

August 7, 2018

The Honorable James N. Mattis
Secretary of Defense for the United States
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Mattis:

The undersigned groups are writing in opposition to the Pentagon's recent unnecessary and unprecedented attacks on transparency. We represent nonpartisan watchdog organizations that advocate, in part, for transparency in government and military spending, and we are greatly concerned by the Pentagon's renewed efforts to keep the American public in the dark.

We feel that the Department of Defense (DoD) has unacceptably reduced the public's access to basic operations of our wars during your tenure as Secretary. While we certainly understand the need to keep our troops safe at home and abroad and the importance of strategic planning, we cannot accept the recent pattern of the Pentagon implementing secrecy for the sake of secrecy. American taxpayers, voters, and Congress deserve to know how the Pentagon is spending money, the number of troops you are stationing outside of the United States, and whether our efforts abroad are working.

A few recent examples are troubling and should be reexamined:

Secrecy around Troop Deployments

For the past ten years, the Pentagon has maintained a public website posting troop numbers deployed across the globe.¹ Last year, it stopped reporting on troop numbers in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq,² opting instead to defer questions concerning DoD personnel numbers to "OSD Public Affairs/Joint Chiefs of Staff."³

This time last year, you told members of the press that you changed the accounting process for tallying troops abroad and hoped that this accounting resulted in more accurate numbers being reported to the public.⁴ Your policy of blacking out troop numbers on the Pentagon's public website seems like a complete reversal of that goal—instead opting to keep the public entirely in the dark. Maintaining a public record of troop numbers serving abroad is essential for the public

¹ "DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications," Department of Defense. https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp (Downloaded July 17, 2018)

² David Welna, "Pentagon Questioned Over Blackout On War Zone Troop Numbers," *National Public Radio*, July 3, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/03/625544265/pentagon-questioned-over-war-zone-numbers-blackout> (Downloaded July 17, 2018)

³ Dominique Mosbergen, "After Promises Of 'Transparency,' Pentagon Under Scrutiny For Troop Number Blackout," *The Huffington Post*, July 4, 2018. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/pentagon-troop-number-blackout-iraq-syria-afghanistan_us_5b3c6a27e4b07b827cbc12e4 (Downloaded July 18, 2018)

⁴ Department of Defense, "Press Gaggle with Secretary Mattis," August 14, 2017. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1278359/press-gaggle-with-secretary-mattis/> (Downloaded July 18, 2018)

to understand exactly where their tax dollars are being spent, and for Congress to understand where more or less funding is needed. It is even more important for understanding if our military strategies are working when servicemen and women are wounded or killed and more troops are being committed to the effort.

As you know, several Members of Congress expressed similar concerns in a letter to you in May, pointing out, in part, that a lack of transparency means that they don't know if U.S. military strategy in our longest-fought war is actually working.⁵ Your response to that letter failed to shed light on how you intend to prioritize transparency wherever possible while still maintaining the secrecy necessary to protect strategic operations and the safety of American troops.⁶ We urge you to reverse the policy of redacted troop numbers and to release accurate figures to the public.

Obscuring Information about Afghanistan Force Capabilities

In addition to secrecy around troop numbers, we oppose the Pentagon's decision to restrict information assessing the capabilities of Afghan forces being trained, in part, using U.S. resources and funding. Information on troop strength, salaries, training, equipment, and infrastructure projects was included in every report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) for years,⁷ but that recently changed with a new DoD decision prohibiting SIGAR from including this information in their reports.⁸

SIGAR is now prohibited from releasing information on casualties, personnel strength, attrition, capability assessments, and operational readiness of equipment, seemingly as a result of past reports revealing that the number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan is rising.⁹ This is an unacceptable level of secrecy that significantly hinders the ability of the public to assess American progress on our longest war.

This policy also makes it easier for bad actors to engage in waste, fraud, and abuse in secret—a problem that military leaders acknowledged when they declassified such information in the past¹⁰ and that you, yourself, noted in a memorandum on the importance of SIGAR's work

⁵ Letter from members of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security, to Defense Secretary James Mattis regarding the redaction of troop numbers, May 10, 2018, p. 1. <https://democrats-oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2018-05-10.%20Lynch%2C%20Welch%2C%20DeSaulnier%2C%20Gomez%20%26%20EEC%20to%20Mattis%20re.%20Defense%20Manpower%20Data%20Center.pdf> (Downloaded July 17, 2018)

⁶ Letter from Defense Secretary James Mattis to Representative Stephen F. Lynch regarding the Defense Manpower Data Center quarterly reports, May 24, 2018. <https://apps.npr.org/documents/document.html?id=4571223-Letter-to-Mattis> (Downloaded July 18, 2018)

⁷ Neil Gordon, "Darkness Falls on Afghanistan Oversight," Project On Government Oversight, January 29, 2015. <http://www.pogo.org/blog/2015/01/darkness-falls-on-afghanistan-oversight.html>

⁸ Jamie McIntyre, "US military classifies Afghanistan data as Taliban make gains," *The Washington Examiner*, October 31, 2017. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/us-military-classifies-afghanistan-data-as-taliban-make-gains> (Downloaded July 17, 2018)

⁹ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 20, 2017, p. 103. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-10-30qr.pdf> (Downloaded July 17, 2018)

¹⁰ Tim Molloy, "Declassified: U.S. Backs Down From Secrecy on Afghanistan Spending," *Frontline*, February 3, 2015. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/declassified-u-s-backs-down-from-secrecy-on-afghanistan-spending/> (Downloaded July 17, 2018)

exposing wasteful practices in Afghanistan.¹¹ Inspectors general must be independent watchdogs—this decision to limit SIGAR’s ability to report on Afghanistan force capabilities is an overstep by the Department and an infringement of SIGAR’s independence. The restriction on their reporting should be lifted immediately.

Preserving Public and Media Access to Life-Saving Information

An unnecessary increase in secrecy is not unique to this Administration, but things appear to be worsening under your leadership, resulting in policies and proposals that appear designed to keep the American public out of your hair. For example, every year, the DoD proposes that it be exempt from certain disclosure requirements of the Freedom of Information Act,¹² an essential tool for regulated public disclosure. Every year, Congress denies this exemption because it is unnecessary to protect the effectiveness of military operations.¹³

This trend is making its way to individual branches of the military, as well, and poses great harm to the health and safety of American troops. Earlier this year, the Air Force restricted the media’s ability to conduct interviews and visit bases in what it called a “public relations reset.” *Defense News* reported that, at the time, it was the “third major Defense Department entity to push out guidance restricting communication over the past eighteen months.”¹⁴ Shutting the media out can mean that life-threatening conditions and abusive practices go uncorrected because there is no one to draw attention to the urgent issues, especially when service members aren’t comfortable going to their superiors or don’t know what recourse they have available to them to expose problems.¹⁵ As a result, lives may be lost or millions of dollars may be wasted. You are in a position to put an end to this pattern of restricting public access to information and we urge you to do so.

The undersigned organizations are greatly concerned that you are engaging in secrecy that will hide wasteful practices and may actually put our troops in danger by silencing whistleblowers and preventing the exposure of abuse. We look to you to find a balance between protecting the strategic planning of military operations and respecting the public’s right to know how their tax dollars are being spent.

Sincerely,

American Society of News Editors

Association of Alternative Newsmedia

¹¹ Memorandum from Defense Secretary James Mattis on “Our Mission and Stewardship Responsibilities,” July 21, 2017. http://www.pogoarchives.org/m/ga/mattis_sigar_memo_20170721.pdf

¹² Department of Defense Office of General Counsel, suggested text for the NDAA bill, May 25 2017. <http://ogc.osd.mil/olc/docs/25May2017NDAABillText.pdf> (Downloaded July 17, 2018)

¹³ Project On Government Oversight, “Civil Society Opposes DoD’s Requested FOIA Expansion, Again,” June 26, 2017. <http://www.pogo.org/our-work/letters/2017/civil-society-opposes-dods.html>

¹⁴ Valerie Insinna, David B. Larter, and Aaron Mehta, “US Air Force Orders Freeze On Public Outreach,” *Defense News*, March 12, 2018. <https://www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2018/03/13/air-force-orders-freeze-on-public-outreach/> (Downloaded July 17, 2018)

¹⁵ Scott Maucione, “Transparency groups decry Air Force media crackdown as new details emerge,” *Federal News Radio*, March 13, 2018. <https://federalnewsradio.com/air-force/2018/03/transparency-group-pans-air-force-media-crackdown-as-new-details-emerge/> (Downloaded July 17, 2018)

Campaign for Liberty

Demand Progress Action

e-PluribusUnum.org

Government Accountability Project

Government Information Watch

Niskanen Center

Open The Government

Project On Government Oversight