



Interview with the Honorable Robert Work, Former Deputy Secretary of Defense

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PETER LEVINE: I'm Peter Levine, the Director of the Defense Management Institute; and we're here today as a part of a series of interviews with individuals who've made significant contributions to the improvement of the management of the Department of Defense. Today, we're speaking to the Honorable Bob Work, who served as the 32nd Deputy Secretary of Defense from 2014 to 2017 and as the 31st Under Secretary of the Navy from 2009 to 2013. Secretary Work is currently a Senior Counselor for Defense and a Distinguished Senior Fellow for Defense and National Security at the Center for a New American Security. Those of us who have had the privilege of working with Bob over the years know that nobody is harder working or more dedicated to making the Department work well than he is. Bob, welcome; and we're pleased to have you here.

ROBERT WORK: Thank you very much, Peter. It's great to be here.

PETER LEVINE: Let me just jump in at the beginning, literally the beginning of your career. How did you come to the Department of Defense? You can go all the way back to the Marine Corps, if you want; but I'm particularly interested in how you came in as a senior management official in the Department.

ROBERT WORK: Well, for me, it was all a matter of luck and timing. I was working at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments with Andrew Krepinevich and Mike Vickers, and Michelle Flournoy, at the time, was the president of the Center for a New American Security. She was nominated, or she was picked, to lead the Obama Transition Team for the

Department of Defense. So out of the blue one day, I get a call from Michelle and she says, “Bob, I need your help,” and I say, “Ok, if I can do it, I'll give it to you.” She says “I want you to come in on the Obama defense team,” and I said, “Well, what would I do?” And she said “I would like you to be the lead for the Department of the Navy.” I had been writing on naval issues at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments for about six or seven years; and I said, “Ok, tell me more,” and she says, “Well, you can't get paid for this, and you have to go on a leave of absence. So, you can't be being paid by CSBA while you're over there.” And I said, “Well, how long is this going to last for?” And she says, “Well.” This was just before Thanksgiving, right after the election. And she said, “We'll need you until Christmas. But I promise, I'll get you back to CSBA by the first of the year.” And so, I said, “Ok, so I can't get paid for about six weeks. I'll come in.” She says, “Yes, your job will be to write a memo to the incoming Secretary of the Navy, who we don't know. We don't know who it's going to be yet. And you will tell the Secretary of the Navy: here's the state of the Department, here are the problems you're going to face when you get here, here are the big decisions you're going to have to make in the first 100 days, 200 days, first year, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” And I said, “Ok, I'll do it.” So, I went over, and I mean, everybody, most of the people who were on the team knew they were going to come into the government. Ash Carter was there at the time. He thought he was going to be the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence. It turned out he became AT&L, Acquisition, Technology and Logistics. Jeh Johnson was there. He knew he was going to be the GC. Michelle Flournoy knew she was going to be Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. And it was like that. Most of the people were there. I was there with the understanding that I would go over, work on the team, and then go back to CSBA, which was fine with me. I wasn't looking to come into the government. Over the next six weeks, you know, we worked hard, did a

lot of interviews, talked with everybody in the Department of the Navy who was in an important position, and we became quite close. We were sitting around lunch one day, just around the table bullshitting. And someone said, “Well, Work, what would you like to be if you were asked to come into the Department of Defense?” And I literally, I was drinking a Diet Pepsi like I always was, I said, “Hell, I'd like to be the Under Secretary of the Navy.” It really, it was a throwaway line. Richard Danzig, I was Richard Danzig's Senior Military Assistant when he was the Secretary of the Navy, and he had been the Under Secretary of the Navy, and he had told me many, many times what a great job it was. And so, I want to be Under Secretary of the Navy. I was just kind of kidding around. So, Michelle Flournoy was as good as her word. I went back to CSBA right around the first of the year, started to get paid again. That was really good. And towards the end of January, I'm not sure what day I received a call, and the guy said, “This is Scott Gration. I'm the head of Presidential Personnel.” And one of the guys on the team was a guy named Jim Ludes. You might know him or might have known him. He was on the SASC. He was a SASC staffer, and he was a prankster. He was always pulling practical jokes and everything. So, I thought it was Ludes punking me. So, I said, “_____ you, Ludes,” and I hung up the phone. Phone rings again. “Hey, this is Scott Gration. I am Scott Gration, and we would like you to come in to the Department of Defense as the Under Secretary of the Navy.” And you know, I was kind of shocked. I said, “Ok, cool.” And then I went through all the stuff for my confirmation, and I finally was confirmed in May of, that would have been 2009, May of 2009. And I come in. So, I'm the Under Secretary of the Navy for four years. Awesome job. In my view, it is the best job for training a Deputy Secretary of Defense because it's the only Department, as you know, with two different services, and they're always at odds, and you have to kind of be the umpire, and you're going to let the children fight, and sometimes you have to

