

Statement of

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**Acquisition Advisor to the Director,
Missile Defense Agency**

Before the

House Armed Services Committee

Regarding

Department of Defense Acquisition Reform

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Mr. Terry Little is the Acquisition Advisor to the Director of the Missile Defense Agency (MDA). He is the Director's primary advisor and representative on "big picture" acquisition matters. He conceives and implements acquisition streamlining initiatives, leads non-advocate acquisition reviews, and serves as an independent communication channel for acquisition concerns for all MDA and BMDS participants including government and industry. He retired from Government Service in January 2006. The government has reemployed Mr. Little as a Highly Qualified Expert.

Before retiring, Mr. Little was the Executive Director of the Agency (November 2004 – January 2006) and served concurrently as the Director of Kinetic Energy Interceptor Program. He came to the Agency in September 2002 after being the Director of the Air Force Acquisition Center of Excellence. Mr. Little is the DoD's most seasoned program manager. He has more than 25 years experience heading major weapons acquisitions. He is also noted as one of the Department's most forceful advocates for and practitioners of acquisition innovation. He has managed seven major programs during his career; he led three of those through the entire development phase and into production. Before moving to Washington, he concurrently directed both the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM) and the Small Diameter Bomb (SDB) programs. Both are models for acquisition innovation in the DoD. Mr. Little also headed the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) for the first five years of the program; JDAM was a pilot program for using commercial practices to buy military-unique systems. His experience before JDAM was in managing classified programs.

Mr. Little served 8 years active duty in the Air Force after graduating from Officer Training School as a Distinguished Graduate in 1967. He continued serving this nation when he became a civilian Air Force operations research analyst at Eglin Air Force Base Florida in 1975. He moved to the weapon acquisition field in 1980 as the Director of a major classified program. He was selected for the Senior Executive Service in January 1997. He is an Honorary Professor at the Defense Systems Management College and a member of the Board of Governors for NASA's Project Management Academy.

Among his many awards for public service are:

- 2006 & 1996 Secretary of Defense Meritorious Civilian Service Award
- 2003 Senior Executive Service Presidential Rank Award for exceptional long-term Weapon System Acquisition accomplishments
- William J. Perry Award for Development and Fielding of Precision Strike Systems
- David Packard Excellence in Acquisition Award
- Air Force Stewart Award for Excellence in Program Management

Mr. Little received a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Texas (1966) in mathematics; a Master of Science degree from the Air Force Institute of Technology School of Engineering (1972) in systems analysis; and a Master Degree from the University of West Florida (1979) in business administration.

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen, my name is Terry Little. I am currently the Acquisition Advisor to the Director of the Missile Defense Agency. I retired from federal service, but re-employed in the Missile Defense Agency in an advisory capacity. The committee invited me to testify today based on my 25 years of defense acquisition experience. My remarks and any answers I may give reflect my opinion and views only and not those of the Department of Defense or the Missile Defense Agency.

I want to thank the Committee for giving me the opportunity to offer my views on the Department of Defense's acquisition system. Although I have not recently participated in any formal studies, I do have some strong views that I have developed over the years from my experiences and observations.

My interaction with the defense acquisition system has been from the bottom up. I have been managing major acquisition programs in the Department of Defense almost continuously from 1981 until 2005. All but one of the programs I managed were Air Force programs and, all but that one, were joint programs with the Navy. Like the committee and fellow panel members, I have also been an interested and reflective observer of major acquisition programs in the Air Force as well as the other Services over the years. My aim was trying to learn as much I could from the experiences of others. I have managed acquisition programs both within the context of the DoDI 5000 series, as well as outside it, including classified programs in the Air Force and a program at the Missile Defense Agency. All the programs I have managed enjoyed success to varying degrees. So what has been different with my programs as compared to so many other programs in the Department that have been disappointing?

That is probably a question that I cannot answer directly. I think I know what I have done that produced a modicum of success, but it's speculative for me to comment on what others have or have not done that has yielded not-so-good results. Nonetheless, I will try and to offer some thoughts that might be helpful in charting out a way ahead. I want to begin by commenting on our overall acquisition process within the Department.

Our acquisition process is very cumbersome, frustrating, and bureaucratic. There are enormous areas for improvement.

