

RON JOHNSON, WISCONSIN, CHAIRMAN

JOHN McCAIN, ARIZONA
ROB PORTMAN, OHIO
RAND PAUL, KENTUCKY
JAMES LANKFORD, OKLAHOMA
MICHAEL B. ENZI, WYOMING
KELLY AYOTTE, NEW HAMPSHIRE
JONI ERNST, IOWA
BEN SASSE, NEBRASKA

THOMAS R. CARPER, DELAWARE
CLAIRE McCASKILL, MISSOURI
JON TESTER, MONTANA
TAMMY BALDWIN, WISCONSIN
HEIDI HEITKAMP, NORTH DAKOTA
CORY A. BOOKER, NEW JERSEY
GARY C. PETERS, MICHIGAN

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

CHRISTOPHER R. HIXON, STAFF DIRECTOR
GABRIELLE A. BATKIN, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

September 7, 2016

The Honorable Deborah Lee James
Secretary of the Air Force
U.S. Department of Defense
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

Dear Madam Secretary:

I am writing regarding the increased use of private contractors to meet the U.S. Air Force's growing demand for operators of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). On September 5, 2016, *The New York Times* reported that the Department has four UAVs that are flown by contractors as part of the campaign against the Islamic State, with plans to add six more over the next two years.¹ As you are aware, the demand for UAV resources is at an all-time high due to unanticipated mission requirements in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan, as well as a limited supply of trained UAV operators.²

I have taken a great interest in the military's use of contractors during my time in the Senate. As the proponent of wartime contracting reform legislation in the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act, I am well aware of how hard it has been for the military to improve accountability over its contractors, and I want to ensure that the lessons we have learned are applied as the battlefield changes.

I have also taken a great interest in the increased use of UAVs as assets in the fight against the Islamic State, as well as the heavy demand that use places on the Air Force's limited number of UAV operators. As I noted in a letter to Air Force Chief of Staff General Mark A. Walsh last year, and as I heard in my visit to the outstanding men and women of the 20th Attack Squadron at Whiteman Air Force Base just last month, UAV operators report high levels of stress and fatigue, and suffer the same rate of post-traumatic stress disorder as pilots flying manned aircraft.³ I commend the Air Force's efforts to boost the retention bonuses UAV operators receive, as well as the steps that have been taken to increase the number of qualified Air Force pilots. However, I am also concerned that the use of contractors to operate UAVs may

¹ *Air Force, Running Low on Drone Pilots, Turns to Contractors in Terror Fight*, The New York Times (September 5, 2016).

² *Id.*

³ Letter from Sen. Claire McCaskill to Gen. Mark A. Welsh, III (June 18, 2015).

be a short-term fix with long-term consequences. As UAV contractors are typically paid far higher than service members, their use may actually encourage trained Air Force UAV operators to seek more lucrative opportunities in the private sector, aggravating and even prolonging the current shortage.

To assist me with my ongoing oversight, I request that you provide the following information:

- 1) The names of the contractors who operate UAVs for the Air Force;
- 2) For each contractor listed above,
 - a. The number of UAVs that each contractor operates;
 - b. The military facility (or facilities) at which the contractor provides the service; and
 - c. The contract number, the date of the contract award, the term of the contract, value of the contract, and name of the contracting officer;
- 3) The Air Force program office(s) responsible for overseeing these contractors;
- 4) A description of how contractors are selected, trained and overseen, including the use of government flight representatives and ground representatives;
- 5) How data on contractor personnel that operate UAVs is collected as required under Section 844 of the 2013 NDAA;
- 6) A description of any legal limitations that restrict contractor operation of UAVs (e.g. deploying weapons), and how the Air Force addresses those limitations and meets mission requirements;
- 7) The number of UAVs operated by the Air Force and the number operated by contractors, both currently and projected each year for the next three years;
- 8) The number of UAV operators currently needed by the Air Force, the number of UAV operators provided by Air Force personnel, and the number of UAV operators provided by contractors, both currently and projected each year for the next three years;
- 9) The number of UAV flights conducted by the Air Force for the Central Intelligence Agency, and the number of those flights operated by contractors;
- 10) A comparison of the cost to the Air Force of flying UAVs operated by contractors as opposed to flying UAVs operated by Air Force personnel;
- 11) The typical rank and compensation of Air Force personnel operators of UAVs;

The Honorable Deborah Lee James
September 7, 2016
Page 3

- 12) An analysis of what impact the use of contractors will have on UAV operations, including retention and attrition of UAV operators;
- 13) Any audits, reviews, or assessments of UAV contractors, including reports submitted to the Contractor Performance Assessment Reporting System.

If any of the above information is classified, I ask that you provide a justification for the classification. I also request that you provide a briefing to the Subcommittee on the use of contractors operating UAVs. I request that you provide this information and briefing as soon as possible, but by **no later than Wednesday, September 28.**

I appreciate your assistance. Please contact Jackson Eaton with the Subcommittee at (202) 224-9872 with any questions. Please send any official correspondence relating to this request to Kelsey_Stroud@hsgac.senate.gov.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
Ranking Member
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations

cc: Rob Portman
Chairman
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations