

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 7, 2010

The Honorable Robert Gates
Secretary of Defense
Office of the Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We understand that the White House has undertaken a review of the current policy of not sending Presidential letters of condolence to the families of service members who have committed suicide. Along with thirty-nine of our colleagues from both sides of the aisle, we recently introduced legislation (copy enclosed) expressing the support of the House of Representatives for overturning this outdated policy. As this legislation has a direct relation to our military personnel and their families, we would welcome the opinion of the Department of Defense regarding both the legislation and the underlying policy.

We have undertaken to encourage the President to overturn this policy because we believe it undermines our military's efforts to deal with the growing epidemic of soldier suicide. As you well know, all branches of the military are currently engaged in a broad push to address the issue of soldier suicide by removing the stigma that surrounds mental illness and prevents many troops from seeking help for fear of harming their careers or looking weak to their colleagues. We firmly believe that a letter of condolence to the family of a soldier who died by suicide from the Commander-in-Chief will send a strong signal that America will not tolerate a culture in our Armed Forces that perpetuates the stigma of mental illness.

Second, we believe that treating the families of soldiers who die by suicide differently than the families of soldiers who die by other means, diminishes the sacrifices those families have endured on our country's behalf, while their son or daughter, husband or wife, served in our Armed Forces. Treating the families differently also flies in the face of the fact that soldiers on active duty who die by suicide currently receive full military burial, complete with a flag-draped coffin and a 21-gun salute; and so far as we can determine, military morale and discipline have not suffered because soldiers who die by suicide receive full military burial like the rest of their peers who die in service to their country.

Finally, we believe that a Presidential letter of condolence is as much about respect for the family – an acknowledgement by the Nation of their personal loss – as it is about the soldier. Whether the soldier died in combat, in a car accident, or because of suicide does not and should not tarnish what that soldier accomplished in life; or lessen our country's expression of appreciation for the hardships the family of that soldier endured on behalf of all of us so that we might enjoy the freedoms that we have today. But, the lack of acknowledgment and condolence from the President of those sacrifices only leaves these families with an emotional vacuum and a feeling that somehow their service to America has been less than others.

In our opinion, and the opinion of our colleagues who have co-sponsored our resolution, the policy of not sending Presidential letters of condolence to the families of service members who have died by suicide is an anachronism that serves no concrete purpose. We hope the Department of Defense agrees, and we respectfully ask you to provide us your opinion on the legislation and the wisdom of overturning this policy.

We appreciate your personal time and attention to this critically important matter, and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,



Dan Burton
Member of Congress



Grace Napolitano
Member of Congress

Enclosure

111TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

H. RES. 1229

Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the President should overturn the policy that prohibits sending a presidential letter of condolence to the family of a member of the Armed Forces who has died by suicide.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MARCH 25, 2010

Mr. BURTON of Indiana (for himself, Mrs. NAPOLITANO, Mr. KENNEDY, Ms. BERKLEY, Mr. HINCHEY, Ms. RICHARDSON, Mr. YOUNG of Alaska, Mr. INGLIS, Mr. ROTHMAN of New Jersey, Mr. CARSON of Indiana, Ms. KILROY, Mr. LOEBSACK, Mr. TONKO, Mr. WOLF, Mr. PENCE, Ms. MOORE of Wisconsin, Mr. SMITH of New Jersey, Mr. GRIJALVA, Mr. WAXMAN, Mr. FRANK of Massachusetts, Mr. OLVER, Mr. HASTINGS of Florida, Ms. SHEA-PORTER, Mr. RUSH, Mr. MICHAUD, Mr. MCCAUL, Mr. GRIFFITH, Ms. JACKSON LEE of Texas, Mr. KAGEN, Mr. THOMPSON of Pennsylvania, Ms. BORDALLO, Mrs. SCHMIDT, Mr. LUJÁN, Mr. GONZALEZ, Mr. HINOJOSA, Mr. ORTIZ, Mr. PASTOR of Arizona, Mr. PIERLUISI, Ms. ROYBAL-ALLARD, Mr. SERRANO, Mr. LANGEVIN, and Mr. GUTIERREZ) submitted the following resolution; which was referred to the Committee on Armed Services

RESOLUTION

Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the President should overturn the policy that prohibits sending a presidential letter of condolence to the family of a member of the Armed Forces who has died by suicide.

Whereas suicide is a growing problem in the Armed Forces that cannot be ignored;

Whereas a record number of military suicides was reported in 2008, with 128 active-duty Army and 48 Marine deaths reported;

Whereas the number of military suicides during 2009 is expected to equal or exceed the 2008 total;

Whereas long-standing policy prevents President Obama from sending a condolence letter to the family of a member of the Armed Forces who has died by suicide;

Whereas members of the Armed Forces sacrifice their physical, mental, and emotional well-being for the freedoms Americans hold dear;

Whereas the military family also bears the cost of defending the United States, with military spouses and children sacrificing much and standing ready to provide unending support to their spouse or parent who is a member of the Armed Forces;

Whereas the loss of a member of the Armed Forces to suicide directly and tragically affects military spouses and children, as well as the United States;

Whereas much more needs to be done to protect and address the mental health needs of members of the Armed Forces, just as they serve to protect and defend the freedoms of the United States;

Whereas a presidential letter of condolence is not only about the deceased because it also serves as a sign of respect for the grieving family and an acknowledgment of the family for their personal loss; and

Whereas a lack of acknowledgment and condolence from the President only leaves these families with an emotional vacuum and a feeling that somehow their sacrifices have been less than others: Now, therefore, be it

1 *Resolved*, That it is the sense of the House of Rep-
2 representatives that—

3 (1) the current policy that prohibits sending a
4 presidential letter of condolence to the family of a
5 member of the Armed Forces who has died by sui-
6 cide only serves to perpetuate the stigma of mental
7 illness that pervades the Armed Forces; and

8 (2) the President, as Commander-in-Chief,
9 should overturn the policy and treat all military fam-
10 ilies equally.

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