Can we do better by more closely linking the budget and acquisition processes? Yes. Budget instabilities are the bane of every program manager I have ever known.

However, contrary to popular opinion in the Department of Defense that blames Congress, I believe the instabilities come mostly from what the Services do to themselves by having more programs than they can afford and by breaking lower priority programs to fix higher priority ones.

Could we make major improvements to the requirement process? Absolutely. We call the newest process “capability-based requirements,” but my observation is that not much has changed from the old process except for labels. I would offer that the way the Missile Defense Agency handles requirements in collaboration with the user seems right to me.

Can we streamline the oversight process? Yes, particularly by removing a lot of the staff people engaged in that process--people who are little value-added and have no accountability for outcome. A 50-75% cut in headquarters’ acquisition oversight staffs might stimulate the kind of streamlined thinking we need. I particularly think the functional staffs in headquarters duplicate field activities and create useless work.

Could we make organizational or institutional changes that might be helpful? Again, I think the answer is probably yes. I would be particularly pleased to see more continuity in our Acquisition Executives. Too, I think we might find better ways to take advantage of our most senior, proven program managers as mentors and advisors for those who are less experienced. It seems wrong-headed that we promote our best military program managers to flag level and then put them where they are outside the acquisition process. I realize that there are many who posit that changing organizational relationships and wiring diagrams will have a marked effect on program outcomes. My view is that those type solutions will be ineffective.

I believe the Goldwater-Nichols legislation is fundamentally sound as it pertains to acquisition. However, I am somewhat chagrined at how the Department has implemented it. In particular, the clear, unambiguous reporting chain the legislation provides for the program manager is, in practice, not that clear or unambiguous. There are simply too many people outside the accountability chain who have a “say so.” I also fret that there are too many waivers to the tenure and the personnel qualification requirements the legislation calls for.

This is probably heretical for an ex-program manager to say, but I think that having a somewhat inefficient, frustrating acquisition process may not be a totally bad thing. I don’t think we want to get it so streamlined that we rush to mistakes. With so much money involved, it could be good that we are so deliberate and slow to make decisions.

I would now like to draw on some specific inferences from my own experiences.

After I retired in January 2006, I sorted through a large number of plaques, pictures, awards and other mementos from my career. I had a very large number of those as you might imagine. They were cluttering up the garage; my wife insisted I do something with them. When I was finished sorting every single one of them was in the trashcan except for one. That one was a small going away plaque from the program team for very first program I managed. On the plaque was a verbatim quote of something I had told the program team over and over during the years I was the leader. The inscription was “Organizations don’t make things happen. People do.”

Seeing the plaque again reminded me how my experience has transformed my thinking. I came into my first program manager job very concerned about failing. I had virtually zero training and had never even been in a program office. I started my job thinking I was going to do the traditional management functions: planning, organizing, directing, etc. When I began to understand better the complexity of what I was undertaking, I was stunned by the magnitude of it all. It seemed overwhelming. What began to emerge over the first months was my realization that I had very capable people-- both government and contractor-- to help me--people who could understand and deal with the complexity. My job was to create an environment where they could succeed and to lead them through change. That meant developing and communicating a vision, creating a sense of mission, dealing with external interfaces, devising incentives and nurturing the team members. And, when things did not turn out as we might have wanted, to help them over the hump and alter our course. In short, my job was not to manage the program; it was to lead it.

Most program managers I have known have failed to grasp that or, if they have grasped it, have not practiced leadership. Instead, they look for organization, structural or process solutions to problems that are essentially people problems. At its very core, this acquisition business is not about contracts, testing, acquisition strategies, plans, technology, finance, oversight, or any of the other things one can learn about or make rules about. It’s about people. It is about peoples’ behavior--people who are generally trying to do the right thing, who have personal strengths as well as weaknesses, people who have knowledge and energy to bring to the program and who are looking for someone they can follow. That “someone” is the program manager.

Several years ago, I was a member of a large study team the Secretary of Defense chartered to re-engineer the Department’s acquisition oversight and review process. Very early in the team’s deliberations we got into a lengthy dialogue about the answer to the question “what factor(s) should determine how much oversight and review a program should get?” We argued for several days sometimes late into the evening. Some thought the total program value should be the determinant. Others believed that the degree should depend upon how critical the program was to the user or to Congress. Still others thought it should be a function of risk or of how well the program appeared to be proceeding. All of us grew tired of talking about it. Finally, after one particularly

grueling session, I suggested to the group that I would call the Defense Acquisition Executive and ask him what he thought. The group reluctantly agreed after I assured them that I thought he would talk with me because I knew him. I called him (Dr Paul Kaminski) at home and explained the debate we were having. When I had finished he thought for a minute or two and then replied, “The most important factor in deciding how much oversight and review a program should have is who the program manager is.” Absolutely right, he was. No factor outside the program matters more to success than who the program manager is. It’s about credibility and the trust that credibility creates. Many program managers don’t get it, in my view.

I think that another influential factor for the results I have produced is how I implemented the concept of a team. To me the “team” is not an abstract concept. It is not simply a gaggle of people working together. A team has to have a clear and distinct goal--a goal that doesn’t change over time. What makes a team is that this common goal, more than any other factor, determines the behavior of every team member. Where an individual’s behavior is motivated by something other than achieving the team goal, that person and the team will be dysfunctional. Let me illustrate with a simple example.

Suppose the Washington Nationals decide their goal for the upcoming season is to play in the World Series. We can agree that achieving that goal should determine the behavior of every player on that team. However, assume that the Nationals have a pitcher with a personal goal to win 20 games during the season and that he behaves in a way to achieve that goal. Should that person be part of the team? I say no. Why? Because there will come a time when his personal goal will conflict with the team’s goal. That pitcher will choose his goal over the team goal. For example, he may pitch when he is tired without telling the coach. A successful team can’t allow that.

Now let’s get back to acquisition. As the program manager, my goal is program success. Program success is to achieve the expectations for the program. My “team mates” are those who both share the same goal and accept that all others are subordinate insofar as their participation on the team. This means that inside the program office, I don’t want people who are specialists--those who are simply advocates for the best technology, the most air-tight contract, the most capable software, the most comprehensive test program, the lowest cost development program, etc. I want everyone’s behavior on the program governed by the same overall goal that I have. I want everyone’s decisions and recommendations to be as if I were making them. In other words, everyone’s work and thought processes must reflect a balance of competing interests just like mine. Otherwise, I am just not smart enough to synthesize all the conflicting inputs I get from within. Neither can I empower people to make decisions. When I can’t get people to meet these standards, I get rid of them. A team simply can’t function when one or more of its members have extraneous goals. The same applies to contractor teammates. I accept that they can have a legitimate goal of making money for

the company, but their overarching goal better be program success or we are going to have a huge problem.

One upshot of this team approach is that my program offices have always been quite small relative to those for similar size programs. This is partly a result of my eschewing large numbers of highly specialized people in favor of a few who are specialized, but who can think and work more broadly. It's also partly a result of my limitations in that I don't know how to form a team that involves a large number of people--it leaves too much room for conflicting goals and poor communication. And finally, it's because I have come to believe that large program offices necessarily lead to work for both the contractor and others that is non-value added work. Frankly, I have a difficult time understanding why even the largest programs in the Department need more than 100-200 people to do what they need to do. Numbers beyond that just blow my mind!

I learned about how critical leadership and a team approach were to program success heuristically--that is through trial and error. I don't think that it has to be that way. We should do a much better job selecting and mentoring program managers than we do now. I would suggest a rigorous screening process that would include attitude and preference testing as well as coming up with solutions to hypothetical and complex questions. There is some research on the attributes of successful program managers that would be useful, including work by Dr. Owen Gaden at the Defense Systems Management College. I would also recommend that some matching of an individual to the needs of the particular program would be a good idea.

We could also do better training of program managers. We send our best people to senior service schools for a year; I think we could afford to have training of similar duration for the people who are going to manage our largest acquisition programs. The bulk of that training should not be academic or process-oriented. Rather prospective program managers need to hear from seasoned program managers who have "been there and done that." This training would come after we had selected a person for a program manager position.

There has been research suggesting that we get most of what we need to be successful in our jobs not from training, but from emulating others and our experiences. Once we select and train a program manager, I think that manager should work under the mentorship of an experienced, capable coach. Ideally, that would be the Program Executive Officer. However, I have seen many cases, and experienced some, where the Program Executive Officer was not as capable as the program managers he was supposed to be mentoring. This should not be.

