



**The Brookings Institution and Center for Strategic and International Studies
Vying for Talent Podcast**

“Lessons from the US Space Force on creating an agile talent model”

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Guest:

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Episode Summary:

In the latest episode of Vying for Talent, co-hosts Jude Blanchette and Ryan Hass are joined by Katharine Kelley, the deputy chief of space operations for human capital at the U.S. Space Force. Kelley highlights the value of diverse talent and the importance of upskilling, drawing on insight from the Space Force’s “melting pot” of Defense Department culture and practices.

KELLEY: We know unilaterally that teams that are diverse and teams that have multiple viewpoints and teams that have varying backgrounds and experience are more effective than teams who are essentially replicas of each other. And so we have an inherent advantage here because we are bringing in such a diverse population from across the DOD to build what is today's Space Force.

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HASS: So, far on this podcast, Vying for Talent, we've discussed human capital's impact on domestic industry and international competitiveness. Today, we're going to widen the aperture to look even broader at the arena of space. Supporting a modern space force requires more than just cutting edge technology—it's driven by human talent, which innovates everything behind your phone's GPS system, to rover missions to Mars, and trips to the moon. Today, we'll be talking with someone whose job is all about strategic planning and human capital for the United States Space Force. My name is Ryan Hass and I'm from the Brookings Institution.

BLANCHETTE: And I'm Jude Blanchett from the Center for Strategic and International Studies. We're the co-hosts of Vying for Talent, a podcast exploring the role of human talent in the unfolding competition between the United States and China.

Our guest today is Katharine Kelly, the deputy chief of space operations for human capital for the United States Space Force. Ms. Kelly serves in a key role in the executive leadership and managerial direction of Space Force in all functional areas of personnel management. Prior to her current position, Ms. Kelley spent nearly two decades in the leadership positions in several personnel and logistics-focused positions in the U.S. military, including as the chief human capital officer for Army Futures Command, the superintendent at Arlington National Cemetery, and in various civilian roles managing logistics and enterprise infrastructure within the Department of the Army.

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HASS: In today's discussion, Ms. Kelly will discuss the critical role that human capital plays in shaping America's leadership as a space power. And with that, let's begin the conversation.

BLANCHETTE: This podcast focuses on the importance of human talent in big questions of international competition. But we want to start with a with a personal question or focus on the individual. How did you choose your career path? What led you to focus on this critical issue of human capital?

KELLEY: Thank you for the question and thanks for being interested in my background. I would tell you that I've been working for the United States military for almost 20 years now, mostly in the Army. And I've just recently come to the United States Space Force, which has been an outstanding opportunity to really meld some of my experience with ground-based warfare and really understand the connectivity between that and space domains. So, this is a really exciting time.

My particular interest in the human capital perspective has to do with some prior experience with the IT and technology communities within, in this case, the Department of the Army. But how inextricably linked in today's world IT is to the success of the human, and how you

really have a hard time distinguishing uniquely between just a human problem set that doesn't have a technology piece to it as well, whether it's empowering and enabling the human or amplifying what the mission is of the human.

And so, for the last probably 12 years of my career, it's been even more so the bringing together of what that people domain looks like inside of the technology arenas that we all operate in that has become so important to me. And so, it's really been a recent passion of mine, but one that's been grounded in a lot of my existing military experience.

HASS: Ms. Kelley, may we pick up one piece of the biography that you just touched upon—your time at the Army Futures Command? Can you tell us a bit more about how the Army Futures Command works, how human capital plays into the Army's strategic thinking about its future?

KELLEY: Absolutely. I am so very excited and proud of what the Army did several years back when they recognized that they had a major issue if we continued to believe that all conflict in the future could still be executed successfully with technologies that were in many cases still dating back to post-Vietnam. And that continuing to, what we would say, “bolt on changes” to existing equipment and ways of communicating was not going to be sufficient in today and in tomorrow's fight. And I think the Army was very smart to recognize that near-peer competitors like China, near-peer competitors like Russia, are going to have advantage that they needed to be prepared for.

