

ELECTION 2020

Candidates tell MOAA their views on the military

By Kathleen Curthoys

MOAA asked, and the candidates answered.

President Donald Trump, Democratic nominee Joe Biden, and Libertarian candidate Jo Jorgensen — all competing in the 2020 presidential election — responded when MOAA asked for their outlook on uniformed services issues in the weeks leading up to Election Day.

The questions cover a wide range of topics related to servicemembers, veterans, and their families, as well as national defense posture, the defense budget, and what the services need to accomplish their missions.

Their answers are presented here in their entirety and verbatim, as provided by the candidates through their campaign teams.

We have made an effort to present these responses in a balanced way, in keeping with MOAA's pledge to be nonpartisan.

DEFENSE BUDGET

The Defense Department continues to align its requirements with the 2018 National Defense Strategy, shaping the upcoming DoD budget request to be unveiled shortly after the start of a new presidential term. Do you think military spending levels should increase or decrease? What would your priorities be for military spending?

TRUMP: Last year I was proud to sign into law the largest-ever investment in the United States military. Before I came into office, the military endured deep and devastating budget cuts. Our military, quite frankly, was very depleted and the Obama-Biden administration failed to give our military forces what they needed.

As candidate for president in 2016, I promised to reverse these crippling cuts, and to ensure our military remains unchallenged and unrivaled anywhere in the world.

This year provides \$738 billion to ensure we are ready to take on near-peer competitors. That's an all-time record. In the history of our country, that's the highest amount we've ever spent on our military. And that's after \$700 billion in my first year, and \$716 billion in my second.

In addition to massive acquisitions made over the past two years, our current effort authorizes nearly 100 new F-35s; 24 brand-new F/A-18s; 155 Army helicopters, of

all different types; 165 brand-new Abrams tanks; more than 50 Paladin howitzers; 2 new Virginia-class submarines; 3 new Arleigh Burke destroyers; a Ford-class aircraft carrier, and two others on their way; and much, much more. And it's all made, right here, in the USA.

For the first time since President Harry Truman created the Air Force over 70 years ago we created a brand-new American military service: Space Force. Space is the world's newest warfighting domain. Amid grave threats to our national security, American superiority in space is absolutely vital. The Space Force will help us deter aggression and control the ultimate high ground.

But our military is more than new equipment and branches, it's people. We gave our service-members the highest pay raise they've had in a decade. The 2020 National Defense Authorization Act improves education, child care, and private housing for military families, and it ends the so-called "widow's tax," which blocked benefits for families of fallen heroes.

Within three years of record military investment, our country has rejected a future of American decline and embraced our destiny of American dominance.

BIDEN: The United States has the best-trained and best-equipped military force the world has ever seen, but our superiority is being challenged in ways not seen since the Cold War. With the return to great power competition posed by the rise of China and a revanchist Russia, we need to maintain our superiority, but we must do so affordably and by preparing for the wars of tomorrow.

President Trump has abandoned all fiscal discipline when it comes to defense spending. His budget is dominated by investments in aging legacy capabilities. At a time when we're winding down our main combat efforts from the last two decades, we need to make smarter investments in our military.

We can maintain a strong defense and protect our safety and security for less. The real question is not how much we invest — it's how we invest.

We have to make smart investments in technologies and innovations — including in cyber, space, unmanned systems, and artificial intelligence — that will be necessary to meet the threats of the future. We have to move away from investments in legacy systems that won't be relevant for tomorrow's wars, and we have to rethink the contributions we and our allies make to our collective security.

And we have to invest in our other elements of national power. Our military is one tool in our toolbox. We have become over-dependent on the military to advance our security interests overseas — and underinvested in other tools including diplomacy, economic power, education, and science and technology.

JORGENSEN: Total military spending should decrease. We should turn America into one giant Switzerland: armed and neutral, with a military force that's ready to

defend America's shores and soil against any foreign attack. With no U.S. involvement in foreign wars, a military that's laser-focused on defending America, and a citizenry with the unabridged right to keep and bear arms, America will be safe.

I will bring home our American military personnel stationed in foreign countries in an orderly and responsible manner. I will end U.S. military aid to foreign governments, and I will end U.S. blockades and embargoes of nonmilitary trade. This will keep our servicemen and servicewomen out of harm's way, and foster peace.

MILITARY PAY

Pay and service-earned benefits for servicemembers are seen by some as costing too much, but others would gladly pay more. How would your administration view military pay raises year to year among competing budget priorities?

