



SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

January 18, 2024

Dear Senator Wicker:

Thank you for your letter of January 10, 2024, about my hospitalization at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (“Walter Reed”). I am grateful for your well-wishes for a speedy recovery. Members of Congress, the press, and the public have raised legitimate questions about disclosures and notifications related to my recent hospitalization. The Department of Defense vows to be transparent with you and the American people, and I am committed to ensuring we maintain trust in the Department.

I want to be clear that at no time during my stay at Walter Reed were there any gaps in authorities or risk to command-and-control. Either I, or the Deputy Secretary of Defense, have always been fully prepared to support the President as Commander-in-Chief throughout the duration of my care at Walter Reed. The Deputy Secretary always has access to the classified and unclassified communications systems necessary to carry out her duties and to act for, and exercise the powers of, the Secretary of Defense, as required.

As you are aware, on January 8, 2024, the Department of Defense Performance Improvement Officer and Director of Administration and Management (PIO/DA&M) was directed to conduct a review to be completed within 30 days to identify the relevant facts and circumstances during the period of concern, evaluate our processes and procedures, and ultimately recommend appropriate improvements to processes going forward.¹ The Department’s Inspector General has also announced that his office will be conducting its own review. I look forward to receiving the recommendations put forward by the Inspector General and the PIO/DA&M to improve the Department’s policies and procedures. I remain committed to answering your questions, even as we work to protect the integrity of these ongoing reviews.

Following my diagnosis with prostate cancer, I underwent a prostatectomy at Walter Reed on December 22. I was placed under general anesthesia for the procedure and the Deputy Secretary assumed the functions and duties of my office and was serving as the Acting Secretary of Defense pursuant to 10 U.S.C. § 132(b), referred to internally as a “transfer of authority” (TOA), for a temporary period. On December 23, I was discharged from the hospital and resumed my full functions and duties as Secretary of Defense that same day.

¹ On January 11, 2024, a corrected copy of this memorandum was promulgated to reference the correct operative Executive Order.

On Monday, January 1, 2024, as an unexpected complication of the December 22 procedure, I began experiencing nausea and severe pain in my abdomen, hip, and leg, and I decided to return to Walter Reed via ambulance, given the amount of pain that I was experiencing. The following day, I was admitted to the intensive care unit for closer monitoring, and the Deputy Secretary again assumed the functions and duties of my office. The Deputy Secretary's staff and my staff, as well as the Joint Staff, were notified that the transfer had occurred through regular email notification procedures. As previously noted, the Deputy Secretary, who was in Puerto Rico at the time, always has access to the classified and unclassified communications systems necessary to carry out her duties and to act for, and exercise the powers of, the Secretary of Defense, as required.

On January 5, I resumed my functions and duties as the Secretary of Defense. During the period of my stay at Walter Reed beginning on January 1, I did not lose consciousness, nor did I undergo general anesthesia. I received excellent care from the doctors and medical professionals at Walter Reed, and I expect to make a complete recovery. While at Walter Reed, I had full access to required secure communications capabilities and continued to monitor the Department's day-to-day operations worldwide.

Again, at no time during either of my hospital stays was there ever a lapse in the command-and-control of the United States Armed Forces. The Deputy Secretary keeps a complete suite of communications and capable staff with her at all times, regardless of geographic location. While I was in the intensive care unit, the Deputy Secretary made some routine operational and management decisions for the Department and was fully authorized and ready to support the President on other matters, should the need have arisen.

With respect to the January 4, 2024, strike in Iraq against a leader of the Iran-backed Harakat al-Nujaba terrorist group, the President had previously approved the strike before the Deputy Secretary assumed the functions and duties of my office on January 2. The Department can provide additional information about military actions and operations conducted during my hospitalization in a classified setting.

As I have stated previously, I take full responsibility for my personal decisions related to the disclosure of my cancer diagnosis. Health matters, particularly potentially serious illnesses such as cancer, are deeply personal, but I recognize that the office I hold requires a greater level of transparency.

I also share your concerns that the Department must take steps to improve policies and procedures to ensure timely notification of the President, senior officials within the Department of Defense, and other relevant parties, as appropriate, when the Deputy Secretary of Defense, or the designated official as determined by the order of succession or the President, is assuming the functions and duties of the Secretary of Defense. I have always said that the Department of Defense is a learning organization, and I am committed to transparency and improving processes moving forward. I welcome the PIO/DA&M's 30-day review and the review by the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General in order to improve the Department's policies and procedures.

The information provided in this letter represents a good-faith effort to respond to your questions as expeditiously and accurately as possible, recognizing that the 30-day review described above is ongoing. The Department has already begun to collect additional information in connection with your requests, and we look forward to working with the Committee to accommodate your legislative needs and oversight interests while protecting Executive Branch confidentiality interests.

I remain focused on defending the nation and taking care of our Service members and their families. This requires that I preserve the trust and confidence of the Congress and the American people, and you have my assurance that I will redouble my efforts to do so going forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. J. V. Bush". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a prominent "R" and "B".

cc:
The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman