

April 19, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, which advocate for robust government accountability, oversight, and transparency from across the ideological spectrum, we write to request your support in significantly curtailing the size and scope of Unfunded Requirements Lists (UFRs) the service branches and other components of the Department of Defense (DoD) furnish to Congress each year. These lists, though currently required by statute, negatively impact prioritization efforts throughout the military and make the Congressional budget process unnecessarily complex and unwieldy. While we are working with Congress to repeal the UFR requirements currently under law, we ask you to follow the example of former Secretary Robert Gates in asking the service branches to cut down on these requests.

As you are well aware, Congress currently requires the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Space Force, National Guard, Missile Defense Agency, and the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment to submit UFRs to Congress each and every year.¹ Though the statutory requirements for UFRs are relatively new, Congress has requested -- and the service branches have submitted -- UFRs on and off since the 1990s.

Former Secretary Robert Gates correctly saw these lists as harmful to Department-wide planning and prioritization, not to mention a potential boondoggle for America's taxpayers. As Mark Thompson, formerly of TIME Magazine and now at the Project on Government Oversight (POGO), wrote in July 2009:

“This year, however, Defense Secretary Robert Gates is determined to crack down on what are known inside the Pentagon as ‘unfunded priority lists’ and on Capitol Hill — to make them more palatable to skeptical lawmakers — as unfunded ‘requirements’ or ‘mandates.’ Taxpayers who follow such arcane budget shenanigans call them ‘wish lists,’ and for good reason — they’re basically lists of goodies that the Pentagon’s civilian leaders felt weren’t needed. Not only are they a waste of tens of billions of dollars, but funding such weapons outside normal channels leads to an unbalanced military force, jeopardizing the never-ending quest for the military services to fight wars jointly instead of engaging in internal budgetary guerrilla warfare with one another. And in going after them so directly, Gates is continuing his campaign to bring fundamental change to the Pentagon that will last beyond his tenure.”²

Thanks to Secretary Gates’ leadership, UFRs were cut down in size by about 90 percent from one year to the next, demonstrating that fundamental reform to this inefficient and unwieldy practice is possible -- while still complying with current law.

We urge you to take up the mantle from Secretary Gates by asking the service branches, the Missile Defense Agency, and the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment to significantly cut the size and scope of their UFRs for FY 2022 (and beyond, so long as UFR requirements exist under law). Should you choose to lead here you will no doubt encounter some resistance from Congress, but you can also count on strong support from the undersigned organizations, who work with members of Congress across the ideological spectrum on budget, spending, and Defense Department matters on a daily basis. We hope that under your leadership the Department focuses on being responsible stewards of the significant funds they already receive, rather than jockeying for more taxpayer dollars and undermining the budget process.

Should you or your staff have any questions we are at your service, and thanks in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,



National Taxpayers
Union



Project on
Government
Oversight (POGO)



American Friends
Service Committee



CODEPINK



Common Defense



Council for a
Livable World



FreedomWorks

¹ See: 10 U.S.C. §222a, 10 U.S.C. §222b, 10 U.S.C. §2504a, 14 U.S.C. §5108, and 50 U.S.C. §2756,

² Thompson, Mark. “Gates Takes Aim at the Military’s Spending Wish Lists.” TIME Magazine, July 17, 2009. Retrieved from: <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1911152,00.html> (Accessed April 6, 2021.)



National Priorities
Project at the
Institute for Policy
Studies



Public Citizen



R Street Institute



Taxpayers for
Common Sense



Taxpayers
Protection Alliance



The United
Methodist Church
- General Board
of Church and
Society



Win Without War



Women's
Action for New
Directions
(WAND)