TRUMP: Our most precious resource remains our great men and women in uniform. In my administration, servicemembers experienced their biggest pay raise in a decade and I have voiced opposition to smaller pay increases. Pay is not just about compensating our incredible servicemembers for their service and sacrifice but about ensuring we recruit and retain exceptional talent in our ranks.

BIDEN: We need to ensure that our military pay raises keep pace with increased costs of living. In my administration this will be a high priority. We must keep faith with the men and women who have dedicated their lives to serving their country. Despite consistent pay increases in recent years, some military families are still struggling to make ends meet, and even report food insecurity, lack of quality child care, and poor financial health. That is totally unacceptable.

Military servicemembers and their families risk everything for our country — they have earned a guaranteed living wage. As president, I will work aggressively to update the federal workforce compensation framework for servicemembers, so that the government leads the way in ensuring that hard-working families can attain a middle class life, and I will support legislation that will, in the meantime, provide an additional allowance for military families living below the poverty line.

JORGENSEN: The bold reduction in military spending I propose would provide the budget flexibility necessary to ensure that military personnel are adequately compensated so that we will retain the best and brightest troops and officer corps.

GLOBAL CONCERNS

What do you consider to be the greatest threat to U.S. interests overseas? How, if at all, would you change the U.S. military presence in hot spots around the world? Do you consider the U.S. military to be overcommitted, or undercommitted, to missions and security concerns in other countries, or at an appropriate level?

TRUMP: Competition from near-peer competitors poses the greatest long-term threat to our incredible country. Specifically, we see China as an ever-increasing economic and military threat as they continue to expand their influence throughout the world.

Relatedly, we continue to ask our NATO allies to fulfill their obligation to provide 2% of their GDP to defense. Several NATO countries have not made that commitment and are not on a glidepath to do so. We remain committed to our friends in liberty but we cannot allow America to be uniquely burdened. Our allies must step up to the plate and fulfill their end of the bargain so that America can focus our resources on challenges abroad and at home.

Additionally, we are working with our Middle Eastern allies to ensure Iran does not develop a deliverable nuclear weapon which would destabilize the Middle East. Likewise, we are working closely with our allies in the East to prevent farther nuclear escalation by North Korea. Finally, we continue to put pressure on the illegitimate Maduro regime in Venezuela so that it can return to its former vibrancy.

BIDEN: Russia and China present the most distinct and immediate threats from state actors. Russia seeks to undermine our democracy and our partners in Europe, including the members of the NATO alliance. China poses the greatest strategic challenge to the United States and our allies in Asia and in Europe. However, many of the greatest dangers we face now and for the foreseeable future — indeed, existential threats to all countries — are transnational threats like the climate crisis and pandemics.

I will end the forever wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East, which have cost us untold blood and treasure. I will bring U.S. combat troops home from Afghanistan in my first term. Any residual U.S. military presence would be focused only on counterterrorism operations and supporting local partners. For the time being, we will also likely need to maintain a residual presence in Iraq and Syria — with our coalition partners — to prevent a re-emergence of ISIS. But we do not need large deployments of combat forces to maintain our security. When I take office, I will want to hear from both our military leadership and our civilian security experts as well as our allies before making final decisions on where and how we should adjust our overseas presence. As president, one of my early actions will be to order a careful review of our defense strategy.

JORGENSEN: The biggest threat to our overseas interests is our being drawn into other countries' wars. Our military involvement in hot spots around the world since WWII has been uniformly nonproductive, at best, and destructive, at worse. Armed and neutral — that's how we keep America safe.

Trade barriers are another threat to our overseas interests. I will keep the United States out of trade wars, and encourage free trade with other countries. When goods don't cross borders, soldiers will. When goods do cross borders, soldiers won't.

MILITARY READINESS

With recent increases in military spending, what is your view of the strength and readiness of the armed forces now? What do you think the services need in order to be prepared to face current threats around the world?

TRUMP: The American military has never been stronger thanks to our historic investments. We have reversed years of neglect by focusing on modernization and improving readiness. As our men and women have demonstrated, they are prepared to fight and win when called upon. With the help of allies, we destroyed the ISIS caliphate and killed their leader, al-Baghdadi, an acknowledged terrorist leader. We have shown we are prepared and willing to fight when and wherever needed to protect American lives and interests. The warriors who keep us safe have, now and forever, my undying commitment.

BIDEN: While we must maintain adequate readiness at all times, my view is that too much is being invested in legacy capabilities that are outdated, expensive to sustain, and which won't be effective in the future. I anticipate that we will need to shift manpower and funding away from some areas and move it to others to ensure that we are fully prepared for current and emerging threats. We must also improve our capability and our readiness in emerging areas of conflict like cyberspace and space.

