

Rapid Pace of Change Needed



Gen. Allvin '86 becomes sixth USAFA graduate to serve as Air Force chief of staff

By David Bitton

It all came full circle for Gen. David Allvin '86 when he raised his right hand and pledged once again to defend his country and the Constitution last November, as he did 37 years ago at the same location: Falcon Stadium.

"To stand at the Air Force Academy at the exact same place where I first raised my right hand and accepted a commission as a second lieutenant was special," Gen. Allvin says. "I didn't really understand the emotion until it happened."

Classmate and Air Force Academy Superintendent Lt. Gen. Richard Clark '86 looked on as Gen. Allvin was sworn in as the 23rd chief of staff of the Air Force and sixth Academy graduate to reach the service's highest rank.

Gen. Allvin happened to be at the Air Force Academy for a conference on Nov. 2 when the Senate confirmed him for the chief of staff position. He was sworn in that same day at the Air Force Academy.

Gen. Allvin, the Air Force vice chief of staff since November 2020, filled in as acting chief after Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr. was sworn in as the 21st chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on Sept. 29.

As chief of staff of the Air Force, Gen. Allvin is responsible for ensuring 689,000 active-duty, Guard, Reserve and civilian

personnel have the needed training and equipment to accomplish their missions.

A command pilot with more than 4,600 hours in 30 different aircraft, including the C-12F, C-141B, C-17 and C-130J, Gen. Allvin has commanded at the squadron and wing levels.

He later held major command assignments including serving as commanding general for NATO Air Training Command in Afghanistan; director of strategy and policy for Headquarters U.S. European Command; and director for strategy, plans and policy for the Joint Staff at the Pentagon.

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— Gen. David Allvin '86

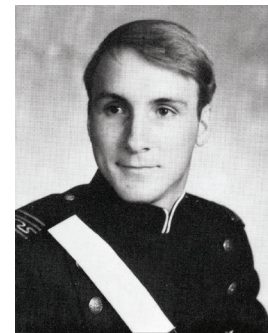
Checkpoints sat down with Gen. Allvin at his office in the Pentagon in February. The following is a portion of that question-and-answer session.

How was it that you came to the Academy, and did you have specific career goals in mind as a cadet?

When I was kid, I always liked flying. And my dad was a patriot. And so the idea of putting those two together, I heard about the Air Force Academy and I thought that was a nice mix. I also thought maybe I wanted to be an astronaut at some point. Interestingly enough, though, the first time I ever got on an airplane was to go to the Air Force Academy. So it was a hunch that I was going to like flying, and it's turned out OK.

What are some of your most vivid memories from your time at USAFA? And what were the most important lessons you learned while a cadet?

It was quite an experience, obviously, at the Academy. Believe it or not, some of it was going to football games and having that ritual almost every Saturday. It started the night before — we'd have to



LEFT: Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall, left, swears in Gen. David Allvin '86 as the Air Force's 23rd chief of staff as wife, Gina Allvin, holds a Bible at Falcon Stadium on Nov. 2, 2023.

ABOVE: Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin '86 says his time at the Academy instilled in him a love for the military branch.



**USAF GRADUATES
WHO SERVED AS
AIR FORCE
CHIEF OF STAFF**

Gen. (Ret.)
Ronald Fogleman '63
1994-97

Gen. (Ret.)
Michael Ryan '65
1997-2001

Gen. (Ret.)
Norton Schwartz '73
2008-12

Gen. (Ret.)
Mark Welsh III '76
2012-16

Gen. (Ret.)
David Goldfein '83
2016-20

do all of our stuff to prepare for inspections. You get through the inspections, the parade, and you get ready to go to the football game, and that was always something where the whole Academy came together. I think also, some of the key events, the Ring Dance, 100s Night as you get closer and closer [to graduation], and of course, being accepted into the wing after your six weeks, seven weeks of BMT [basic military training]. All those were poignant events. I think, in general though, the lessons that I learned were really about peer leadership. Because I had a full experience — I did very well some semesters and other semesters didn't do so well — I got to see the Academy from different perspectives. But as a cadet squadron commander my fourth year, I really learned that there wasn't that much difference between me and the two-degrees, three-degrees and four-degrees, so you really had to practice peer leadership, and I think that's carried with me until today.

