

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 2, 2020

The Honorable Robert O'Brien
Assistant to the President for National
Security Affairs
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable John Ratcliffe
Director of National Intelligence
Office of the Director of National
Intelligence
Washington, D.C. 20511

Dear Mr. O'Brien, Secretary Esper, Secretary Pompeo, and Director Ratcliffe:

We write to seek clarification on your knowledge of, and actions related to, reports that allege Russia's military intelligence unit (GRU) covertly offered and made payments to Taliban-linked militants to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan.¹ Sources have confirmed and provided additional details about this arrangement, including that it may have directly resulted in attacks that caused American military casualties.² If true and President Trump did nothing, it represents a shocking betrayal of the most basic responsibility of a Commander-in-Chief: to keep deployed American troops safe from those who would try to kill them. President Trump has dismissed these reports as a "Fake News tale" and "Just another HOAX!"³ Similarly, Russian government

¹ New York Times, "Suspicions of Russian Bounties Were Bolstered by Data on Financial Transfers," Charlie Savage, Mujib Mashal, Rukmini Callimachi, Eric Schmitt and Adam Goldman, June 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/us/politics/russian-bounties-afghanistan-intelligence.html>; NBC News, "White House learned of Russian bounty intelligence in early 2019," Carol E. Lee and Josh Lederman, June 30, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/white-house-learned-russian-bounty-intelligence-early-2019-n1232565>; Washington Post, "Russian bounties to Taliban-linked militants resulted in deaths of U.S. troops, according to intelligence assessments," Ellen Nakashima, Karen DeYoung, Missy Ryan and John Hudson, June, 28, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russian-bounties-to-taliban-linked-militants-resulted-in-deaths-of-us-troops-according-to-intelligence-assessments/2020/06/28/74ffaec2-b96a-11ea-80b9-40ece9a701dc_story.html.

² NBC News, "White House learned of Russian bounty intelligence in early 2019," Carol E. Lee and Josh Lederman, June 30, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/white-house-learned-russian-bounty-intelligence-early-2019-n1232565>.

³ Tweet by President Donald J. Trump, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1278284552679624705?s=20>.

officials referred to the alleged bounty program as “outright fake news.”⁴ In other words, President Trump appears to be knowingly echoing what appears to be false denials of the Russian government while its spy unit allegedly pays Taliban-linked militants to kill American soldiers.

Numerous public reports allege that the Russian government offered bounties to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan, which included the use of a “key [Afghan] middleman who for years handed out money from a Russian military intelligence unit to reward Taliban-linked fighters for targeting American troops.”⁵ United States Special Operations Forces (SOF) raids reportedly provided information on this Russian bounty program, and this information was reportedly in circulation within the Trump Administration “in early 2019.”⁶ This revelation also raises questions about whether the Russian scheme can be directly connected to attacks that resulted in the deaths of U.S. troops, including an attack in April 2019 near Bagram Air Base that killed three U.S. Marines.⁷ Unfortunately, the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) briefing by Trump Administration officials altogether failed to meet even the minimum standards for briefing the committee with legislative and oversight responsibility for the Department of Defense.

The intelligence suggesting the existence of this alleged bounty program was reportedly discussed during a March 2020 interagency meeting at the White House and was included in at least one written version of President Trump’s Presidential Daily Briefs (PDB) in early 2019.⁸

⁴ Newsweek, “How Russia Reacted to the U.S. Troop Bounty Claims,” Brendan Cole, July 1, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/taliban-russia-new-york-times-peskov-kremlin-media-1514614>.

⁵ New York Times, “Afghan Contractor Handed Out Russian Cash to Kill Americans, Officials Say,” Mujib Mashal, Eric Schmitt, Najim Rahim and Rukmini Callimachi, July 1, 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/world/asia/afghan-russia-bounty-middleman.html>; New York Times, “Suspicious of Russian Bounties Were Bolstered by Data on Financial Transfers,” Charlie Savage, Mujib Mashal, Rukmini Callimachi, Eric Schmitt and Adam Goldman, June 30, 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/us/politics/russian-bounties-afghanistan-intelligence.html>; NBC News, “White House learned of Russian bounty intelligence in early 2019,” Carol E. Lee and Josh Lederman, June 30, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/white-house-learned-russian-bounty-intelligence-early-2019-n1232565>;

Washington Post, “Russian bounties to Taliban-linked militants resulted in deaths of U.S. troops, according to intelligence assessments,” Ellen Nakashima, Karen DeYoung, Missy Ryan and John Hudson, June 28, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russian-bounties-to-taliban-linked-militants-resulted-in-deaths-of-us-troops-according-to-intelligence-assessments/2020/06/28/74ffaec2-b96a-11ea-80b9-40ece9a701dc_story.html.

⁶ Associated Press, “AP sources: White House aware of Russian bounties in 2019,” James LaPorta, June 30, 2020, <https://apnews.com/425e43fa0ffdd6e126c5171653ec47d1>; New York Times, “Trump Got Written Briefing in February on Possible Russian Bounties, Officials Say,” Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, Nicholas Fandos and Adam Goldman, June 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/us/politics/russian-bounty-trump.html>; NBC News, “White House learned of Russian bounty intelligence in early 2019,” Carol E. Lee and Josh Lederman, June 30, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/white-house-learned-russian-bounty-intelligence-early-2019-n1232565>.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ New York Times, “Trump Got Written Briefing in February on Possible Russian Bounties, Officials Say,” Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, Nicholas Fandos and Adam Goldman, June 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/us/politics/russian-bounty-trump.html>; Associated Press, “AP sources: White House aware of Russian bounties in 2019,” James LaPorta, June 30, 2020, <https://apnews.com/425e43fa0ffdd6e126c5171653ec47d1>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/us/politics/russian-bounty-trump.html>;

The operation of a Russian-bankrolled bounty program to kill U.S. and coalition forces would be a brazen use of proxy forces to harm American lives. But instead of directly addressing the numerous reports of an alleged Russian scheme to kill our troops, various Trump Administration officials have deflected or covered for President Trump's alleged ignorance of the matter. The White House initially insisted that President Trump was not briefed on this intelligence, in part, because, as the White Press Secretary asserted, the President only receives briefings on intelligence "when there is a strategic decision to be made" and "there is still no consensus" among the various intelligence agencies.⁹ Similarly, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said the bounty program allegations "have not been verified or substantiated by the Intelligence Community" and "President Trump had not been briefed on the items," and the Defense Department spokesperson asserted that the Pentagon "has no corroborating evidence"¹⁰ of the Russian scheme but "continues to evaluate [the] intelligence."¹¹

As you all know, U.S. SOF are presently in Afghanistan advising the Afghan Special Security Forces on building their counter-terrorism capacity,¹² and will therefore continue to be in harm's way, albeit with the limited scope of their mission. The Administration's claims of the President's lack of knowledge of the alleged Russian-funded bounty program to kill our troops raise serious questions about the Administration's knowledge of and actions taken related to this scheme, including how you are handling your respective roles as the National Security Adviser, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, and the Director of National Intelligence (DNI).

Given the President's denial of knowledge of an alleged serious threat to our troops in Afghanistan that has been confirmed by multiple sources, we are profoundly concerned about the safety and security of U.S. servicemembers and the behavior of top Administration officials. Accordingly, we are seeking answers from each of you to the following questions by July 16, 2020:

1. What have you told President Trump regarding reports suggesting the existence of a Russian-funded bounty program to offer and make payments to Taliban-linked militants to kill U.S. servicemembers, and when did you provide this information? Was this

⁹ The Washington Post, "Intelligence reports on Russian bounty operation first reached White House in early 2019," Karen DeYoung, Shane Harris, Ellen Nakashima and Karoun Demirjian, June 30, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/democrats-assail-administration-officials-for-not-forcing-trump-to-address-russian-operation-targeting-us-troops/2020/06/30/4744f408-badf-11ea-80b9-40ece9a701dc_story.html.

¹⁰ NBC News, "White House learned of Russian bounty intelligence in early 2019," Carol E. Lee and Josh Lederman, June 30, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/white-house-learned-russian-bounty-intelligence-early-2019-n1232565>.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Statement by Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs on Intelligence That Russian GRU Operatives Were Engaged in Malign Activity Against the U.S. and Coalition Forces in Afghanistan," press release, June 29, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2241964/statement-by-assistant-to-the-secretary-of-defense-for-public-affairs-on-intell/source/GovDelivery/>.

¹² U.S. Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability In Afghanistan, Report to Congress In Accordance With Section 1225 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, as amended; Section 1521(c) of the NDAA for FY 2017; Section 602(b)(14) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 (8 U.S.C. 1101 note); and Section 1520 of the NDAA for FY 2020," June 2020, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/01/2002348001/-1/-/1/1/ENHANCING_SECURITY_AND_STABILITY_IN_AFGHANISTAN.PDF.

information orally briefed or included in the written PDB received by the President, and if so, on what day?

2. Who was in attendance at the reported March 2020 interagency meeting during which this intelligence was discussed?
3. What action, if any, has President Trump taken or directed you to take in response to reports of the alleged Russian-funded bounty program? If the President took or directed you to take any action, did such action include conveying any information related to this matter to U.S. military commanders on the ground in Afghanistan or to the Afghan National Security forces, or ensuring the implementation of additional force protection measures to enhance the safety of U.S. forces?
4. Since the emergence of reports on the alleged Russian-funded bounty program, have you had conversations on the matter with your Russian counterparts, and if so, have you instructed them to refrain from actions that endanger U.S. troops?
5. Was this matter raised by President Trump during any of his meetings or conversations with Russian President Putin since the beginning of 2019,¹³ including their most recent phone call on June 1, 2020?¹⁴
6. What steps is the administration taking to review attacks on U.S. forces during the period of concern in light of this intelligence? Is there any evidence that the alleged Russian-funded bounty program contributed to attacks on any U.S. or coalition forces? If so, please provide additional information on these attacks and any casualties.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

/s/
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/s/
Mazie Hirono
United States Senator

¹³ The Washington Post, “Trump has spoken privately with Putin at least 16 times. Here’s what we know about the conversations,” Adam Taylor, October 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/04/trump-has-spoken-privately-with-putin-least-times-heres-what-we-know-about-conversations/>.

¹⁴ New York Times, “Trump and Putin Discuss Russia’s Attendance at G7, but Allies are Wary,” Michael Crowley, June 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/us/politics/trump-putin-g7.html>.