I want to hear from our military leadership before making final judgments. If I become president, I will task the secretary of defense to conduct a comprehensive review of our posture relative to the threats we face and to recommend how that posture should change over time. This review would address all aspects of our defense posture to include readiness, modernization, and force structure.

JORGENSEN: The U.S. military spends more than the next seven largest military forces in the world, combined. Despite our dominance in spending, we lost or gave up on wars from Korea to Vietnam, from Afghanistan to Iraq.

When we stop involving ourselves in other countries' wars, we will have much more than enough military readiness to defend our soil and shores.

Because we are surrounded by two oceans and friendly neighbors to the north and south, potential battles of the future may well not be naval, air, or infantry attacks. We need to research and develop credible defenses against cyber attacks and attacks from space, and be on the lookout for other points of vulnerability. We should pursue nuclear disarmament while maintaining a viable nuclear defense. These goals can be easily achieved with a modest portion of today's military budget.

MILITARY SERVICE

Relatively few Americans have served in the military, and many have no interaction with servicemembers, leading to what's termed the military-civilian divide. What would you do to promote military service? What changes, if any, would you make to the Selective Service System?

TRUMP: The heroes of this great nation, from WWII to Iraq and Afghanistan, are held in the highest esteem. Whether their service was the result of the draft or voluntary, our men and women in uniform have no quit in them. Our citizens have never failed us when our nation needed them.

My historic investment in our military is meant to give those who serve every opportunity to be successful on any battlefield and to also attract the best our nation has to offer. I will continue to place the warfighter at the forefront of my agenda and then care for them when they return home.

The best recruitment tool for an all-volunteer force is a well-transitioned veteran. To that end, I have signed an executive order supporting our veterans during their transition from uniformed service to civilian life. I'm honored to be at the forefront of the greatest strides ever made at the VA for our veterans.

BIDEN: The United States does not need a larger military, and we don't need a draft at this time. The all-volunteer force has been a source of strength for decades. I would, however, ensure that women are also eligible to register for the Selective Service System so that men and women are treated equally in the event of future conflicts. We should explore targeted recruiting efforts to build a military that is more geographically and demographically representative of the nation as a whole and that has the skill sets needed for modern warfare.

JORGENSEN: The Selective Service System has not been used to draft anyone since the Vietnam era. I would end it immediately. The so-called military-civilian divide can best be bridged by staying out of foreign conflicts, and creating as much transparency as possible while maintaining the protection of vital military intelligence.

VETERANS CARE

With many thousands of veterans in need of care and support services for decades to come, and with many facing potentially long-term effects from warfighting such as traumatic brain injury and burn-pit or other service-connected exposures, how should the VA adapt for them now and in the future? With VA undergoing a massive health system reform over the last year, what challenges and improvements have you experienced or seen from these changes? What changes or improvements, if any, would you want to see in VA health care and benefit programs?

TRUMP: I am completely and totally committed to our veterans and their care. I signed the most significant reform in VA care since its inception with the MISSION

Act, enabling veterans in the VA to receive care in the private community whenever it's in their best interest or when they require urgent care without any prior authorizations.

I have also strengthened the VA's hospital system. As policymakers across the spectrum realize, the VA also needs to be the right size to address veteran needs in the future, focusing resources on the areas where its impact can be greatest. The Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission will ensure the VA of the future best serves our veterans. The VA's health system reform will ensure that servicemembers will have one electronic medical record from the first day of boot camp until they are honorably laid to rest. These improvements will allow for far better coordinated and higher-quality care.

BIDEN: I commit to always providing high-quality care for veterans with service-connected disabilities, and I would expand the list of presumptive conditions to ensure that no veteran who experienced a TBI or had exposure to burn pits or other environmental toxins goes without access to VA health care and benefits. We must never again have an Agent Orange-like crisis. I will also use the full power of the federal government to protect veterans from the ongoing threat of COVID-19 and ensure those who are exposed receive the best possible treatment. This administration has underperformed on the rollout of the Mission Act, constantly underfunding the community care program, and creating unnecessary headaches for veterans with referrals, scheduling, and payment.

My administration will strike the right balance between VA and community care, but do it in a timely, responsible, and accountable way for our veterans. I will ensure that caregivers are always fully integrated into the veteran's care team and prioritize research for emerging service-connected conditions like toxic exposures and traumatic brain injury. I will expand VA eHealth and telemedicine to provide rural veterans access to the best providers. Finally, I will take seriously the crises of veteran suicide and homelessness and give them the attention and the priority that they demand.

