



January 4, 2019

The Honorable Patrick M. Shanahan
Acting Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Shanahan:

I am writing to convey our concern about certain remarks President Trump made during the Cabinet meeting on Wednesday, appearing to direct you to overclassify information and undermine the effectiveness of federal watchdogs.¹ Towards the end of the meeting, while answering questions from the media, the President spoke negatively of federal Inspectors General (IGs) charged with overseeing U.S. overseas contingency operations.

Specifically, the President expressed dismay at the IGs who “[go] over there and...do a report on every single thing that’s happening, and [then] release it to the public.” He explained that “the public means the enemy,” who “[reads] those reports [and] studies every line of it,” and that these reports should be “private” and “locked up.” To further emphasize his apparent displeasure, the President called this situation “insane,” and then directed the following comment to you: “And I don’t want it to happen anymore, Mr. Secretary. You understand that.”

The Project On Government Oversight (POGO) is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to achieving a more effective, accountable, and transparent federal government that safeguards constitutional principles. We were founded in 1981 by Pentagon whistleblowers who were concerned about the Department’s procurement of ineffective and overpriced weapons.

Inspectors General play a pivotal role in overseeing government agencies and making recommendations to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse. As a long-time champion of IGs and governmental transparency, POGO was disturbed by President Trump’s statements. Without further clarification, his directive to you could lead to an unprecedented and dangerous attempt to silence these important watchdogs whose pursuit of corruption and waste saves the government billions of dollars. For example, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has recovered \$951 million in criminal and civil fines and settlements and identified roughly \$2 billion in potential savings to U.S. taxpayers.² Contrary to President Trump’s implication, SIGAR does not publicly release “every single thing” it investigates—in fact, sensitive information is routinely kept out of its public reports and published in special classified annexes, to which access is tightly controlled.

¹ “Remarks by President Trump in Cabinet Meeting,” January 2, 2019. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-cabinet-meeting-12/> (Downloaded January 4, 2019)

² Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “About SIGAR.” <https://www.sigar.mil/sigar.html> (Downloaded January 4, 2019)

The Inspector General Act was enacted, in part, to ensure that IG reports become publicly available—within reason. The Act, as amended by the Inspector General Empowerment Act of 2016, stipulates that IGs shall post on their websites, within three days, unclassified reports that include a recommendation.³

Recently, there has been an alarming trend toward increased—and often unjustified—secrecy in Defense Department matters. POGO and other groups wrote a letter to your predecessor last year in which we documented some of the more egregious examples of “secrecy for the sake of secrecy”: the discontinuation of reporting on troop numbers in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq; withholding information about Afghan force capabilities; seeking additional exemptions from the disclosure requirements of the Freedom of Information Act; and imposing additional constraints on media access to Department officials.⁴ Congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle have also expressed concerns about the Department over-classifying information that is essential to properly oversee the Department’s operations.⁵

We understand and appreciate the need to keep legitimately sensitive information classified, but excessive secrecy can cause untold damage in the long run. Keeping the public in the dark will prevent the discovery of wasteful practices and may put our troops in danger. The bottom line is that there must be 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 and whether our armed forces are achieving their goals.

We were encouraged that during your nomination process to be Deputy Secretary of Defense, you promised that transparency would be one of the “central principles” in your approach.⁶ We therefore have high hopes as you take the helm at the Department, and we look forward to working with you and helping you achieve this principle.

Sincerely,



Danielle Brian
Executive Director

cc: United States Senate Committee on Armed Services
Russell Senate Building, Room 228
Washington, D.C. 20510

³ Inspector General Act of 1978, Pub. L. 95–452, § 4(e)(1)(C)

⁴ Project On Government Oversight, “Civil Society Calls on Pentagon to Increase Public Access to Information,” August 17, 2018. <https://www.pogo.org/letter/2018/08/civil-society-calls-on-pentagon-to-increase-public-access-to-information/>

⁵ Charles S. Clark, “Key House Democrat Says Pentagon Will Have to Become More Transparent,” *Government Executive*, November, 13, 2018. <https://www.govexec.com/oversight/2018/11/key-house-democrat-says-pentagon-will-have-become-more-transparent/152807/> (Downloaded January 4, 2019); David B. Larter, “Lawmakers chide Navy, DoD on step back from transparency,” *Defense News*, January 10, 2018. <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/surface-navy-association/2018/01/10/lawmakers-chide-us-navy-on-step-back-from-transparency/> (Downloaded January 4, 2019)

⁶ Senate Armed Services Committee, “Advance Policy Questions for Patrick Shanahan Nominee for Deputy Secretary of Defense,” p. 4. https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Shanahan_APQs_06-20-17.pdf (Downloaded January 4, 2019)

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