Started

Heather

It was 1976, and I was a junior in high school growing up in rural New Hampshire. The black-and-white television in my mom's bedroom reported on the evening news that the first class to include women had entered the United States Air Force Academy.

That was interesting.

Even at 15 years old, I was a competitive and adventurous kid, prone to do things a bit out of the ordinary. That image of women entering that beautiful campus in the Rocky Mountains stuck with me. A few days later, I went to talk to my grandfather about it. He had been one of the first pilots in the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force in World War I and came to America in 1922 in search of work. A barnstormer and mechanic, George Gordon "Scotty" Wilson opened little airports in New England in the 1920s and 1930s. In World War II, he was part of a group of civil aviators who patrolled for submarines along the Atlantic coast, towed targets for gunnery practice, and ferried parts to airfields to support the military. That group eventually became known as the Civil Air Patrol, the official auxiliary of the US Air Force.

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I deeply admired my grandfather. As his only granddaughter, I was something special to him. I knew he wanted the best for me, and he was proud of how well I was doing in school, but I was also a little afraid of what he might say. It was, after all, 1976. Opportunities were opening for women, but thinking about going to the Air Force Academy was more than a bit unusual.

He was sitting in his customary armchair in the living room of my grandparents' small house when I told him I was thinking about applying to the Air Force Academy. There was a long pause as he stared at his aged hands resting in his lap. Then, in his soft Scottish brogue, he said, "Well, I flew with some women in World War II— towing targets and ferrying airplanes. The WASPS. They were pretty good 'sticks.' So, I guess that would be okay."

With his blessing, I applied to the Air Force Academy.

On Saint Patrick's Day in 1978, my congressman's office told me that I had been accepted. It was a full ride scholarship and an opportunity to chart my own course.

A few days after graduating from high school that same year, I went to see my grandfather to say goodbye before leaving to attend the Academy. I was 17, the same age he had been when he lied about his age and joined the RAF. The same age his son, my father, was when he enlisted in the Army Air Corps just after the end of World War II.

My father, also a pilot and mechanic, died in a car accident when I was 6 years old. As a child, I don't think I really understood how turning the arc of my life toward aviation might have felt to my grandfather. Now with children and grandchildren of my own,

I have a deeper understanding of what my decision meant to him.

The day I left for the Air Force Academy was the only time in my life I saw my grandfather cry. A single tear traced the wrinkles of his aged face. He didn't acknowledge it was there and neither did I. I wonder now what he was thinking about—about the son he lost too soon, about the life he had lived in aviation, about the granddaughter he loved and who loved him? I didn't ask. In that moment of emotional connection, it was likely some of all those things.

My brother drove me in his pickup truck to the airport in Hartford, Connecticut. I had a small brown suitcase with a single change of clothes, a dozen sets of white underwear, and combat boots we'd been advised to purchase early to break in. I had a 35 mm camera that was my high school graduation present from my mother. Most important of all, I had a one-way ticket to Colorado Springs, Colorado.

I was on my way. I didn't know it then, but it would be the adventure of a lifetime.

Dave

I was in high school at Ramstein Air Base, where my father worked as a colonel on the NATO staff. My older brother had been at the Air Force Academy for 3 years and was at the top of his class as a leader, eventually rising to wing commander—the highest-ranking cadet.

I applied to the Academy but received a polite rejection letter rather early in the process with every box checked as to the reasons why: academics, athletics, leadership, extracurricular activities, community involvement, the list goes on.

So, I applied to the University of Wyoming where my best friend, Bob Ihle, planned to attend. My passions as a teenager were scouting, the outdoors, and music. Where better to study forestry and pursue my dream of becoming a guitar strumming, back-country ranger at a national park? They let me in.

Then I got the phone call that would change my life. A lieutenant colonel from the Academy admissions office called me at the base commissary where I was bagging groceries for tips. "We haven't heard back from you on the preparatory school scholarship we offered," he said. "Are you going to take it?" The thing was, I had no idea what he was talking about. As it turns out, they sent an offer letter to my aunt in New York, but she never forwarded it to us in Germany.

I thanked him and kindly informed him I was headed to Wyoming to study forestry and to please give the scholarship to someone else. There was a long silence on the phone before he asked if I wanted to discuss it with my parents first. Meanwhile, my boss was yelling for a bagger. I quickly told him I would, though it wouldn't make any difference, because I knew I was set on Wyoming, and my first tuition check had already been paid. After all, Bob would leave in a week, and we'd already discussed him setting up our dorm room. I wasn't far behind.

