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NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND



**PUBLIC SERVICE
MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD**

Subject: 10/18/2018 Faith Leaders Round Table

The following is a record of a conversation between commissioners and a panel of leaders from the Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim faith traditions which took place on October 18, 2018 in Crystal City, VA. The commissioners conversed with the faith leaders on religious perspectives regarding female participation in combat and registration for Selective Service. This memorandum is protected by the deliberative process privilege and should be treated as for official use only. This memorandum is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

Attendees:

External Panelists:

- Rabbi Kenneth Block, Temple Beth Torah
- Mary Rice Hasson, Director, Catholic Women's Forum
- Pastor Todd Peters, McClean Bible Church
- Command Sergeant Major (Ret.) Sultan A. Muhammad, Masjid Muhammad

Commissioners: Joe Heck, Shawn Skelly, Jeanette James, Debra Wada, Janine Davidson, Avril Haines, Mark Gearan, Tom Kilgannon, Alan Khazei, Ed Allard, Steve Barney

Key Takeaways:

- Faith leaders did not identify any explicit teachings or text regarding women in combat; however, some identified associated doctrine that informed their perspective. Ms. Hasson, who is Catholic Christian, expressed the strongest opposition, citing arguments of women's unique vulnerability, societal role, and capacity to bare and care for children. Rabbi Block, a member of the Jewish faith, was the strongest advocate for female inclusion based on the argument that everyone had an equal obligation to serve in some capacity, so long as they were able to meet service standards. CSM Muhammad and Pastor Peters, Muslim and Protestant respectively, drew from their personal military careers and expressed concerns over readiness and tactical discipline, but also offered positive examples of women in combat situations.
- Each panelist expressed support for a mandatory service program and consensus among the group indicated that longer service terms, such as a minimum of one year, would be more beneficial to participants. Panelists stated that faith communities could assist in funding and

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promoting different service opportunities which could help overcome some of the current barriers and engender an ethos of service in young Americans.

Meeting Discussion:

Chairman Heck opened the conversation with an introduction of the Commission and an invitation to the panelists to introduce their faith backgrounds and connection to military service.

Pastor Peters greeted the commissioners and stated that he spent 26 years serving as a U.S. Navy SEAL and currently serves as a pastor at the McClean Bible Church, with a congregation of about 13,000 people, and in Manassas, with a congregation of approximately 1,200. He works closely with youth at both locations.

CSM Muhammad greeted the commissioners and explained that he retired from the Army after 32 years of service, which included four deployments in combat and noncombatant roles, and as the Defense Logistics Agency's senior enlisted advisor. Born a Muslim, CSM Muhammad stated that he has served the Muslim community for over 39 years and worked on challenges of Islamic inclusion within the Army.

Ms. Hasson greeted the commissioners and discussed her familial attachment to the military, being the daughter of a Marine and the mother of a Ranger. Ms. Hasson served the Catholic Church in several capacities, including as an attorney, a representative to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, and a leader engaging in dialogue with the Vatican about women's role in church and society.

Rabbi Block greeted commissioners and explained that he served as a Navy chaplain but was never activated. For the past 40 years, Rabbi Block has served as a Veterans Affairs chaplain, focusing on addiction recovery, and as a rabbi of a small congregation of approximately 94 families in Chantilly, Virginia.

Chairman Heck thanked the panelists for coming and asked *if there is a formal position from within each respective faith community regarding women in combat roles.*

Ms. Hasson stated there is no specific teaching on women in combat roles within Catholicism, but there are several other related teachings, such as on just war, the right of conscientious objection, and women's occupation and role in society.

CSM Muhammad responded there is no formal position from within the Muslim community on females serving in the military; however, he noted that several examples of female Muslims serving in the military exist. For instance, he stated that his imam's daughter currently serves in the Army. In his experience, CSM Muhammad noted that women were always on the front line, though their experience was not publicized. He reiterated, religiously, no doctrine or issues existed, and emphasized that compassion belongs to all serving, regardless of gender.