How did your time in the Air Force Academy prepare you for your career? And, specifically, how did it prepare you for your role as chief of staff of the Air Force?

That's an interesting question because I'm not sure that you drive from the start with anything to prepare you for chief of staff of the Air Force, specifically. But the thing that the Academy prepared me for

was a love of what the Air Force stood for, a love of what the Air Force's place in the nation's defense was, and how I could fit into that. I didn't know what was coming. Sometimes when you're a lieutenant, you just looked at the next step. But the Academy prepared me for a diverse number of assignments, and the ability to look forward and see that there are options out there and really discover how your talents and your passions fit with those options. Those things allowed me to have a pretty diverse career. I wouldn't say my career path was traditional. I would say it was a little bit nonstandard, but it helped me have the will to look at as many things as I could and try and see what my passion was and how it aligned with what the Air Force needed.

What are the highlights of your career?

It's interesting because I started putting on the uniform more than four decades ago, if you count when I went to the Academy. So it's hard to pick a singular one, but the beauty of it is, as I was mentioning, I got to explore different passions.

I felt my time at the United States Air Force Test Pilot School was really the epitome of me achieving my tactical excellence and expertise. I feel like when I graduated test pilot school, there was nothing I couldn't do in an airplane. That was very gratifying.



Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin '86 speaks to a largely cadet crowd during the National Character & Leadership Symposium at the Air Force Academy on Feb. 23. (Photo by Ryan Hall)

The Air Force also gave me the opportunity to really hone my strategic and critical thinking. And so the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies allowed me the opportunity to do that.

I had the opportunity to be a wing commander, which is a unique experience in our Air Force because you get to connect all the way down to your airmen and have influence all the way up to the senior leadership of the Air Force. It's a really pivotal place.

I was able to take my squadron over into the theater in time of war and that was something that the nation depends on us to do. Some of those were highlights as well. There are so many highlights that allowed me to progress in diverse areas and that prepared me to be a general officer.

Through the years, have you viewed the chief of staff position as a career goal?

Never. When you were at the Academy, it was a name you had to memorize. Then, as you learn more of the history, you understood some of the greats and what they did in their career that eventually [elevated them] to that position. But you never actually — I didn't at least — picture yourself in that position. But I was always anxious to see where I could lead next, what I could do next, not really ever intending that to be the destination, to be the senior military officer.

Have you been able to settle into your new role, and what have you been up to since being sworn in?

The work of being a chief of staff I've settled into fairly nicely. I think largely that's because I was the vice chief of staff for three years. Many of the same issues are still there. Sometimes I would sit in for the chief and so I was fairly comfortable with the workload. But there is a difference between being the vice chief and being the chief, in that you're humbled every day with the level of support that you have and the fact that you have an entire staff trying to make you successful as the senior and sometimes as the face of the United States Air Force. So you feel responsibility to that team because every day they wake up and they want to make you successful. You want to earn that every single day.

As far as the content, the issues, I feel fairly comfortable. It's still very humbling every day to wake up in the Air House with all the support and finish knowing it was another day that I served in the same position as some of the greats of our time.

You're taking over as chief during a particularly unstable time around the globe. What are the biggest challenges and threats our nation and partners face today?

I think this is a key time. I would agree that it's dangerous, it's dynamic, but it's important. Some of the key challenges

are the rapid pace of change; an emerging threat, potentially the likes of which we haven't seen for several decades; technology is changing; information is ubiquitous. There are all these things that are changing the security environment and one of the challenges is bringing an enterprise along as large as the United States Air Force that is a bureaucracy at its core. It's a pointy edge, it's the tip, it's a fighting force that can beat anybody. But at its base, it's an enterprise, it needs to move; to enable this Air Force to move appropriate to the pace of change, appropriate to the security environment, I think is one of the general challenges that I will tackle every single day while I'm the chief of staff.

What are the biggest opportunities that lie ahead?

It's the other side of the coin, isn't it? There are opportunities to leverage the pace of change. The fact that technology is changing so fast, everything is digital. It's about speed. Character of war privileges speed and tempo and agility. But when you think about it, to be successful in warfare, you want to always have initiative. That's one of the principles of war. How do you gain initiative? Well, you have to have situational awareness, which means you have to be able to make sense of the environment and then act. And if you can do that faster than the adversary, then they're always on their back foot. They're reacting to you, they're



Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin '86 greets CIC Rachel Parillo during the National Character & Leadership Symposium at the Air Force Academy on Feb. 23. (Photo by Ryan Hall)

responding to you, and you can gain and maintain that initiative. Well, now there are opportunities through technology ... that we can actually have that speed advantage. That is going to be key, and I think those are opportunities. That, in addition to human-machine teaming.

I think there are several ways warfare will change — things we used to do manually that machines can do in partnership with us. When we hear about things like collaborative combat aircraft, these are where we're going to optimize, to maximize the things that machines can do, and leave the humans to do the things that humans do best: complex tasks, understanding context — those sort of things. When we master that, that's a new form of warfare. And as we see the airmen out there and the youth of today, they're ready to do that; they're ready to tackle it. That's the great opportunity I think we have ahead of us.

How do you see the domains that the Air Force mission addresses (air, space, cyber, etc.) evolving in the days ahead?

I think they're merging. I think we have an increasing respect for space. There are a lot of things that are happening in space that weren't when I was coming up. There's going to be a greater role that space plays in the joint fight, and so we as the United States Air Force need to continue to work as closely with our sister service Space Force as we did when

they were in the Air Force. The idea that these two working together — one domain almost being an extension of the other one — there are so many things that we have in common because space also can exploit the speed, the tempo, the agility that we can in the air domain. These are going to be increasingly important, specifically if we're talking about having a potential conflict in a place far, far away, where distances matter. I think this is going to be something where these domains are going to evolve together and we're going to have to have a better way of synchronizing operations in each of these domains to make a better joint war fight.

What can the Air Force do to strengthen its numbers and retain its best and brightest to combat personnel shortages?

When we look at retention and recruiting, it really is about being able to communicate the value proposition of our Air Force. And the things I talked about earlier are not disconnected from this. The ability for us to advance our institution into something that the youth want to be involved in, it's something that's exciting, it's something that is important. I think that has been the key.

My children now are becoming adults and finding their way in the world. They want to matter. They want to do something that's important. They want to have a life of purpose. This is how you

can get that. You can attain a life of purpose and do something that's greater than yourself, to be important, to matter. Our United States Air Force provides that to them. This way of life that we enjoy is something that we should never take for granted. And understand that there are many out there who envy it. It's something that's worth protecting and something that's worth defending. And I think when we make that case to the youth and they understand you can advance and live a life of purpose, I think we'll be able to increase that communication and address the recruiting and retention issues. They'll always be there because there are conflicting things in society and in the world, but we have a value proposition. I think that value proposition remains very important and something that our youth will be attracted to.

Do you feel the Academy is keeping pace with what the Air Force will need in the future?

I think the Academy really has responded very well. For example, when the Space Force became the Space Force, the Academy already started thinking about how they develop leaders of character that can go into either the Air Force or the Space Force. As they develop the [Madera] Cyber [Innovation Center] and the Institute for Future Conflict, those are things that will maintain that relevance. I think that's going to be key because as we understand the changing character of war,



LEFT: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., left, and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin '86, share a smile during Gen. Allvin's welcome ceremony at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, Nov. 17, 2023.

RIGHT: Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin '86, from left, speaks during the National Character & Leadership Symposium at the Air Force Academy on Feb. 23, 2024, as Gen. Michael Guetlein, vice chief of space operations; CTC Ruben Banks; Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force JoAnne Bass; and Chief Master Sgt. of the Space Force John Bentivegna look on. (Photo by Ryan Hall)

as we call ourselves digital immigrants, versus the digital natives who are the youth, they understand inherently some things better than we do. And so they may be able to leverage their inherent understanding of this digital world to be able to advance further faster than if it was us trying to make up the rules. The way the Academy has done it — changing their curriculum, changing the cadet experience to be able to understand the type of environment that they're going to have to lead in into the future — I think they've done a good job. There are things that we can continue to move forward on, and I think we're gonna do that as we start to reoptimize our entire Department of the Air Force to deal with this environment. And the United States Air Force Academy is going to be a key part of that.