knock their heads together, et cetera. But, it was an awesome job. So, they asked me to stay on into the second administration. But, I said, “Hey, look, I’ve had a great time for four years. I don’t want to stay, do the same job for another four years. If you have another job, I’ll consider it.” So, then I went over and became the CEO of the Center for a New American Security. Now, if you remember, this would have been in 2013. In the fall of 2013, Ash Carter left abruptly as the Deputy Secretary. He surprised everybody. In fact, he left at the worst time because we were in the process of building the program and caught everybody by surprise. Christine Fox became the Acting Deputy Secretary of Defense, and I received a call from the White House, and they said, “Hey, would you consider coming back as the Deputy Secretary of Defense?” So again, it was just timing it. Because of what happened, they had a hole they had to fill. I had been a, you know, I had proven myself as the Under Secretary. So, they invited me to come in as the Deputy. And I said, “I’ll come back under one condition, and that will be that I am not forced upon Secretary Hagel. You know, I would like to have an interview with Secretary Hagel, and if he wants me to be his deputy, then I’ll say yes, but I don’t want to be forced upon him.” So, they said, “Ok.” They set up the interview. So, I had a good interview. He asked me to be the Deputy, and I said I’d be honored to do so. And so, I came back in. So again, for me, it was all luck, timing. There was no, there was no magic.

PETER LEVINE: So tell me, when you came in as Under Secretary of the Navy, what surprised you most about being in a senior position in the Department other than being in a senior position? What about the government, what about serving at that level, came as most of a surprise to you?

ROBERT WORK: Well, the Department of the Navy was in a special situation at that time. They had not had a confirmed Under Secretary of the Navy for about a year and a half. So, they

had gone through a bunch of guys who were acting or performing the duties of, whatever, and everyone had forgotten what it was like to have an Under Secretary in the Department. So, when I came in, what surprised me the most was just, first, how badly the Department needed an Under Secretary of the Navy. And then the second thing was how hard it was to get both the US Navy and the US Marine Corps to accept an Under Secretary of the Navy as being another senior civilian mucking around in their business. And so, it took some time for me to establish my bona fides. You know, many of the people considered me a colonel in the Marine Corps. Christine Fox used to call me Colonel Work. It would drive me freaking crazy. But after a while, once I established myself as a, I hope, a capable leader, then I started working really closely with the Assistant Commandant. I mean, the, yeah, the Assistant Commandant, the Vice CNO. And it was an awesome job.

PETER LEVINE: So, you've mentioned a couple of times that the difficulty of working with two different military services, each of which has not only a strong tradition but a strong tradition of independence. Are there any keys that you would mention to others or how to deal with that, how to get them to play ball in the right way?

ROBERT WORK: Well, it's as you know, Peter, it's all about personal relationships. So, I established a weekly lunch with, individually, with the Assistant Commandant and with the VCNO, and then I would have a lunch with both of them once a month. And sometimes we would have an agenda but most of the time it was me just getting to learn, I mean, getting to know them, getting to know what were the things that were most important to them, trying to figure out if they really believed in a Department of the Navy, and if they were willing to do what was necessary to make a Department a true Department. And, as it turned out, they both were. There was a, at the time when I came in, there was a big argument in the Department of the

