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General Bryan P. Fenton
Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command

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Moderator: Charles Phillips
Co-Founder & Managing Partner
Recognize
Trustee, The Economic Club of New York

Introduction

Vice Chair Dambisa Moyo

Hello, and welcome to the 779th meeting of The Economic Club of New York. I'm Dambisa Moyo, Vice Chair of the Club and Co-Principal at Versaca Investments. I am very happy that you're all able to join today, and I thank you very much for being here. I would like to welcome the students joining us virtually from Princeton, Rutgers, and the NYU Stern School of Business as well as members of our 2024 Class of Economic Club of New York Fellows. As a reminder, we are currently accepting applications to join this select group of next-gen business leaders in 2025. If you know someone who might be a good fit, you can find the application on our website.

The Economic Club of New York is proud to stand as the nation's leading nonpartisan platform for discussion on economic, social, and political matters. For more than 100 years, the Club has hosted over 1,000 preeminent guest speakers, contributing to our tradition of excellence.

We continue that discussion and tradition today with our guest, General Bryan P. Fenton, the 13th Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command. He oversees all special operations for the U.S. Department of Defense with 70,000 Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines Special Operations personnel and an annual budget of \$14 billion.

A career Special Forces Officer, he has commanded at all levels and served all over the world. The General has also deployed multiple times serving in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Africa, Iraq, and the Philippines. He earned a bachelor's in business administration from the University of Notre Dame, and a master's from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and was the 2009-2010 U.S. Army Fellow at Georgetown University.

Today, General Fenton will be in conversation with Charles Phillips, Economic Club Trustee and Co-Founder and Managing Partner of Recognize. Time permitting, they will take questions from those in the room. We plan to end promptly at 1 p.m. As a reminder, this conversation is on the record as we do have media in the room and joining virtually. Now please join me in welcoming General Bryan Fenton and Charles Phillips to the stage. Thank you.

Conversation with General Bryan P. Fenton

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Good afternoon everyone. We are very honored to have General Fenton here today. And there's so much to talk about, such a unique position he holds in the Department of Defense so we'll get to all of that.

I think one of the good places to start might be just the origin of SOCOM. So when I

mentioned this to people that I was going to interview you, they were confused. We didn't know we had something set up where all the special forces...so maybe a little perspective on how it got formed, a little background before we start getting into detail.

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Sure. Thank you. First, just everybody in the room and everybody that's dialed in, thanks for having us today. I'm very honored and very much appreciative of the opportunity to come and speak and have a good conversation. And I realize how busy everybody is but thank you for the opportunity and your time.

So SOCOM, so SOCOM's origins, founded, really by Congress. Congress stood up the Special Operations Command in 1987. And it was the result of, I think, looking backwards where there had been Special Operations Forces in every element of the services – so some in the Army, some in the Navy, Air Force, Marines – yet not integrated or working together in a more fulsome way and also with no overarching budget that is of their own.

Also in 1979, a failed mission to rescue our U.S. hostages in Tehran, where that really came probably to the forefront, different service helicopters with different teammates in the back that would be called ground force teammates, challenging conditions in terms of getting everybody to work together in a way that you have now in your Special Operations Command.

So in 1987, Congress passed a law to stand Special Operations Command up with a headquarters in McDill Air Force Base, our corporate headquarters for lack of a better term, and then bring all the service elements under one umbrella. So we have Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine teammates. We already have some Space Guardian teammates as well. We may make that a little bit more fulsome here in the near future. Gave us our own budget. We call it Major Force Program 11. That allows us to do Special Operations unique type of things. Whether it be modify equipment or use it in the conduct of deploying folks down range and doing the missions that were directed by the Defense Department or by the President.

And also with an Acquisition Executive, so we have the ability to go get our own technology, our own equipment, unlike any of the other combatant commands that are across the globe as you might see in Indo-Pacific all the way across through European Command. And we're very blessed that it's more like what the services have, the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines. And that Acquisition Executive, Miss Melissa Johnson, sits in our C-Suite right next to the Command Sergeant Major and I, so we do our acquisition of our technology and our science and research and development at what I call SOCOM speed. Very, very fast with the DNA of a startup.

We're the newest kid on the block so to speak in the Department of Defense, only 30-plus years old. We still have an edge to us. I think we're very innovative. We're very

creative. And as a result, we get after our technology needs and our research and development needs that way. So since 1987 we've had a corporate headquarters with a budget, with elements from all the services working for Special Operations Command and deployed across the globe.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: And just for background, you've got some pretty famous units under your command. It's the Rangers, it's the SEALs, Marine...all that.

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Yes. So inside the teams to teams, we're very blessed. We have them as components – Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines – but right behind that is Army Special Operations all the way across through Marines Special Operations. So in our ecosystem in the Army, you would find our Rangers, the very famous Ranger regiment. It harkens back to a lineage from World War II. You'd find our Special Forces teammates also known as Green Berets also from lineage of the Office of Strategic Services in World War II and really stood up formally in about 1952 as a result of what was going on in Europe during the Cold War.