What advice might you have for USAFA cadets?

Stay engaged. And I think the other thing is, we always say, practice how you fight. Your experience at the Academy should be as representative as possible of when you're a lieutenant, a captain and so on. And I think changing the cadet experience is going to allow opportunities for that, but I would love for the cadets to start forward-projecting themselves as a lieutenant and understanding the environment that they're going to be in and what that means in their career progression. The better able they are to

lead from the start, the better our Air Force is going to be. We're going to need them to lead from day one. This environment is going to be challenging and we're going to need them to lead strongly — small teams, big teams — early. And that's what they're going to need, probably more so than when I came in.

What guiding principles do you intend to follow during your tenure as chief of staff?

Well, it's in my guiding principles: Follow-through is one of the key ones. I want to follow through. I think we're at a point right now where we need to solve for agility. What I mean by that is we cannot wait for the perfect answer to start moving. Things change too much. If you wait too long to get the perfect answer, it will be perfectly irrelevant. We have to stop confusing precision, which we do very well, for accuracy, which is tougher and tougher in times of change. They're not the same thing. There have been plenty of ideas out there, and I was privileged enough when I was on the Air Staff 10, 12 years ago to start writing about these things. Those ideas — under Chief [Mark] Welsh, under Chief [David] Goldfein, under Chief [Charles Q.] Brown. Now let's just implement them rather than trying to come up with a new, better idea. For me, it's follow-through. I think our airmen are ready for that and I think our airmen deserve that.

Why is it important the Air Force work with our sister services and our allies around the globe to deter near-peer adversaries, and if needed, fight a war?

Two parts. Let's start with allies and partners around the world. First of all, the fact that we have allies and partners, so much more than our potential adversaries, speaks volumes. It means that there is a value proposition and a set of common values that we share. That is powerful.

So for those wanting to overturn that, usurp that for their own purposes, it becomes a steeper hill to climb. The more we're able to credibly demonstrate that, that's deterrence. Deterrence is between the ears. Deterrence is about whether one chooses to pick a particular behavior or action or not. That deterrence is based on a perception, and that perception is based on what you see and what you sense. If they can see and understand that we have a strong, interoperable, capable alliance and partnerships around the globe, there's deterrence. Within our joint force, I also believe that since the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, we've started moving more toward jointness. I believe that in this changing character of war — again, one I believe privileges speed and tempo and agility, lethality and resilience — it is more important for our joint forces to be better and meshed and take our service cultures and make sure we can adapt those to understand that the speed of the



fight is going to demand that we don't sort things out on the fly. We have to have them ready — a tight integral joint team from the beginning. Both of those things are absolutely critical.

We've seen in the news that the Air Force is in the process of making 10 to 20 significant changes, including getting rid of the major commands structure. What can you share about concrete or potential changes and when they could be implemented?

Whenever you undergo a change like the one we're deliberating, there's oftentimes a lot of people who think they know what it is before they really do. And when we refer to things like changing major command infrastructure, I would say there are several sources who have divined things that aren't actually the case.

Here's what we are doing: We've taken an introspective look at the Department of the Air Force and understood that we really haven't adapted the way that we've done business as the environment has evolved. And so it's been a couple decades before we really looked at:

- Is the way that we're doing things appropriate to the environment we see?
- Are we aligning our units of action to ensure that we're able to deploy as a large unit and do a complex task from day one?
- Do we have the ability to retain the right talent that we need?

- Are we developing our Air Force in a cohesive way that takes into account the pace of change?
- Are we doing that in a way that we can iterate and keep up with the pace of change?

Those are the sorts of things that we're looking at. People say, "Perhaps you're just reorganizing; you can't reorganize your way out of a problem." We're actually reoptimizing. And in some cases, organizations don't solve the problems. But you might find if your function has changed and your form stays the same, it might inhibit you getting to your goal. So sometimes the organizational design is counter to where we want to go. As we look at it, as people understand what it really is, my hope is that they can see it as a comprehensive whole, and it really isn't just tearing down and rebuilding for that sake. I think people will be interested to see what it is versus what people imagine it is now. And that will be coming out soon enough.

Editor's note: Specific changes were announced in mid-February after the interview with the chief.

