

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 15, 2017

The Honorable James Mattis
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1300

Dear Secretary Mattis:

We write today to request information on the recent reorganization of the National Security Council (NSC) to include President Trump's chief political strategist Steve Bannon as a regular attendee of NSC Principals Committee. We would like understand whether the Department of Defense was consulted prior to these changes and your views on whether partisan political considerations should be a part of the national security decision-making process.

As you are aware, on January 28, 2017, President Trump issued a Presidential Memorandum titled Organization of the National Security Council and the Homeland Security Council.^[1] The memorandum states that the Principals Committee "shall continue to serve as the Cabinet-level senior interagency forum for considering policy issues that affect the national security interests of the United States."^[2] However, the Presidential Memorandum also downgraded the role of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Director of National Intelligence (DNI) on the NSC Principals Committee while placing Mr. Bannon as a regular attendee of these meetings.

These actions have drawn bipartisan condemnation and represent a departure from the commitment of past administrations to keep the NSC and national security policy free from political influence. Leon E. Panetta, a former chief of staff to President Clinton, condemned the addition of Mr. Bannon to the Principals Committee, saying "The last place you want to put somebody who worries about politics is in a room where they're talking about national security." Josh Bolten, former chief of staff for President George W. Bush, echoed these concerns, stating that decisions made by the NSC, "involve life and death for the people in uniform" and should "not be tainted by any political decisions."^[3] Even former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, who served on the NSC under President Bush and Obama, recently stated that "partisan politics has no place at that table. And neither does Mr. Bannon."^[4]

In addition to his role as a political advisor, concerns regarding Mr. Bannon's participation in the NSC Principals Committee have stemmed from his expression of extreme,

^[1] *Organization of the National Security Council and the Homeland Security Council*, Presidential Memorandum (Jan 28, 2017).

^[2] *Id.*

^[3] *Bannon Is Given Security Role Usually Held for Generals*, New York Times (Jan. 29, 2017).

^[4] *I Was on the National Security Council. Bannon Doesn't Belong There*, New York Times (Feb. 6, 2017).

even apocalyptic, views regarding national security and foreign policy. Mr. Bannon has reportedly described himself as a “Leninist” who wants to “destroy the state” and “bring everything crashing down.”^[5] He has predicted “the establishment of an Islamic Republic in the United States” and stated that “the road to this unique hell on earth is paved with the best intentions from our major institutions.”^[6] When asked recently about Mr. Bannon’s statements at a congressional hearing, the Director of the National Background Investigations Bureau testified that such statements would be cause for concern during the background check process for a security clearance.^[7]

As the Secretary of Defense you remain a regular attendee of the Principals Committee and one of the highest ranking national security officials in the country. At your confirmation hearing you testified that “the defense of our country is neither partisan, nor personal” and that you would advocate for your views in the new administration forcefully and frankly in “every circumstance.”^[8] President Trump has also shown a willingness to defer to you on controversial issues of national security, including the use of waterboarding as an interrogation technique.^[9]

We are concerned that the unprecedented elevation of a political operative to the senior leadership of the NSC may compromise the national security decision making process and put American lives at risk at home and abroad. We are also concerned that President Trump reportedly may not have been briefed on this memorandum or fully understood the changes it made to the NSC. To better understand your position on the recent reorganization of the National Security Council (NSC), we respectfully ask for responses to the following questions:

1. Did the White House seek input from the Department of Defense regarding recent reorganization of the NSC before the issuance of the Presidential Memorandum on January 28th? If so, how much time was the Department of Defense given to review and respond to the memo?
2. Do you believe the recent reorganization of the NSC and the inclusion of Mr. Bannon at Principals Committees meetings will improve national security policy development and decision-making? If so, how?
3. Are partisan political concerns considered by uniformed military officers or at the Department of Defense when determining what constitutes a threat to national security and when to authorize the use of force?

^[5] Steve Bannon, *Trump’s Top Guy, Told Me He Was ‘A Leninist’ Who Wants To ‘Destroy the State’*, The Daily Beast (Aug. 22, 2016).

^[6] Steve Bannon’s *Islamophobic Film Script Just One Example of Anti-Muslim Views*, The Guardian (Feb. 3, 2017)


^[7] House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, *Hearing on Improving Security and Efficiency at OPM and the National Background Investigation Bureau*, 115th Congress (Feb. 2, 2017)

^[8] Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Hearing on the Expected Nomination of Mr. James N. Mattis to be Secretary of Defense*, 115th Congress (Jan. 12, 2017)

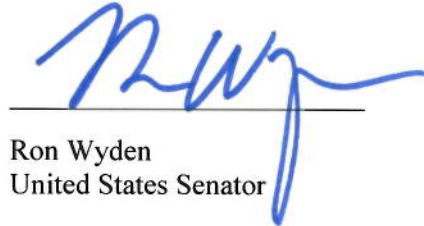
^[9] *Trump Says He’ll Defer to Mattis and Pompeo on Waterboarding*, Politico, (Jan. 25, 2017)

Please submit your responses in writing by March 1, 2017. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Tony Samp at 202-224-5521. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



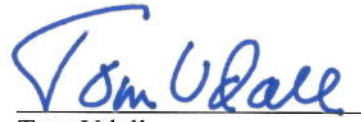
Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



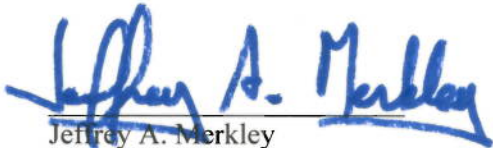
Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



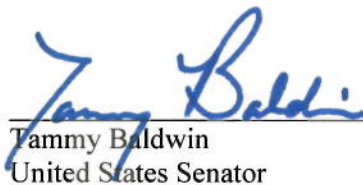
Tom Udall
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
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Al Franken
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



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