

**STATEMENT OF JAMES BAEHR
NOMINATED TO BE GENERAL COUNSEL,
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Distinguished Members of the Committee,

It is the honor of my life to appear before you today as the nominee for the General Counsel of the Department of Veterans Affairs and to tell you about my commitment to my fellow Veterans. I am profoundly grateful to the President for this nomination and to Secretary Collins for his confidence in my ability to serve in this role. If confirmed, I pledge to continue to uphold my lifelong commitment to the Constitution and fully devote myself to the Department's sacred mission to care for our Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

I am blessed to have some of my family in attendance. My father is here and has always taught me to pursue service over self. My mother is here too in spirit, though she passed away of cancer three years ago— she taught me never to stop pursuing my dreams. My wife, Jasmine, and our newborn son, James, are here - whose presence in my life strengthens my resolve to ensure that the benefits and opportunities afforded to today's Veterans will be there for future generations of warfighters and their families. I cannot thank my wife enough for the sacrifices she has made to support my many endeavors in the military, government, and private sector and that she will continue to make should I be confirmed. I hope my son will want to choose the path of military service, which has been the most important and noble decision I have made in my life, and someday be blessed to call himself an American veteran.

I was an incoming freshman when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center. I was 19 years old then when I ran into a Marine Officer Selection Officer in the dining hall of Dartmouth College who changed my life. He asked me if I wanted to attend Officer Candidate School that summer. I had no business going to Quantico. I had no military background in my family. I was a nerd. But I couldn't shake the conviction that I should serve my country. I signed up. I went to OCS. And when I graduated, I became a Marine.

After law school at the University of Virginia, I was blessed to serve as a judge advocate, defending my fellow Marines at Camp Pendleton, California. After active duty, I took a clerkship in New Orleans on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. I was then hired as a federal prosecutor and served in the Department of Justice. I remained in the Marine Corps Reserves, serving as a Civil Affairs Team Leader and then deploying to Iraq in 2018 during the fight against ISIS.

When I returned from Iraq, I experienced firsthand the dislocation that so many Veterans feel after coming home from the intensity of deployment to the civilian world. My life had changed profoundly, but I returned to an entirely unaware world. I felt disconnected, and it was only through the love and care of friends, family, and fellow Veterans that I returned to myself.

Around this time, the opportunity arose to enter a different mission: to become a key policy advisor to President Trump on Veteran issues in his first administration. I worked closely with Secretary Wilkie and his team to improve Veteran access to health care, increase accountability

at VA, and address Veteran mental health and suicide through a whole of government approach to address the problem. I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to thank the Senators and staff of this committee for their advocacy on these issues and the incredible support given to our Veterans and their families. When we left, Veteran satisfaction at VA was at a rating of over 91%. And when COVID hit, we worked tirelessly to execute the VA's fourth mission to serve the nation during a national emergency.

After the administration, I returned to litigation to fight public-impact constitutional cases, representing litigants challenging government overreach and servicemember families impacted by government negligence. I continued to serve in the military reserves, upholding the law as a military trial judge.

I would take all these experiences with me in my service to Veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs. I am not just a nominee; my life is entwined with the VA. I receive care at our beautiful New Orleans VA Medical Center. My family purchased our home through a VA home loan guarantee. I have also transferred my GI Bill, which the VA administers, to my son. I serve as an appointed Commissioner on our state's Veterans Affairs Commission, seeing first-hand how state and federal veteran efforts interact.

I sincerely appreciate the Department's challenges and the urgent need to ensure that Veterans receive the highest level of service they have earned. You have my wholehearted commitment to uphold the oath to the Constitution that I swore as a Marine and as a prosecutor and to place the Veteran at the center of all that I do.

If confirmed, I will work tirelessly to advance principles of accountability, and integrity, and mission accomplishment in the Office of General Counsel.

First is accountability. The first lesson of Marine Corps leadership is that "You are responsible for everything that happens or fails to happen under your command." I will take responsibility for my actions and those of my office and maintain accountability.

Second, integrity. I will fully commit to faithfully interpreting the law and providing the Secretary with the best legal counsel so that the office operates with trust and credibility.

And third, mission accomplishment—making sure that my office is never an obstacle to impede the VA from delivering the care, benefits, and services that Veterans deserve in a timely fashion.

I am humbled by this opportunity to continue serving my fellow Veterans. If confirmed, I will work tirelessly to support the Secretary and this Committee in delivering on the promise made to every Veteran. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering your questions.