Why are these changes necessary and what are the potential impacts?

The changes are necessary because the environment has changed; the threat has changed. The world has changed, and our Air Force owes it to the airmen who

are willing to sign up to fight and die and to the country we've pledged to defend.

We will make this organization operate in a way that will make Americans proud. We can show any adversaries that if you pick a fight, it's the wrong fight if you're picking it with us. We don't want to have that fight, but if we do, we're going to win it.

As for impacts, I think there will be some changes that might require a culture change. This is not a breaking and rebuilding of our Air Force; it is a transformation.

And the compelling case to me is what I opened with: It's the environment, it's the threat, it's what America expects its Air Force to do. And we need to optimize to meet that expectation. With any change, there'll be angst and there'll be some tumult here and there; I fully expect that. If not, I think then it means we're heading down the same path that we have been, which might have been optimized for the environment of the past but not for the one that we have to prepare our Air Force and our nation for.

You have a stressful job. What do you do to decompress?

I do have a stressful job, but a lot of airmen have stressful jobs, too. I think the one thing that I've learned: You're always learning; I'm still learning. I've learned over the past five to seven years how to recognize that stress and be aware of it. Because once you're aware of it, you



FAR LEFT: Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin '86 speaks with his wife, Gina Allvin, during his welcome ceremony at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, Nov. 17, 2023.

LEFT: Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall, left, shares a moment with Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin '86 after the welcome ceremony at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, Nov. 17, 2023.

might be able to nip it in the bud and do things early on before it becomes something that can be debilitating or really impact your ability to do a very important job.

I'm excited about wearable technology. I have wearable technology on me. This idea that we are switching from a type of medicine where you take a prescription to more functional medicine where you can understand the root causes and you can do things yourself without having to wait until it gets worse. Sometimes I do breathing exercises. Breathing? Yes. Concentrating on breathing manages your sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. It allows me to remain calm and understand when I eat and what I eat. Sometimes you know you shouldn't eat junk food, you should do this or that, but there is data coming from this wearable technology that can let you be more precise. And the more precise you are, the more you can nip these things in the bud, and you don't ever get to that point where you're almost on the edge and then you've got to recover because you're not doing anybody any good.

I believe this job and all of our jobs are so important. You can do the small things so you don't have to do something major to recover.

And when I do relax, it's normally with my wife, [Gina] — we'll watch a movie or go on a walk together. I love my fitness routine. Again, we have very precise ways of measuring your fitness,

and my fitness routine helps me manage my stress as well.


As a member of the Long Blue Line, what role do you want to see the Association of Graduates, as the alumni association, play going forward?

I think that path of continued relevance, to be able to tie [together] the proud heritage. [Is] it a Long Blue Line? How long is this blue line going to be? One of the foundational pieces of airpower, and of being an airman, is innovation. [Innovation] is in our DNA. So we need to understand what parts of our heritage we hold on to entirely, and what part of our heritage that is innovation allows us to maintain being a member of that Long Blue Line without being trapped by old paradigms. What the Association of Graduates can do is keep themselves relevant by helping us all keep ourselves relevant, and understand some things we hang on to and some things we can leap into the future and our successors' successors will thank us for it. And I think that's where the Association of Graduates can help keep us together as graduates.

Do you have any other comments, advice or thoughts as you settle into your new role?

I'm equal parts excited and anxious. Those are slightly different. I'm excited for the opportunities. I'm anxious because I think there are lots of things we

need to do and we can't afford to wait anymore. I wake up every day with that sense of urgency.

When I see what airmen do every day, and when I look at the Academy and see what our future leaders are going to do, I have a very positive outlook. Keeping that sense of urgency, if you will — to make sure we can adapt our Air Force to what it needs to be in the future and an appreciation for the fact that we have Americans signing up to join our winning team, to preserve what this nation holds dear — there is no better thing to wake up to every day. That's what I would like to exude to everyone that works around me and all the airmen that I'm so privileged to serve. 

Editor's Note: Some of the original questions and answers were edited slightly for clarity.



Please scan the QR code or visit usafa.org/checkpoints to view video highlights from our conversation with Gen. Allvin. The Association and Foundation thanks the chief for taking time from his busy schedule to talk with our *Checkpoints* team.