You'd find incredible helicopter pilots in one our most elite helicopter regiments called Task Force 160th. That's just the moniker for it. But you can imagine the ones that do just the most incredible missions as would have been done in the Osama bin Laden raid. And you'd also find Civil Affairs teammates, folks who actually meet the world

where they are in terms of civil action projects, working with U.S. AID, our State Department team, as a way to assist in not kinetic ways, in ways that are not about war. They're about nation to nation.

In our Navy, you have your Navy SEALs. You have some incredible boat drivers. In our Air Force Team, we have pilots with all the airplanes, and we also have a ground component. And then our Marines Special Operations Team, the newest to the SOCOM family, has the title of Marine Raiders. And that's taken from World War II lineage as well. And then we have a sprinkling of Space Guardians from Space Force inside of SOCOM that we're looking to make a little bit more formal here in the coming months. So we're blessed. We have a very integrated team, a joint team, and in any given day, about 6,000 of those teammates are deployed across the globe in about 80 to 85 different countries.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: I was going to keep going until you mentioned the Marine Raiders.

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Charles wanted those to go out first.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: You must see all sorts of the landscape of the security environment. There's so much going on in the world. Multiple hot spots, which we

normally don't have, but visible ones to the Americans now. So how do you assess the global security environment? All the changes that are happening, all the conflicts, the administration changing. How would you kind of sum it up?

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Yes, I think in a couple of words, the most challenging I've seen in my 37 years of being in the military with a large number of those being in Special Operations. And I say that probably through three lenses. The first lens would be the convergence of the adversaries that have been so named in our national defense strategy and our national military strategy that are derivatives of the national security strategy.

And what I would offer in that is in singularity the People's Republic of China has manifested in the military space a very large military presence in the Indo-Pacific as, I think, is noted and certainly known by everybody here. At the same time, they've got a diplomatic corps that we certainly assess is all about diplomatic pressurization combined with economic coercion at times to really turn countries in a different direction from even at times relationships with the United States and other partners and allies that we all have.

Then when we think about Russia, look no further than the tragedy that's Ukraine. You know, the largest land war in Europe since World War II. Going into its third year, the

tragedy that unfortunately each night befalls folks in Kyiv or Lviv or even on the front line of troops and an industrial base that's starting to crank back up again in terms of the Russian side with armaments and material that are challenging, at a speed and a rate that I think not only challenges Ukraine but certainly challenge the rest of us. That would be NATO first as we think about approaches in the future.

Right behind that would be Iran. You know, at the center with the regime, we've long talked about the nuclear side. I think now we're talking a lot more about their long-range missiles or theater ballistic missiles and their weaponry. And then right behind that is their use of proxies that I imagine everybody in here is certainly following. Whether it be Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and Iranian-aligned militias that are in Iraq. At times, almost all the time imposing Force posture challenges for our service members down range, certainly in Iraq and Syria.

And then North Korea, if they were ever to have been forgotten for a period of time, they've certainly come back. I imagine everybody's tracking from what's been out in the news, the arrival of North Korean soldiers inside of Russia to add to the Russian capability against the Ukrainians. And that's certainly a part of the North Korean, I would offer, thought process on top of the nuclear threat that they pose, not only to the peninsula but to the Indo-Pacific. What I would add is in singularity enough of a challenge, but now we're watching them converge.

We talk about a fusion of these adversaries now. And I'll give you the vignette that I like to talk about is if Ukraine at the start of the second invasion was ever fighting Russia, and it was Ukraine against Russia, it's a way different proposition right now. What we see is it's Ukraine against Russia, plus Iran, plus now North Korea, and certainly in material solutions, the PRC. And that's a fusion that concerns not only the Ukrainians and NATO, but certainly the U.S. and our security senior leaders.

You can see that as well as it starts to transition in the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb, with the Houthis as proxies to the Iranians receiving Iranian material solutions. Yet at times, maybe there's an appearance that there may also be some Russian influence as we think about that convergence. So that would be one set, I'd call prism of a challenge.

The second prism, I really, folks call it the changing character of war. Maybe we call it the fluid future of warfare takeaways. It's going to be very different and our takeaway is the view we have into the Ukraine effort that's going on right now. When you look at it, if you're on the ground, the trench warfare and the hand-to-hand fighting would resemble much of what folks experienced in World War I and maybe a bit of World War II. But if you look up in the skies, it's 21st century moving into 22nd century type warfare with uncrewed anything. Big drones, little drones, one-way munitions. Certainly things you can't see in the electromagnetic spectrum that's knocking these things down. There's

the infusion of space and cyber.

And not only things in the air that are uncrewed but certainly on the maritime surface and sub-surface. Vessels that have no one in them either being used for reconnaissance or being used for kinetic effect. And look no further than the fact that Ukraine has been able to put Russian warships to the bottom of the Black Sea absent a Ukrainian Navy. The technology combined with automation and probably artificial intelligence is changing character not only in theory, when we think about all things uncrewed, drones in the air, on the surface and sub-surface of the maritime space and on the land when you think about robotics combined with artificial intelligence, everybody here in this room has watched ___. Maybe it's beyond a hockey stick. Maybe a comet, straight up in terms of the arrival and then the application, not only in the private sector but in the military sector.

