

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 18, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

The Honorable Hung Cao
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of the Navy
1000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20350

Dear Secretary Hegseth and Acting Secretary Cao:

We write in response to growing public alarm related to the conditions of recent and ongoing military deployments. Combat deployments are always challenging in any number of ways – and extended deployments that keep servicemembers separated from loved ones and raise long term readiness concerns, compound these challenges. We are particularly frustrated that the ongoing war of choice with Iran has resulted in these notably long and challenging deployments, and that our nation’s servicemembers and their families back home are being placed under increasing strain in support of an ill-defined and creeping mission.

In recent days the public has seen alarming reports about conditions on the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. Following those reports it was announced that the USS *Lincoln* would be returning home after more than 265 days deployed. This was a deployment approaching nine months – during which it set the record for consecutive days at sea. We are particularly concerned by public reports detailing multiple instances of the health and well-being of servicemembers being stretched to the max.

Unfortunately, even in the face of these hard truths, this administration has continued to proceed in a callous and flippant manner. On Friday, when asked about the USS *Lincoln*’s deployment, President Trump characterized it as “not nearly long enough.”¹ He also flatly disagreed with reports that family members were concerned about conditions on the ship.

The deployment of the USS *Lincoln* came alongside that of the USS *George HW Bush*, which earlier this year deployed from Norfolk, VA and remains engaged in the Middle East. It also

¹ “Trump says USS Lincoln’s deployment was ‘not nearly long enough’”. CNN. Kevin Liptak. Updated 14 August 2026. <https://www.cnn.com/2026/08/14/politics/trump-uss-abraham-lincoln-deployment>

follows that of the USS *Gerald R. Ford*, which in May returned to Norfolk after an 11-month deployment that was extended to cover the Caribbean and coast of Venezuela, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean.

Last month, we had the privilege of sitting down with some of the crew and leadership from the USS *Ford*, and we spent several hours with the ship during its ongoing maintenance period in Hampton Roads. In those conversations we heard about the burden and the challenges of the recent deployment – the longest since the Vietnam War – which included a dramatic fire and a series of plumbing issues aboard the ship. During many of the conversations we had with the crew, they emphasized that one of their frequent worries during the extended deployment was the well-being of their families back home. We heard many stories reflecting the weight that this worry places on our sailors as they perform their duties.

As you both know, military service is shouldered by the entire family, with partners and spouses, kids, parents, and other family members working to balance the challenges that exist back home while a loved one is deployed. Over the years, Congress has worked hard with successive administrations to improve upon the network of support available to these families, while local communities and support organizations across the country have also stepped in to fill gaps as best they can.

It is clear that more must be done to support these families, and we worry about the strain that these extended deployments will continue to have on servicemembers in combat and their families back home. The USS *Lincoln* is now reportedly being replaced by the USS *George Washington*,² with no strategic end to this war in sight. Secretary Hegseth, your recent comments suggested that the U.S. naval blockade against Iran can continue “indefinitely” and that “the United States Navy can maintain a blockade like that because we’ll rotate ships in and out, as we have, and we’ll continue to.”³

Against the backdrop of multiple long and extended deployments for other ships in the region, we ask that you please provide answers to the following questions, related to these deployment impacts on military families:

1. Secretary Cao, on August 6 you met with family members of sailors deployed on the USS *Lincoln*.⁴ What challenges did you hear expressed by those family members

² “USS Abraham Lincoln to be replaced amid poor conditions for troops deployed to Middle East”. *NBC News*. Gordon Lubold, Courtney Kube, and Mosheh Gains. Updated 13 August 2026. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/uss-abraham-lincoln-replaced-poor-troop-conditions-rca592141>

³ “US can keep naval blockade on Iranian ports ‘indefinitely,’ Pentagon chief says”. *Reuters*. Phil Stewart. Updated 13 August 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-can-keep-naval-blockade-iranian-ports-indefinitely-pentagon-chief-says-2026-08-13/>

⁴ “USS Abraham Lincoln families press Navy leaders over sailors’ mental health”. *Stars and Stripes*. Alison Bath. Updated 13 August 2026. <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2026-08-11/abraham-lincoln-middle-east-mental-health-town-hall-meeting-22506344.html>

- related to the deployment? What concerns were expressed related to conditions on the ship?
2. How does family readiness factor into force management decisions? What factors are taken into account?
 - a. What analysis was done in considering the decisions to extend the USS *Ford* and *Lincoln* deployments?
 - b. What analysis was done to consider the extensions of other surface combatants supporting operations in CENTCOM?
 3. What data do you actively collect related to the impact of extended deployments on military spouse employment?
 - a. For spouses who are also in the military or are civilian employees, are there additional flexibilities that are made available to them as a spouse's deployment is extended?
 4. What data do you actively collect related to the impact of extended deployments on childcare?
 - a. Are there additional resources that are made available to families as a deployment is extended?
 5. Please provide the most recent data related to the impact of extended deployments on servicemember retention. Of particular note, what is the role of family impact in a servicemember's retention?
 6. What mental health resources or services are made available to servicemembers and their families during extended deployment? Do those resources continue post-deployment?
 7. Alongside the recent extended deployments, has there been increased demand for various support services offered through your departments, including Fleet and Family Support Centers, non-medical counseling, financial counseling, and other family support programs?
 - a. Are additional resources provided to those programs alongside extended deployments, and is additional resourcing needed from Congress?
 8. In light of recent and ongoing deployments, what changes have you implemented, or are considering related to support programs for families during extended deployments?

We thank you for your response to this matter.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator