

OSD(Public Affairs) Transcript of Dr. Carter's 14 July 2009 Interview with Bryan Bender of the Boston Globe

The transcript of the interview is as follows:

GLOBE: Lay out what you see as the main challenges of this job.

CARTER: There are a lot of troubled programs. This is pretty familiar territory. What's very lucky for me is I have a hierarchy that is interested in what I am doing and is involved in what I am doing. Washington jobs can be miserable if you don't have a good boss. I have a president that is interested in the issues that I deal with. A secretary of defense who is interested in the issues I deal with. A deputy secretary that's interested. They are interested and they are involved. That is the best part.

A hard part about this job is that a lot of people think of it as a weapons-buying job but there is a lot more to it than that. It is that, but that's just a piece of what I have to do. In addition there is the support of two wars, including the logistics associated with the withdrawal from Iraq and the push into Afghanistan. [There is also] The whole technology portfolio in the Department of Defense. The nuclear weapons. We are negotiating a new arms control treaty. Even such things as energy, which has just been put into this office.

The good news is I have a hierarchy that is a good hierarchy and that is crucial in Washington. The hard part is you could stay up all night there is just so much to do. One minute you are dealing with a managerial problem, the next minute you are dealing with a technical problem, the next minute you are dealing with an operational problem, the next minute you are dealing with a political problem.

GLOBE: There is the perception that this administration believes the defense industry is not a team player. What could the defense industry do differently to help you do your job?

CARTER: I am not a believer that industry is an enemy of the government. That's how we arm ourselves in this country. We don't have a government arms industry. We buy from private industry. We can't do it without industry. I just had dinner Thursday night with the CEOs of all the top 15 defense companies and I said that to them. I want to have an open, non-antagonistic relationship where we work together. If we can align our interests so I get done what I need to do for the warfighter and the taxpayer and you get done what you need for your business. We can't always do that, but we're not always headed in opposite directions either.

GLOBE: How did they respond?

CARTER: They certainly [responded] very enthusiastically. They feel the same way. They are doing this partly to run a business but mostly they understand this is a public trust also. That they are providing equipment that people's lives depend on, that the country's destiny and security depend on. They take that seriously. I think this is a relationship that needs to be worked on. You can never make it so that their interests entirely coincide with the government -- of course that's not the case -- but they are not entirely discrepant either.

GLOBE: How tough are the "tough choices" that Secretary Gates has talked about as you proceed with the Quadrennial Defense Review?

CARTER: People talk about acquisition reform. Acquisition reform takes place at the front end of a program's lifetime and at the back end. [With] all of the legislation that was passed this year dealing with acquisition reform..everyone wants us to do better. Some people in the acquisition business feel threatened by that. I think it's a tremendous opportunity for us to do better.

There is the front end: How to start programs so that they are begun in a realistic manner, with eyes open about the cost, eyes open about the technology. But there is acquisition reform at the back end also, which is having the discipline to stop doing things that aren't working or aren't needed any longer.

Secretary Gates in April made a number of decisions of that kind, to stop doing things that weren't working or weren't needed anymore. Those are the kinds of choices that are being made in the QDR. Of course they are difficult because by the time a program has come to full maturity it is a large thing. It has lots of supporters. It has people whose jobs are associated with it. So in practical terms it is not a small thing to end a large project. But we have to do that if it is warranted because that is what the taxpayer expects us to do with their money and that is what the warfighter expects if we know full well that we could use the money being spent on that program elsewhere for better military utility.

GLOBE: How much more difficult will reform be if Congress mandates you buy things you don't want?

CARTER: Anybody who wants to cherry-pick and change one piece of the defense program or another I would say, 'You tell me what you want to cut in order to save something that the department has ended and why that choice is better for the warfighter than the choice we have made.' I think we have a good analytical basis for

the decisions we make and that is the test that somebody should be put to who wants to change this piece or that piece because they have some particular program or issue that they favor.

GLOBE: The defense industry has expressed concerns that the QDR is not taking into account the potential impact of a new strategy on the defense industrial base. Will the review consider the defense sector's ability to meet the Pentagon's needs now and in the future?

CARTER: It will be incorporated in the QDR to the maximum extent possible. I think it is a legitimate question because we depend upon technological superiority. That is our comparative advantage relative to antagonists and we therefore can't be heedless of the health of the technology base that supports our programs. So I think industrial base issues are completely legitimate. The hard thing is to get good analysis done on them so that the question of expertise and industrial base doesn't just become a discussion about jobs. We need a good way of assessing industrial base impacts and I would say we are not very good at. That is something I think we need to get better at. We should take it into account but it is a hard thing to take into account.

GLOBE: What are your priorities when it comes to the modernization of the nation's nuclear arsenal?

CARTER: The [ongoing] Nuclear Posture Review, and the president's decisions about arms control and nonproliferation -- I don't know where all of that will come out. But as long as there are nuclear weapons on earth we are going to have a nuclear deterrent and my job is to make sure that deterrent is safe, secure, and reliable. It's precise size and shape will be determined by the president this next coming year. But he has indicated he doesn't expect us to be rid of nuclear weapons in his lifetime. That being the case, when this year is over I am the one who needs to field what it is we need to field -- strategic weapons, nonstrategic weapons, warheads and delivery vehicles, command and control systems, the people and the discipline to make sure there are no incidents or accidents. The technical support to our nonproliferation and arms control efforts, all of that fits or falls under AT&L. That's a lot to do all by itself and that's just a piece.

GLOBE: What about your logistics portfolio?

CARTER: A lot people thing of this as a weapons-buying job. That is really just a piece of it. It is an important piece. But today, with two wars going on, it is a lot more than buying weapons for the conflicts ten or 20 years in the future. In the title is the word logistics. That makes some people want fall asleep. But you'd be surprised.

Logistics is incredibly important. We are now in the middle of a huge movement of people and equipment in the Middle East to make the responsible drawdown occur in Iraq. The president has given us a timetable. I am sure a lot of people look at that and say, "There's no problem with doing that." But when you get down in the boiler room and look at moving mountains of equipment that is accumulated over six years of war in Iraq and either bringing it home, or donating it to the Iraqi security forces, or taking it to Afghanistan, it is a huge logistical challenge. And we have no choice but to meet the president's schedule. Right now I am confident that it can be done. We are doing all the planing for it. This is not as much equipment as was in Iraq in Desert Storm [in 1991] in terms of tonnage but there was no timetable, there were no IEDs [back then]. We need to do all this as we complete the mission and make sure there is still stability in Iraq.

And then getting into Afghanistan: Afghanistan from a logistics point of view is about as austere an environment as you can imagine. The terrain is difficult, the roads are tough, there is not the local indigenous contractor base and so forth to work off of. Getting out of Iraq and getting into Afghanistan is a very big project. It takes up a lot of my time and energy and we can't afford not to get it done.

In the acquisition area the war is also creating a new imperative for somebody in this job. You have to pay attention not only to important leaps forward in technology and weapons looking at ten or 15 years but ten and 15 weeks, sometimes ten and 15 days. Secretary Gates has said on several occasions that the troops are at war and the Pentagon is not. One of the parts of the Pentagon he means is this part of the Pentagon. I am very mindful of his frustration that getting equipment to the troops that they need -- the MRAP [vehicles] as a counter to the [improvised explosive device] is a great example. Nothing happened unless he pushed from the top. Now I want to give him an alternative, which is to push on me. And so we're very involved in supporting, in a responsive way, the ongoing campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, be it to counter IEDs, be it intelligence that supports the capture-kill mission, be it protection for operating bases. I was there two weeks ago and [there are] bases as small as a football field that are right in the middle of the city. These are people are exposed to somebody throwing a grenade or something over the wall at any time and it is not reasonable that they don't have the best technology supporting them. So rapid acquisition support is a very important challenge. It is completely different from the traditional mission of acquisition and weapons buying which people associate with this job.

GLOBE: What are the main challenges in the area of future technology?

CARTER: There are two real challenges in the technology area. One is the familiar one, to make sure that we keep the technological edge, which is the American way of waging war. But the second is to do that in a climate in which the best technology does not always originate in the defense world as it did 50 years ago or even in the United States as it did 30 years ago. That's the challenge. One ingredient of that is the science and technology workforce in the country and in the government. And I have concerns about both of those. I work with my good friend and former neighbor at Harvard John Holdren, the president's science adviser.

GLOBE: Since you have been on the job have you ever encountered a program so troubled it stopped you in your tracks?

CARTER: Almost every day you encounter a situation and you say, "How on earth can this be going on?" That's my job as a senior manager in the Defense Department: to get people together and surface the problems in an honest way. To do that you have to be non-punitive and in a problem-solving mode. That is a lot of what I do every day. You say, "How on earth could it have gotten this way. What were people thinking?" Every day. It's not like everything is like that but every day you find something and that's why big programs, big logistics efforts, and big military operations require senior oversight. [It's] no fault of any individual but in some collective way things can go very wrong.

There are many, many causes of screwed-up programs and people are always looking for common denominators. But self-deception is probably the greatest common denominator, where people march along, knowing that there's something wrong, nobody wanting to speak up, everybody hoping it will get better somehow. And eight years into a program you can find a program that has worked its way into that kind of corner. The job is to make everybody realize they have a common problem and work toward solutions. It's an everyday occurrence.