Now let me talk about expectations. When we cite programs with bad outcomes, many times we are talking about programs where the expectation for the program's cost,

schedule, or performance was unrealistic to begin with. Thus, the program was doomed to disappoint before it ever got underway! How could this happen?

Throughout my time as a program manager, I have been a fanatic about creating reasonable and realistic expectations. Because I was the first program manager for all my previous programs, I was able to set the initial expectations for cost, schedule, and performance. In every case, I anticipated I would be with the program for a long time. I will have more to say about continuity later, but this prospect shaped my expectation setting. I felt I was going to be personally accountable for achieving what I promised. So, I wanted to set expectations at a level where I thought, with high confidence, the program would succeed. Most program managers don't expect to have long-term continuity with their program and I suspect that shapes expectations they create.

Were the expectations that I set more realistic than those of others because I was smarter or better trained than others? No, I think there were three other factors.

1. When a program starts, there are enormous pressures on a program manager to over-promise. These pressures come from users, contractors, technologists, budget people and others. These are all well-intentioned pressures meant to "sell the program" or make it palatable in a very competitive market. I believe that many of the people applying these pressures rationalized doing that because they believed that once a program started, it would likely continue no matter how disappointing the results. Historically, there are ample grounds for that belief. How was I able to resist these pressures when many program managers do not? I am not a people-pleaser. I think that that there is an obvious answer whenever someone who is not my boss wants me to do something differently and I don't. Having a vision that, if I caved in, I would some day be standing in front of someone explaining why I had failed is a powerful motivator. My feeling of accountability, made it easy to be firm and direct in saying to those exerting the pressures "No, that's not how it's going to be." Some might say this demanded courage, but I would say that it simply required conviction and resolve.
2. The second factor behind my being able to set realistic expectations was my unwillingness to commit to concrete cost, schedule, and performance before I had enough information to do so. It is natural when there is lots of money involved for people to want to know exactly what they will get for the money and when will they get it. People want to know this before spending the money. The problem is that many times in this business we have little idea what's a reasonable expectation until we spend some money to gain added information. Our acquisition system doesn't tolerate that. It wants precise performance numbers, costs, and schedules early. I have come to realize that resistance is futile within the current DoD system. So, when the process compelled me to make an early judgment about what the development cost, a performance number or schedule

would be, I offered what I believed was a “you-bet-your-job” answer rather than one that I thought might be possible. In my experience, conservative expectation setting is rare. Most program managers I know--both government and contractor--prefer to say that something is “doable”, “achievable”, “success-oriented”, “aggressive,” or “tight.” I have learned that those type words accompanying an expectation really mean that it isn’t going to happen.

3. The final factor that I think underlies my being able to set more realistic program parameters is an obvious, but critical one: I have had much more experience than my peers. Program management will always be as much art as science. One can learn the science part, but the art part comes from practicing, from learning from mistakes, from being “in the field” instead of a spectator. Most critical program decisions will be judgment decisions where intuition plays as large a role as facts. We would like to think that there are right answers to every issue, but there just aren’t.

This leads me to another way that I perceive myself as perhaps different from many other program managers in the Department. Most program managers I know would say, at least privately, that things cost what they cost. You just tally it up, they would say. The inference is that performance is the most important among equals. I don’t accept that. I believe that you can manage costs by doing the right things and by having a cost-sensitive perspective. Let me use an anecdote to illustrate my point.

Shortly after I became the manager for the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) program, I found myself in the Air Force Chief of Staff’s office telling him about the program plan. When I had finished he asked me how much these things were going to cost. I had that information because we had just completed a cost estimate. The estimate projected a unit cost of \$62,000 average for 10,000 units. I had very high confidence in that estimate. The technology for the weapon was very mature--essentially off-the-shelf. Also, the bomb kit was relatively simple. However, as I tried to formulate the answer to the Chief, I realized that the estimate had a lot of assumptions and I had not gone over it in detail. So, my answer to the Chief was as follows: “If we buy enough of these we can probably get the unit cost down to about \$40,000.” The Chief thought a moment and then he said, “Mr Little, I want the very first unit to cost less than \$40,000. We are going to have to buy a lot of these so they need to be cheap. I want to see you again when you can assure me that you have figured out how to make this happen or when you are ready to tell me what I need to do to allow you to make it happen”. Making a long story short, the very first unit was less than \$20,000. How did that happen? Simple. We managed the cost as if it were a technical requirement. The design was not “the design” until we were certain we could satisfy the cost requirement just like the requirement for each bomb to strike accurately. We knew we could make something that would work well, but it took some time, money, ingenuity, concentrated engineering and total team commitment to make something we could afford. By the way, I never asked the Chief to

do anything. What I did many times was threaten to go to the Chief when others wanted me to speed up, add new performance requirements, or cut the development cost. That threat worked great! It's unfortunate that most program managers don't get that kind of top cover.

I should also note that making cost performance or cost schedule trades during development, like I was able to do with all the programs I managed, is a fantasy for most program managers in DoD. The only time this even becomes a possibility is when the program is on the edge of cancellation. It's just too hard to get the requirements community to accept less performance than that to which they think they are entitled--particularly when they think that cost is someone else's problem. To the users, the requirements are the vehicles they have to "hold the developers feet to the fire."

It is also quite possible to manage development costs. The way to do that is to develop what I call a "fixed price mentality" for developments. I will try and explain what that means.

During the 1980s, the Department had a disastrous experience applying fixed price contracts to development programs. The basic concept, I think, was a sound one. The application was miserable. In particular, the Department applied fixed price contracts to very high-risk development programs and, typically, the program selected the low bidder as the winning contractor. These two factors together produced contracts with very unrealistically low prices and predictable bad results as the work unfolded.

The Department, in an over-reaction, totally abandoned fixed price developments. So, today, the Department uses cost reimbursable contracts for virtually all system developments. This is a mistake, I think. A more creative and effective alternative would have been looking for ways to make developments lower risk and to remove the motivation for contractors to buy-in or "low ball." This switch to cost reimbursable contracts has had some very bad consequences that many people do not acknowledge--consequences that contribute substantially to the widespread cost growth and out-of-control development programs we see. I will explain.

1. The certain prospect of a cost reimbursable contract encourages contractors and acquirers to undertake developments that are excessively high risk. A new development that relies on essential technologies that are immature, manufacturing processes not yet proven, or beyond the state-of-the-art breakthroughs is surely going to be disappointing. It's going to cost more, take longer, and deliver less than anyone expected when it started. I argue that most everything the Department needs to develop today can proceed in low-risk stages with each stage providing an increment of capability. The expectation for that capability should be consistent with what we know we can provide at low-risk and in a short, predictable development time. Therefore, each increment should also be

compatible with a fixed price contract; if it's truly not, then the risk is probably too high to start. Once the development begins, the high-risk technology work can happen outside the program in parallel and at its own pace. When that technology is mature, then we can fold it into the development program as an added capability. But, one might say, "...this is spiral development which the Department policies encourage." It is, but, in practice, the increments are too risky and too long and have requirements that are inconsistent with what we know we can do. Also, the essential parallel technology work for future spirals tends to be under-funded. Cost reimbursable contracting encourages this troubling situation.

2. Many of our major developments lack execution discipline. Somehow, discipline doesn't seem to matter too much when the Government reimburses the contractor for all his costs and programs can almost always get more money after they begin. One of the major "lost disciplines" has been that of proper planning. There is a prevailing attitude that it's acceptable to "make-it-up as you go along" when you have a cost reimbursable development contract vehicle. After all, some would argue, the plans never come to pass anyway. There are too many unknown-unknowns that pop up inside the program and too many perturbations from outside. That's all false rationale. While it's true that things we didn't plan for happen, it's also true that the act of planning gives us a sound understanding of the work scope, the interfaces, and the critical tasks. When the detailed planning does not happen we end up learning many things from doing that we should and could have figured out beforehand. I would be the first to admit that doing detailed planning for anything beyond about three years is a pretty fruitless activity. However, if we could get to shorter, lower risk developments as I suggested, such a time horizon would be perfectly acceptable.
3. Finally, I believe that cost reimbursable contracts have allowed our major contractors to become very inefficient. Where a contract is cost reimbursable, the contractor has no motivation to reduce costs. What do I mean when I say "inefficient"? I mean employing more people on a program than is necessary for actually doing the work. I mean having more mid-level managers than the work needs. I mean tolerating marginally performing employees. I mean allowing indirect costs to balloon. I mean becoming comfortable with rework and repair. I mean buying new equipment or building additional hardware when it is not cost effective to do so. I mean allowing major subcontractors to "skate through" problems. I mean "inspecting-in" or "testing-in" quality. I mean "fee-stacking" where a prime collects profit on a suppliers profit. I could go on, but the point is that we have created an environment where inefficiency is very acceptable.