And then I would add adaptive and 3D printing that's making supply chains, I would call in some ways more manageable and at some point we may be able to do some of the printing of the type of material solutions we need forward on the battle field. We're watching others do that, and I think that we're taking a leap, and certainly take great notice.

Those two prisms, the fusion of adversaries and the fluid future of warfare are then

probably added to by the global trends. You know, we're watching markets fracture. If you think about the challenge the Ukrainians had getting their goods to market, mostly their wheat to other nations and other continents being interrupted. Commercial shipping in the Red Sea at risk based on the Houthi actions over the last two-plus years.

Not only against Israel, not only against the U.S. fleet, but also against the commercial shipping that many of them now, and there may be experts in the room here who are part of that industry, are having to find alternative routes to bring their goods to market. And at some point the cost increase that will then be, certainly transitioned to consumers. That's a different global market along with what happened after Covid and supply chains. I think those three prisms are making it one of the most complicated times I certainly think I've ever seen, and maybe many in this room as well.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: I think many of us think of Special Forces for small conflicts, counterterrorism, we remember capturing Osama bin Laden. As we pivot from the Middle East threat to these bigger superpowers, China and Russia, what's the role of Special Forces in kind of the new warfare for bigger clients?

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Yes, thanks Charles. I think the role for U.S. Special Operations Command first continues in that. And what I'll offer is if we start with, our product that we provide the nation is national security success or winning against very

challenging political environments at times – and I’m talking about forward-based – and contested or congested environments: mega cities, rural areas, technology that’s going against us.

The three business lines that we do that in would start with that very first one, our counterterrorism mission. I like to say that while the califate that ISIS and Al Qaeda have certainly desired for years is now contained somewhat inside of Iraq and inside Syria with their global leadership, the ideology is still running around unconstrained. It’s on the internet, social media platforms where folks can be inspired or aspired to do ill things against not only this nation but against our partners and allies.

And you can see that in motion maybe even as Director Wray talks about it in public, what the FBI is seeing, some recent arrests in our own nation of folks who aspired to do terroristic-type events associated with ISIS and certainly in capitals across the globe. As these events start to manifest themselves, it’s all from a position of ISIS or even Al Qaeda at times trying to orchestrate this.

So I think that mission continues for as long as I can see as I do not think the ideology will go away anytime soon. And certainly it’s a whole government approach. It’s not just U.S. SOCOM but we are one part of the team, not only in this nation but with international partners from the Special Ops community, the intelligence community, law

enforcement and judiciary communities as well.

I think the second mission is crisis response. And put simply, that's our solemn obligation as an incredible military to rescue U.S. citizens anywhere in the world that are being held hostage. There are very few nations in the world that have that capability, but it's one that we take on as a sacred, solemn obligation that if there's a U.S. citizen or someone has been directed by the President that might be a partner and ally in trouble somewhere in the world, we have a very short string to be able to go there and get them home.

That includes our diplomats as most recently was seen in Sudan. In Khartoum, there was a very high level of fighting between government and non-government forces and our diplomats were under duress. And we were able, after an initial order, to be able to get there and within a very short period of time to go in, in a very challenging environment and bring them out to safety. And we've done that in many other places and that's not the only manifestation.

We absolutely have a requirement to be able to do non-combatant evacuation of U.S. citizens that may be in troubled war zones. You can imagine Lebanon. You can imagine some other places across the globe where there are a high number of U.S. citizens that at some point will want to come home and we stay ready for those types of missions

along with the rest of our military.

The one that is probably the most emergent right now but is a legacy and a lineage of Special Operations, strategic competition. And I say it's the most emergent because for 24-plus years, we've really had to focus on the counterterrorism mission to ensure that nothing like was stormed, normed, and formed in Afghanistan ever comes back to this nation ever again in that manifestation. And we stay on that mission as I just described. But it could be other places in the world that have under-governed spaces where there's not a domestic law enforcement that can handle it, and we absolutely have to stay very aware, very vigilant.

In strategic competition, this is the requirement by our Defense Department. We provide options and advantages to commanders, U.S. commanders across the globe against the People's Republic of China in the military space if God forbid we ever went to some level of high-end conflict. But get ready for left of conflict. Provide options and opportunities for our government that would be very helpful to ward off anything like that. And then to also provide options to our partners and allies in a very Special Operations unique way akin to what we were asked to do back in World War II with the OSS. And now in a modern-day world, do it with the technology that we're able to get our hands on, that's afforded to us. And to do it in a way that also provides dilemmas and challenges to the adversaries such as the PRCs, such as Russia, Iran, and North

Korea.

We call that strategic competition. We are not at war, but there is a sense that those countries are using other elements of their instruments of power – diplomatic, economic, information, and even lawfare if you look into the South China Sea in the case of the PRC pushing very hard on a treaty ally, the Philippines, ramming their ships, the PRC ships into Philippines Coast Guard and naval vessels that are just trying to resupply their exclusive economic zone. So we see this every day across the globe in various form factors.

