United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 19, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

We write to express serious concern regarding reports that you and your office directed an unprecedented effort to block the promotions of highly qualified military officers based on perceived political or ideological views, participation in Department of Defense initiatives, and/or actions taken in the course of carrying out their official duties. These reports raise serious questions about whether the Department is undermining the military's established, merit-based promotion process in favor of political considerations that threaten the integrity of our military leadership and national security.

On November 9, MS NOW reported that your office has sought to prevent certain officers from advancing to senior leadership positions based on their past participation in the implementation of Department policies under previous administrations, diversity initiatives, or public statements. According to the reporting, your staff conducted internet searches into the backgrounds of military officers and communicated instructions by telephone to avoid creating a written record of additional criteria. These allegations follow earlier reports that you intervened to remove officers from promotion lists after they had already been selected through the military's established merit-based, and Congressionally-mandated promotion process.

Our military's discipline and command structure are built on a system in which servicemembers are promoted to leadership positions based on their capabilities, dedication, and proven record of performance and leadership. Congress has established statutory procedures governing officer selection and promotion to ensure these decisions are grounded in professional qualifications and subject to appropriate oversight.

The reported scope and nature of your intervention represent an extraordinary departure from longstanding norms governing military promotions. The apparent establishment of an additional screening process based on political considerations, particularly one reportedly operating without transparent criteria or documented justification, raises serious concerns about whether the Department is circumventing the safeguards Congress established to protect the integrity of military promotions.

Moreover, removing flag officers and general officers from promotion lists exceeds your authority as Secretary of Defense. Pursuant to Section 618(d) of Title 10, United States Code, the Secretary of Defense may remove "an officer recommended by a selection board for promotion to a grade below brigadier general or rear admiral (lower half)," ranks below O-7.

It is particularly troubling that officers may be penalized for faithfully implementing lawful policies and directives issued by previous administrations. This sends a dangerous message that servicemembers' careers depend on whether their past service aligns with the political preferences of the current administration, rather than their performance, judgment, and leadership.

This does real damage to military readiness and could have cascading consequences for years to come. The Department invests decades in developing senior leaders with the operational experience, technical expertise, and judgment required to lead our forces. Removing qualified officers from promotion consideration for political reasons risks depriving the military of that experience and undermining trust and respect between civilian leadership and servicemembers. It could also deter future generations from considering military service if they see accomplished officers' careers derailed by the political whims of an administration. Just as concerning, it risks creating an environment in which officers prioritize political conformity over providing candid military advice and exercising sound professional judgment.

The most critical positions in our military must be filled by the best-qualified individuals who can most effectively lead our troops and safeguard our nation. Decisions about who advances to these positions must be based on merit, not political loyalty.

As members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, we have oversight and legislative jurisdiction over "[p]ay, promotion, retirement, and other benefits and privileges of members of the Armed Forces." As we consider whether legislative reforms are necessary to protect the fairness and integrity of the military promotion process, we request answers to the following questions:

1. Since January 20, 2025, how many officers selected or recommended for promotion have had their promotions removed, withheld, delayed, or otherwise blocked following intervention by you or your office? Please provide a breakdown by military service, grade, date of action, and the stage of the promotion process at which the intervention occurred.

2. Provide the selection criteria and instructions furnished to each promotion selection board whose recommendations were subsequently reviewed or altered by you or your office. What additional criteria, if any, have you or your staff applied when evaluating officers recommended for promotion? Please identify whether those criteria were documented, formally approved, and communicated to the relevant selection boards.

3. For each officer whose promotion was removed, withheld, delayed, or otherwise blocked, please identify the basis for the decision, the supporting evidence, and the statutory or regulatory authority relied upon.

    a. For each intervention, please provide the specific statutory or regulatory authority relied upon, including whether the action was taken pursuant to 10 U.S.C. §§ 618, 624, 629, or another authority. Please identify the documented justification and

any legal review conducted by the Department to determine its compliance with applicable law and regulations.

4. To what extent have you or members of your staff considered an officer's participation in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; implementation of COVID-19 vaccination requirements; involvement in the Afghanistan withdrawal; public statements; and/or other actions taken pursuant to lawful Department policies when evaluating promotion recommendations?

5. Describe the process for reviewing officers recommended for promotion. Were any internet searches, social media reviews, or other background investigations conducted as part of that review process? Who directs these reviews, what information is collected, and how are findings documented? Please provide all written policies, instructions, memoranda, and other records governing these reviews, including records of decisions communicated verbally.

6. What roles have the military service secretaries, service chiefs, promotion selection boards, and other senior military officials played in these decisions? How many officers recommended for promotion by military leadership have subsequently had their promotions blocked or delayed following intervention by you or your office? Please explain how the recommendations of military leadership were considered in these cases.

7. How many officers have retired, separated from service, been involuntarily separated, been forced to retire due to reaching statutory limits while their promotion is on hold, or otherwise experienced adverse career consequences following these interventions?

8. Provide copies of notifications provided to Congress under 10 U.S.C. §§ 618(d)(3) and 629(a), written notices provided to affected officers under 10 U.S.C. § 624(d), and records of verbal communications to affected officers.

Please provide a written response, including the requested records and supporting documentation, within 30 days of receipt of this letter. If any responsive information is classified, please coordinate with our offices to arrange its transmission through appropriate channels.

Sincerely,

Mark Kelly
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Gary C. Peters
United States Senator

Elissa Slotkin
United States Senator