

STATEMENT OF JAMES D. RODRIGUEZ

NOMINEE FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF LABOR, VETERANS EMPLOYMENT
AND TRAINING SERVICE BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS OF
THE UNITED STATES SENATE

OCTOBER 6, 2021

Thank you Chairman Tester and Ranking Member Moran. And, thank you to all the members of the Committee, for inviting me to speak today, and for our conversations in recent days.

I want to thank President Biden and Secretary Walsh for the honor of this nomination. I share their compassion, and commitment to the employment of our transitioning service members, Veterans, and military spouses. Since the age of eighteen, I have served our Nation in some capacity that was directly related to supporting our men and women in uniform and their families, so this has truly been my life's work. And none of this could have been accomplished without the support of my support system: My wife Vanessa who has been by my side and my best friend for more than thirty years, my two daughters Courtney and Casey whom are my shining lights, my son-in-law Justin, my mother and father in-law Mike and Alice and the rest of my extended family and friends.

I grew up in a small town in Texas called Aransas Pass, along the Gulf Coast. I was raised by my grandmother under very modest circumstances and spent most of my youth growing up in the projects. There were times when I went without food, electricity, and heat. I was one of the many kids who were on the free breakfast and lunch program, which helped our family immensely. I had every opportunity to find a lot of trouble to get in to, but instead I started working various jobs and threw myself into high school sports.

At fifteen years old, I worked as a deck hand on a shrimp boat in the Gulf of Mexico and then as a deck hand on a smaller boat that went out in to Matagorda Bay every morning at 5:00 am. I worked in fast food during the summers so I could save up money to buy my own school clothes and help pay utility bills for my grandmother. I graduated high school and waited for my ship date to boot camp, working in the local shipyard as a welder's assistant inside the steel hulls of shrimp boats in the infamous Texas summer heat.

Fortunately, I found my calling in the United States Marine Corps where I was able to serve at duty stations across the country and with allies around the world. As a young enlisted Marine, I recognized the power of education. I enrolled in my first college course after returning from Desert Storm in 1992. Seventeen years and many duty stations and deployments later, I finally graduated with my undergraduate degree in 2009. Fortunately, completing my graduate degree only took two years and I continue to be a lifelong learner. We are thankful to have two daughters -- a Red Raider and an Aggie, who graduated on time.

The truth is, my story is no different than many other men and women whom have overcome personal challenges and have dedicated their lives to something bigger than themselves. For twenty-one years, I had the honor of serving alongside Marines, Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen who came from communities all across this great Nation. I saw the dedication each one of them

had to each other in and out of uniform. Throughout my entire career, I have always tried to lead by example, with compassion and dedication to the team and mission. During my six years as a Marine Corps Drill Instructor, my philosophy was that we were not only training these men and women to be good Marines, but we were also training them to be good citizens.

This point was driven home to me when I served as the company FirstSgt of Wounded Warrior Battalion West at Balboa Naval Medical Center in San Diego from where I ultimately retired in 2009. These brave men and women sacrificed physical and mental health in defense of our Nation, and most would have to transition out of the military before their enlistment was complete, which exacerbated their stress. This was my first real understanding of the military to civilian transition challenges. If I am fortunate to be confirmed as the Assistant Secretary, I will continue to work with Congress and the truly dedicated DOL-VETS team to bring the best programmatic resources to these good citizens.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.