Navy over the blue-green split, which is the amount of money, I mean, the percentage of the Department of the Navy TOA that is dedicated to Marine Corps. It's generally around 17%. And the Marines thought that was too low. They wanted to have more. The Navy didn't want the Marine Corps to have more. So, that was a constant point of contention. And the way we solved that was to do it by program. So, say the Marine Corps had CH-53 Echoes coming on board, and we had to pay for them. Everybody knew it. And so, we would say, "Ok, look, the percentage is going to go up to 17.3, but it's a temporary percentage just based on, you know, when we're bringing the airplanes in." When the airplanes go away, it dropped back down to about 17%. So, we worked through all of those issues. A real big issue was the F-35B, the VTOL aircraft. And man, that was, the engine wasn't doing all that great. The airplane was overweight. Congress was beating us over the head for overspending and schedule slips. But we finally worked our way through that. The other thing, if you remember was TACAIR integration, which were the number of Marine squadrons that were going to be put on US Navy aircraft carriers as part of the air wing. They wouldn't be in a Marine air combat element. They would be on a carrier as part of the air wing. And the Navy had a strike fighter shortfall, and they needed the Marines to have four squadrons on the deck, and the Marines didn't want to have four squadrons on the deck. They said, "This is will screw up our, the number of airplanes for our Marine expeditionary units." You know, we need to have our airplanes to respond to COCOM demands and that one turned out to be quite difficult because of the strike fighter shortfall. And it was through that, to tell you the truth, Peter, the strike fighter for shortfall and the TACAIR integration, I proved to both the VCNO and the Marine Corps that sometimes I called ball for the Navy. Sometimes I'd call it for the Marines, but I would explain to them, this is why I'm making this decision. And over time they became comfortable with me and trusted me. I might not make a decision that they liked,

but I made a decision that they understood that I had thought hard about and was trying to do the best for the Department.

PETER LEVINE: You and I have talked, I think in the past, about the problem of turnover among civilian employees, and I think as senior civilian political appointees, and I think the averages tend to be about two years. How important do you think it was that you were able to stay the full four years to build those relationships?

ROBERT WORK: I think it's vitally important. You know, it would be very difficult to make political appointees commit to the full term of an administration. But I do believe that they should commit to not leaving like in the last six or seven or eight months. If you remember for Secretary Carter, if you left in the last 6 to 7 months, you were literally dead to him. If you remember what he did to Christine Wormuth, you know, when she said, "Hey, you know, my children. This is a family situation. I really have to leave." And he didn't even give her a goodbye ceremony. I mean, it was kind of crazy. But, I do believe that people, once they sign on, they should stay on as long as they can and to the end, if possible. You know, the whole thing about the uniforms waiting out the politicals, and that's always going to happen. We just, it's, you just accept it. But if you can keep people on longer and to the end where you have a seamless handoff from one political to another, you can limit the damage of waiting people out.

PETER LEVINE: As Under Secretary, you served under Secretary Mabus, who was also known for his independence. You got to deal with that from two different directions, first, as Under Secretary of the Navy and later as Deputy Secretary of Defense. Can you talk about the challenges of working with somebody who is that strong minded and independent and how you build a relationship with him and connect him both to the services and to OSD and make all

those things work. I think you're sort of the position of being the grease to make the operation work in a way.

ROBERT WORK: Well, that was a hell of a relationship. Most of the Secretaries of the Navy since World War II have either been lawyers or captains of industry; but he was a governor of the state of Mississippi, and he would make the damnedest decisions sometimes. And I was talking to him one time and I say, "Sir, sometimes I just don't get you." And he says, "Look, I am an elected executive. You know, when I was the governor, no one had any veto over me, except for the Supreme Court and the AG." He said, "I would make a decision and no one, they might question me, but, you know, it truly was my way or the highway. And when I was a politician, you have to have no more than two or three, maybe four priorities. My first priority is shipbuilding. We're the US navy. We need to have ships. My first priority is build ships." And boy did he. While he was there, we had like 75 ships under contract at one point. And man, he would, everything, and he says, "Look, you have to be ruthless with your priorities." And so, he would just annihilate aviation to get more ships. And we'd go in and say, "Mr. Secretary, this is really causing a problem in the aviation community." And he says, "Look, I wish I had money for both, but I only have enough money for one, and my number one priority is ships. Do you get it?" And I go, "Yes, sir, I get it." You know, and he was ruthless. Then his second one was he called it the Great Green Fleet. He felt very strongly about renewable energy and renewable fuels and everyone thought he was crazy, you know. They said, "Our entire global infrastructure is designed to deliver DFM - defense fuel. I mean diesel fuel marine. We don't have the infrastructure to store this renewable fuel or to, you know, pump it and tank it and move it." And he said, "Well, we're going to learn. We're going to do it." And, then he set goals. He said, "I want to have a carrier battle group deploy in 2013 on complete renewable fuels, completely with

renewable fuels, and all the airplanes on the carrier deck.” And, you know, we pushed towards that goal and everyone, I mean, he was taking heat in the press. They're saying, “God, this is...” You know, they didn't call it woke then, but it was, it was kind of the same thing. You know, “This is some kind of weird-ass, liberal, lefty dream that doesn't have anything to do with warfighting, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” But that was one of his priorities and then his third priority was 21st Century Sailor & Marine, very much like Carter and Force of the Future. And he did all sorts of different things for personnel management and readiness. Those were his three priorities. And, man, I learned a lot watching him. You know, he said, “These are them, guys. Write it down. They aren't going to change. And when I say priority, I mean, priority. If I have to choose between priority one and two, priority one gets it. If I have to choose between priority two and three, priority two gets it.” So, working for an elected executive was really something eye-opening. I learned a lot. One of the places where it really showed up in was in ship naming. He, you know, there's, there are rules for ship names, but like a class, generally you name destroyers, for example, after naval heroes. Normally you name tankers after rivers. Things like that. But he said, “Hey, this is one of the things I get to do as the Secretary of the Navy. I'm going to name ships the way I want to name ships.” And he would name ships for like Cesar Chavez. It would just drive the uniforms and Congress crazy. And he said, “Hey, this is my right. As the Secretary of the Navy, it's written into law. I get to name the ships. Nobody else.” And you know, he's like, “I'm the governor, and I'm going to name the ships.” I remember one day he was, he got up, we were talking and he said, “Bob, I've got to go, got to go to a ship naming ceremony.” And I go, “Which ship are you naming today, sir?” And he goes, “The Gabby Giffords,” and I go, “What? What did Gabby Giffords ever do for the US Navy?” And he said, “Well, not too much for the Navy but, you know, her husband was shot or she was shot or, you

know, I can't remember now, and I want to name it for Gabby Giffords.” And I said, “Ok, sir, you're going to take a lot of heat for this.” And he goes, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, I don't really care.” I looked back and I think, there was a Secretary of the Navy who was a governor of a New England state; and he approached ship naming the same way, exactly the same way. So, like I said, working for a former political, elected executive political person was really something.

PETER LEVINE: Having worked for an elected official, it was Senator Carl Levin, I was grateful in fact to Secretary Mabus for the Carl Levin. So, it does work. As Under Secretary of the Navy, you also served as the first Chief Management Officer of the Navy. Can you talk about what your view is of that designation? Were there additional responsibilities that came with that? Did it affect how you did your job or was it simply a recognition of things that you would have done anyway?

ROBERT WORK: I think it was a combination of both. Quite frankly, what happened is the White House assigned a political appointee to the Department of Navy. It was Eric Fanning. And I had never worked with Eric, couldn't have picked him out of a lineup. And it just turns out that he has a particular interest in management issues and was really good at tackling them. And so, I designated him as the Deputy Chief Management Officer. And I said, “Eric, I'm going to, I have your back. You come to me when you think you want to make a big move. I'll give you top cover,” and it worked out really well. I was extremely happy to have him because, you know, I was working issues like strike fighter shortfall, TACAIR integration, keeping track of the Secretary's priorities, which caused all sorts of unease in the Department, and I was constantly having to, you know, tamp down feelings. So, having the Deputy Chief Management Officer was really good. And I remembered that when I became the Deputy and when we talked about, you know, should the Deputy be the Chief Management Officer, just the span of all of the things that

the Deputy handles, having one person who's dedicated to that full-time, in my view, is the best way to go. Much better than having a separate Deputy of Defense for management stuff. I believe very strongly in a unitary Deputy.

PETER LEVINE: You described your relationship with Eric Fanning as you asked him to take the lead on the issue, but you had his back and when he was going to do something significant he came in to talk to you about it so you could be on board with it and make it clear to everybody that that he had your approval. I think you did similar things with me when I was your Deputy Chief Management Officer when you were a Deputy Secretary of Defense. Is that a conscious strategy that you were able to use in other areas as well? Was it unique to the management issues or is this a strategy that you think that can be used by senior officials across other areas?