And so the establishment of Army Futures Command was designed to address the fact that it is so continuing to be a challenge for the department to balance the tyranny of the now with the need to look at the future. And the Army, in my experience, is always challenged with that balance. How much time and investment can I spend on future and how much time and investment demands that I react to the now. I think we see that right now with the Ukraine conflict.

But what I think Army Futures Command is really asked to do in a really positive way is to focus on the future and to very narrowly and unilaterally focus on the futures and let the rest of the service manage the now. And I think that's an important point.

I think that's a point that also really resonates with me with the Space Force, because we've got to have the same balanced discussion. How much of the evolution of what we have today for space domain awareness and capability is sufficient to manage today's discussions. But really it's about tomorrow and where we need to be tomorrow in relation to our competitors.

So, my experience at Army Futures Command was really about how do you do that in the midst of the day-to-day expectations that the United States places on the Department of Defense. And so, you've got to have people intentionally thinking about the future and you've got to have leaders who believe in it enough to protect it and defend it against things that are always going to come and attack. And that is prioritization, ruthless budgeting, defending what you're investing in. And I think that is absolutely the same challenge that we have in the Space Force today.

BLANCHETTE: So, can we build on that and unpack that a bit? One is, you just mentioned a tension between responding to challenges of today, which require a certain set of skills, but also being able to look around the corner and begin building up a talent pipeline, policies,

procedures that also position you to be, Space Force to be, competing in the domains it needs to ten years from now.

So, Space Force is relatively new, three years old. Can you talk a bit about how Space Force manages those challenges? What are the assets you see, the talent skills assets that Space Force has now? And looking ahead, what are some of the gaps or shortages that you think the force needs to address?

KELLEY: It's a great question, and I think it's actually a question that's relevant for the entire department, Department of Defense. We have to build agility, and we also have to build people who are comfortable operating in a highly contested and complex environment that demands a level of technological literacy.

In Space Force, we are intentionally focusing on what we define as a digital service, and that's a term that we have used in a way that is both challenging to our own mindset and also setting a strategic target for us to shoot for.

So, what do you really mean by a digital service? So, we are trying to build pipelines of talent that not only have people who are comfortable in that type of an environment, but also people who consistently recognize the fact that the skills you needed today are probably not the skills you're going to need tomorrow. Skill atrophy in the tech space is a real problem. And so, we have a very mindful eye on the fact that we have to routinely and iteratively look to train and retrain and relearn specifically because the technology arena that we are all working and living in is moving so fast. And our near-peer competitors are doing the exact same thing, that if we continue to presume that the skill set the person needed when they first got hired is the one they need in two years and then two-and-a-half years and in five years, we're going to fail.

And so, we are intentionally in the Space Force trying to think about not only bringing in the right talent, but how do we continue to upskill that talent to stay relevant in today's challenges and in today's environment.

I think that's a really important point, because a lot of our systems do not reward that. A lot of our talent systems say come in, meet the target, and then give us time in grade or time in service. And that defined your career path. But they don't say, go back and make sure that you understand waterfall software development and that you have a latest Java coding experience. But that's the kind of people we need. That's the kind of talent that we're after, because those are the people who are going to be able to be really agile in these environments where our systems are reliant upon technology such as software and data and AI.

So, that's the focus, and that's a big challenge given some of the confines of the systems that we have to operate in.

BLANCHETTE: Some of the challenges you were just mentioning on the skill atrophy and, you know, greater literacy competency capabilities in technology, in the digital domains, we could be probably sitting in a C-suite of a corporation we'd be having the exact same conversation. So, Space Force, to quote Secretary Rumsfeld, you know, you go to war with the talent base that you in many ways have. How do you think about Space Force's unique talent and discrete talent challenges in the context of the broader human capital environment with which Space Force is recruiting from? So, these are systemic challenges beyond just the

Space Force. Are those things you just watch or do you feel like the Space Force needs to lean in on helping that broader foundation of human talent and how to develop it?

KELLEY: There's so many things to unpack in that. Let me start with a couple of interesting nuances that that really speak to the Space Force situation. So, we are a lot of the former Air Force space and missile community now moved over into the Space Force, and we are about 30% above that baseline number, which by the way, was about 5,000, with inter-service transfers from the other departments. That is a really unique position to be in. That means we have a chunk of Air Force culture, a chunk of Army culture, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard. Right? We are literally a melting pot of DOD culture that is today's Space Force, which is a really interesting problem set, one that I've not encountered in my prior experience.

