RV240 127320 Public Sector Future EP61 Gen Bob Brown

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**Project: Public Sector Future WWPS Podcast Series**

**Detail: Episode 61**

**Talent: AT Ball [host], Gen. Bob Brown [guest]**

**OLIVIA NEAL**: Hello and welcome to Public Sector Future. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches and new technologies in the public sector in order to deliver better outcomes. Today we’re going to be shifting our focus to digital transformation in defense and intelligence organizations, with guest host, AT Ball, who you met in our previous defense episodes.

Today, AT is joined by General Bob Brown, the President and CEO of the Association of the United States Army. He was appointed to this role following a career of leadership and achievement within the military. Today, together with AT, General Brown explores the evolving role, and criticality of digital technologies, within the Armed Forces. Over to you AT, to guide us through.

**AT BALL:** Today I have the distinct honor to interview the President of AUSA. General Bob Brown, an experienced commander who has led at every level, from platoon all the way up to the Army Service Component Command, ultimately serving as the Commanding General of U.S. Army Pacific, where he led the largest Army Service Component Command, across the Indo-Pacific region before his retirement in September of 2019.

Sir, I want to thank you for being my guest today. This month’s AUSA annual meeting and exposition was obviously a huge success, both for the association in the Army. You had a record 41,000 people registered to attend the event

Thousands more watched the speakers and visited forum updates on the newest technologies from the more than 755 defense industry partners who were present. Of course, Microsoft, we were among the many sponsors for the event, but what I’m really interested in, Sir, is based on this context, can you share with our listeners how you would describe what your role in this process actually is, and how your prior experience prepared you for this position?

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Well, first, thanks, A.T., great to see you. Great to be with you. And our paths crossed many times over the years and I really value your – your amazing service to our nation. So thanks. It’s great to be here.

Well, I’m – I’m very fortunate, I was selected – they choose a retired four-star to be the president, CEO of the Association of the United States Army and AUSA is a nonprofit. Been around just one year short of 75 years, really, as the Army’s premier association. We help educate, inform and connect America with the Army.

And so, boy, for me, I’m pinching myself every day, what an opportunity to help soldiers and families that – that I love serving with over the years.

And I’ve often said it’s amazing. You can see more, in an afternoon at – at the annual meeting of the Association of the United States Army than if you traveled for two years, trying to go see all this stuff.

We also had 92 countries there, 20 Chiefs of Army from other countries, and just an amazing turnout And as you said, we’re grateful. Really appreciate Microsoft’s tremendous sponsorship. And that helps so we can bring in world-class speakers, the experts from around the world, and the numerous forums over 50 different forums, discussing the future.

I was fortunate enough to kind of, for me, stumble into the military. I was a – a pretty good basketball player way back in high school. In fact, I’m so old a guy named Earvin ‘Magic’ Johnson was a senior the same year I was in Michigan in high school. He was going to Michigan State and I had gotten a basketball scholarship to University of Michigan. That’s where I was going to go.

Then a guy named Coach Krzyzewski, Coach K, the coach at West Point at the time came by my house and talked me into visiting West Point. And lo and behold, I fell in love with the idea of selfless service, and I ended up doing just 42 years if you count four years at West Point, 38 years in the Army, and – and finished up, as you said, U.S. Army Pacific.

126,000 soldiers, thousand, and it was like, "Holy smokes," so from – from Alaska, the West Coast of the United States to – all the way half the Earth’s surface, a responsibility for the land forces in Korea, Japan, obviously Hawaii.

**AT BALL:** That’s a great rundown on AUSA, and certainly, the preparatory assignments you had to prepare you to – to walk into a role with these kinds of responsibilities to – as you point out to help educate the force.

And I’d like to ask you, Sir, from – from your position, how has the need for digital technologies been manifested at your level?

**GEN BOB BROWN:** You know, when you look back, I was fortunate to go through the transition the Army went through, stepping into the digital age. I – I actually did the test and evaluation of the first digital brigade, the Stryker Brigade, and – and with that –

**AT BALL:** Remember that well.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Yeah, and I had the second Stryker Brigade, in the Army, but that was the one chosen to do the evaluation of the modular concept, and the most digitally-advanced organization in the Army at the time. This is way back in 2002, but you know, it applies what we saw early on, and I’ve seen, and – and the reason that – you know, the digitization, and digital transformation is so key.

Of course, the world changed. The fog of war used to be not enough information, when we were young, you know, it was a little easier to have initiative, because you were only going to get two or three pieces of info, and they were guesses at best, and nobody was going to second-guess you and say, "Why did you do this … why did you do that?"

Hey, you – you took the initiative. There used to be a saying, "Do something, do anything, Lieutenant, take the initiative."