ROBERT WORK: I think it can be used across other areas. Obviously, the span of control of the Deputy or the Under, you always have to consider. You can't have too many direct reports or it just becomes unwieldy. But, for me working with Eric Fanning and the Department of the Navy, I said, "Look, this is to me is directly applicable to what we're trying to do in the Department of Defense." And so, it helped me kind of say, "Ok, this is the way I'd like to work it." And, you know, I had complete faith in you, just like I had complete faith in Eric, and I never really worried about what you were doing. No one ever came in and said, "Oh my God, Peter is going to try to build an empire," or something like that. You kept your eye on the ball. It worked for me and I think it can work in a lot of areas. That was generally what happened with Force of the Future with Secretary Carter, where Brad Carson as the Under Secretary for P&R kind of became the lead sled dog. And man, that was tough, as you remember. The services hated that shit. Oh, hated everything about it. Much of it was just reflexive. Some of the problems they had with it, I thought had merit. But man, poor Brad Carson. He took it from both ends because in

the end, then Secretary Carter got mad at him, and he was getting it from Secretary Carter and from services, and then it spilled over to Congress. Wow. I have a lot of respect for what Brad did because that was a tough one. That was a tough nut. When you're doing something that the services dislike so much and are willing to openly kind of push back.

PETER LEVINE: Well, can we talk about your role as Deputy Secretary of Defense? Because obviously as Deputy Secretary, one of the things you had to do was to manage that situation once it exploded. I don't know whether you consider that to be a good example of your management style, but as I understand it, you sort of took over that issue. Can you talk about what you did, and how you tried to calm tempers there?

ROBERT WORK: Well, the way I handled that, Peter, was I just slotted into my Executive Officer kind of mindset. And I would sit down with Brad, and I would say, "Brad, look. Here's the boss's view on this." Sometimes I would tell him, "I don't agree with it, but you and I are here to do what the boss wants." So, I really tried to spend a lot of time to tell Brad, "Brad you are doing a great job. You are taking shit from all sides. If I can help, you know, deflect some, please tell me how. I will support you in the meetings. But the bottom line that you and I have to understand is, this is one of the boss's top priorities. He wants to get it done. And so, you and I are going to get it done whether it hurts or not." And then I would call in. Generally, I found the Department of the Army was the one that pushed back the most. So, I would talk with Dan Allen, and I'd say, "Dan, for God's sakes, the boss wants this," and he goes, "Well, we're going to fight him tooth and nail." And I said, "Ok, well, how about you tell the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Secretary of the Army to go in and tell Secretary Carter to his face that what he's doing is wrong, and we're going to fight you. Why don't you do that?" And of course, they never did. And I said, "Because if you feel that strongly about it, then come on, man. Let's go. So,

man, that was one of the most uncomfortable things I had to do as the Deputy. I mean, I think you remember, there were sparks flying.

PETER LEVINE: I'll let you stop with that. It's common lore that the inbox of the Deputy Secretary of Defense grows by about a foot an hour. I don't know if that's literally true, but I do remember the whack-a-mole set you had on your conference table, and I always thought that that was the perfect symbol for what your job was. Can you talk about how you handle work of that volume and what advice, I guess your present successor doesn't need your advice, she seems to be doing perfectly well with this. But what advice you would offer people, in general, about how you deal with that kind of volume of incoming traffic?

ROBERT WORK: Well, it's interesting. When I was the Under Secretary of the Navy, my personal staff consisted of a Navy captain, a Marine colonel and Caroline Wilson, a civilian government employee. That was it. And they handled everything, and they were like a multi-domain operation. They knew all of the stuff that was coming in, and they could, you know, cross reference, and they would say, "Here. It's over here," but you can't do that at the Deputy Secretary's level. There literally is just too much. So, the way I did it was with special military assistants, SMAs, and I generally had one for every one of the Under Secretaries. So, if you remember, Lacy, Lacy was the Under Secretary of Defense for P&R and she was kind of, "Hey, what's happening, Peter?" And she'd come and tell me, say, "Hey, we got something coming up, sir, you know. Peter's going to need your help on this," and she would be the one who would come down to you and say, "Hey, this is on the boss's mind." And I had an SMA for every single one of the Unders, and for me that worked really well. I tried to keep in touch with the Unders by having lunches, and I would tell them what's on my mind, blah, blah, blah. And we saw each other all the time in the DMAGs. But having the SMA was, in my view, very, very good.

PETER LEVINE: I remember that Secretary Carter tracked his time, it seemed like, down to the minute. We had a few, a couple of times, when we had briefings on how he was spending his time, and he did it so that he could make sure that the signal he was sending the Department was sent, in part, by what he was willing to commit to and sending the right signal, making sure that he stayed on message with the things that were his own personal priorities. Did you have a system for making sure that you could keep track and stay on message for your priorities or were you drawn in so many different directions that you just had to, sort of, fight the battles as they came?

ROBERT WORK: Every day, I'd sit down with my command group, my SMAs, and I would say, "Ok, are we covering everything?" And they were really, really good. You have to pick the right people there. People who don't use your name, you know, and go down and say, "Work wants this, meh, meh, meh." You know, they have to be able to work with the people and really gain their trust and then come back. And so, the way I did is every evening we would sit down and we'd say, "Ok, what did we screw up today? You know, what do we have to get accomplished the rest of this week?" And it just worked for me. I had just a tremendous staff, a tremendous staff. The Chief of Staff is really important, too.

PETER LEVINE: He had some good ones. The tradition in the Department, I believe, is that Secretary of the Defense handles the strategic issues: the White House, the big policy issues, the, what we call sometimes, the up and out issues. And the Deputy Secretary of Defense handles the down and in issues of the day-to-day management of the Department. Can you talk about how you allocated, you and Secretary Carter allocated, I guess, Secretary Hagel before Secretary Carter, how you allocated responsibilities and made sure that you were each leveraging the

limited bandwidth you had to the maximum and stayed on message and in-sync with each other was there?

ROBERT WORK: It really was, you know, talking with the Secretary. So for example, the Secretary usually does all of the interactions with our allies. And Secretary Carter called me in one day and said, “Look, I’m just being pulled in 1,000 different directions. This is what we’re going to do.” This was at the height of the war in Syria and Afghanistan, and there were just meetings all the time with NATO allies. And he says, “Look, I am going to take Central Europe. I’m going to take the guys who are sending most of the troops to Syria and Afghanistan. I’m going to take Southern Europe because all of the refugees were coming from Syria.” He says, “I want you to handle the northern rim. I want you to take the Nords.” And so that became part of my portfolio. And man looking back, it was one of the most enjoyable parts of my portfolio. So, I took Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, et cetera. And so, I would go over and represent the government, do all of the meetings, et cetera. And the way, at the DCs, the Deputies Committee meetings, which just kind of eat the Secretary’s lunch because the numbers that they have, normally the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy would go to those and represent the Secretary. But he would say, “Bob, there are going to be DCs where I want you to represent me.” And he would come down and say, “Ok, this next DC is going to be on nuclear issues. I want you to go.” And so, it was really, there wasn’t a list of things on both sides. It was the Secretary coming to the Deputy and saying, “Ok, I need you to cover this, cover down on this for me.” And that’s the way it worked with Secretary Carter. Secretary Mattis, he generally handled all of those things, as did Secretary Hagel. I mean, if I was ever going to write a book, I’d write a book about the different leadership styles of the Secretaries. You know, I worked

directly for Hagel, directly for Carter, and directly for Mattis, three totally different leadership styles.

PETER LEVINE: Each effective in their own way, I imagine.

ROBERT WORK: Oh, yeah, absolutely. The other, I mean, one of the other things that I had to do is, if you remember Secretary Hagel, he had a volcanic temper. And when he lost it, I mean, he lost it. And in a meeting one day, the Under Secretary of Defense for P&R. She was before you. I can't remember her name right now.

PETER LEVINE: Was it Erin Conaton, or?

ROBERT WORK: No.

PETER LEVINE: Jessica Wright? Jessica Wright, I think.

ROBERT WORK: But he just went off on Jessica, I mean, really bad to the point where she came down to my office, and she was crying. And she says, "I'm quitting. I'm out of here." And so that was another role of the Deputy. Yeah, I went down to Secretary Hagel, and I said, "You've got to apologize to her, you know, because this is going to come out. This is how the story is going to read: you're a toxic leader. And you don't want that. And look, if you're going yell at somebody, just kick everybody out of the room except for that person. Yell at them face-to-face, but don't yell at them in front of all these other people." And by God, the next day he called Jessica and convinced her to stay around, I think for five or six months. But man, you know, things like that I did not like at all. But that's the role of the Deputy. In the Under Secretary role, I did it when Secretary Mabus fired the president of the Naval Postgraduate School. And I had to fly out to the Naval Postgraduate School, and I had a meeting with the

entire faculty. They just, you know, 200 or 300 people. And I said, “Ok, this is why we're doing this.” And those things are always the hardest for me. I don't like them.

PETER LEVINE: You also got to be a Deputy Secretary of Defense. Your tenure pretty much coincided with the Budget Control Act, the sequestration-era budgets. I imagine pretty much continuing resolutions on top of continuing resolutions. Eras of tight budgets and CRs that we seem to be likely, and government shutdowns, that we seem to be likely headed back into. Is there any advice that you would have for those who may be having to handle similar types of situations down the road as they face this same kind of pressure, budget pressure?

ROBERT WORK: Well, every time is so unique. You know, what is the outlook of Congress? What are they thinking? How is the White House thinking? Oh, it's just, but man, that was bad. It was just really hard times because everyone knew we didn't have enough money for all of the things we had to do. So, you know, we had to prioritize. You remember the DMAGs. I mean, it was like, well. I think looking back, I would have tried to meet more often with the staff directors of the HASC and the SASC and, you know, try to get their advice, and say, “Look, where are we headed here? You know, you do realize what's happening, right?” And, of course, they did, but I would have maybe tried to spend more time talking to them and maybe even trying to go in and talk with the Chairman. But man, that's not something I'd want to live through again.

PETER LEVINE: Let me change. We're nearing the end of the hour, and there's something I want to get to, which is in my view, perhaps your single achievement as Deputy Secretary, which is the Third Offset, which I'm sure others would say that has many fathers. I view you as sort of the champion of that and the initiator of that. Can you talk about where that came from and how

you were able to make that a priority of the Department from your position and bring life to that initiative?

ROBERT WORK: Well, while I was at CSBA, I was there for, you know, from 2001 through 2008 when I came in as the Under Secretary, and, in addition to writing a lot on naval issues, I wrote a lot on revolutions in war and the changing character of war. I had been working on that since the 1990s with the Office of Net Assessment. So, I have very strong feelings on the military technical trends and what they were doing, as far as the character of war was going on. And when I was the Under Secretary of the Navy, I was watching what was happening out in the Western Pacific with China. And I was saying, man, this is not good. You know, the normal ways that we are used to thinking about fighting a war with China are just not going to work anymore. So, I left the Department with that firmly in my mind. And then I started talking to guys like Bill Perry, Paul Kaminski, Harold Brown, and they had a similar situation in the seventies, and they concocted the Second Offset. I had never even heard of the term offset until I talked with Paul Kaminski. He was the guy who said, “This is the way we thought about it. You know, we couldn't match them tank for tank or plane for plane. We were much better than them in technology. So, we needed to do some type of technological jujitsu to gain an advantage.” And he told me all about how they thought, what they did, and, you know, how closely Brown and William Perry worked together. Brown is the Secretary. Perry is, I can't remember what the name of it, but he was AT&L for lack of a better word.

PETER LEVINE: DDR&E, I think.

ROBERT WORK: That's right. So, I started thinking about that, and I said, “You know, if I go back in, as the Deputy, this is something I want to concentrate on.” Now, of course, I couldn't just launch off on my own. So, I went and talked with Secretary Hagel, and I said, “Look, this is