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Pastor Peters stated there is no specific teaching in the Old or New Testament regarding women in combat. However, he added the Old Testament includes several examples, such as Deborah, of women who took the helm in leadership positions. He added that the New Testament underscores service as a major theme but does not delve into this topic.

Rabbi Block noted that the Israeli Defense Forces maintains universal conscription, with only an exemption for the ultra-Orthodox. He stated that although there are more opportunities for exemption absent a national emergency, no argument within Judaism exists to defend gender-based exemptions. He stated that service is universal and even after term commitments, individuals must serve in the home guard until their sixties.¹ He recalled when he was placed on a kibbutz in Israel, there was no question about those coming in as immigrants—everyone was drafted. He added that the *Law of the Pursuer*, laid out in the Talmud, emphasizes self-defense and the obligation and expectation to do something which is in your capacity. Therefore, he noted that, during his time in seminary, when he worked with people who wanted to be classified as conscientious objectors, his seminary could not come up with a defense from within Judaism.

Chairman Heck asked *what is the exemption for the ultra-Orthodox.*

Rabbi Block responded that the ultra-Orthodox believe in an interpretation of the scripture which states that only God can establish the state of Israel. He continued that the ultra-Orthodox believe Israel is not a state because the Messiah did not establish it, and therefore, they do not see themselves as part of the current system or obligated to defend the state.

Chairman Heck asked *what each panelist heard from members of their community when the DoD lifted the ban on combat MOSs or in relation to women being subject to conscription.*

CSM Muhammad recalled little conversation with the chaplains regarding whether women could serve. He offered a corollary of the changing views of service for certain populations by stating that Muslims in the 1960s registered as conscientious objectors. As time passed, serving the country and the view of civic duty changed and now many Muslims serve in the Armed Forces. He added that, from a religious standpoint, Muslim-Americans in the armed forces are more concerned with fighting other Muslims in Muslim-majority countries abroad than with the question of women in combat.

Ms. Hasson responded that the Church is very clear that women and men have equal dignity but also different occupational roles in society. She stated that certain combat positions do not necessarily respect those roles, and many from within the Catholic community feel that combat is

¹ Note: The age for an “age exemption” from the IDF reserves is 40 for non-officers, 45 for officers, and 49 for highly specialized positions (usually in the aviation, medical, and engineering fields). Source: The Knesset, “Knesset Announcement: The Age of Exception from Reserve Service Reduced to 40, for 13 positions and roles,” June 27, 2018 (Tel Aviv). Translated by Omer Kaufman. Available: www.main.knesset.gov.il/News/PressReleases/pages/Press27.06.18.aspx

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contrary to a woman's nature, can disrupt the family and a woman's calling as a mother, and transgresses the spiritual and physical part of being a woman.

Dr. Davidson asked *if there was a difference between compelling women to serve versus permitting them to serve.*

Ms. Hasson responded there was a difference, and compulsion was the primary issue.

Chairman Heck asked *what if compulsion does not necessarily mean a combat role, but rather service in support of combat troops.*

Ms. Hasson responded that the Catholic Church has a strong tradition of service, so there is no objection to service. However, she stated it is the compulsion aspect which is troublesome to Catholic women because it may impact their reproductive ability and ability to become mothers.

CSM Muhammad asked *what a "non-combat" role meant to the commission.*

Chairman Heck responded non-combat arms MOSs, and perhaps not even necessarily deployed.

CSM Muhammad stated that he didn't see any of the more than 130 MOSs which did not involve some sort of danger or chance of combat involvement.

Ms. James stated that the main distinction between combat and non-combat roles is the intentional purpose to engage with and kill the enemy.

CSM Muhammad responded that he respectfully disagreed with that philosophy. CSM Muhammad believed his assignment to a logistics brigade charged with escorting combat controls constituted one of the most dangerous assignments in the field. He noted during his time as a M-60 gunner, it required an 18-person escort for transport through a combat location. During that time, a female was selected to be his personal driver because she was the best shot—underscoring for him that skills, not gender, is the most important criteria.