Well, of course that changed. And we went from the fog of war being not enough information to the fog of war being too much information, overwhelming amounts of information.

And I can remember, early on, the Stryker Brigade having more capability than a division, and my staff bringing in stacks of paper and saying, "Look, Sir, we have all this information for you. We got all this, isn’t this great?"

And I said, "Well, not really, because I’ve got like 10 minutes to make a decision. I need you to cull through those volumes of information, look through those haystacks of information to find the golden needles that help me make a decision."

Well, that – that was tough to do. Well, digital transformation can now do that for us. It – it helps fight to that fog of war from overwhelming amounts of information, and it’s absolutely critical to really get at what the right decisions are. And what’s also changed, the ideas and innovation used to come from the Department of Defense, and the business would get those ideas, and leverage them. Now let’s completely changed. The ideas are coming from business and they turn faster. And the Department of Defense has to be able to get those ideas from the business world and Defense Industrial Base.

**AT BALL:** Absolutely, Sir, you’re – you’re really kind of segueing, brilliantly into the next line of questioning that I’d like to present to you. And it’s – it’s really about these opportunities for digital transformation.

As you look across the expo floor at AUSA this month, where is it that you’re witnessing this imperative, for the Defense Industrial Base, or DIB as we like to refer to it, for them to leverage these digital tools and promote digital transformation, both within their enterprise, and in terms of the technologies that are underpinning the products that they provide to the U.S. Army?

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Everyone has to leverage technology.

There’s not a system out there that doesn’t have to, in some ways, leverage this cutting-edge technology. And there’s – the challenge is, of course, that have been around a while, how do you get at solutions that make sense that the government can afford, you know, things like cloud-based, instead of having to buy all new equipment?

And you know, cloud-based solutions. How do you make sure that is secure.

You know, there’s some that think, ‘Well, it’ll all be done by technology.’ No, no. People will remain essential, but they’ve got to leverage the technology and – and that cutting-edge technology, you know, artificial intelligence, machine learning, the huge advancements in so many areas. If they can’t leverage that technology, they will not be able to make decisions and perform in a timely manner.

And it’s going to be those that do leverage it will have the advantage. The speed of decisions will be the key factor that hopefully will keep us from ever having to go to war, because those that would do harm to us would be deterred so much, knowing how we can leverage those decisions so rapidly, but if God forbid, you have to go to war, you can win decisively.

**AT BALL:** We are working –we, Microsoft, we’re working so hard to – through space and 5G capabilities to deliver that hyperscale capability, those cognitive services, out to the tactical edge.

Maybe it’s easier for our audience for you to – to share an example of how these technologies, if delivered out to the – securely, out to the tactical – your brigade headquarters, your battalion headquarters.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Yeah.

**AT BALL:** How these technologies might have improved a specific military outcome that you were faced with,–

**GEN BOB BROWN:** I’ll take it to more when running a joint task force, the first-ever four-star land task force in the – in the Indo-Pacific region.

So the Indo-Pacific had always only had maritime force, or joint task force, pulling all the forces together, but then they realized, "Wait a minute," as I mentioned earlier, all domains are going to be involved. And it’s difficult to hide, today, in maritime domains or in air domains. It’s difficult to hide. You’re going to be seen. It wasn’t maybe 20, 30 years ago. It’s difficult now. It’s hard to hide.

Land still remains an area you can hide. You can blend in, in a city. You can hide in a jungle. You can hide in caves. You can hide in mountains. You know, land is more survivable.

So in going through this scenario, leveraging all domains, the technology you’re talking about was essential to find where there were weaknesses in the adversary system to be able to persistently stay there in a survivable area, and in essence, be able to create a scenario where the enemy could not stop you and you could defeat them, leveraging all domains.

You mentioned space, for example. Space has a key role that most people don’t realize. It affects maritime, it affects air, it affects land, on just the ability of everything from GPS usage of where you are to – to data that they can provide that you can leverage, again, if you can sort through volumes of data.

So we were able to be very successful in these exercises, defeating an adversary’s aggressive actions, consistently, when all domains were leveraged and the technology was leveraged, and we could make decisions faster than they could, more effectively, leveraging technology.

It takes all domains, air, land, sea, cyber and space, effectively working together. I don’t see how you can do that without the hyperscale cloud, and without the technology you’re discussing that can help you sort through all that information and quickly make decisions in a secure environment.

That was one of the challenges before, to be secure. You couldn’t leverage the cloud. Well, now you can.

**AT BALL:**

I’d like to drill back on something you brought up early in the conversation about, you know, AUSA’s mission and the – the education piece of this.

