

June 3, 2026

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Chairman
Senate Committee on Armed Services
Russell Senate Building, Room 228
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Armed Services
Russell Senate Building, Room 228
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
House Committee on Armed Services
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
House Committee on Armed Services
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Wicker, Ranking Member Reed, Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Smith and Members of the Committees,

We are [Count Every Hero](#), a nonpartisan initiative of former secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force and retired four-star admirals and generals who have served under each President from John F. Kennedy to Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

Strong and healthy civil-military relations are foundational to both a functioning democracy and a military capable of defending the Constitution. Few things are more essential to that relationship than a promotion system the force can trust — one that rewards demonstrated capability, not political considerations.

We write to express our serious concern about Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's reported intervention in the military promotion process. According to multiple reports, the Secretary has blocked or delayed promotions for at least a dozen senior officers across multiple branches of the military. Most recently, he [removed at least nine Navy officers](#) from a promotion list assembled by a board of senior admirals through an established, merit-based process — disproportionately women and Black men. Addition or removal of candidates from a flag list assembled by a board of senior officers is a prohibited action by a service secretary or the Secretary of Defense absent a narrowly specified and identified disqualification of a candidate after the flag list is presented. There is no public indication that standard has been met here.

These interventions threaten military effectiveness and morale in the ranks in ways that should concern members of both parties. Readiness suffers when leadership gaps go unfilled. Retention suffers when officers conclude that advancement depends on perceived political loyalty rather than professional merit. And once politicized promotion decisions become normalized, future administrations of either party may feel entitled to engage in retributive personnel decisions — creating instability that will outlast any single administration.

We urge the Committees to act on a bipartisan basis to enact procedural guardrails that protect merit-based promotions from political interference — including clear timelines for promotion transmittals, limits on unilateral removals without proper process, written notice to Congressional committees, and a meaningful opportunity to respond for any affected officer.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

Co-chairs, Count Every Hero

Secretary Louis Caldera, 17th Secretary of the Army

Secretary Debbie Lee James, 23rd Secretary of the Air Force

Secretary Sean O’Keefe, 69th Secretary of the Navy

Adm. Steve Abbot, USN (ret.), former Acting Homeland Security Advisor to the President

Gen. George Casey, USA (ret.), 36th Chief of Staff of the US Army

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