And what we've been asked to do by the Secretary of Defense, in particular, and Special Operations is to really increase our participation in that in a way that we had after World War II and had done for years during the Cold War, providing options for the United States in a Special Operations unique way, very low key, discreet. Some would call it a lower threshold of conflict or also known as the gray zone. And now that's really back in force. And we add that to those other two missions and that's probably another reason this is one of the most complex, complicated eras I've seen in my 37 years in the military.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Yes, we were talking earlier, and I think that people would be surprised to know how closely you work with the Commerce Department, Treasury,

DOJ. Can you talk about some of those relationships and how broad the mission is now?

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: I can. First, I would offer, it really is critical for us as U.S. Special Operations Command to have great relationships with teammates in Commerce, in Treasury. You would expect in the intel community, the IC as we call it, but across the depth and breadth to include even our State Department in a really big way. And what that does, I believe it gives us integrated approaches to solving problems. Everything is not a nail and it needs a hammer. There are other options inside of our government and across our elements of power. Whether it be the diplomatic side, the economic side, the informational side that are more apropos and more appropriate for solving these certain problems that may come up, and certainly being looked at by senior leaders.

So I would say that for Special Operations Command we probably got very good at that in the aftermath of the tragic events of 9/11. And our work with the Treasury team to do what we call counter-threat financing, to understand flows of money that the terrorist networks were using, whether they be any number of banking instruments or some level of less formal instruments to move money because we knew at some point it was leading to an operation. So we got very good at working with Treasury and others on, one, how to trace it, and then frankly how to affect it as money ended up being the

engine for many operations. It always is.

I think the other thing that we've been even more able to do over the last couple of years is integrate that with our Commerce teammates. I would offer that many nations will tell us, your military, I really appreciate what you're doing in the military space. You are a preferred partner, but we'd really like some economic input, some direct foreign investment. Where are your U.S. investors?

And so we had an opportunity to have trade discussions with the Commerce team, in this case under Secretary Raimondo, telling her how we've seen this across the globe and then offering it to her team to go off and at some point develop options and opportunities for either a bilateral or multilateral trade relationship that may not have been there before.

We think that's really important because at the very end of the day, it's a combination of your military security and economic security that makes any nation really whole. And we know that, we're the beneficiaries of that here. I would offer we're probably the best military in the world because of the economic engine we have in this great country of ours that is the envy of the entire world. Whether it be the capital markets, our innovation, our manufacturing, we really are – and we hear this out across the globe – so hopefully I'm adding to what you all know as business leaders. We're the envy.

And the military, on the other part, when we talk to our military colleagues, we're the envy of them. But we always offer that we are that because of this great economic engine we have in this country. And so as we see opportunities out there for other countries to enjoy that type of national security when you bring those together, we provide that type of information back. We do joint planning together. And I think we're as close as we have ever been – at least from SOCOM, and our greater military with teammates in places like Commerce and Treasury and Homeland Security, our State Department for sure.

And then there's points in time where there's instruments that can be used that wouldn't be the military. Tariffs, sanctions. We're able to provide information back at some point, through our eyes, whether they're working or not. We may see the world through a different pair of glasses, or we know a baseline in a certain country. And against the backdrop of those sanctions or other instruments, we provide input back to whoever that may be – certainly the National Security Council or it could be in Commerce, it could be in the Treasury Department. So very, very good relationship. And I think it's grown a lot over the last couple of years and growing even more.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Well, you have a huge job just coordinating the Special Forces in the U.S., 70,000 people, but some of our allies have Special Forces as well. Do you work with them? Can you have the same level of coordination? What's been the

success story there?

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Yes. We absolutely do work with the international Special Operations community. I would tell you that over the 23-plus, 24-plus years now that we've been, after the tragic events of 9/11, we've gotten a lot closer. You know, in years gone by, we had relationships. We did some training with many of them. We had a pretty good relationship. But it wasn't forged against the same existential threat we all saw after those events. And we, at many points, worked together in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, Yemen and Somalia, together with our international Special Operations teammates.

And that's a different relationship. It's a lot tighter. It's a lot more underpinned by trust. I think everybody in this room knows you really don't have a relationship until you either go through the speed of trust or you don't, and it's the slowness of trust and you never make it, it's not real. And I think in this case it's absolutely real and it's very critical. And we have it across the globe.

We're very blessed that some of them are against the backdrop of what we call the Five Eyes Team, the U.S., the Canadians, the Australians, New Zealand, the U.K. That is very, very tight. But the rings as they go out are just as tight with our French teammates, our Spanish teammates, teammates in the Indo-Pacific and South America,

and the Middle East. It is a very vibrant international Special Operations Team and one that we know is relied on by all their nations in the same way we're relied on by our nation.

So we have a global gathering every year down in Tampa. It's usually the first week of May. We call it Special Operations Forces Week. Last year it was international. This year it was international. About 22,000 teammates had come down, about 90 different countries. And we had the chance to really talk about the issues that are not stovepiped to any one nation. They are absolutely interrelated.

Whether it be terrorism, whether it be, as I would like to say, the world votes, and volatility, and there's a crisis, and we might depend on an international SOF partner to give us the access to a place, either with our helicopters or through our teammates, maybe even for the information or the intelligence we may not have. And we offer the same thing vice versa. If they're going to a place, we have those same categories that we're able to offer without even thinking. It's in the blink of an eye.

And I think in many ways, the world, we call ourselves the quiet professionals so we don't advertise this a lot, talk about it a lot, but I hope that at some point the world would be very proud of how the international Special Operations Teams across the globe are really working together to solve complex and complicated problems that bedevil all of us

frankly.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: I think that a lot of people would like to know, switching to a different topic, how does one get to be a Four-Star General in the Army? And was this always something you thought of early? When we walk down the streets of Manhattan, we don't see many people that look like you, so people want to know more. So how long were you thinking about joining the Army? How did it all start?

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Yes, so first, I don't think anyone really ever envisions, probably in any profession that you're successful at, at being at the top. My sense is you envision going in. You find that there's an incredible group of people that you love working with, and it's got the purpose and the mission that's beyond anything that's just about the individual and then at some point you just stay. And I think that it's been that, I got into the Special Operations community, I really found that it was a purpose-filled endeavor with selfless servants, and the most incredible people I had ever been around, from all walks of life, all nations frankly, and our own military. And just incredible experiences.

And as a result, I absolutely endeavored every day to just do the best I could and to provide value, whether it was at a smaller level unit or even today, I think the Command Sergeant Major and I would tell you, you know, what keeps us awake at night really is

are we doing as much as we can for all of our teammates deployed across the globe and doing it as hard and fast and as they taught us. Because many of these teammates we're very blessed to have, we've served with for 20 or 25 years.

And there was probably a whole dose of luck, I imagine, and blessings that get you to a point where I'm able, with the Command Sergeant Major Shane Shorter, who is sitting right here, to give back hopefully more than the ecosystem invested in us as we were coming up and to make sure that we're giving them the resources, the tools, the guidance, the strategic wins that they crave and they need, and then ensuring that if we can, we help it all get to the point of where we'll win for the nation no matter what the mission is.

When I think about that, I wanted to be a football coach. I went to Notre Dame and had a chance to work for Lou Holtz, football coach, very famous at Notre Dame and known across the U.S. And at some point, he actually talked me into a little bit of this military service. He had the opportunity to serve in the Reserves before he really got into coaching full-time. And he talked a lot about what he had learned in the military in terms of discipline, leadership, just people to people skills. It was folks from all across our great nation, all across the world in the military even when he was there. And that it just, it had him become a different person even for his four years. And after we had those conversations, I got the itch and as I joined I found exactly what he was talking about

and what others certainly had told me about as well.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: So I believe Notre Dame plays Army this weekend. Who do you root for?

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Go Irish. I have to. I have to. But on other occasions, go Army. Beat Navy.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Not this year. We'll see. So let's get into technology and innovation because we've talked a lot earlier about autonomous weapons, how that's changing so much, the lack of enough drones, manufacturing capacity, and the impact it's going to have on your mission. So number one, I know you've done some things to speed procurement yourself, within your organization. But secondly, how does that replace things that you're already doing and what's the future of warfare when you look at these sorts of weapons?

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Yes. I think it's, you know, the unfortunate and tragic events in Ukraine have given us insights at speed, I think, that maybe before as we were standing back and pontificating about this, we thought were years in the making. That's not the case. As we've had the opportunity to really be alongside our Ukrainian Special Operations counterparts, we got to know them in 1994 after the wall came

down. Our approach as Special Operations Forces, in this case, Special Forces, was to really engage. Meet the world where it was, and folks who wanted us to come aboard and have an opportunity to learn from each other, we took them up on it. And Ukraine was one.

And we've had the opportunity since then to really move through a journey with Ukrainian Special Operations Forces on building a non-commissioned officer corps just like we have in our great military. In fact, the secret sauce in our military is our non-commissioned officers. That is the envy of the world when they think about our military because we're so blessed to have at every level, sergeants and corporals, and command sergeants, major, you name it, who really are the engine for us to be as good as we are. And we showed them that, and we show that to many nations across the globe that are willing and lots of them take us up on it.

And so as we've been alongside them and then after the second invasion, the insights we have because of the trust we've built since 1994 have been astounding. And I would tell you that, if I could wrap it up, literally the spin cycle inside of Ukraine on some of this technology from it being introduced to being utilized to the Russians countering has gone from four to six months to four to six weeks. It's that fast. And it may be in the air domain with a certain type of drone and the way it flies, how it navigates, and at some point it's countered. And then a new counter over the counter, build a better mousetrap,

kind of going back and forth, has sped up in an incredible way these last couple of months.

And I think what it's caused us to think about as we step back is not only that, but the way in which these new capabilities to some extent, long range systems, smaller systems of drones that, you know, \$800, that have very high-res cameras on them and at some point can do some level of recognizance that would have taken humans to do, you know, 25 years ago.

And replacing that, bringing the Force protection challenge down and accomplishing the mission has had us laser-focused on what is that look like for Special Operations Command. And a sense of we know that that's not a flash in the pan because we're also seeing that level of technology being used by the Houthis in the commercial shipping lanes. These uncrewed boats, autonomous, that are attempting to run into mostly commercial vessels as they transit the Red Sea or the Bab-el-Mandeb. So I think for us it's given us a couple of takeaways. We've got to be in that space.