Pastor Peters stated that, from a faith perspective, many people were apprehensive about sending women to dangerous situations. However, he added that very few people were apprehensive about their sons and daughters choosing to serve and looking for other ways outside of the military to serve. From a SEAL perspective, Pastor Peters stated that he had done a lot of rescue missions of people who never intended to be in combat—such as Jessica Lynch. In reference to the draft, in general, Pastor Peters noted that he has met with various flag officers from the Vietnam era and all of them agreed conscription was not a good idea.

Rabbi Block commented that the Talmud says that "the law of the land is the law," meaning that Jews are obligated to follow the rules of the state they live in, even if they conflict with Jewish law. He noted that this is why German Jews joined the Prussian and German armies in the 19th and 20th centuries. He added that the same rationale prevents Jews living in the state of Virginia from having multiple wives, despite Jewish law allowing polygamy. Rabbi Block commented that most people he has spoken with are motivated by allegiance and loyalty to country. He stated that, within his

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conference, he has not heard any opposition to women being included in the SSS. Moreover, in his 40 years of experience working with those who struggle with PTSD and addiction, Rabbi Block noted that the psychological impacts of war were equally destructive regardless of gender. He added everyone has certain attributes and qualities to contribute to the cause of national defense.

Ms. Hasson responded the Catholic perspective recognizes that each sex has different gifts. She stated that women tend to be more empathetic and attentive, making them more vulnerable to PTSD. She noted the Catholic Church teaches that these God-given differences are a good thing and should be respected. Additionally, Ms. Hasson stated that most women she speaks with indicate a preference to not perform combat duties, and, instead, show preference for activities promoting healing, helping, and peace.

Ms. Skelly asked *if Ms. Hasson believed it was likely that if women registered, they would be sent to combat.*

Ms. Hasson responded if women were required to register but could not fill combat replacement roles, then men might say the process is unfair. She stated that if women were conscripted and combat roles were open to everyone, then the logical conclusion is that women would be placed in combat role. However, Ms. Hasson reiterated that women have increased vulnerability in combat positions and are uniquely vulnerable to rape.

Rabbi Block stated that, in his experience with the VA, people—regardless of their gender or faith—struggle to cope with killing another human being. He noted this is why enemy combatants are often referred to using slang such as “krauts” or “commies,” thus reducing their humanity and, in turn, making them easier to kill. However, though killing others is morally objectionable, Rabbi Block noted that death is a necessary evil and a necessary byproduct of war. Therefore, he recommended that more emphasis be placed on the measures to help those in combat situations adjust and regain their humanity when they come home, rather than worry about what gender goes to combat. He reiterated that his conference does not object to the inclusion of women in the military and expresses support for universal service.

Mr. Kilgannon commented, with regards to women’s rights, women currently have the choice whether they wish to serve. He asked *if the President mandates women must serve, is that progress or a setback for women’s rights.*

Ms. Hasson responded that it would be viewed as a setback because a mandate does not empower choice. Further, she stated that mandating women to serve disrupts the family and added that many women have claimed conscientious objection on this basis. She commented that men do not have the same psychological bond with their children as women do and that women have a unique role as mothers.

Rabbi Block responded that, as a father, he bonded with his children and, when he is separated from them, he feels it. He added that the military is currently reevaluating paternity leave policies because men do feel this separation during deployments. He expressed strong opposition to the notion that men and women bond with their children differently and stated that there is no basis for

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claiming such a difference. He noted that, in the past, some were of the view that women should not be allowed to assume other occupations, such as becoming doctors. However, he stated that, if he got sick today, he would prefer to go to the institution with the best doctors, regardless of gender, and military occupations are no different.

Mr. Kilgannon noted in the example provided that the doctor had the choice to pursue that profession.

Rabbi Block responded that every citizen is obligated to serve the country; however, individuals should be matched based on their individual attributes and what they are able to carry out based on their capabilities and training.

Ms. Hasson expressed strong disagreement and stated that from a faith perspective, men and women are fundamentally different, and these differences cannot be erased and must be respected and accounted for.

Mr. Allard commented that while combat takes something out of a person, public service puts something in. He told panelists to bear that in mind and asked *how each faith community felt about conscientious objection*.