I went home for supper.

My dad was reading the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper over a plate of lasagna when I casually mentioned the phone call and that I had turned the offer down since everything was in motion for Wyoming.

There was a long pause.

My dad slowly folded the paper and set it aside. His steely blue fighter pilot eyes that had seen combat over the skies of Vietnam locked onto mine. I remember my younger brother, Mike, also looking at me like I was a bit crazy.

"Let me make sure I understand this," my father said deliberately. "Someone from the Air Force Academy called you today and offered you money to go to school. And you told him no, that you would rather use my money to go to school."

Let's just say I called Lieutenant Colonel Jackson back. He didn't seem surprised and hadn't given the scholarship away.

A year later, after time at preparatory school, I received a different kind of letter from the Air Force Academy telling me that I had been accepted in the class of 1982.

I'm forever grateful to that lieutenant colonel.

Chapter 1:

Am I Worthy?

Dave

On a full moon night, while flying a combat mission over Serbia on May 2, 1999, I became a pilot with more takeoffs than landings. Once I pulled the ejection handle and rode the rocket seat out of my dying F-16, my life depended on the courage and commitment of a small team of special operators who risked everything to bring me home.

You can read more about the details of this experience and the leadership lesson it taught me in the next chapter, but besides “get back up,” this experience taught me another equally important lesson.

During the final moments of the rescue, as the sun began to rise and as the team fought their way to me, overcoming surface-to-air missiles that enemy troops were firing from below, I thought about these brave young warriors and how lucky I was to be from a nation that wouldn’t leave anyone behind. America was not going to rest that night until I was safely back in the arms of my wife and daughters.

Was I worthy of their risk?

This question—am I worthy?—thus became my daily “mirror check” in every position I was privileged to fill. It remains my mirror check to this day and will be for the rest of my leadership journey.

Leadership is a precious gift offered by those entrusted to our care. As servant leaders, we must work every day to earn and re-earn this gift. The way we do this is through how we act when nobody is watching, how we live our lives, how we approach the tough decisions when good options are long gone, and how we treat and take care of those who choose to follow us.

As soon as we start feeling entitled to either the position or the perks of rank and responsibility, we begin to deviate from true servant leadership. Trust grows over weeks, months, and years, but it can be lost in a moment of indiscretion or in a sense of entitlement.

To be truly worthy of the gift of leadership, we must also understand the difference between character and reputation. Character defines who we are and forms the very essence of a servant leader. Reputation is how others see us after watching our performance over time. If we focus on the former, then the latter will take care of itself. (The same is not always true in reverse.)

Knowing the importance of character in leadership makes us reflect on our own actions and values. In doing so, we are challenged to evaluate our worthiness through the lens of courage, humility, and service.

Am I worthy of the risk those young warriors took to bring me home those many years ago?

Am I worthy of the trust extended to me by the parents of the young men and women who chose to join the Air Force—those young people who are the greatest treasure in our nation’s arsenal? Am I worthy of leading those who look to me to make tough decisions with character, courage, and competence?

Am I worthy of standing before my grandchildren, to whom I dedicate this book, in the hope that they, too, will be inspired to pursue a path of servant leadership? The only answer I have found appropriate over the years is one that brings me to prayer. Please God, I hope so. I hope I am worthy.

Heather

It was 2007. I was called into a briefing in the windowless hearing room of the House Permanent Select

Committee on Intelligence, which, at the time, was high in the Capitol building underneath the cast iron dome.

I had been working for over a year on oversight hearings and draft legislation to update our foreign intelligence surveillance laws, which failed to keep up with advancements in technology and the changing nature of global threats. We came close to an update in late 2006 but ultimately didn't get new legislation across the finish line.

Our government isn't set up to be efficient; it is set up to protect us from tyranny. Even easy, commonsense things are hard to get through the Congress. And updating intelligence collection laws—balancing national security with protection of civil liberties—in a technical area of the law wasn't easy. But it was important. The 2006 draft legislation died, as all legislation does, when the new Congress was sworn in. And with a change in power in the House of Representatives, I was now in the minority. I wasn't setting the agenda, but in that committee room, all of us knew there were problems with the wiretapping laws and all of us knew that they needed to be fixed.

