

Letter from Seven Former United States Secretaries of Defense

May 4, 2023

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader Schumer and Leader McConnell,

As former Secretaries of Defense, we strongly urge the Senate to act expeditiously on the nearly 200 nominees for general and flag officer who are being blocked from Senate confirmation.

The blanket hold on the promotion or reassignment of these senior uniformed leaders is harming military readiness and risks damaging U.S. national security. Because the Senate is required to confirm every general and flag officer for promotion or for reassignment, this practice has traditionally been a *pro-forma* exercise, except where there have been specific concerns about individual nominees, which were then handled separately.

The current hold that has been in place now for several weeks is preventing key leaders from assuming important, senior command and staff positions around the world. Some are unable to take important command positions, such as leading the 5th Fleet in Bahrain and the 7th Fleet in the Pacific, which are critical to checking Iranian and Chinese aggression, respectively. Others include the next military representative to NATO, a post essential to coordinating allied efforts in support of Ukraine, as well as the future Director of Intelligence at U.S. Cyber Command. Leaving these and many other senior positions in doubt at a time of enormous geopolitical uncertainty sends the wrong message to our adversaries and could weaken our deterrence.

Moreover, if this blanket hold is not lifted, nearly 80 three- and four-star commanders who are ending their terms in the coming months will not be able to be replaced. Worse, this will impact certain members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, including the Chairman of the JCS.

There are also real-world impacts on the families of these senior officers. Most cannot move and resettle their families; their children cannot enroll at their next schools on time; and spouses cannot start new jobs at the next duty station. We can think of few things as irresponsible and uncaring as harming the families of those who serve our nation in uniform.

We appreciate that Senators can have sincere and legitimate concerns about a Pentagon policy, including as it may relate to broader domestic or social issues. These lawmakers also deserve timely and thorough responses to their questions. However, we believe placing a hold on all uniformed nominees risks turning military officers into political pawns, holding them responsible for a policy decision made by their civilian leaders.

Rather, senators should leverage the numerous means available to them to challenge and change DOD policy, such as introducing legislation, conducting oversight hearings, or amending the annual National Defense Authorization Act.

We, therefore, strongly urge the Senate to ensure the continued readiness of the U.S. armed forces by lifting the blanket hold and promptly voting to confirm these uniformed nominees.

Sincerely,

The Honorable William J. Perry
Former U.S. Secretary of Defense

The Honorable William S. Cohen
Former U.S. Secretary of Defense

The Honorable Robert M. Gates
Former U.S. Secretary of Defense

The Honorable Leon E. Panetta
Former U.S. Secretary of Defense

The Honorable Chuck Hagel
Former U.S. Secretary of Defense

The Honorable James N. Mattis
Former U.S. Secretary of Defense

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Former U.S. Secretary of Defense