So, you ask yourself as a senior leader, what do I do with this unique set of circumstances? You really have to focus on building a Space Force culture, and you have to figure out ways to bring these groups together into one. And one of the ways that we really feel strongly that we're going to achieve that is we have a heavy, heavy focus on team building. In our guiding document called "The Guardian Ideal"—this is a document that is publicly available if anybody is interested in it—but it is our strategic talent management guidebook or aspirational document or strategy, whatever you'd like to call it. In that we really lay out an intentionality behind teaming. Small teams: three to five, 12 to 15, 25 maybe in the largest, but really focusing on the importance of team construct, because one, we are trying to recognize the fact that we have multidisciplinary people coming into the service today who have to be effective.

Two, we have mission sets that actually task organize really effectively around teams. You do not want one person only watching for missile warning and missile tracking. You want multiple people, you want layers of defense, and you want other perspective and opinion.

The other thing is, to your point about C-suite experience, we know unilaterally that teams that are diverse and teams that have multiple viewpoints and teams that have varying backgrounds and experience are more effective than teams who are essentially replicas of each other. And so we have an inherent advantage here because we are bringing in such a diverse population from across the DOD to build what is today's Space Force.

So, in our case, capitalizing on that uniqueness, capitalizing on the power of a diverse team, and then capitalizing on what I would call the galvanizing call to what is at stake for the United States right now. Those three things coming together have got to be and are part of why we are a new service. They are also part of why it is such an imperative that we find and cultivate that talent, that we bring that talent into an effective team, and that we communicate to the American public what that team is bringing to the United States from a defensive position.

HASS: You talked about the private sector recently, and we all know that there's a space industry that is developing in the United States. How does Space Force relate to that space industry? Is it as a competitor for talent and enabler of talent, both, some combination thereof?

KELLEY: Many people who've worked for me in the past have heard me say this, and I am a very big believer in this. High performing organizations import talent as well as export talent. So, when I think about the private sector, I think about us as partners. I think we are

enabling each other. And I think the reality is we have no choice but to do so. The Space Force is not going to be successful without private companies in support of our mission. Contrary to some belief that, you know, this should all be done independently and federally led. I don't believe that's the right answer. And I don't think Congress believes that's the right answer either.

The private sector also needs to have people who understand the challenges of the federal government and the challenges that we live within, from everything from acquisition to talent management to data and cybersecurity and privacy. And so, I like to think of the private sector as healthy competition when it comes to talent. But the secret to this is to build an exchange of talent. And we have legislative authority to do something called public-private talent exchanges. And this is where literally you can take a private employee and a government employee and swap. You don't have to worry about who's paying their benefits. You don't have to worry about who's paying their salary. None of that changes. Just they come to work each day in the different environment.

And that's an example of a really unique authority that Congress has given us that we are looking to implement in certain targeted areas so that we can get after that point I just made, which is we've got to understand each other, and we've got to be complementary to each other, and we've got to figure out how to make things work together. That's on the specific talent side.

From the technical perspective, our private companies that we work with today are literally embedded with us in many cases. And it comes back to this concept that we continue to talk about and that I've discussed here today about teams. We cannot do any of this alone. The private sector can't succeed without us laying the foundation of what the nation needs to be in a good position against a near-peer competitor such as China. Contrary to some belief, but really what we believe, is that we can't be successful in that environment without them. And so, we're really putting a lot of effort into how we bring that public experience space in and be realistic about the fact that we've got to be complementary in the talent exchange partnerships.

HASS: One of the other requirements for sort of maximizing our capacity as a country is partnerships with the academic community. How would you characterize the nature of the partnership that Space Force has with academic institutions and the pipelines that they're developing to cultivate talent for the Space Force?

KELLEY: I'm so glad you brought that up. This is something that we're quite proud of as well. And while I would say we're in the infancy stages, we have a university partnership program in Space Force that right now has 13 institutions with signed memorandums of agreement with the Space Force. And those institutions also have their own network of connected universities, especially ones that tap into underserved and underprivileged communities and really focus on HBCU and other diverse talent pools. And so, we're intentionally trying to build some pipelines into the communities where we know we need to diversify our own internal talent pools.

