

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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May 10, 2018

The Honorable James Mattis
Secretary
Department of Defense
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1400

Dear Secretary Mattis:

As members of the Subcommittee on National Security, we are writing to express our strong objection to the Trump Administration's most recent decision to redact U.S. troop numbers for Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan from the Defense Department's quarterly public reports on U.S. personnel strength. This data was publicly available to Congress and the American people throughout the Bush and Obama Administrations and should continue to be so under the Trump Administration, as it has facilitated the development of policies and measures designed to maximize the protection of U.S. Forces deployed overseas. In the interest of continued force protection, transparency, and accountability relating to our military presence in key combat zones, we respectfully request that you immediately reverse this policy.

According to press accounts, the Defense Manpower Data Center "stripped" total U.S. troop numbers for Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan from its quarterly report in December on the number of active duty, reserve, National Guard, and civilian personnel assigned in the U.S. and overseas. In place of this data, the Defense Department left "blank spaces where Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan figures used to be" and inserted a proviso indicating that, "with ongoing operations, any questions concerning DoD personnel strength numbers are deferred to OSD Public Affairs/Joint Chiefs of Staff." The Department also reportedly redacted personnel numbers for Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan from last September's report. Moreover, it is our understanding that the Defense Department has instructed the Defense Manpower Data Center to count personnel going forward based on their permanently assigned unit locations. As a result, thousands of overseas personnel will be reported as stationed in the U.S. when they are actually deployed overseas.¹

This data has been publicly available for more than a decade and provides Congress and the American people with critical information pertaining to Operation Enduring Freedom,

¹ *Pentagon Strips Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria Troop Numbers from the Web*, Military Times (Apr. 9, 2018) (online at www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/04/09/dod-strips-iraq-afghanistan-syria-troop-numbers-from-web).

Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Operation Inherent Resolve, and other missions. An accurate and transparent accounting of deployed U.S. troops has enabled Congress to make better-informed decisions regarding the equipment and personnel necessary to maximize U.S. force protection in combat zones. It has also underscored whether our military strategies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and other areas are achieving their desired results. As you may recall, the U.S. troop figures released in November served to highlight significant discrepancies between the actual number of troops on the ground in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan and the much lower, artificial "force management levels" publicly acknowledged by the Pentagon.² As a result, the Defense Department undertook a policy review to ensure greater accuracy in reporting U.S. troop deployment figures.

As Secretary of Defense, you have underscored your commitment "to developing a more transparent accounting of our troops in the field."³ We believe that an immediate reversal of the decision by the Defense Department to redact key data on U.S. personnel strength would help fulfill your commitment and greatly enhance transparency and accountability in this area.

We respectfully request the courtesy of a reply by Wednesday, May 23, 2018. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this letter.

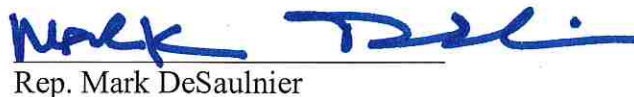
Sincerely,



Rep. Stephen F. Lynch
Ranking Member



Rep. Peter Welch



Rep. Mark DeSaulnier



Rep. Jimmy Gomez



Rep. Elijah E. Cummings
Ex Officio

² *26,000 US Troops Total in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, DoD Reports*, Defense News (Nov. 27, 2017) (online at www.defensenews.com/news/your-military/2017/11/27/26000-us-troops-total-in-iraq-afghanistan-and-syria-dod-reports).

³ *Jim Mattis Promises More Accurate Accounting of US Troop Deployments*, Washington Examiner (Aug. 29, 2017) (online at www.washingtonexaminer.com/jim-mattis-promises-more-accurate-accounting-of-us-troop-deployments).

The Honorable James Mattis

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cc: The Honorable Trey Gowdy, Chairman

The Honorable Ron DeSantis, Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security