The second one is that right now is almost, I feel like it is the private sector space. Where things before would have been in the government, think about when we built rockets, SIM chips back in the day, lots of that was inside the government for our utilization to put people on the moon, to build aircraft carriers, to build bombers and

fighters. And while that is still really important, where the world seemingly is going is a commercial utilization of uncrewed systems to deliver goods, uncrewed systems to take people, driverless taxis, uncrewed systems to do, you can just fill in the blank. I used to worry, now I'm not, with the Roomba running around the house. That's what I used to have to do. Now I'm excited. Go for it.

So we can see where these things are really moving at pace. And then with artificial intelligence and the application of that type of technology over oceans and glaciers of data that need to be turned in a very quick period of time for us to make a really good decision, precise on target, this is the future as we look at it. Our challenge is that we are absolutely seeing most of that start to arrive and rise in the commercial sector. It's hard for our defense industrial base, I think, to see as a signal from me words like I need attritable, atypical, affordable technology at mass and scale for the future, and at speed for both non-lethal effects – intelligence, recognizance, surveillance – and also for the times we need to certainly take on an adversary and not use our most exquisite platforms right off the bat.

And my sense is that's what we're doing right now in the Red Sea. You know, if you think about a Houthi missile coming out from Yemen, maybe \$10,000, \$15,000. We're shooting those things down with, at times multi-million-dollar missiles. That's a cost-benefit curve I think everybody in this room would go, yeah, that's not going to work. We

recognize that as well. And I think for the Special Operations community in particular we see what's going on in Ukraine and against all the elements, whether it's artificial intelligence, autonomy, automation, 3D or adaptive printing, all the way up to these uncrewed systems that have to fly in swarms and hives, it's a place SOCOM's got to actually be positioned in order to help the nation as we go forward in the future.

So we've taken, over the last year, year and a half, opportunities just like this to talk to that very subject to the private sector and visit either with venture capital teams or private equity organizations or even the smallest and the mid-startups that are in this space, whether it be software, hardware, knowledge management, artificial intelligence technology that we can put on our classified and unclassified data. And I think we've got to continue to do it, and I probably have to spin that even faster. As we're used to speed on the battlefield, and I think right now we're trying to get to fly where we're going even faster in the acquisition and what I would call the service-like side of the things we do at Special Operations Command.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: I'll ask the audience to start getting questions ready. I've got a couple final people questions, and then I'll come back to the audience. We have microphones somewhere. So a final one is, it must be extremely hard to find people qualified to be in the Special Forces. So from a recruiting standpoint, retention, where do you stand on kind of the people issues?

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Yes, I'll start by saying that in our strategic priorities at SOCOM, there are three. The first one is people, and then we talk about winning and we talk about transforming. But across all those, those two other buckets, the thread really is for Special Operations Command, our people. And they are the competitive and comparative advantage. And it's been a long-held truth inside of Special Operations Command that humans are more important than hardware, and what was developed decades ago. Now sometimes cheekily I say, and software, and ChatGPT.

The human, for many, many reasons, not the least of which is leadership, which is the social movement of humans toward a common goal and objective like everybody here knows in any sector or segment, will really reign supreme, and especially in Special Operations, the way they think, the way they approach problems. Then we wrap technology around them to make them even better. But we start with what we think is the most incredible comparative, competitive advantage in the world and that's our humans. And we spend a lot of time assessing and selecting and training and bringing them into our organizations.

The SEALs or the Rangers or Green Berets or our Marine Raiders, there is a very deliberate and lengthy process to ensure we have the right person who is going into those organizations. The same thing on our human resources, intelligence, logistics, it all has to work together because every single piece of the SOCOM people ecosystem

has got to be as wired for sound and strong as the other so that we can all do this together because it all, as everybody here knows, is interlinked.

When we talk about win, which I've already described in our three missions, in our business lines, people are at the very heart of that. And then even as I talk about transform, in many forums like this folks will go, oh, you're talking about technology. I'll say, I start with our people first. It's all about here...how are they thinking about the world? How are we educating them for the world – the uncertainty, the volatility, the ambiguity? That needs a human start before we'll talk about technology and then transformation of our great organizations.

With all that at play, the recruiting environment the last couple of years has absolutely been, it's been a challenge. And we at SOCOM are the beneficiaries of the great talent that comes first in from our nation, the young men and women that join our military. But they come to us through the service lines. They come to us through the Army to go to Army Special Ops. They come from the Navy to go, so there's a bit of a waypoint before we get them. And when that waypoint is dry, it hits us in that same way. So I think the challenge that the services had the last couple of years is starting to turn for the better.

And we were talking about it, I think, earlier in the Green Room, is the services have done a lot of work, both to tell the American public that, my phrase, that there is a job

catalogue in the Department of Defense that's probably bigger than anything in the entire world. You can be a lawyer. You can be a doctor. You can be a veterinarian. You can be a cyber team. It could be space. There's so many things. And then you can actually even pick and move to other jobs. And on top of that, serve with really incredible people and have a purpose-filled life. And then whether it's four years or 40, go out and do great things as well for the nation and other service-minded endeavors.

So I think we're coming out of that a bit. Yet when the services are challenged in recruiting, so are we. And there's a bit of a bow wave that's headed our way based on the last couple of years. Yet at the same time the services are actually turning the corner. I think they're getting into a good spot. So we might have to run a bow wave for a year or two before we settle out because the services actually settle out. We have very limited opportunities to bring somebody from the street right into the Special Ops community. It's very small. About 4,000 on any given year, either in the Army for Green Berets or Rangers, or our enlisted SEAL contracts, about 1,000 come in that way. But on the whole, we're really dependent on the services to lend us and loan us their really great talent that they have in their service.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: We'd be remiss if we didn't ask you for a few thoughts on leadership given your impressive career. And these are all business leaders in the room. They'd love just a few words of wisdom.

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: I might, I'd also ask for some back from this room here, incredibly successful folks. I think I'd start where I mentioned a little earlier. Leadership is a social movement of taking a group of humans and people toward a common objective and whatever that might be. It could be in sports to win a championship. It could be in the business world to be the leader in your product vector or segment. It could be in the academic arena to solve incredible problems and make the world a better place. And certainly it's the same in our military.

And when I think about it like that, you know, I have a couple thoughts for everybody here. You know, I think the very first thing is this combination of being an incredible listener and absorbing what a teammate, especially today, where as I see coming into our ranks, the younger teammates, they absolutely, they want to be valued and they have value. We just have to listen. And so listening as intently as they're giving us this incredible input I think is really a key leader trait, that whether you're a strategic leader like everybody in this room or you're an initial entry leader like we have in our military. I talk a lot about, I use the old adage, two ears, one mouth for a reason. And that's either with your troops or whether you're sitting with different stakeholders if you're at a level like the Command Sergeant Major and I.

But I think right behind that is make your transmissions count. Your communication to your organization is really, really important. Clarity, preciseness, how you get it down

through, I call it layers and layers of organizational, we have 70,000 folks, units from Okinawa, Japan and South Korea all the way across the United States to places in Germany and in between. Ensuring that everybody can get it through whatever modalities or mediums. And then reinforce it. I think we're a really busy world today and folks have a lot going on up here, and it's almost like you're trying to distill signal from all the noise, so they understand where it is that we're trying to take them.

I think, you know, second really is about having a vision, at this level in particular. And it's at all levels but I didn't have to have that when I was a lieutenant. I had an incredible platoon sergeant, really showed me what it meant to be in the military. You know this, you saw it yourself. He showed me the skills I would need for the next couple of levels, and that was passed on to sergeant majors and beyond. I think now, as Command Sergeant Major Shorter and I think about it, our job as strategic leaders, enterprise leaders, is to have a vision for the organization. Yet have enough tactile stepping stones where folks can actually get to that vision. It's not so gooey or opaque that they, what are you talking about, what do you mean?

And that takes an immense amount of work on the part of the leader to have the idea even though it may still be cloudy a couple of years down the road, but have enough, I think, instinct, corps sense to give some of the stepping stones that go in that direction and then also know that the world will change, and it's going to have to move a little bit.

But with that North Star that was put out there as the vision, I think folks will get it there for you. And most of our teammates, just like you have, they actually bring something back way better than anything I could have imagined if I would have tried to micro-manage it. Because we have just these incredible teammates all up and down the Special Operations enterprise.

And then lastly, and I've got more, but in the interest of time...I talk about today, leaders need to be, they need to have energy. The world is a draining place, and there are Donny and Debby Downers all over the place. And if you're the CEO of division, hate, nastiness, you're probably making a lot of money in this world today. People are going for the click bait and hyper clicks. But if you're the CEO of just goodness and authenticity and humbleness, it's unfortunate, nobody's hearing about you. But that's what everybody should really get after.

And I think being an energized leader who is caring for teammates, ensuring everybody knows they're valued, thanking them for being part of the team, giving them a good direction. You need energy to do that as a leader. And I think folks want to see somebody who is energized, and it's not a false happiness. But when I step in the door each day I think, hey, whatever I've got going on at home, that's the conversation between me and the windshield. And then when I step into the office, it's, hey, what are we doing, teammates, and excited to be there, excited to get after these really

challenging problems that everybody in this room has. But not with a face that's like I'm upset or I have a challenge because I think everybody's got them.

And what they really want to see is an inspirational teammate. So I call it inspirational leadership, or be a happy leader so that as your teammates are moving along, they get that energy as you, as a leader, really take them into some challenging waters, rough waters. Those would be a couple of things I talk about, but I would be interested...

CHARLES PHILLIPS: Hence the Four Stars...Alright, questions.

QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD

QUESTION: Thank you, General. Thank you. There's been reporting about how the U.S. government has made efforts to counter Chinese efforts to establish a base in Gabon in part by providing training to local security forces and economic assistance. So my question is, is that an example of what you were talking about with working with your partners in Commerce and Treasury? Second, when you look at our strategic adversaries and what they have done in the gray zone, what does that make you think we should do to either achieve parity with them or surpass them or to establish counter measures or counter capabilities?

