

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 20, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
1300 Defense Pentagon, Room 3E970
Washington, DC 20301-1300

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

We write to express our continued concern about the degradation of the longstanding editorial independence of *Stars and Stripes*. Most recently, our offices have been informed that the Department of Defense assigned an active-duty Public Affairs officer to serve as a “deputy” to *Stars and Stripes* Publisher Max Lederer, reportedly without consultation with Mr. Lederer. On August 18, Mr. Lederer announced that he will retire after more than three decades at *Stars and Stripes*, including nearly two decades as Publisher, citing fundamental differences between his understanding of the value and mission of *Stars and Stripes* and the Department’s plans for the organization.

The placement of an active-duty Public Affairs officer in the senior leadership of an organization whose credibility depends on its independence from the military chain of command raises serious questions. Mr. Lederer’s abrupt departure only heightens those concerns, particularly as the Department determines who will assume leadership of *Stars and Stripes*. This is particularly troubling in light of the Department’s recent actions affecting *Stars and Stripes*, including the April firing of independent Ombudsman Jacqueline Smith after she publicly defended the newspaper’s editorial independence and communicated concerns to Congress.

We therefore request that you provide, no later than August 28, a detailed explanation of this assignment, including who directed it; the officer’s duties, authorities, and reporting chain; whether the officer will have any role in editorial, personnel, budgetary, or management decisions; whether the officer will serve as acting or permanent Publisher following Mr. Lederer’s departure; and what process and qualifications the Department will use to select Mr. Lederer’s successor. . Please also explain what safeguards the Department has put in place to ensure that this officer, or any other Department official, cannot direct, influence, review, or interfere with *Stars and Stripes*’ editorial decisions or coverage.

For generations, American servicemembers, particularly those stationed overseas and in combat zones, have relied on *Stars and Stripes* for credible and independent news. That trust depends on preserving a clear separation between independent journalism and the Department’s public affairs apparatus. At this critical moment of leadership transition, that independence must not be compromised. We urge you to preserve that independence and provide prompt answers regarding these latest developments.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator