

Statement to the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

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Distinguished Members of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service:

Thank you for the opportunity to share insights on this topic of vital national importance. My name is Lauren Bean Buitta. I am founder of Girl Security, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization empowering K-12 girls and young women in national security. Through our programming, we seek to mobilize all girls as active stakeholders in their nation's security. We seek to foster girls who are both civic-minded but also national security-minded.

Over the last three years with Girl Security, my team and I have spent time in classrooms and other venues in different parts of America with K-12 girls, teachers, families and communities learning more about their understanding of U.S. national security.

The following comments are a summary of my own findings informed by my work with Girl Security, as well as the experiences of girls in our network who I invited to contribute commentary on their civic education and service experiences.

From where we sit, we believe that engaging youth around a discussion of civics and national security can effectively advance a civics understanding as well as a service mindset.

America Today: Bridging a Generational Divide

To begin, it is crucial to note that we, older generations (~35+), cannot underestimate the uniquely uncharted terrain young people are forging, in large part because of reliance on technology, the valuation of social media, and growing income divides. High school girls in our program reveal to us “they know” their generation “is a crappy experiment.” They explain, the world is putting its weight in their shoulders while also chiding them for their developmental and social shortcomings; expecting them to save the world, but failing to actively understand how best to train them from their unique spaces across our country. As a society, we are just beginning to *consider* how certain societal shifts affecting young people, specifically technology, gun violence and a lack of civil discourse, are altering the cognition and development of younger generations.

This suggests that any sustainable campaigns to both increase awareness about national service and elevate civics education in America necessitates forging a better understanding of the experience of youth in America today. At one time, successive administrations organized a White House Conference on Children and Youth, which brought together delegates representing different issues together to improve the lives of children and youth in America. While it was suggested to me that such a similar effort would not be logistically feasible (e.g., there would be too many people), I believe coordinated regional efforts like this Commission are feasible and

would provide critical opportunities for leadership to genuinely harness the voices of youth and their advocates. Such efforts could also be coordinated around existing national days of service.

Through the course of our work with communities, we sometimes hear adults share sentiments about younger generations, such as: “They’re entitled.” “They’re snowflakes.” “They weren’t even alive when 9/11 happened.” Importantly, the imprint of a national trauma like 9/11 or Pearl Harbor doesn’t erode from generation to generation. As a country, we ensure - as we should - that we never forget. However, each generation’s remembrance of a defining national trauma is captured through a personal lens: I remember where I was when the plane hit the twin towers, for example. I remember my brother’s phone call before he deployed to Iraq. My lens frames my recall of this important period. These moments also shaped my motivation to contribute to public service.

For children and youth today, their defining traumas look rather different than those of the generations preceding them, not because the trauma itself is necessarily unique, but because the context is unique. This unique context must inform efforts to reenergize generations of young people in civics and service. We must let them lead a dialogue around civics, education, and service in this new era.

Civics Education: Applying a National Security Lens to a Project-Based Approach

As others noted in additional testimony as part of this hearing process, teachers and administrators are managing sometimes-competing demands and uncertain budgets. As one high school partner notes, “We don’t have time to teach civics. It’s math and reading, and some STEM.” Additionally, others note that efforts to forge civil discourse around civics topics can be “controversial,” garnering strong reactions from parents. Lastly, schools note the significant impact technology and social media are having on girls’ social and emotional learning and development goals, creating broader concern about the ability of younger generations to compete – and innovate – in a global economy.

Informed largely by the third factor – the impact of technology on social and emotional learning – we employ a project-based approach that incorporates social and emotional learning competencies in and outside of the classroom. Additionally, because youth in our program are most often learning about national security for the first time, active learning through personalized scenarios is the predicate for their broader awareness and engagement with security.

It is evident there is no one size fits all approach to teaching civics, and while others identify U.S. education reform a national security issue, we believe national security as a lens offers a new approach - one approach - to amplifying the importance of civics education.

Civics, like national security, is an abstract concept for most youth. In other words, young people don’t necessarily understand their potential contribution, because they are not applying what they may be learning in the classroom in everyday life. As Erin Connolly, one of our early career advisors noted: “I was never offered a civics course and my knowledge is based off of one American Government class in high school and a teacher who really affirmed the importance of

voting, it's our right but also our duty. I lacked a real understanding until I moved to the DC in my early 20s and actually engaged with Congress, and even then there was a large learning curve as to how our government actually operates.”

We also continue to send mixed messages, particularly to girls, about their civic role. When we liken a political leader to a teenage girl, that pejorative analogy resounds.

National security has long been the purview of a few, and perhaps the public has been purposely distanced because of a rationale that looks something like: the public might not understand the complexity of exercising defense capabilities, or it might be impossible to build public consensus around national security decisions like surveillance. However, national security policies and laws affect the broader public personally, and therefore, the public must be informed and engaged. Specifically, young people on the frontlines of some of our most pressing national security challenges must be informed and engaged. We don't know what we don't know, and for many young people, there is much misinformation and lack of education around national security, which accounts for many of the most seismic policies and laws impacting Americans and a global community today.

National security also provides a tangible set of experiences to foster active learning through many project-based scenarios upon which we can engage young people on issues affecting them personally today in a real and urgent way, while also building their civics understanding by demonstrating their role as stakeholder-citizens.

In our work, with our team, we fundamentally believe that an understanding of civics is a national security imperative, and that protecting our nation's security is imperative to protecting our democracy. Therefore, we cannot discuss one without the other; we must discuss both.

To effectively make national security accessible to girls, we begin each in-school program with a quote from an essay my brother wrote after returning from his second deployment to Iraq.

“WE ARE NOT JUST PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN AMERICA.”

In white font against a black background, these simple words strung together seem suspended in time. For many girls, it is their first time considering their identity as something more than themselves: a citizen among many citizens of a nation with borders, values, strengths, weaknesses, and challenges.

We then follow with, “the many ways in which we live our lives *mostly* secure is not ‘just the way it is’; it is the way it *must* be for America and its many liberties to flourish.” We then ask the girls, “What does national security mean to you?” The responses are always informed by the unique experience of each girl.

“National security means my family and community are safe.” “National security means that our schools are safe.” “National security means that every child has access to education.” Certainly, girls' understanding of national security may not conform to a practitioner's explanation, but

they engage with an exploration of how this very important function affects them personally. Through that analysis, they – the girls – forge a role for themselves.

What follows this foundational dialogue is a series of exercises and scenarios intended to empower girls to define an understanding of national security within the context of how it has been historically defined for them. In conjunction, girls exercise problem solving skills in situations with many different, and some undesirable, outcomes affecting their personal security. In other words, we let girls lead, providing a construct for their engagement, dialogue, and problem-solving.

The primary goal of educating youth about civics is to develop a working understanding of how government works, with an overarching goal of fostering a stake in the liberties government creates when it works the way it was intended, as well as an obligation to contribute to its working to sustain those liberties. Similarly, a primary goal of educating youth about national security is to develop a working understanding of how national security affects them personally, as well as an understanding of what is required to protect their nation's security with the goal of harnessing their engagement.

But consider how young people are experiencing both government and national security: If a child cannot commute to school safely, how can she appreciate liberty and mobility? If a girl's data is bought, sold, or breached, how can she value privacy? If young women hesitate to vote for fear of being targeted by a foreign state or fear of her vote being altered, as several of girls indicated, how can she authentically build trust in people and systems designed to capture her unique and powerful voice?

A shifting national security landscape provides an opportunity, albeit a challenging one, to engage youth affected by national security daily in their lives, as social media users coexisting in cyberspace with individuals or systems seeking to disrupt U.S. critical infrastructure; voters seeking to exercise the duty Erin noted; or students seeking context amid a highly contentious political and discourse environment. They are "experiencing" national security, though most don't know it, and therefore, they are experiencing government, though most don't know it.

This new landscape defined by misinformation, discord, and uncertainty, also provides a unique opportunity to for adults to admit: We don't know what we're doing. Help us figure it out. I believe we would find, as we do in our program, that younger generations share the values we seek to uphold, share a sense of purpose oriented around keeping themselves and their families and friends safe, and feel a sense of urgency today about the direction of our country.

It comes down to a simple sentiment that 250 girls shared with our team three weekends ago, "We are the ones we have been waiting for." It comes down to the voice of younger generations, as captured by one of our high school partners in a letter to the National Security Council:

"While some may say our generation takes for granted our security, we say we are an untapped resource. Our generation will bear the responsibility of developing solutions to emerging issues such as net neutrality, AI, and nuclear proliferation. We are a resource to be tapped, to be educated, to be engaged. We are not solely

the reactive consumers of data we may appear to be, or even are at times. We must all work together to protect our country and ensure the future of our democracy.”

It comes down the commitment of future generations, as one 14 year-old girl notes: “Now is the time to reverse our country’s downward spiral, to make America listen, and to create a better future for generations to come.”

If we ask younger generations what civics means to them, if we let them lead a dialogue about how civics should be situated in their education, which topics should be covered, whether standardized tests or performance measure should apply, we might not get the answers we want, but their answers will provide the direction we need as a country.

Thank you.