

NatCon 2026 — State of the Organization Address and CEO Succession Announcement

Student Veterans of America 18th Annual National Conference

The Broadmoor Hotel and Conference Center, Colorado Springs, Colorado — Thursday, January 8, 2026

Speakers, in order of appearance:

1. Jared Lyon — President and CEO, Student Veterans of America (outgoing)
2. Scott Blackburn — Chair, SVA National Board of Directors
3. Cory Boatwright — Interim President and CEO, Student Veterans of America (incoming)

Part I — Jared Lyon, President and CEO (Outgoing)

[Lyon enters stage left to "Sandstorm" by Darude. Walks to podium.]

[00:08] So I understand that the rule in the aviation community is you can never pick your call sign. The rule at SVA is you can never pick your walk-on music. So that was [a lot], thanks, Dr. Kinch.

[00:24] Good evening, everybody. This is one of the most motivated rooms of people that I've ever had the chance to see. One of the biggest crowds we've ever had here at NatCon. Do that one more time with heart. Good evening, everybody. Outstanding.

[00:45] You know, one of the first classes I ever took at community college was a public speaking course. I thought it would be easy. Shortly after I'd gotten out of the Navy and taking this course using my GI Bill, was the hardest B I ever earned. But in that course, the major takeaway for me was always get to know your audience. And so, I hope that you'll indulge my professor's prerogative for a moment and sound off in any way that you feel appropriate.

[01:07] Where is the United States Army?

[Audience response.]

[01:31] That was — that was — wow, now for everybody else. Remember, the Army is just the biggest, okay? It doesn't necessarily mean anything, okay?

[01:51] Now, I've made this mistake before by not going in order of precedent, and one year I accidentally left out a branch that we all love. So where's the smallest but meanest branch? Where are United States Marines?

[Audience response.]

[02:13] We actually only have 16 Marines this year, but they are that motivated. Pretty impressive.

[02:21] All right, where are my sisters and brothers of the world's finest Navy?

[Audience response.]

[02:31] All right, we've got a pretty — we've got a pretty high ranking Airman in the room. So the Air Force has really got to give it up. Where's the Air Force?

[Audience response.]

[02:45] The etiquette of the United States Air Force is still unmatched, y'all. That is okay.

[02:54] I'm still looking for this one. Where's the Space Force?

[Audience response.]

[03:01] You wait. They'll be here. They will be here.

[03:07] All right. Now, I know we're going to — proud, and proud from our Coasties. Where's the United States Coast Guard?

[Audience response.]

[03:16] Always willing to party, the US Coast Guard. Really, really, well done. And then, hey y'all, I'd be remiss, but where are our family members, caregivers, survivors? Can we all give it up for them?

[Sustained applause.]

[03:36] Let's be honest, putting up with veterans is never an easy thing. And I know none of us would be here without them. So one more round of applause for family members, caregivers, and survivors.

[Applause.]

[03:51] Y'all, welcome to the 18th Annual Student Veterans of America National Conference. Personally, this is my 16th NatCon, and I can tell you it never gets less exciting to walk into a room full of motivators like you. People who are actively working to build better lives for themselves, their families, and their communities.

[04:13] And for anyone that might be here for the first time — welcome. You definitely picked a good weekend to be with us. Got a little snow for you on the way in. You're going to swap more contacts than you have in a while, and you're going to pick up more LinkedIn connections than you probably planned. But by Sunday, you're going to leave here with ideas, relationships, and motivation that will follow you home. We call this the NatCon High.

[04:38] Please do me a favor — be a sponge these next few days. There are student veterans that we all know back at home who couldn't make it with us this year. So bring these resources, these networks, these ideas back to campus and share it with them.

[04:59] Now, before we go any further, I just want to pause for a moment and place this conference in calendar year 2026 into a little bit of context.

[05:10] This year actually marks 25 years — September 11th, 2001. Like many in this room, that day shaped my life in ways that I couldn't imagine at the time. I was in Navy boot camp on 9/11, having joined what was still a peacetime military. The events of that morning went on to shape the service of

millions of post-9/11 veterans — women and men who prepared for and served during over two decades of war.

[05:30] That generation of service is the reason organizations like Student Veterans of America exist. And as we approach that 25th anniversary of 9/11, I hope that SVA chapters across the country find ways to pause, remember, and help ensure that we never forget that day, what it meant, or the responsibility that it placed on those who raised their right hand after that day.

[06:06] And at the same time, 2026 also marks another milestone. It is the 250th anniversary of the founding of our United States of America. Few communities understand service, citizenship, and leadership more deeply than student veterans.

[06:25] There are national and local America 250 initiatives that are happening across the country, and SVA chapters are uniquely positioned to help campuses engage thoughtfully — connecting our shared history to the leadership and civic responsibility of our country and the leadership that we will need in the decades ahead.