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Thank you. I think your first example is certainly an example of strategic competition. You know, as we have partners and allies across the globe, I would imagine in all cases we'd want a really incredible military connection, a relationship with them as well as economic, diplomatic, and informational. And so we strive for that everywhere we are. And when we see things coming at them or us that are not that, first and foremost, we feel it's our obligation to tell them that, to ensure that they're able to weave through mis- or disinformation about what may be true intent is, either in that location or others. There are examples aplenty about where we see this across the globe.

And I think when folks see that through authenticity and long-time trust and relationships, nations listen. Just like we do to our partners and allies when they come and talk to us about things, especially in Special Operations Command. So that is absolutely an example of that. And it's an inter-working, not only between, in this case African Command and General Mike Langley and his team, but his inter-agency team of Commerce and Treasury and other elements that are from our U.S. government.

We actually have the same thing. We have a small cell of inter-agency teammates down at SOCOM that represent Homeland Security, Department of Energy, Commerce, Treasury, U.S. AID, a diplomatic side from the State Department. And each and every day, we're all thinking through those lenses as well in this strategic competition space.

And it's phenomenal because all the other departments and agencies have different prisms or optics that they see the world, but when we put it all together, all those ideas really make a phenomenal way ahead or phenomenal potential outcome.

To your second point, I think absolutely we see what, in the case of either PRC or the Russians, and in particular in Africa where Russia – I would call it leapt into mis- and disinformation in places across the continent, we see that continuing. That is a lever, if you think about an approach, and most folks think about warfare in terms of the missiles are flying, or there's high-end kinetics, there's probably an approach where it may not be warfare, it may be less than that, a traditional approach or a traditional warfare where the elements of power are levers, in terms of economic, diplomatic, informational, lawfare, and of course, your military.

But I pulled that one out because I think this idea that we should all be working in terms of economic and military security equals national security is really, really important. And when we see that work in a way I would offer that looks bright, the impact, the second and third consequences are actually phenomenal. And so my sense is that over time we have to continue to think like that to push back on those that are using those levers quicker and faster than maybe we are and that at some point aren't beholden except to one person. Maybe Xi Jinping or Putin. And we've got an incredible inter-agency team process that really gives us a chance to make sure we're looking at the pros and cons.

And I think we're watching that thing now really start to speed up and the recognition is because we're watching what's happening across the globe with the PRC and the Russians.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: We'll take one more before we close up.

QUESTION: Good day, Sir. I'm Tavi, and I'm currently serving with the U.S. Army Reserves on the Civil Air Force, and it's actually under your command so it's a pleasure speaking with you.

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Very good to see you.

QUESTION: Thank you. I realize that speaking with people who are out there, a good number of people still don't know about the difference between national security and national defense. Sometimes it's being used interchangeably. So I wanted you to highlight on that, to bring the difference between national security and national defense and also to highlight on one of the national defense strategies that the U.S. Army or U.S. military does.

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Sure. Thank you. I think in many ways, I would say absolutely like you just offered, we're trying to reinforce that. I think there's a defense

piece to any nation that is one part of national security. Domestic security is another part. But I think defense, especially for us, we're usually thinking outward across the globe, our military, as you know well. I think there's the domestic security side that we think about law enforcement, homeland security on top of the economic security. And you could layer on some level of health security. All of those to me are layers of national security and what I imagine any population is looking for from their government.

So I appreciate you bringing that up because I absolutely agree that all of those have got to be factored in when we think about the relationships the United States has across the globe and over time has built even more of and that all of those are key factors of those relationships. There may be a military relationship that's prominent meaning it's seen more acutely than others.

But I would offer our diplomatic information and economic relationships are probably more potent and carry greater weight because the world is looking for those types of connections with the United States and certainly I would call other partners and allies. And it benefits anyone to have them all. But the military manifestation is actually seen and that's where folks go to. But I would offer that maybe the most potent is the other parts that when combined together make true national security. Thank you.

CHARLES PHILLIPS: General Fenton, thank you for what you're doing for the country

and for spending some time with us today.

GENERAL BRYAN P. FENTON: Thank you for your time. Thank you everybody.

VICE CHAIR DAMBISA MOYO: General Fenton, thank you so much for taking extra time to help us understand better what you do and the important role that you play for the nation. Thank you both for your time today and that insightful conversation.

I want to quickly highlight a few more exciting speakers that will be joining us over the next few weeks. This Thursday, the 21st, we will host a luncheon featuring Ken Griffin, the CEO of Citadel. Arkin Group's Jack Devine, a veteran of the CIA joins us for a webinar on November 25th. And the CEO of animal health giant, Zoetis, Kristin Peck, will be here on December 4th. Keep an eye out on the website and your email for more updates in the coming weeks. And as always, know that you are welcome to invite guests to our events. And if you don't want to wait for one of our events that I just mentioned, you can find more outstanding conversations On Demand. Season Two of the Club's podcast is now Live. Be sure to check out The Forum hosted by Becky Quick.

Finally, I would like to take a moment to recognize members of the Centennial Society joining us today. Almost 400 of our members have committed to join the Centennial

Society and their contributions continue to provide the Club's financial backbone. Thank you everyone for joining us. For those participating virtually, we will see you next time.

And for those in the room, please enjoy your lunch. Thank you.