

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

August 19, 2026

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

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

We are writing with extreme concern regarding recent reports about the operational ruse executed during President Trump's departure from the NATO summit in Ankara, Turkey on July 8, 2026.¹

According to published reports and statements from administration officials, a possible threat of an Iranian missile attack prompted a deception operation in which President Trump was secretly evacuated from the primary presidential aircraft via a catering truck and instead flown out of the country on an Air Force C-32A. Meanwhile, the legacy Air Force One aircraft — carrying White House civilian personnel, military support staff, members of the press — was ordered to depart with window shades drawn, effectively using innocent civilians as an unannounced target decoy without their knowledge or consent.

This operation represents an unprecedented and unacceptable breach of ethical military conduct and a stunning lack of care for the lives of everyday government employees and unwitting American journalists aboard that plane. To intentionally place civilians in harm's way as human decoys to draw potential enemy fire appears to be a grave ethical violation and undermines foundational principles of U.S. military law.

Under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and the U.S. Department of Defense Law of War Manual, military commanders and civilian leadership are strictly prohibited from using civilians or non-combatants to shield military objectives or facilitating tactical deceptions that endanger non-combatant lives — even if it is to protect the president. The American public and Congress deserve immediate answers about this mission, including who authorized it and why civilian lives were intentionally or inadvertently placed at risk.

Therefore, we demand that the Department of War provide written responses to the following questions:

1. Who specifically authorized the decision to allow the legacy Air Force One aircraft to take off with civilian staff and press pool members onboard while knowing the aircraft was a potential target for an enemy missile attack and without alerting them to this fact?
2. What was your specific operational role as Secretary of War in planning, approving, or executing this deception operation?
3. Was a formal risk assessment or Department of War legal review conducted prior to execution regarding the legality and ethical standard of using unwitting civilian non-combatants as a decoy?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/10/us/politics/trump-plane-ruse.html>

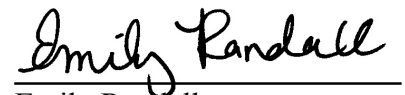
- a. If so, who authored the legal justification?
4. What protocols exist within the Department of Defense to protect non-combatant passengers during high-threat presidential transport operations, and why were those protocols disregarded or overridden in this instance?
5. What corrective directives have you subsequently issued to ensure that civilian non-combatants will not again be deployed as unwitting decoys in tactical deception maneuvers?

Members of the press and civil servants serve our nation in crucial and often thankless positions; they do not sign up to be human shields for any president and to have your department treat their lives as expendable. We expect a prompt, comprehensive response and full transparency on this critical matter by September 2, 2026.

Sincerely,

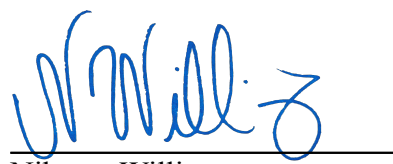

Yassamin Ansari
Member of Congress

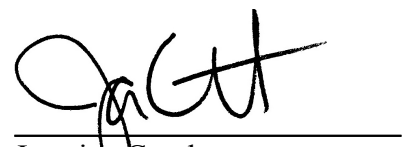

Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress


Emily Randall
Member of Congress


Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress


Mike Quigley
Member of Congress


Nikema Williams
Member of Congress


Jasmine Crockett
Member of Congress

CC: Sean M. Curran, Director of the Secret Service