[06:42] These moments of reflection and renewal are part of the same story, and they remind us why the work we do at SVA matters — not just for today, but for the future that we are all in this room helping to shape.

[06:59] Now, I mentioned a little bit earlier the NatCon High. It's a feeling I know exceptionally well, because I've been on both sides of this conference.

[07:11] I first found SVA as a student veteran trying to figure out my own transition out of the United States Navy back in 2010. My first chapter experience was at my alma mater of Florida State University. Go 'Noles.

[Audience response is muted.]

[07:26] That was not as good as it could have been. Florida State.

[Audience laughter.]

[07:31] But it was at Florida State where I learned what it meant to lead again — this time without a uniform and without the positional authority of rank, but still with purpose.

[07:44] In 2011, at my second-ever NatCon, I was named SVA's National Student Veteran of the Year. This was an honor that changed the trajectory of my life. And tomorrow, we'll recognize the next leaders with SVA's highest honors — Chapter Advisor of the Year, Student Veteran of the Year, and Chapter of the Year.

[07:59] Hell yeah. Let's give it up to our finalists.

[Applause.]

[08:07] By the way, the years that followed my graduation from Florida State *[pauses, looks to audience for a response from Florida State]* — nothing.

[Laughter.]

[08:22] That's all right. I stayed connected as an SVA alumni, volunteer, and mentor, including at Syracuse University.

[Audience cheers — presumably from Syracuse University.]

[08:33] Way to go, Cuse. Proud of you. It was at Syracuse where I was back in the classroom as a graduate student, supporting the next generation of SVA chapter leaders as a mentor.

[08:38] In 2014, I joined SVA's professional staff. And in January 2016 — exactly 10 years ago — I was entrusted with the role of President and CEO of Student Veterans of America.

[09:00] Over the last decade, together we built something big. I would argue something enduring.

[09:11] SVA grew from a small but determined movement into a national institution, expanding from our first few hundred chapters to over 1,600 campuses across the country and in all US territories and three countries overseas.

[09:29] We've strengthened research and advocacy that helped to protect and expand education benefits, including the Forever GI Bill. And we became a trusted and proudly nonpartisan voice for student veterans and their families, working with Congress and the presidential administrations of both parties since our founding in 2008. That's to make sure that we've made policy that reflects the realities of today's student veterans, military-connected students, our family members, caregivers, and survivors.

[09:58] That progress doesn't belong to any one person. It belongs to the student veterans and alumni who showed up. It belongs to the chapter advisors who, despite the challenges, found a way. It belongs to the chapter leaders who led with courage. It belongs to the SVA staff and board members who have poured themselves into this mission. And it belongs to the donors and partners who believed in SVA year after year.

[10:22] And it's because of all of you that I could not be more proud of the work that we've done together — or more grateful for the chance to strengthen this community alongside each and every one of you.

[10:39] But I'll be honest — a decade is a long time. And in that time, I haven't just been your CEO. I rejoined the ranks of student veterans as a doctoral student at Syracuse University nearly four years ago. I haven't finished yet.

[11:01] During that time, I also became the father of two beautiful redheaded boys.

[11:11] That one we'll give it up for — Campbell and Nolan, the Lyon boys.

[Applause.]

[11:17] And I've tried to do everything that I could to help ensure that SVA is strong, stable, and ready for whatever comes next. And I think that we've been doing a pretty great job at that.

[11:24] As I approach the completion of my PhD, it feels like the right moment to pause, to reflect, and prepare — for me and for SVA.

[11:39] SVA is focused, resilient, and positioned for its next era of impact. And after an amazing, sometimes exhausting, but always exhilarating decade, I'm excited to see what new leadership will do with the organization that we've all built together.

[11:54] And so, you are all hearing it here first. And yes, sorry for anyone on LinkedIn, but I wanted my SVA family to hear it first, here at NatCon.

[12:09] This is going to be my last NatCon as President and CEO of SVA, and it'll be my first NatCon right back where I started — as a student veteran, just like all of you in this room.

[Sustained applause.]

[12:31] Let me tell y'all, I'm already excited about what's next.

[12:35] The next chapter at SVA is going to place an even stronger emphasis on partnership, innovation, and opportunity. You're going to see that throughout this weekend. Where else do you see a partner like Google that wants to outfit every student veteran with a new phone at check-in?

[Applause.]

[13:00] Y'all got to know, when we got that call, we're like, "We get to be Oprah. You get a phone, you get a phone."

[Laughter.]

[13:08] And also access to their free professional development and career certificates — from which, if you haven't checked them out yet, y'all, Chad McFarland is running around here. He will get you signed up.

[13:17] And where else do you get the chance to serve alongside leaders through a service project with the Travis Manion Foundation? Let's give it up for their help.

[Applause.]

[13:26] That just proves — when a big group of student veterans come to a town, we're not invading. It's a new word these days, but we're here to leave things better than we found them. And working with great service organizations like the Travis Manion Foundation, we're able to do that.

[13:45] We're connecting directly with employers at the Employment Summit that was hosted earlier today by Hiring Our Heroes and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Let's give it up to those great partners.

[Applause.]

[14:04] Here at NatCon, you're going to take part in research conversations that are shaping national policy. You'll connect with the Veteran Assistance Expo, getting you squared away with the benefits that you've earned through your service to our country. You'll innovate with peers. You're going to build new partnerships. And you'll leave with ideas that make your campuses and your communities stronger.

[14:20] That's because NatCon isn't just a conference. It's a working space for the future of veteran education, and it's the kind of American leadership that I humbly believe this country needs.

[14:40] None of this happens without an extraordinary team. The staff of Student Veterans of America — honestly, y'all are the best you'll ever find. And that goes for our past staff as well as our present staff. Please thank the SVA staff members, past and present.

[Applause.]

[14:54] Our partners are helping to bring this conference to life. TikTok is sharing NatCon with the world, and we're lucky enough to have my dear friend Johnny Vargas with us. Y'all might know him better by his social media handle, where he has so many followers — as Viva la Vargas.

[15:13] Disney continues to champion student veterans and their leadership, and is the sponsor of this general session. Can we give it up to Disney?

[Applause.]

[15:35] And y'all, for the second year in a row, we are grateful to The Broadmoor for creating a space where community can gather, learn, and connect in this beautiful, beautiful facility.

[15:44] These partners show up because they believe in you. They believe in what you're doing now and what you're capable of next in your lives.

[15:52] As I step away from my role and prepare to step down as the CEO of Student Veterans of America, I do so with deep confidence in where SVA is heading. You're going to hear more about that leadership in just a moment.

[16:10] And I want you to know this — I'm not going anywhere. I'm just switching seats in this big SVA family we've built together. I'm stepping away from the podium, and I'm coming back to sit next to you as a peer, as an alum and a mentor, as well as a lifelong advocate for student veterans.

[16:31] And tonight, as part of that continuity, I'm proud to formally pass the leadership of Student Veterans of America to the SVA National Board of Directors, and to my dear friend, Air Force veteran Cory Boatwright, who is going to serve as the Interim President of Student Veterans of America.

[16:47] Thank you for letting me do this work, and to do it for so long. I'm proud to be part of this community, and I'm grateful for the ways that SVA has — and will continue to — help all of us grow and succeed for years to come.

[17:04] I love all of you. It has been a privilege to serve as your National President and CEO. And I made it through without crying. That might not be easier tonight at the bar. So thank you all.

[Sustained applause.]

[Lyon exits stage right.]

Part II — Scott Blackburn, Chair, SVA National Board of Directors

[Blackburn enters stage left to "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana. Walks to podium.]

[17:58] So we have the tradition of the change of command, and I get to be the Army guy that — we go from the Navy guy to the Army guy. I'm going to hand it in a second here — I'll hand it to the Air Force guy.

[18:16] Before I do that, I just want to talk a little bit about Jared. Twelve years here at SVA, 10 years as our CEO. And in that time, nobody has done anywhere near the work that Jared has done for our student veterans — the advocacy, the research, the Forever GI Bill.

[18:40] This organization is forever indebted to Jared. And SVA is today what it is because of Jared. So one more applause for Jared.

[Sustained applause.]

[19:03] But the show must go on, right? Because the mission will endure. And the mission is always going to endure because of all of you here in the audience today — and in particular, our chapters and our student veterans, that are the lifeblood and that are going to keep on coming no matter what. And we are always going to have the obligation to do everything that we can to serve them.

[19:20] So on behalf of the Board of Directors, I'm extremely excited and optimistic about the future. I am incredibly inspired by all of you, and I'm also incredibly inspired by our SVA staff who is extremely dedicated, passionate, and is going to continue to deliver for all of you, and are here putting on their best today.

[19:50] So Jared mentioned, Cory is going to be playing the interim role. We are going to be having a national search that we will be launching very soon to get the next permanent CEO. But until then, we're in really, really good hands.

[20:09] Cory is an Air Force veteran, as Jared mentioned. He is a two-time student veteran. Go Air Force.

[Audience response.]

[20:16] He's been at BlackRock, he's been at Deloitte, he's been at LinkedIn, and most recently, he's been a nonprofit leader at Hiring Our Heroes.

[20:30] So while he doesn't have the amazing flowing hair of Jared, and nobody has the incredible beard of Jared, Cory definitely does have the passion — and this organization is in great hands. So bring it up for Cory.

[Applause.]

[Boatwright enters stage left; Blackburn greets him.]

Part III — Cory Boatwright, Interim President and CEO (Incoming)

[Boatwright at podium, with Blackburn having handed off. "Immigrant Song" by Led Zeppelin plays on entrance.]

[20:59] Thank you, Scott. And thank you, Jared. Can we give him another round of applause for Jared? I mean, incredible stuff. Thanks, bud.

[Applause.]

[21:09] Jared, I just got to say that you should be really proud of what you've created here and what you've built. You and the team have created an incredible institution, and I'm just incredibly proud to be part of this story.

[21:17] I want to begin by celebrating the work that has come before this moment and the people that make this community what it is. Student Veterans of America is strong because of this community. It's strong because of our partners, our supporters, and our donors. SVA is strong because of our dedicated staff, because of the chapters, and because of all of you, the talented students that are in this room.

[21:49] For those of you that don't know me well yet, I'm a two-time student veteran, as Scott just mentioned. But like many of you, I took off the uniform and went straight to school — first in 2011 for my undergraduate degree, and then again in 2019 for my graduate degree. I know what it's like to navigate transition, to wrestle with belonging and purpose, all while balancing school, work, and family.

[22:13] For those of you who do know me, you know that I lead with integrity and heart and believe that there's a path in place for us all to be our best selves. I'm focused on doing things the right way and delivering meaningful outcomes for our community. I think about veteran opportunity all the time, and I will not stop working for you and the opportunities that you deserve.

[22:31] I also recognize that these moments bring mixed emotions. Change often does. What I want to say with clarity and confidence is that the work continues with focus, care, and with purpose and intention. Our staff remains fully committed to serving chapters and student veterans across the nation.

[22:49] As Interim CEO, my role is straightforward — to provide stability, to listen, and to be transparent. But also to make sure that every decision stays grounded in our mission to act as a catalyst to student veteran success — to, through, and beyond higher education, where higher education is not the finish line, but is the launch pad for a lifelong leadership and service.

[23:14] I also want to share something pretty exciting. Take out your new Google phone. We hosted focus groups, and you told us that building skills for the careers of the future really matters. That's why Google career certificates — to student veterans, SVA alumni, and chapter members. And to make — thank you.

[Applause.]

[23:47] And to make sure you're part of that, we're adding a little incentive. So again, grab your phones. If you sign up and enroll today, you will be entered to win one of three chapter event kits that include 50 SVA-branded t-shirts, a popup banner, and also a branded — pull out your phone — great. Scan the QR code that are on the screens next to me, and then enter in your information. And when you receive your Coursera invite tomorrow, enroll in the course that you're most excited about. We'll announce the winners at the ball on Saturday night.

[24:16] This is the future of SVA. Pathways that move you forward. Real momentum and real opportunity. Whether you realize it or not, the future is built here and now — by the conversations that you're going to have this weekend, by the relationships that you will strengthen, and by the students you will serve when you go home.

[24:32] I'm grateful for the confidence that the board has placed in me. I'm incredibly honored to serve alongside the staff and team, and I'm proud to stand with this community. Thank you for being here, and thank you for believing in what's possible. Now, let's get to work together.

[Applause.]

[Boatwright exits stage right.]

Transcription notes

Source: Verified against the official YouTube recording of the session (link), grounded against the prepared Thursday Welcome General Session script for proper-noun spelling and vocabulary.

Editorial policy: Intelligent verbatim. Filler words, false starts, and disfluencies have been removed where they did not carry meaning; every substantive word, improvisation, and audience-directed aside is preserved as delivered. The delivered remarks are treated as the canonical text; no distinction is drawn between scripted and improvised passages, because the audience experienced none.

Audience reactions are noted in brackets at the points where they occur, sparingly and accurately.

Corrections applied to ASR errors (machine-transcription artifacts only, no substantive content changes): "SBA" → "SVA"; "Nackcon" / "Naton" / "Ncon" → "NatCon"; "Corey Boight" / "Tori" → "Cory Boatwright"; "Travis Manning" → "Travis Manion"; "Deote" → "Deloitte"; "Black Rockck" → "BlackRock"; "Broadmore" → "The Broadmoor"; "Viva Lavarus" → "Viva la Vargas"; "carriers" → "caregivers" (where context required); "CSV" → "SVA".

Timestamps correspond to the YouTube recording starting at 00:00.

Speakers identified by name and role at time of session: Jared Lyon (President and CEO, outgoing); Scott Blackburn (Chair, SVA National Board of Directors); Cory Boatwright (Interim President and CEO, incoming).

Canonical page: <https://jaredslyon.com/natcon-2026-ceo-succession-announcement/>

Source video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtboJVD5AXI>

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