Certainly, we don't have to return to fixed price developments to solve the problems I have mentioned. There are other ways. In fact any program manager can solve these issues for his or her program today simply by changing how he or she does

business. More broadly, if we could alter how we develop across the Department so that we took lower risk, shorter steps we could increase fixed pricing and begin to change the cultural mentality away from a cost-based mentality to one that was price-based.

Now, I want to return to something I mentioned earlier--program manager continuity. I had a long tenure on every program I managed, an average of five to six years. This prospect not only contributed to my feeling accountable, but also contributed to program stability. I believe that our major programs should have managers who remain with the program until that manager dies, retires, resigns, is removed for cause, or has served five years. Some would say that this means that, therefore, we must have civilian program managers. I don't agree with that. In fact, as a general rule, I think that today military make better program managers than civilians do. There are two reasons. The first is that military members tend to have closer ties to and understanding of the users. That's pretty obvious and a good thing. What's less obvious is that military members, at least theoretically, rise in rank mostly by demonstrating leadership. That's what programs most need. Civilians tend to advance based upon technical competence. Most programs have plenty of that. What they don't have plenty of is leadership. We could alter this over time, but for now, we simply don't have a cadre of civilian managers ready to take on major programs.

I want to use a couple of anecdotes to better communicate my opinions about continuity. I have watched the Joint Strike Fighter program since it began. I have lost count of how many program managers that program has had. I have known some of the past managers, but I want to speak about one whom I did not personally know: Mike Hough. I believe he was the program's manager for about two years. There is no person working with him with whom I have ever talked--military, civilian, or contractor--that was not highly impressed with his knowledge, his integrity, his openness, his people skills, his candor, or his ability to keep the program on track. He was, in the estimation of everyone with whom I have talked, to the epitome of a great leader. Yet, after a relatively short tenure, the Marines promoted him and he moved off to some staff-type job. I say, "what's up with this?" Why would the Department accept the disruption to its biggest and arguably, most important program? Is it because no one understands the huge turmoil that's inevitable any time a program gets a new manager? Surely not. Why would the Department accept the risk of getting a new manager not up to the task, when they already had a great one there? No sane commercial company would ever allow this to happen. It doesn't pass a "reasonable person" test. I would think some creative people could find a way to solve this sort of problem without having to adopt a misguided tact like denying promotion to people like Mike Hough. This has to be fixed.

Programs take on the personality of their leader. I am convinced of that. Program people adopt the leader's priorities, ways of seeing the program, communication style, trust behavior, openness to new ideas, problem-solving approach, etc. In one particular instance, when I left a program to manage another, the program team began to rapidly

self-destruct. Within three months, it was in total disarray. It's not that my successor was incompetent. He was simply different from me. He wasn't into teams and, unlike me, he was a micro-manager and very, very cautious. It took 18 months for the program to get back on track. I bear some blame, of course. I failed to institutionalize the philosophy I had put in place. My excuse was that I didn't see the need because I never expected to leave that program until I retired. Looking back, I believe the program would have produced a much better result had it not have had to deal with the significant disruption of having a different manager at a critical time.

In summary, I will suggest that no matter the statutes, processes, policies, oversight approach and top-level organization, the rubber will always meet the road where the program manager is. The program manager drives the execution and leads the team toward developing and producing the product the war-fighter needs. He can control program outcome by what he does and how he does it. All the outside factors are environmental; the program manager can deal with them. I believe that we can and must do a lot better in grooming program managers, selecting them, training them, mentoring them, empowering them to act, keeping them in place, and holding them accountable. In my estimation, it's at that level where there is the most progress to be made.

That concludes my testimony. I want to thank the committee again for the opportunity to share my experiences and views. I look forward answering any questions you have.