

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 8, 2026

The Honorable Steve Feinberg
Deputy Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Deputy Secretary Feinberg,

We write regarding the Department of Defense's (DoD) attempt to undermine the editorial independence and First Amendment protections of *Stars and Stripes*. *Stars and Stripes*, "the U.S. military's independent news source," has served millions of service members continuously since World War II, providing members of the armed forces with a credible, non-partisan source of news in times of peace and war.¹ DoD's new policy threatens the credibility of *Stars and Stripes*, and the reliable flow of unbiased news to service members, and contradicts decades of Congressional reforms that guarded against censorship at the paper.² We urge you to immediately rescind DoD's new policy and restore editorial independence guaranteed by the First Amendment to *Stars and Stripes*.

On March 9, 2026, you issued a memo that greatly expands the authority of a DoD political appointee into decision-making at *Stars and Stripes*, places new restrictions on its reporters, and limits civilian editors from contracting wire service stories that are of interest to service-members unless "approved by" a DoD political appointee, including sports and coverage of war zone areas.³ The policy "will likely also stifle much of *Stars and Stripes*' daily newsgathering operations."⁴ The memo further directs that "Stripes should republish articles or other content produced" by DoD's public affairs office and route Ombudsman reports to Congress through DoD's legislative affairs staff.⁵

These changes are in direct conflict with decades of Congressional reforms that addressed previous eras of censorship at the paper. When representatives received numerous reports of

¹ *Stars and Stripes*, "About Stars and Stripes," <https://www.stripes.com/about-us/>; Associated Press, "Defense Department says military newspaper Stars and Stripes must eliminate 'woke distractions'," David Bauder, January 15, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/stars-stripes-pentagon-trump-hegseth-3bcc613b19a92587b16ce5d9adddfec>.

² *Id.*

³ U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, "Modernization of Stars and Stripes Operations," memorandum, March 9, 2026, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/27880913/modernization-of-stars-and-stripes-operations-osd002139-26-res-final.pdf>; *Stars and Stripes*, "Pentagon plan expands oversight of Stars and Stripes, limits content," Rose L. Thayer, March 13, 2026, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2026-03-13/pentagon-modernization-plan-stars-and-stripes-21051529.html>.

⁴ NPR, "Pentagon tightens controls over Stars and Stripes after calling it 'woke'," Maria Aspan, March 14, 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2026/03/14/nx-s1-5748020/pentagon-tightens-controls-over-stars-and-stripes-after-calling-it-woke>.

⁵ U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, "Modernization of Stars and Stripes Operations," memorandum, March 9, 2026, pp.4-7, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/27880913/modernization-of-stars-and-stripes-operations-osd002139-26-res-final.pdf>.

military personnel attempting to “suppress unfavorable news” at *Stars and Stripes* in the 1980s,⁶ Congress ordered investigation into censorship at the paper.⁷ Military commanders were found to have “repeatedly attempted to influence the reporting of news” and that “public affairs officers... caused stories to be withheld.”⁸ Overall, military editors published significantly fewer stories that presented “a negative image of DOD” or “politically sensitive topics” as compared to commercial papers, limiting coverage on the AIDs crisis, the Iran-Contra affair, and mismanagement at DoD.⁹

In response to the evidence of military censorship uncovered in its investigation, Congress called for the establishment of an independent ombudsman to report directly to Members, which proved its value as an important bulwark against future instances of censorship when an Air Force colonel was found to have “violated military regulations by manipulating the paper's news content.”¹⁰ On April 22, 1994, DoD formally codified many of Congress’s recommendations to protect *Stars and Stripes* including the appointment of a civilian editor in chief and the insulation of editorial decision-making from DoD officials.¹¹ Over the years, Congress has continued to affirm *Stars and Stripes*’ editorial independence.¹² When DoD leadership attempted to eliminate *Stars and Stripes* in 2020, Congress passed additional protections against the Department’s ability to shut the paper down.¹³

But in January 2026, DoD rescinded editorial protections which have stood for more than 30 years.¹⁴ At the time, we urged the Department to support *Stars and Stripes*’ editorial independence guaranteed by the First Amendment, and codified through Congressional reforms and DoD policy.¹⁵ Instead, you introduced new restrictions that could once again lead to censorship at the paper.¹⁶

⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, “FREEDOM OF THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE PRESS ACT [Remarks by Representative Glenn English],” August 4, 1987, p. 61 (22280),

<https://www.congress.gov/100/crecb/1987/08/04/GPO-CRECB-1987-pt16-4-2.pdf>; U.S. Senate, “FREEDOM OF THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE PRESS ACT [Remarks by Senator William Proxmire],” May 5, 1987, p. 58 (11094), <https://www.congress.gov/100/crecb/1987/05/05/GPO-CRECB-1987-pt9-1-1.pdf>.

⁷ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989, Public Law 100-180, Section 321, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/1748/text>.

⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Stars and Stripes: Inherent Conflicts Lead to Allegations of Military Censorship,” December 14, 1988, pp. 3-5. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/nsiad-89-60.pdf>.

⁹ *Id.*, pp. 4-5; 39; 83; 88; 90.

¹⁰ House Armed Services Committee Report on the FY1990 -1991 National Defense Authorization Act, H. Rept. 101-121, July 1, 1989, p. 10; Associated Press, “Pentagon Report Rips Management of Military Newspaper,” Robert Burns, February, 20, 1990 [On file with the Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren].

¹¹ 59 CFR 19137; U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Stars and Stripes: Inherent Conflicts Lead to Allegations of Military Censorship,” December 14, 1998, <https://www.gao.gov/products/nsiad-89-60>.

¹² National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013, Public Law 112–239, Section 593.

¹³ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Public Law, 116-283, Section 643; Politico, “Pentagon orders shutdown of Stars and Stripes newspaper,” Associated Press, September 4, 2020 <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/04/pentagon-halts-stars-and-stripes-newspaper-408945>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, Federal Register Notice, “Stars and Stripes Media Organization,” January 15, 2026, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/01/15/2026-00695/stars-and-stripes-media-organization>.

¹⁵ Letter from U.S. Senators Elizabeth Warren, Richard Blumenthal, Mazie Hirono, et al. to Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, January 16, 2026, <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/services/files/550DF8D5-B719-40E6-B3B3-382831111795>.

¹⁶ TexasMetroNews, “Pentagon’s Press Panic Threatens August Stars and Stripes,” Clarence Page, March 30, 2026, <https://texasmetronews.com/113875/pentagons-press-panic-threatens-august-stars-and-stripes/>.

Your attempted overhaul of *Stars and Stripes* is even more troubling because it occurs when thousands of deployed service members and their families rely on the paper as a uniquely knowledgeable and independent source of information about activities on the battlefield and elsewhere in the Department. It is also concerning in light of this administration's broader unconstitutional attacks on the First Amendment rights of news organizations at the Pentagon. In 2025, DoD pushed out dozens of media organizations across the political spectrum - including *Fox News*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* - when they refused to comply with prohibitive restrictions on members of the press.¹⁷ DoD's press policy was deemed unconstitutional for violating bedrock First Amendment protections and engaging in viewpoint discrimination, favoring reporters that wrote stories, "favorable to or spoon-fed by department leadership."¹⁸ New press rules issued by the Department are similarly being challenged for violating the federal court's ruling.¹⁹ Now, DoD is attempting to impose many of the same restrictions – reprinting DoD official statements as fact, restricting journalists' ability to conduct investigative journalism, and limiting access to DoD sources – on *Stars and Stripes*.²⁰

The mission of *Stars and Stripes* to provide "independent news and information to the U.S. military community" is more important now than ever as tens of thousands of service members are deployed to the Middle East.²¹ In times of war and limited access to media, *Stars and Stripes* is distributed freely to deployed troops – serving as a vital, independent link that keeps service members informed about the government and country for which they put their lives on the line.²² DoD should immediately rescind restrictions on *Stars and Stripes*, restore the DoD policies that guaranteed the paper's editorial independence to be governed by First Amendment principles,²³ and respond to the included questions by April 22, 2026:

1. Why did DoD withdraw the DoD rule²⁴ that required *Stars and Stripes* to provide independent journalism to the military community under the principles of the *First Amendment*?
2. Who sits on the *Stars and Stripes* Advisory Group, and how were they selected?

¹⁷ Associated Press, "Journalists turn in access badges, exit Pentagon rather than agree to new reporting rules," David Bauder, October 15, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/pentagon-press-access-hegseth-trump-restrictions-5d9c2a63e4e03b91fc1546bb09ffbf12>.

¹⁸ New York Times, "Judge Rules Pentagon Restrictions on Press are Unconstitutional," Erik Wemple, March 20, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/20/business/media/pentagon-press-restrictions-new-york-times.html>; *New York Times Company v. Department Of Defense*, 25-04218, (2026).

¹⁹ New York Times, "New York Times Accuses Pentagon of Defying Court Order," Erik Wemple, March 24, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/24/business/media/new-york-times-pentagon-court-order.html>.

²⁰ U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, "Modernization of Stars and Stripes Operations," memorandum, March 9, 2026, pp.4-7, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/27880913/modernization-of-stars-and-stripes-operations-osd002139-26-res-final.pdf>.

²¹ Stars and Stripes, "Miscellaneous FAQ," <https://www.stripes.com/help/miscellaneous-faq/>.

²² Stars and Stripes, "Ombudsman column: Risks and challenges of getting news of the war to Stripes' readers," Jacqueline Smith, March 10, 2026, <https://www.stripes.com/opinion/2026-03-09/stripes-iran-war-news-21010401.html>.

²³ 59 FR 19137

²⁴ Stars and Stripes, "Pentagon plan expands oversight of Stars and Stripes, limits content," Rose L. Thayer, March 13, 2026, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2026-03-13/pentagon-modernization-plan-stars-and-stripes-21051529.html>.

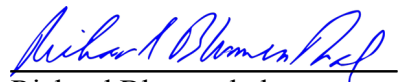
3. Which non-member subject matter experts has the *Stars and Stripes* Advisory Group consulted? Why were they consulted?
4. What *Stars and Stripes* articles has DoD determined were not “consistent with good order and discipline”? Has DoD withheld any stories from publication at *Stars and Stripes*?
5. How many Ombudsman reports have been sent to Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs office since the issuance of the March 9, 2026 order?
 - a. Please provide all original copies of Ombudsman reports and Congressional correspondence from the Stars and Stripes ombudsman transmitted to OSDLA since the issuance of the March 9, 2026 Memo.
 - b. Has DoD LA modified, redacted, or in any other manner altered the content of material provided by the Ombudsman to be directed to Congress since March 9, 2026?
6. How many waivers authorizing the reprint of commercial wire stories has DoD issued to *Stars and Stripes* since March 9, 2026?
 - a. How many commercial wire stories have *Stars and Stripes* editors requested to be reprinted that have been denied by DoD leadership since March 9, 2026? Please provide a list of any such stories withheld from publication and the rationale for their removal.
7. Why were *Stars and Stripes* staff not included in decision-making of policy updates to Stars and Stripes management or notified of changes once they were issued?²⁵
 - a. Will any representatives of *Stars and Stripes* be included in the Department's efforts to update the policy regarding *Stars and Stripes*, DoD Directive (DoDD) 5122.11, as per the March 9, 2026 memo?

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

²⁵ *Id.*



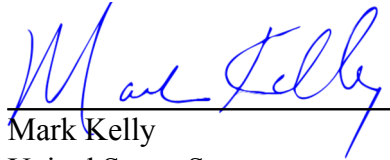
Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Ruben Gallego
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Mark Kelly
United States Senator

CC:

Max D. Lederer Jr., Publisher, *Stars and Stripes*

Erik Slavin, Editor in Chief, *Stars and Stripes*

Jacqueline Smith, Ombudsman, *Stars and Stripes*