what I see. This is, I think this is really important, and I'd like to run this for you. Now it's going to be talking about a lot of things about that may upset people in the Department because I'm going say what we're doing here doesn't work anymore. We're going have to spend more money over here,” and, to his credit, Hagel said, “Yeah, I would like to do this.” And I told him, “You know, we're going to call it the Third Offset,” and I said, “You need to roll it out. You know, this can't be a Deputy Secretary thing. If it's going to be seen as anything, it has to be seen as your thing with the Deputy running it for you.” And so, he said, “Yes, I agree with that.” And so, he said, “We would like you to announce it at the Reagan Defense Forum in November of 2014, yeah, 2014.” And I said, “We'll write the speech for you. We'll go over it with you, so you're comfortable with it. But if we're going to make this work, it's got to be seen as coming from the Secretary, you know. You have to try to duplicate what Brown and Perry did, or I'll be your Bill Perry, and I'll do all of the programming and shit like that. But you have got to be the guy who's saying, ‘This is my idea. We have to do this.’” And he gave the speech, and he told me afterwards, it was interesting. He said, “Of all the things I did as Secretary of Defense, this was the most important thing I did.” So, it, you know, there's the alter ego model, which was Panetta and Carter, where Panetta wrote a memo that said, “The Deputy is my alter ego. When I'm gone, he acts for me. He speaks for me. If he says something, you can say it's coming from me.” Then there was the kind of business model, Mel Laird and Packard where, you know, Packard was really driving the acquisition train and trying to change the business model of the Department when it came to buying things. And then there was, in my view, the model where the Secretary embraces an idea, whether it comes from him or the Deputy doesn't really matter. But on the outside, the Secretary is saying, “Third Offset.” If the Deputy is the only one saying that it isn't going to work. And I don't think Hagel gets enough credit. I mean, he embraced the idea. He

rolled it out. He talked about it in a coherent fashion, in my view. But he usually doesn't get that much credit for it. So, a lot of people say, "Ok, you're the father of the Third Offset." And I said, "Ok, I'll accept that the idea came from me, but it wouldn't have gone anywhere if it was just me. I mean, Hagel really deserves credit for it."

PETER LEVINE: Pretty soon after November 2014, Hagel left and Carter came in though, if I remember, right. So, was there a seamless pickup of that idea? I assume that Secretary Carter was also supportive or was there a gap and you had to work that one over again with the new Secretary?

ROBERT WORK: Had to work it again. Ash would say, "I don't think of it in terms of an offset strategy, but I do think of it in terms of us losing our technical superiority," and that's the way he started talking about it. And then Joe Dunford started talking about it, and you know where they said, where Joe Dunford came out and said, "If we don't change what we're doing, we're going to lose our military technical superiority by the mid-twenties." And that was perfect, you know, for the Third Offset. That's what it was all about. We didn't want to lose superiority. So, it was designed for us to keep superiority.

PETER LEVINE: Are there any final thoughts you'd like? I've taken up pretty much your hour here. Are there any final thoughts you'd like to share?

ROBERT WORK: You know, I feel strongly that the most important thing that the Department of Defense does is it builds a defense strategy and then a defense program to implement the strategy. You know, I'm channeling Secretary Mabus, that's our number one priority. You have to get that right. And I believe that it is the Secretary's program. You know, when Bob Gates was

the Secretary of Defense, everybody knew that it was Gates' program. And if you were talking out of school, you were going to get a call from, you know, Luca Brasi. God.

PETER LEVINE: Robert Rangel.

ROBERT WORK: Yeah, Robert Rangel. Damn. And Gates would say, "This is the program." And you did not get service secretaries and service chiefs going up on the Hill and talking about something else. You remember what happened in the Air Force when I start talking about the F-22, you know. I don't believe that any of the other Secretaries I worked for had that ruthlessness that you need to have as a Secretary of Defense. If you want to have a program that reflects your desires in the program, there's got to be some dead soldiers along the road. And let's just say that towards the very end of the administration, there is no way that Secretary Mabus should not have been fired. What he did to Carter with that letter on the LCS. It was literally a ____ you to Carter. And if he had done that to Bob Gates, he would have been done by 1700. And I doubt if Bob Gates would have allowed him to put his portrait up on the wall. So, sometimes you just have to say, "Hey, no, it is my way or the highway. And I've made this decision. You're here to support. And all this stuff about oh Title 10, blah, blah, blah. You get your title 10 authority for me. So you, the Title 10 authority flows from the Secretary to you." Anyway, that's about the only thing I could say. There were times when I believe that both Secretary Carter and Secretary Mattis should have put their foot down and said, "Hey, this is not the way it's going to go, boys and girls," but that's for another conversation.

PETER LEVINE: Well, thank you very much for this conversation. It's been fascinating for me. I always loved working with you. I will always love working for you, and now I love hearing what you have to say about it. It's been a fascinating conversation. I appreciate you taking the time.