The law on intelligence collection, written in 1978, was specific to the technology of its time. In those days, almost all local telephone calls were made on phones attached to wires—landlines—and almost all international calls were transmitted over the air, typically using radio waves. By 2007, however, the technology had completely reversed. Nearly all local calls were on cell phones using wireless communication networks, and a lot of international calls were routed by computers on fiber-optic cables laid on the ocean floor. According to the original text of the law, any communications sent over the air could be collected, but if intelligence agencies wanted to touch a wire in the United States—even to gather the communications of terrorists overseas—then they needed a

warrant from a judge. That made no sense, and the law needed updating.

That day, underneath the Capitol dome, we were briefed on a particular case.

The Islamic State insurgency in Iraq was still threatening Americans, and three Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division had been captured by Islamic extremists in a dangerous zone in Iraq known as the “triangle of death.” While the American military immediately began searching house-to-house to find the Soldiers, the Department of Justice went to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court in Washington, DC, for permission to collect communications on the group that the Army thought was responsible.

Think about that for a second.

To get information about the communications and whereabouts of the terrorists holding our servicemen hostage in a combat zone—terrorists who, mind you, have no rights under the US Constitution and have never stepped foot in America—the US Army was sending lawyers to go to a court in Washington, DC.

The briefer, a lawyer from the Justice Department, explained to Committee members how fast they had responded. Within 24 hours, a petition was written, and a warrant was approved by a judge in the middle of the night. My colleagues asked more questions about the missing Soldiers and what was being done to find them.

In congressional hearings, questioning alternates between Republicans and Democrats and proceeds in order of seniority. I had one question when my turn came.

“You say it took you only twenty-four hours to get permission to look at the communications of a terrorist group who might be holding Americans in a combat zone. If it was your son who was being held hostage, is that fast enough?”

The lawyer, who until that moment had vigorously defended the speed of their legal work, paused and looked down at the witness table. Then he looked up at me with sadness.

“No, ma’am. It’s not.”

When it was over, I left the hearing and walked in silence through the tunnels that connected the Capitol to the Cannon House office building. I stepped through my office door, flanked on one side by the yellow and red of the New Mexico flag and, on the other, the Stars and Stripes. I went into the small restroom in the corner of my personal office, shut the door, and looked at myself in the mirror, thinking about the laws we had not yet managed to change. I gripped the edge of the white sink with both hands, bowed my head, and wept.

We had failed them. I had failed them.

Article I of the Constitution grants the Congress the power to “raise and support” armies. Not the President, not the judiciary, but the elected representatives of the people. My constituents sent me to Washington to represent them, and, as a member of Congress, I felt I had not done my job well enough. We hadn’t fixed this law.

As a servant leader, the “mirror check” means asking yourself, “Am I worthy?” This can be especially painful on days when you’re not living up to what people have a right to expect of you.

Am I worthy of their trust?

Am I worthy of their hard-earned tax dollars?

Am I doing the best I can for the people who gave me the privilege to serve?

Am I worthy of their sacrifice?

As a servant leader, to be worthy of those we serve, our job is to do the best we can with the gifts we’ve been given. This is the task, but it is one of the hardest tests of leadership.

A little over a year later, after hundreds of hours of work and negotiation, I was in the Rose Garden at the White House when President George W. Bush signed the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act Amendments that updated our laws. To tell you the truth, I don’t remember anything President Bush said that day. My mind was someplace else. I was thinking about three Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division.

Heather and Dave

Leadership demands that we ask hard questions ... starting with ourselves. Only by doing so can we truly understand that leadership is as much a gift as it is a burden, and that it is as much an opportunity as it is a challenge. As leaders, it is up to us to ensure that we never lose sight of the sacrifices made by others who have enabled and entrusted us to lead. Stories of those who have laid down their own interests and, for some, their lives, for a cause greater than themselves should set a high bar for what it means to be worthy of leadership. Such narratives are not merely tales of valor; they are the benchmarks against which we must measure our own commitment to service. The question “Am I worthy?” grounds us in our role and holds us accountable by demanding honesty and humility. It reminds us of the reason behind our positions of service and the people we are privileged to lead.

**Every day, check yourself in the mirror
and ask: Am I worthy?**