JORGENSEN: The VA system is beyond repair. Our veterans are living with a variety of serious health conditions. The best way to treat them is twofold. First, drastically reduce the cost of health care. My proposal to encourage competition and reduce government and insurance company paperwork will reduce the cost of medical care by 75 percent, making health care far more accessible and affordable than it is today.

Second, I will work to replace the VA with direct payments to veterans who were wounded in combat, so they can spend their health-care dollars how and where they want to spend them. Veterans deserve better than denied care and bureaucratic roadblocks.

DOD MEDICAL BENEFITS

The Defense Department is undergoing a years-long process of reforming its health care system. DoD recently announced that many of its military treatment facilities will no longer serve military family members and retirees, affecting an estimated 200,000 beneficiaries, coupled with a proposed reduction of 18,000 medical personnel positions, resulting in many seeking health care in the private sector. What do you think should be the priorities for military health care reform?

TRUMP: Under my administration, Congress has passed many legislative provisions addressing the military health care system, including a single agency requirement to replace separate health care systems in each of the military services.

Our current military health care system is designed around two distinct functions: a readiness function and a beneficiary function. The mission of the first is to ensure our men and women in uniform rightfully get the care they need to prepare for, be treated during, and cared for after combat. The mission of the second is to provide quality healthcare to servicemembers, military families, and retirees.

While both missions are critical, it is imperative that our military health system is capable of producing specialists who are clinically proficient in the jobs needed to execute real-world missions. On the battlefield, the goal for our providers must always be reducing preventable death. Unfortunately, the bulk of state-side healthcare is predominantly dedicated to prenatal and pediatric care rather than the trauma-care necessary to reach those levels of clinical proficiency.

We must find the right balance to ensure our warfighters are ready at a moment's notice while also caring for their families and those who retire from the profession of arms.

BIDEN: The medical readiness of our servicemembers and their families should be the focus of the military health care system. Ensuring that our troops are healthy, physically and mentally prepared to deploy, and have the medical support and treatment they need in combat or training should be the highest priority for the military health care system. Providing care to their families is also a critical component of that readiness. The Department of Defense should not begin any transition of beneficiaries and retirees until further review and data are gathered to ensure that the health care capacity and capabilities of the civilian infrastructure in nearby communities can support a transition. In order to ensure continuity of care, individuals' needs should be assessed to make sure that any such transfer does not lower the quality of their health care. In light of the ongoing pandemic and the support that military medical personnel have been providing to communities across the country and overseas, I would also conduct an assessment to ensure that any reductions in medical personnel positions are still supportable.

JORGENSEN: When my free-market health plan is implemented, prices will be so low, and consumers will have so many choices for their health care that no one will want VA services.

For instance, the average cost of a hip replacement in the U.S. is \$40,000. In Singapore, which has more of a free-market system, the average cost is \$14,000.

Under my system, Americans, including the families of servicemembers, will have a wealth of high-quality, low-cost health-care and insurance choices.

My proposal to reduce the cost of medical care through encouraging free-market competition and ending bureaucratic stumbling blocks will be a welcome replacement of the VA and employer-paid insurance plans. The safety, quality, convenience, and innovation of health-care services in a free market, coupled with much lower prices, will far surpass any health-care plans that any American has ever experienced in his or her lifetime.

BENEFITS PACKAGE

Changes to the military medical and retirement systems are among a number of proposals to save money. How would you view spending on these and other quality-of-life issues, such as privatized housing and child care to attract talent to the services and retain servicemembers?

TRUMP: We must care for our military families because while you recruit the servicemember, you retain the family. Strong, stable families are both a combat multiplier and a protective factor, enabling our men and women to serve to the best of their ability while helping them bear the burden of war. We owe it to the families to make sure they don't just survive the military life, but thrive in it.

BIDEN: I will never balance the budget on the backs of military men and women and their families. A Biden administration will require the utmost transparency and accountability from both the government and the private-sector partners charged with military housing. And I will enforce a comprehensive and standardized tenant bill of rights for all military families. We won't be making more empty promises to military families. We will hold these landlords, and ourselves, accountable.

I will also fully fund installation-based child care facilities and expand awareness of the DoD fee assistance program, so that military spouses can more easily pursue their educations and careers. Military spouses face an unemployment rate of around 30%. Frequent relocation and high operational tempos often stifle their career trajectory. A Biden administration will build on the work of Joining Forces to ensure that military spouses can access the opportunities and support they need to build the career they want.

JORGENSEN: To recruit and retain the kind of talent we need in today's military environment, we need to offer compensation packages that can compete with the

private sector. My proposal to reduce health-care costs by 75 percent through more competition and paperwork reduction, along with my commitment to keep taxes low, will greatly improve quality of life for all American families.

MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

Last year, Defense Secretary Mark Esper added a fourth prong to the national defense strategy: military family readiness. What do you see as the biggest issues military families face and how would your administration address these concerns?

TRUMP: It isn't only those in uniform who serve our great country but their families too. A heavy burden is placed on our military families and their unwavering dedication and support strengthens our entire nation. Military spouses help carry families through frequent moves and long deployments. They uplift communities, care for fellow military families, and sustain servicemembers through their most difficult battles. One of the great challenges for military spouses is to find a meaningful job as they move in support of their active-duty spouse. We want military spouses to be able to pursue their careers and help their families thrive. All too often military families who are ordered to move across state lines lose the chance for the civilian spouse to practice their chosen profession and have to go through costly and time intensive re-licensing. This administration is committed to continuing to fight for military spouse license portability.

Additionally, the Department of Defense is committed to ensuring privatized housing tenants receive quality housing and fair treatment from the Military Housing Privatization Initiative project owners that operate and maintain privatized housing. The tenant bill of rights for military families signed earlier this year helps protect our military families and is much needed progress in the right direction.

Finally, the most recent National Defense Authorization Act improves education, child care, and private housing for military families, and it ends the so-called "widow's tax," which blocked benefits for families of fallen heroes. It also included the largest pay raise for the military in more than 10 years.

Our nation is eternally grateful to our military, military families, and veterans. I will continue to serve them as they have served for us.

BIDEN: Family readiness is a national security imperative. The care for this community cannot be taken for granted. My administration will treat military families as the priority that they are by: ensuring that we pay servicemembers a competitive wage; creating and promoting programming to increase economic opportunity and career advancement for military spouses; providing resources for military families, caregivers, and survivors; prioritizing support for military-connected children; and relaunching Joining Forces, the initiative started by former First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. [Jill] Biden during the Obama-Biden administration. The Bidens are a military family, and we know that military families

serve, too. After two decades of sustained warfare it is our duty to ensure that military families have the necessary support to thrive.

JORGENSEN: The biggest problem facing military families is the long-term separation of soldiers from their families while being deployed overseas. That would largely end with my policy of non-intervention and of bringing the troops home from foreign wars and foreign bases.

COVID-19

Historically, the interwar periods for the United States have been characterized by large cuts to the military, abruptly punctuated by a crisis and a buildup of forces with a tech-driven “revolution in military affairs” (RMA) born out of necessity. Do you think the COVID-19 crisis represents a national security crisis and necessitates an RMA?

TRUMP: The coronavirus is a national security issue, which is why I have leveraged the full power and scope of the government. I have mobilized both the government and industry to work, not only towards mitigation, but finding what will truly break the back of this pandemic — a vaccine. We are moving at record speed to develop such a vaccine under Operation Warp Speed which will both facilitate development and distribution.

We will manufacture at risk any vaccines that are developed which will allow for rapid distribution when available. I put our incredible vice president in charge of the Coronavirus Task Force to ensure interagency coordination which includes both medical experts and Cabinet secretaries. I also hold weekly conference calls with the governors of each state to allow full discussion and coordination of federal and state efforts. I recognize the tragic loss of life, sickness, and economic distress that has befallen our country. But we will, as we have with all great difficulties in our past, prevail and emerge stronger than before.

BIDEN: COVID-19 is a public health challenge turned into a crisis by a total failure of leadership from the Trump White House. It underscores that challenges to our nation’s security come from pandemics and climate change, in addition to the political-military threats we face from China, Russia, and others. The military has unique operational capacity to support our response to this pandemic. But, the key to solving the public health crisis is following the science with clear public health guidance from our government, rapidly expanding our capacity for testing and contact tracing, ensuring our essential workers have the personal protective equipment that they need, and focusing on developing and equitably distributing therapeutics and a vaccine.

At the same time, we don’t have the luxury of ignoring ongoing geo-political threats from China and Russia, as well as other threats to our security. Our military strategy needs to be responsive to the challenges we face, and part of a whole-of-government approach that matches the right tools to the problem.

JORGENSEN: Our military operations should include the ability to defend the United States from biological and chemical warfare. COVID-19 is a health crisis. As such, it should be dealt with like any other health problem. We need to allow the free market, unencumbered by burdensome regulators such as the FDA and CDC, to rapidly develop and distribute COVID-19 tests, vaccines, and treatments. This would enable widespread and frequent testing of servicemembers. We need to quarantine and treat those who are infected, while allowing other servicemembers to do their jobs.