Ms. Hasson replied that the right of conscientious objection must be respected because the most important part of religion is an individual's relationship with God and the government should not interfere with that relationship.

Rabbi Block commented that, while his faith says he cannot be a conscientious objector, he respects the people whose faith tells them they cannot participate in warfare. He agreed with Ms. Hasson that it is not the government's place to interfere with one's beliefs.

CSM Muhammad responded that you don't want someone on your team who does not want to be there. With regards to women, he added that, from a Muslim perspective, he cannot separate the nature of a woman and recognizes that there are certain things which women can do that men cannot, such as bare children. He added that some believe female pregnancy could reduce military readiness. He disagreed with that reasoning, unless the woman was the only person who could perform a particular job at the time.

Pastor Peters stated that depending on how you interpret the scriptures, there was mandatory service for men aged 20 to 50, and women had a choice. He commented that, as a father, he would be thrilled if either of his daughters wanted to volunteer to serve. Pastor Peters supported the right of conscientious objection from a religious and a military perspective. He recalled having seen conscientious objectors in combat roles who could not deal with the stress and, as a result, endangered their fellow soldiers. He concluded that no role in the military is totally safe, but he hoped that registration would include options to serve in other capacities outside the military.

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Rabbi Block offered that the civilian conservation corps (CCC) was a tremendous option and evoked the example of Vietnam to reiterate Pastor Peter's point that inducting people who do not want to be there risks everyone's life.

Chairman Heck then described the second part of the Commission's mandate: increase Americans' propensity to serve to strengthen U.S. democracy. He noted that the Commission is considering implementing a mandatory national service requirement, which would allow individuals to choose the service path that best suits them. He asked the participants *how they felt about requiring service for a certain period.*

Pastor Peters responded that he liked the idea and felt it would unite the country and create better patriots as it does in Israel. He noted that the challenge of such a program would be deciding at what age to implement it and how to successfully change the culture around service.

CSM Muhammad expressed support for universal service, and especially community service. However, he questioned what types of service would be included and whether every person has the skills required to meet the different service needs.

Chairman Heck responded that the Commission was tasked with scoping the needs of the nation, and for the sake of the conversation, the panelists should consider the "30,000-foot view" and how to match skills sets and desire with opportunity.

Ms. Hasson stated she would be open to the idea depending on what age the program targeted, the range of options it included, and provided it didn't disrupt a women's life and ability to reproduce. She noted the Catholic faith already encourages 18- to 20-year-olds to perform a missionary service trip for a year.

Rabbi Block agreed with the notion of a universal service program and recommended that the program include as few exemptions as possible or else it would risk breaking down, as the experience in Vietnam demonstrated.

Dr. Davidson stated that most Americans conflate conscription with combat, but, in reality, if a person didn't qualify for combat then they wouldn't go. She asked Rabbi Block *if the same process was used in Israel.*

Rabbi Block stated the process is the same, where people are placed only where they are qualified to serve. He noted, similar to the Catholic faith, the Mormon faith also promotes the idea of two years of service. He added that there is a major difference in maturity between an 18-year-old and a 20-year-old. Given the cost of college, he felt that service offered the perfect opportunity for an individual to find their passion and mature.

CSM Muhammad asked *at what age would a universal service program begin.* He noted that 18- to 20-year-olds have life skills, but not necessarily critical skills to meet the needs of the nation. He wondered if the commissioners will advocate for young children to join a youth organization, such as Boy Scouts or Girls Scouts, so that they can develop skills before they were required to serve.

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Pastor Peters commented, in his 35 years of leading teenagers on service trips domestically and abroad, many of the students had no professional skills but did have a willingness to serve. He noted that even on short-term service trips of two weeks, their experience changed their perspective and made them more mature.

Mr. Gearan stated that one of the key challenges commissioners face is that 4 million Americans turn 18 every year, and though the goal of commissioners is to create a uniform aspiration to serve, he questioned whether enough service opportunities existed in the United States to meet that annual supply of young Americans. Mr. Gearan asked the panelists *if their faith traditions offer any other opportunities that they would recommend the commissioners use to increase service.*

Pastor Peters commented that when he heard about the idea of requiring an extra year of high school, he wondered what sort of a revolt that might cause in higher education and how it would impact universities financially. Moreover, he worried that if service wasn't a requirement for everyone, 18-year-olds who chose to serve might be disadvantaged relative to their peers for academic entry, job prospects, etc.

Dr. Davidson stated that some students enroll at a college or university, but, for various reasons, are not ready for the commitment and are forced to drop out. She stated that commissioners are considering the idea of a mandatory "grade 13" to instill a sense of service and maturity in students, and noted that data exists which shows that students who attend college later in life are generally more dedicated and prepared.

Ms. Hasson contested the view that high school graduates don't have any skills and added that service can further develop certain skills. Ms. Hasson stated that though it may hurt prospects in some cases, it may also make students more competitive in others.

Rabbi Block stated if the program is mandatory for everyone, then no one would be getting added privileges or advantages.

Dr. Davidson responded that would be true if the program is mandatory, but posited that if it's not, then perhaps the program's intent would be to change the culture of service so it becomes a resume builder and a competitive advantage for college and jobs.

Chairman Heck added if the program is not mandatory, then the goal would be to achieve a universal expectation of service where the person who didn't participate was the exception.

Mr. Barney asked the panelists *how much time is appropriate or ideal for a service obligation?*

Pastor Peters responded that he has led trips as short as two weeks and as long as two years. He noted that each creates a positive impact, but, generally, the more time invested the greater the return. He added that those students who spend a gap year overseas often return a changed person, with new perspective and motivations.

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Ms. Hasson replied that commissioners shouldn't make the program too short because commitment and personal investment are required to experience transformation. If the program was too short, she believed students would just be marking time until it was over.

Rabbi Block agreed with Ms. Hasson and stated the program should be a year or two at a minimum. Anything less, in his opinion, would be counterproductive.

Ms. James stated that one piece of feedback commissioners received from communities with lower socio-economic levels is that instituting a mandatory 13th year would be economically infeasible. She noted for many students, the expectation is not that they will continue on to college but start working to help support their families. Ms. James asked the panelists *how commissioners should incorporate this feedback when considering a mandatory service program.*

Rabbi Block responded that he didn't see why the service program had to be volunteer or free labor. He argued that, since the military pays its service members, there's no reason why national service programs shouldn't pay their members better than other entry-level, minimum-wage jobs.

Ms. James responded that, currently, national service stipends are often below minimum wage.

Rabbi Block replied that national service members should earn more, and Congress should act to change that disparity.

CSM Muhammad appreciated Ms. James' comment and noted that there are non-faith-oriented communities whose insights and perspectives on service are different based on their experience. He questioned how commissioners could create a cultural shift around service if individuals in those communities do not have influencers advocating the benefits of service or organizations that provide requisite incentives. CSM Muhammad stated that those are the same type of individuals who were forced into the military when there was a draft, and he believes any future service program needed to be tailored to consider this populations' needs.

Rabbi Block stated that CSM Muhammad referred to a radical change in culture, which is difficult—but can be done. He added that God told Moses, “you can take the slaves out of Egypt, but you cannot take slavery out of the people.” He noted that it took forty years, and a generation was sacrificed, because it required such a change in culture. Rabbi Block commented that societal changes are often difficult at first, but people readjust.

Ms. Hasson commented if commissioners decided to add a 13th year, it would likely change how high schools choose to prepare students, which, in her opinion, would be a very positive change.

Mr. Khazei stated that he absolutely believed implementing such a program required a culture change. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] He asked panelists, from their faith perspectives, *what is the best way to initiate cultural change and convince the country and taxpayers that such a program is worth it.*

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Ms. Hasson asked *if commissioners would be open to allowing certain non-profit or faith-based organizations to participate and raise funds in support of service years*. She stated that doing so would create a win-win, where churches fund the cost of service opportunities that are parallel to its mission, influencers with faith-affiliations would raise awareness for the program, and individuals who need to support their family would have some compensation.

Rabbi Block expressed that he thought this collaboration was a great idea and advocated looking at how Mormons create and fund service slots.

Pastor Peters referenced his former mentor, who created a system of “habattitudes” that are now used to teach morals and train rookies joining organizations in the NFL and MLB, who might have come from less-fortunate backgrounds and never previously had access to large sums of money. He stated that the program was conceived of when employers in rural Nebraska approached school boards and informed them that the caliber of students they were producing was not suitable to their needs. Pastor Peters stated that such programs are built on the iceberg principle, where a foundation of character is developed and can be built upon. In his opinion, faith-based values could easily align with this mission and be injected into general service-oriented programs.

Ms. Haines asked a clarifying question regarding concerns expressed earlier about women being mandated to register for selective service. She asked *whether these concerns derived solely from women’s psychological and physical risk in combat situations, or if concerns also derived from a feeling that women were less qualified than men for combat*. Ms. Haines asked, *if the latter, was there a faith aspect to this argument*.

Ms. Hasson responded that though there is unity of body and soul, women and men have significant differences which are much deeper than physiological. She noted that they differ in vulnerability and inclination—data suggests that women express a much lower desire than men to fill combat billets.

Ms. Haines asked *if Ms. Hasson meant that women are less likely to want to be in combat roles, but not that they are necessarily less qualified*.

Ms. Hasson responded that there are physical differences, in addition to differences in vulnerability and inclination. She noted that, of course, women could be taught how to competently shoot a gun, but questioned what impact being exposed to combat situations has on female fertility. She stated that it’s great to say that everyone should serve, but she believed it was important to allow for service options that take into account different risk and gender inclinations.

Ms. Skelly asked *if Ms. Hasson felt her concerns were adequately heard or addressed by the current AVF*.

Ms. Hasson replied that, from her personal perspective, not enough research exists on how different types of military service impacts fertility.

Ms. Skelly asked Ms. Hasson, *with regards to the overall presence of women in the armed services and in combat roles, whether those concerns still present with respect to the AVF*. Ms. Skelly commented that if a draft were

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implemented, she is not convinced that the character of the armed forces would be markedly different than currently exists today.

Ms. Hasson responded that there is an emphasis on making the military more family friendly, which is good for women and children, though perhaps not good for the military's readiness. She stated that she hears a lot of complaints about those initiatives and doesn't believe the U.S. military has implemented them well, but concerns are not as grave as with the imposition of combat on women.

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Rabbi Block commented that many of the issues being raised will not apply or happen in any potential draft scenario due to the changing nature of the military. For instance, he stated that drone pilots increasingly have similar rates of PTSD as service members in conventional combat roles. He noted that a female drone pilot does not necessarily have the same risks as CSM Muhammad's driver, but she is still serving in a combat role.

Mr. Kilgannon commented that some argue for the inclusion of women in the military through the prism of fairness to women. He asked panelists *to what extent should commissioners consider fairness to men, given the issues that can arise when women are integrated with men in close quarters such as issues of attraction, paternalistic instinct, etc.*

Rabbi Block responded that these are legitimate concerns, but such concerns must be evaluated through the context of these issues as they exist in society at large. He noted that adultery, harassment, and favorable treatment are all issues which exist in all levels of industry, faith communities, and in Congress and politics. Rabbi Block stated that he did not believe such concerns presented legitimate reasons that women should not serve, but rather cause to ensure that proper structures are in place to mitigate and respond to their occurrence.

CSM Muhammad commented that human nature will always exist, but the military and other organizations can train leaders to avoid giving into their basest instincts.

Pastor Peters recalled studies on adding females to SOF units which found that men have difficulty overriding their paternalistic instinct. He commented that in real life, the urge to save your buddy is so strong, he could only imagine—even with elite training—that the urge would be stronger with respect to women. However, he noted that most of the objections he heard from men in combat roles revolved around the perception that including women might result in reducing standards and compromising everyone's safety.

Rabbi Block reiterated the need to maintain requirements and standards when implementing universal service.

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Chairman Heck thanked the panelists for participating in the conversation and sharing their experience and insight with the commissioners.

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