You – you personally have witnessed the rise of a new generation of military leader, those who are already used to leveraging these digital tools that we’re describing. They use them in their everyday lives. And does this add expectations now to the military and military systems that they will need to adopt and use more digital tools during operations, even the program director?

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Absolutely. Yeah, you’re absolutely right.

You know, this generation doesn’t necessarily learn by – you know, of course, they read books, but you know, they’re going to want to see more tools that come directly to their personal device, directly to a laptop, and leverage technology in ways you and I never were able to, and they’re going to expect that.

And so many things we did, we developed Army University—I’m really proud when I was there—that helps with improving education across the Army, but we – we really had to look at how do you adjust and get to digital solutions, where before we were – we were really in a –in a linear, old-fashioned system, like you mentioned.

Here’s an example. Technology. How much technology did we have for the infantry squad in the past? I mean, I used to – you know, it just used to drive me crazy was I was command of the Maneuver Center. I’d show *A Band of Brothers*,World War II, and then I’d show *Restrepo*, the movie, and there – you know, from World War II to Afghanistan, very little change, and a poor, young company commander, trying to look at a map, figure out where he was, no technology to leverage.

It’s almost like today, excepting black-and-white TV, or a corded-phone, as opposed to – you know, it’s – it’s insane.

**AT BALL:** Yeah, is – if you look at what we’re trying to do with mixed reality, right now, in the IVAS systems, this is – this is something that is so long overdue. I mean, you – you talked about me being an aviator, and you know, I grew up with heads-up displays.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Right. Right.

**AT BALL:** In the aircraft.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** A.T., you could practice in a simulator. And many times, I know, I saw that saved aviators’ lives.

**AT BALL:** Right.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** The fact that they could do critical, you know, recovery drills in a simulator that wouldn’t be able to do for real. And I witnessed where that saved people’s lives and made them so much more effective. You could practice on the terrain you were going to be. You could practice in – you know, certainly now, because of technology, the infantry can do the same. A thousand times, they could practice with the virtual reality, just game-changing capabilities.

**AT BALL:** Now, Sir, do you see AUSA being able to take on any role to try to help facilitate this generational transition?

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Oh, absolutely, and we do.

Why? Their lives depend on it. And it’s not necessarily the generals, the admirals. It’s the young soldiers on the cutting edge, and particularly the noncommissioned officers, who are there seeing firsthand, on the cutting edge, where they need to innovate. And so getting that in – the capabilities to them on the cutting edge is absolutely critical, cutting through all the bureaucracy

**AT BALL:** We’re absolutely – the best advice we’re getting on the IVAS system, as we continue to improve it and develop it, is from those soldiers that are actually using the devices. I mean, it’s remarkable.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Exactly. And what a game changer to think – you know, I used to have to send infantry squads into a building, not knowing, having any idea, no capability to know what’s in that building, what they’re going to find. They’re going in and – and honestly, in patrols, in fighting, the – the infantry used to get surprised the same amount in 2018, as they did in 1942.

Well, that’s ridiculous. We can improve since – and then so – the leveraging the technology, from handheld, unmanned aerial systems, to the IVAS system, you mentioned, where you can rehearse before going into a building, virtually, and it can show you, and then the technology to know what’s in the building, how you should approach it, what you should do. All those things, gamechangers.

Again, the people being key, and the leadership of those squads, but leveraging that technology, a gamechanger in saving lives.

**AT BALL:** If I could, Sir, I’d like to spin back to a couple of threads that have popped out in our discussion today, especially about talent, you because you’ve mentioned this in a couple areas, and I just want to get more clarity from you on it, because I think it’s such an important part of the force, growing and retaining talent. And it’s more challenging now than ever.

I mean, the adoption of new tools requires, to your points, not just the technology, but the culture and the skills and the intellectual capital to actually use it. It’s, it’s really a triangle of people, processes and technology.

So I – I would like to get your thoughts about how do you, not just grow that talent internally, but perhaps, leverage talent available across different sectors, maybe the DIB or non-traditional defense suppliers, kind of an asymmetric approach to the talent issue, if you will?

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Well, you know, I think what’s happened is you used to, in the past, because of, again, what we were talking about not enough data, not enough information, you used to be able to handle problems in stovepipes.

**AT BALL:** Yeah.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** And, you know, different sectors wouldn’t necessarily have to work closely together. You had time to work it out, to figure it out in the stovepipes. That has completely changed. Now, it requires a cooperation and collaboration at a level, never before seen in history, from organizations that didn’t used to cooperate and collaborate together.

I’m talking business, both defense and non-defense, business, nonprofits.

**GEN BOB BROWN:**

So you – you went from where you could be stovepipe, and kind of internal, to you have to really look at who you have to cooperate with and collaborate with, for success. And that’s greater than ever before in history. You can’t solve these complex problems the world is facing in a stovepipe.

So tools that help you work together better, like many Microsoft has, and is – is, is getting to the Defense Industrial Base, and getting to all these – you know, again, the collective, the people required, they’re essential, because if you can’t collaborate, effectively, you’re going to remain in a stovepipe.

And I – what I’ve found is though, the young leaders get this, they understand this, and they want to collaborate at a level never before seen, and do. And the older folks are a little more hesitant.

They’re a little more, "Geez, we can’t give away all our cards," you know, "Knowledge is power. What will happen if we share so much? The information is more vulnerable." Well, yes, it’s more vulnerable, but there’s still ways to secure it. And there’s ways to keep that information secure, where you can still collaborate, and those relationships are critical.

I would – one, the most critical out there, between allies and partners of the United States, that is our advantage, our allies and partners.

**AT BALL:** I really want to drill down with you on this.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Yeah.

**AT BALL:** This partnering with others, because you had mentioned. You had mentioned we have an international group of listeners, first of all, and you mentioned you had allies and partners there, from 92 different countries, 20 chiefs of armies.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Right.

**AT BALL:** What value do you see in – in the efforts that technology can provide, in terms of interoperability, and interoperability of technologies across these regional allies and partners?

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Yeah, well, it’s critical. First of all, it is our advantage for the United States, our allies and partners. Our allies and partners worry. I know in the Pacific this was a constant. As we were developing new ways to deter and new ways to fight, like multi-domain operations, all our allies and partners were afraid we were going to leave them behind, not include them. And what they found was, no, we’re including them in everything, and –

**AT BALL:** Well, you’re exactly right. One – one of the things that – that we’re sharing, as a company, our mission partner environments.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Yes.

**AT BALL:** In the hyperscale, cloud, deliberately, with – you know, role-based access.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Yeah.

**AT BALL:** And those sort of security protocols for how that data sharing should occur between allies and partners.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** Yeah, that’s a critical capability, A.T. that – because interoperability has several different forms. There’s the people-to-people interoperability, that’s – that’s topnotch. The relationships are very strong across the world.

Of course, you always continue to try to get them better, but we have amazing allies and partners, and in the Indo-Pacific, five of our seven treaty partners are there and critical. So the people-to-people is critical, but the technical is critical as well. And that’s where there have been shortcomings. We didn’t have the capability to go secure allies and partners all the time.

I remember doing exercises with a great ally, Australia, for example. It would take them four hours to log on to our secure systems. Four hours, every time they log on. It was ridiculous. So we didn’t have that, so I know that’s improved greatly. And then also, there’s the policies aspect of interoperability.

Sometimes we shoot ourselves in the foot. Our policies are too restrictive. So you can have where, for example, there’s a digital system that can share information rapidly, but the policy won’t allow it, which makes no sense.

So we’ve really relied on, you know, our Defense Industrial Base, to help us develop ways to – to be more secure, and rapidly in a safe way, and to be more interoperable. It’s critical, and it’s a huge advantage to deter those who would do us harm.

**AT BALL:** Sir, this has been a fabulous discussion. I know, as an AUSA member, the association prides itself on being a voice for the Army, and that your three primary objectives to support the Army are to educate, inform, and connect. You made that very clear today.

**GEN BOB BROWN:** No, and we’re honored. Of course, you – you know, we don’t want to pat ourselves on the back too much, because you can always do better, and – and it is – it is challenging, because – you know, there’s a lot of competition. There’s a lot of needs our nation has, you know, of course, but I don’t think there’s any need greater than our security.

And literally, it does take a strong military and a strong Army. But that strong Army requires working, collaborate – close collaboration with the defense industry, and again, the ideas come from the defense industry now, so the government has to be able to take those ideas in a more rapid fashion and leverage them to help save lives and deter those that would do us harm.

So thanks, A.T., for what Microsoft is doing in this area. And we’ll do all we can to partner together to get the word out and get that support for those things.. There’s a lot of – you know, a lot of folks who have ideas out there, but we’ve got to take those that really do make a huge difference and – and leverage those.

**AT BALL:** Well, thank you, Sir, a brilliant way to wrap up today, and I look forward to talking to you again soon.

**GEN BOB BROWN:**

Thanks, A.T. Good to see you.

**OLIVIA NEAL**: Thank you to General Bob Brown and to our guest host AT Ball, for sharing their insights, and thank you to you for joining us today. Visit us at aka.ms/publicsectorfuture to find more content on digital transformation in defense environments.

If you’ve got any questions or feedback you can find both AT and I on LinkedIn, or you can email us at Ask-PS@microsoft.com.

Thank you and see you next time on Public Sector Future.

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