So, the University Partnership Program allows us to do that. It is designed so that ROTC pipelines can feed into the Space Force. It's designed for civilians, students who are in these schools, who can come and work as a, in this case, a civilian for the for the Space Force, or if they are interested in coming in in a military capacity. We're trying to connect with these

schools who also have a network to try to build that talent line internal to Space Force. And it's really an exciting time.

To the point about research and academia, there is a parallel effort with these partnership schools to actually develop cooperative research agreements so that we can present these universities with problem statements that the Space Force has to solve, things that are very focused on the space domain itself, whether it's space domain awareness, whether it's GPS technology, whether it's missile warning, or missile tracking. There's no shortage of things that need to be evolved or developed or built. And so our partnership will allow us to present these problems to these universities and let them put their top researchers and their student populations into a research environment to potentially get research dollars and then also help develop solutions for the Space Force. So, that particular program has a huge talent element to it, as well as an actual technology development solution. And it's something that we've got a lot of interest in, a lot of focus on to make sure that it delivers.

BLANCHETTE: I wonder if I can bring in China to the discussion. And that's the animating focus of this podcast is thinking about the role of human capital in U.S. competition with China. If you read the National Defense Strategy now out, if you read the National Security Strategy, you read Secretary of State Blinken's speech, comments by the White House, we're positioning China as this galactic challenger that that we need to really put our full shoulder into. And yet there are places in which it looks like that rhetoric is not being matched by sort of real underlying action to fundamentally rethink the competitive nature of the landscape and what hard choices do we need to make and how do we need to position resources more forward leaning to be able to deal with this.

I'm curious if you felt that the focus on China has now opened up space in the human capital domain for more aggressive action by the United States to position itself to take advantage of this. As you were talking about diverse teams with multiple viewpoints, I was thinking, gosh, there's an advantage we have over China, because I guarantee you in the PLA, they're not bringing together diverse teams with multiple viewpoints. So, how do you think about that, how China might be or should be provoking new discussions about talent and how we organize talent to channel it towards preferred outcomes?

KELLEY: I think it's a great question. I have a few things that I could offer in response to that. First, I agree completely with your thinking about the power of a diverse team and whether or not that is a distinguishing characteristic for the United States that is otherwise perhaps absent in the in the PLA. That's a strong statement to make, but I do think we have that as an inherent advantage.

I also think we have an advantage of service, service to our country. We are an all-volunteer force. And while we can talk about the challenges we're having in recruiting right now in our country, part of what I think is so important about that acknowledgment is I'm not sure that the general American public really realizes what's at stake right now. What's at stake from the perspective of how much resource and how quickly China can react in the Department of Defense world with respect to delivering more, delivering greater, more importantly, delivering faster than the United States.

And so, to your point about what is that galvanizing call? One thing that I think the Space Force has to continue to do with the help of Congress and the American people—and podcasts like this are excellent for that, and so thank you both for what you do to bring this

conversation to light, because it's a really important one—we have to realize as an American people that the game is changing around us and the game is not about social media. The game is about what technology is doing in other countries to advance their power on the world stage. And the more myopically focused we are as a country on ourselves internally and not cognizant of how fast and how prolific adversaries such as China could be and are, the further we can fall behind from a pacing perspective.

And that to me, I think, is the galvanizing call for why Space Force was stood up. More importantly, why should you care if you're an American member of society. Because the reality is we have a lot at stake from our own personal lives. When you pick up your cell phone every day and you type somewhere in that you want to go and Google Maps routes you there, that is the United States Space Force architecture that is empowering those GPS satellites to work on your behalf. And that's just a very powerful, tangible thing to ask yourself, so what? And that's a minor piece when you really think about what this what the Space Force missions set really is from the perspective of defense of our nation.

Now, the China piece is a really powerful one because they can just move faster than us. And so, what really has to happen is an honest conversation about what it's going to take to deliver federal programs faster. Again, that gets to not only some legislative authorities and permissions and investment, but also to the partnership with private industry and with academia.

The other piece, though, is we've got to be honest with ourselves and talk about this to the extent that we can. People need to understand what's happening. Even Russia has accelerated their space program in the last ten years. Now, not to the pace that China has, but they are as well. Right? So, this is a real thing. Today's systems that we have in space are really exquisite, but they were not designed for defense. They certainly weren't designed for offense. And they are very old and they need to be updated. So, some people have called this a different type of space race. I would say this is a real potential corollary. And I think the talent piece of what it's going to take to deliver faster and deliver things that can be as agile as places like China's system is, is really what's at stake here for us in the country.

BLANCHETTE: Can I ask a follow up on that? Let's imagine we sit down 15 years from now to do another recording of this podcast, and you're in a position where you feel like the Space Force has achieved a lot of the goals that you want in terms of, you know, successfully pressing our advantages vis-à-vis China. What would be the elements of that success that you would be pointing to? What would be the things that we did right now, tomorrow, next week, next month, in the next few years to position Space Force to where we're in a comfortable position in 2035. I just want you to unpack a little bit what you're just saying—is this legislative authority, is this rethinking the GS system? Like what would be the real three or four key elements of success, you think?

KELLEY: Well, I'll just answer one question first and then I'll come back to what would it take to get there. Success in 15 years is that we haven't had a conflict with China and Russia. And I would tell you right now, there is so much in the geopolitical space that is tenuous at best that it many of us feel that it is a real and potential threat right now today. And it kind of juxtaposed against my previous comments about does the American public really realize it? So, success in 15 years is that we haven't inadvertently found ourselves in some sort of conflict over Taiwan, that the Navy hasn't had to take any really definitive action, that the

Army or Space Force has not been drug into something else. That's success. Right? And that's what I think is real right now, a real potential right now.

What does it take, though, to get there is really the meat of it. And my personal feeling is we are at a pivotal point where we've got to rethink the way we manage talent, especially in the federal domain. We, in many cases, are still bringing people into the military, whether you're active, guard, reserve, or civilian. We are bringing you in through a one-way process and we are moving you through a pipeline that is essentially time based and does not have ways for that person to easily move to one lane or the other. So, what do I mean by that? I bring somebody on active duty today, it is literally an act of Congress known as scrolling to move that person into a reserve status or into the National Guard if at some point in their life circumstances changed and they needed some flexibility or wanted to change.

Because we have built these straight lines in our career paths, we are still operating in systems that are based on somebody comes into one domain and wants to stay for 20 to 30 years and never change. And the rule sets and the laws that govern them and the policies that we in the DOD have put in place as well, because we are just as guilty here, literally keep you in your lane and they disincentivize the permeability of talent. They disincentivize a civilian to serve on active duty. They disincentivize somebody to go part time rather than walk away completely from the military because they have to take care of elderly parents or they have some challenges at home.

We disincentivize people because our systems force them into one model, and that one model is generally based on time. It's not based on delivery of results as much as it should be. Basically if you spent a year doing this job, you're now ready to potentially do that job. Whether you did it well or not, almost doesn't matter—if you did it for a year, you're good. That is a crazy system to expect to react to the pace that a near-peer adversary like China is walking on. They're running, we're still walking, and we're dragging a stone behind us. And that's what's at stake. So, that's my observation about talent.

We've got to have an honest conversation about our systems. We should be able to move people. We should be able to incentivize people. We should be able to bring them into the Department, into federal service, and allow us as the employer to go after the best talent, but be agile enough to work with that talent if their circumstances change or their interests change. And we don't want to lose them forever. Maybe we just need to let them go part time for a bit and still be able to deliver on a capability. Right?

And to the question earlier about the relationship with the private sector, they are going to learn and grow if they're working in the private sector. And boy, wouldn't it be great to bring them back and not have to bring them through this very laborious process to bring them back where they have to fight to get back in against everybody? You have to rescroll through Congress to get back on active duty. We make it hard to keep the best talent. We make it hard on ourselves. That's what I would change, without a doubt.

BLANCHETTE: How widespread a view is this?

KELLEY: I am not alone. I think a lot of people recognize this, but I do, also I'm a realist about the challenge of making wholesale changes like this. It's difficult. And we sit here in D.C. having this conversation and this is why it's hard, right? Because the challenge and the

complexities of making wholesale change like this with respect to the federal workforce is not an easy thing to talk about. And by no means do I mean to make it sound that way.

But, your point earlier is the real important one. What is the galvanizing call? What is going to be that condition that we in the United States need to find ourselves in to make the real substantive changes? And at some point, another 9/11 or another way that we found ourselves dealing with World War II or even Vietnam and Korea—and there are a lot of parallels right now that we're seeing in those circumstances—something really critical might be what has to happen. And I hope it's not, because a lot of us know what could be done. It's just finding the coalition of the willing who are helpful enough and in the right positions to advance the discussion.

And I think we just have to continue to take advantage of platforms such as this one, and my ability to illustrate for Congress how Space Force is trying to think differently about talent management. And I'm not alone in this. A lot of these things that I'm thinking about are a result of 20 plus years as a federal employee, both on active duty and now as a civilian. And so, a lot of my thinking is informed by my own personal experiences in these systems.

HASS: Well, Jude and I are both parents, and so we care deeply about the success of your mission because we agree that success in the next 10 to 15 years would certainly require us not to have conflict with China, Russia, or anyone else along those lines. So, the thesis of this entire project has been that technology will be at the core of competition between the United States and China, and that technology will be driven by innovation. Innovation will be guided by really talented individuals. And the more of those that we can put in positions to do big, powerful things like you are doing with the Space Force, the better off will be. So, we wish you luck and offer support and enthusiasm and encouragement for the mission that you're on.

KELLEY: Thank you very much. I very much enjoyed the conversation and thank you for the opportunity to talk with you both and let me know if your children are interested in joining the Space Force. I'd be delighted to have them.

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BLANCHETTE: I thought that was predictably a fascinating conversation. And again, just highlights that in all of these areas in the U.S. military and military domain where we're typically looking at output—hardware, force structure—that you see at the core of this was really a question about harnessing and channeling human capital. One of the elements in the discussion that I found notable and in fact has been a key theme as we've been looking at the advantages that the United States has is how leveraging the flexibility but I think really critically the diversity of the U.S. talent pool and how organizations can leverage diversity of opinion, diversity of background, diversity of perspective is an advantage which I imagine without serving in the PLA is something that Chinese military does not both celebrate and really use to its advantage. So, as we think about the scale that China has, which is undoubted and it's something we've talked a lot about and written a lot about, there is a qualitative element which you see crop up again and again in our conversations on this podcast.

HASS: Yeah, Jude, I couldn't agree more. I thought that Ms. Kelley was really eloquent in talking about the competitive edges that the United States has. But she was also candid in talking about some of the shortcomings or inhibitors of our ability to tap into the full talents that the Space Force has available. And her discussion about legacy personnel structures was

notable; her emphasis on the fact that time and grade is a determinant of how personnel are allocated to different billets in the Space Force. And that's really limiting their ability to get the right people to jobs that match their skills. I think that's something that I hope that our listeners take away.

BLANCHETTE: In the recently announced national defense strategy. Secretary Austin's introduction has a has a line there that says, "In these times, business as usual at the Department is not acceptable." And so one of the things we'll be watching for is, is that sentence going to be implemented and drive innovation, of which Ms. Kelly's comment on the need to, as you just mentioned, restructure some legacy systems in the way that talent is being moved up, horizontal, or out. The proof will be in the pudding if Secretary Austin and the department are serious about fundamentally driving change or not.

HASS: Well, I hope that his words translate into concrete actions.

BLANCHETTE: I think the final point I wanted to flag that was striking to me in the conversation—and this is adjacent or separate from talent, but is actually the big question—which is when we asked Ms. Kelley about what the vision of victory was for Space Force in competition with China and Russia, I guess I was expecting an answer about out positioning or maintaining the dominant position. But she said something that was surprising but shouldn't be, which is our vision of victory is in 15 years we've avoided conflict with China and Russia. And again, at a moral level that is so obvious. But maybe I've been in the blob too long. It's not a perspective that you usually hear. And it was refreshing.

HASS: Amen to that.

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