

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

December 18, 2020

Secretary-designee Austin,

Congratulations on your historic nomination to serve as Secretary of Defense. As Members of the House Armed Services Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, we are committed to a productive working relationship with the Secretary. Our nation faces a range of distinct national security challenges, and, should you be confirmed, you will lead the Department of Defense and its more than 1.2 million active duty service members, 800,000 reservists, and 750,000 civilian personnel during a critical time.

We have tremendous respect for your experience, your talent, and your service to our nation. We are grateful for your willingness to continue that service. And we recognize the truly historic nature of your nomination, especially at a time that so many segments of our society, including the military, are confronting issues of equality and justice. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines of color have fought for this country since its founding, and currently constitute over 40 percent of active duty service members. Your nomination is both well-deserved based on your experience, and a long-deserved recognition of the men and women who have fought and died for this country.

But separate from your exceptional qualifications, your selection raises fundamental issues that go beyond any one nomination, no matter how qualified or historic the nominee.

As you know, civilian control over the military is a fundamental principle of American democracy, dating back to the founding of the United States. Our founders knew that military force was more effective and responsive with a good balance of military and civilian oversight. Likewise, maintaining a significant cooling off period helped preserve the apolitical character of our armed forces. Since 1947, presidents of both parties, including decorated veterans like Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, have reinforced this principle. President Trump's nomination of General James Mattis for Secretary of Defense in 2017 ignited debate over how to interpret the principle of civilian control over the military in today's context. Congress granted a waiver for General Mattis' nomination for only the second time in history. Your nomination, requiring another waiver so close on its heels, risks this norm becoming moot, and civilian control of the military with it.

In addition, the last four years have brought the further erosion of civilian-military relations across the Department of Defense. A wide range of scholars and national security experts have expressed concern that civilian voices have been increasingly excluded from the development and execution of national security policy. According to the congressionally-mandated review by the National Defense Strategy Commission there is "a troubling sense that civilian voices were relatively muted on issues at the center of U.S. defense and national security policy, undermining the concept of civilian control." It will therefore be important that the next Secretary of Defense take the lead role in rebalancing this relationship.

In light of all this, we ask that you make time to meet with us before the vote on your waiver, and confirm the following:

- A commitment to ensuring that senior policy-making positions across the office of the Secretary of Defense are filled by qualified civilians, reflecting the need for civilian expertise and oversight in developing national security policy up and down the chain of command;
- A commitment to work through the statutory structure of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), and to refuse or dismantle separate organizations or positions stood up in the past four years to provide advice to the Secretary of Defense outside of the OSD structure;
- A commitment that the most significant decisions for the Department, typically handled by the “Big Four” of the Secretary of Defense, Deputy Secretary, Chairman and Vice Chairman, be expanded to include at least one more senior civilian, such as the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy;
- A commitment to rebalance cooperation and collaboration between the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff, ensuring civilian input is considered up and down the chain of command;
- A commitment to brief Congress within 100 days of assuming office on your changes to the structure and operations of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, particularly on any new entities stood up that might circumvent the primacy of civilian control of the military;
- A commitment to work with the Secretary of State and Congress to ensure that senior civilian officials at the State Department have greater visibility and exercise appropriate joint oversight with respect to Defense Department activities with international partners.

We celebrate your historic nomination and your significant qualifications for the job of Secretary of Defense. But we also recognize the importance of our responsibilities, as Members of Congress, to preserve the norms and standards that have served our country for decades. Your response would aid us as we consider a waiver, and demonstrate your commitment to preserving the role of civilians in our most solemn responsibility of protecting the country.

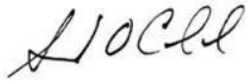
Sincerely,



Elissa Slotkin
Member of Congress



Colin Allred
Member of Congress



Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress



Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress



Tom Malinowski
Member of Congress



Susan Wild
Member of Congress