

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074
MINORITY (202) 225-5051

<http://oversight.house.gov>

March 15, 2018

The Honorable James N. Mattis
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Secretary Mattis:

We are writing to express our grave concerns about the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, as well as the alarming escalation of efforts by the Department of Defense (DOD) to retroactively classify information relating to the war in Afghanistan. The Trump Administration's increased secrecy about the 16-year war in Afghanistan—America's longest war that has cost 2,400 lives and nearly a trillion dollars—comes as President Trump's new strategy for Afghanistan appears to be foundering badly.

Deteriorating Situation in Afghanistan

On August 21, 2017, President Trump announced his new strategy for Afghanistan in a speech on national television.¹ In January, President Trump stated, "What nobody else has been able to finish, we're going to be able to do it."² These actions followed multiple statements during the campaign in which the President touted his broad military acumen:

There's nobody bigger or better at the military than I am. ... I know more about offense and defense than they will ever understand, believe me. Believe me. Than they will ever understand. Than they will ever understand. ... I know more about ISIS than the generals do.³

¹ *Trump Outlines New Afghanistan War Strategy with Few Details*, New York Times (Aug. 21, 2017) (online at www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/afghanistan-troops-trump.html).

² *Attacks Reveal What U.S. Won't: Victory Remains Elusive in Afghanistan*, New York Times (Jan. 29, 2018) (online at www.nytimes.com/2018/01/29/us/politics/trump-afghanistan-war-elusive-victory.html).

³ *It Appears Trump Doesn't Know More Than the Generals After All*, Washington Post (June 28, 2017) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/it-appears-trump-doesnt-know-more-than-the-generals-after-all/2017/06/28/76c2cfca-5a8e-11e7-aa69-3964a7d55207_story.html?utm_term=.babd8d9ed21f).

On October 3, 2017, Senator John McCain, the Chairman of the Committee on Armed Services, expressed great frustration with the lack of specific details in President Trump's strategy for Afghanistan during a hearing before the Committee. He stated:

At the same time, in the six weeks since the President made his announcement, this committee, and the Congress more broadly, still does not know many of the crucial details of this strategy. This is totally unacceptable. I repeat, this is totally unacceptable.

...

Many members of this committee have been actively involved in the war in Afghanistan since it started. A few have even served in the war on Active Duty. We expect—indeed, we require—a regular flow of detailed information about this war. ...

We want to be your partners, but this committee will not be a rubber stamp for any policy or President. We must be well-informed. We must be convinced of the merits of the administration's actions. And, unfortunately, we still have far more questions than answers about this new strategy.⁴

Unfortunately, President Trump's new strategy for Afghanistan does not appear to be improving conditions on the ground. To the contrary, in January, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani warned about the increasingly dire conditions across the country and in the capital, Kabul, stating:

21 international terrorist groups are operating in this country. Dozens of suicide bombers are being sent. There are factories ... producing suicide bombers. We are under siege. And conditions of siege require protective responses.⁵

President Ghani also warned, "We will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. support, and U.S. capabilities."⁶

According to a report from BBC in January, "About 15 million people—half the population—are living in areas that are either controlled by the Taliban or where the Taliban are openly present and regularly mount attacks," and Taliban fighters "are now openly active in 70% of Afghanistan."⁷ Just over two weeks in January, three strikes in Kabul killed 128 people.⁸

⁴ Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Hearing on Political and Security Situation in Afghanistan* (Oct. 3, 2017) (online at www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-82_10-03-17.pdf).

⁵ *16 Years Later, Afghan Capital Under Siege*, CBS News (Jan. 11, 2018) (online at www.cbsnews.com/news/16-years-later-afghan-capital-under-siege/).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Taliban Threaten 70% of Afghanistan, BBC Finds*, BBC News (Jan. 31, 2018) (online at www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42863116).

⁸ *Attacks Reveal What U.S. Won't: Victory Remains Elusive in Afghanistan*, New York Times (Jan. 29, 2018) (online at www.nytimes.com/2018/01/29/us/politics/trump-afghanistan-war-elusive-victory.html).

Retroactive Classification of Information About Afghanistan

Now, more than six months after President Trump announced his new strategy in Afghanistan, we are gravely concerned that the Administration is retroactively classifying information that used to be available to the American people. We believe it is completely inappropriate to abuse our nation's classification system to conceal the policy failures of the Trump Administration.

On November 17, 2017, we wrote to President Trump to express our concern that the Administration had begun classifying public reporting of essential information about our nation's military efforts in Afghanistan.⁹

At the time, the Department of Defense (DOD) began classifying information related to the Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) that had been unclassified for years and published publicly in quarterly reports issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). These included important measures of ANDSF performance, including casualties, attrition, capability assessments, and operational readiness of equipment.¹⁰

Special Inspector General John Sopko bluntly questioned the propriety of the Trump Administration's efforts to begin classifying this information, stating:

The government usually doesn't classify good news. ... If they start classifying this stuff now, what are they going to do next month? It's a slippery slope.¹¹

We never received any response to our letter from the White House. Instead of reversing this retroactive classification policy, the Trump Administration has now doubled-down to classify even more information about the war in Afghanistan.

In January, SIGAR reported to Congress that DOD classified additional categories of information about the numbers of Afghan security forces—information the previous Administration routinely released to the public—and prevented SIGAR from reporting those

⁹ Letter from Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings, House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and Ranking Member Stephen F. Lynch, Subcommittee on National Security, House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to President Donald J. Trump, The White House (Nov. 17, 2017) (online at <https://democrats-oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2017-11-17.EEC%20%26%20Lynch%20to%20POTUS.pdf>).

¹⁰ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Oct. 30, 2017) (online at www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-10-30qr.pdf).

¹¹ *Afghan War Data, Once Public, Is Censored in U.S. Military Report*, New York Times (Oct. 30, 2017) (online at www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/world/asia/afghanistan-war-redacted-report.html?_r=0).

numbers publicly.¹² The newly classified data included the actual and authorized strength figures for the Afghan security forces and the percentage of trained and untrained personnel.¹³

Request for Information

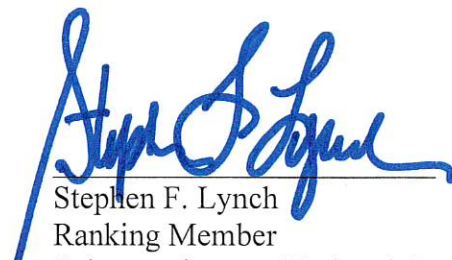
For all of these reasons, we request that you provide the following information and documents by March 28, 2018:

1. all documents referring or related to DOD's decision to classify information in SIGAR's October 30, 2017, report that was not classified previously, including, but not limited to, information on ANDSF and Afghan Local Police casualties, Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police attrition data, and the names and positions of the classifying authorities;
2. all documents referring or related to DOD's decision to classify information in SIGAR's January 30, 2018, report that was not classified in the October 30, 2017, report, and the names and positions of the classifying authorities;
3. all documents from October 30, 2017, to February 26, 2018, relating to DOD's decision to classify specific security goals for Afghanistan in President Trump's new Afghanistan strategy, and the names and positions of the classifying authorities; and
4. all documents from October 30, 2017, to February 26, 2018, relating to DOD's decision to classify the number of U.S. and Coalition air strikes in Afghanistan in 2017, and the names and positions of the classifying authorities.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact Nimit Dhir of the Committee staff at (202) 225-5051. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,


Elijah F. Cummings
Ranking Member


Stephen F. Lynch
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Security

¹² Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Jan. 30, 2018) (online at www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-01-30qr.pdf).

¹³ In January, DOD also attempted to restrict unclassified data on the number of districts controlled or influenced by the Afghan government or by the insurgents, but DOD reversed at least this decision and informed SIGAR on February 15, 2018.

The Honorable James N. Mattis, Secretary of Defense
Page 5

cc: The Honorable Trey Gowdy, Chairman
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

The Honorable Ron DeSantis, Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform