

September 13, 2019

The Honorable Richard V. Spencer
Secretary of the Navy
1000 Navy Pentagon, Room 4D652
Washington, D.C. 20350

Dear Secretary Spencer:

I write to express my concern about reports that the Navy has “quietly stood down its Task Force Climate Change [TFCC]” earlier this year under “suspicious” circumstances and “without full incorporation of climate change considerations,”¹ and to understand the Navy’s justification for taking this action. Given that you identified climate change as a readiness issue for our sailors² when you were nominated to be Navy Secretary and that the Department of Defense (DoD) and military commanders have clearly cited climate change as a national security threat,³ I am concerned that the termination of this Task Force represents a step backward in the Navy’s efforts to combat the threats posed by the climate crisis to its missions and installations.

The Navy created the Task Force Climate Change in 2009 to “recommend policy, strategy, roadmaps, force structure, and investments for the Navy regarding the Arctic and Climate Change” as well as to address “[t]he appropriate Navy role in adaptation to climate change impacts [and] [t]he appropriate Navy role in mitigation, prevention, and solution of climate change impacts.”⁴ The Navy noted the Task Force’s charter would remain active “until superseded by a Navy Arctic/Climate Change Policy Instruction or dissolved by the Executive Steering Committee.”⁵ In announcing the creation of the Task Force, the Vice Chief of Naval

¹ E&E News, “Navy quietly shut down climate change task force,” Philip Athey, August 7, 2019, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060877355>; Navy Times, “Navy quietly ends climate change task force, reversing Obama initiative,” J.D. Simkins, August 26, 2019, <https://www.navytimes.com/off-duty/military-culture/2019/08/26/navy-quietly-ends-climate-change-task-force-reversing-obama-initiative/>; The Independent, “US Navy ends Obama’s climate change task force as Trump rolls back environmental initiatives,” Chris Riotta, August 27, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/trump-navy-climate-change-task-force-obama-temperatures-sea-levels-a9080581.html>.

² Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Richard V. Spencer to be Secretary of the Navy,” July 11, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-72_07-11-17.pdf.

³ U.S. Department of Defense, “Report on Effects of a Changing Climate to the Department of Defense,” January 10, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/29/2002084200/-1/-1/1/CLIMATE-CHANGE-REPORT-2019.PDF>; Senator Elizabeth Warren, “Senator Warren’s SASC Hearing Questions Reveal Unanimity of Military Leaders on Climate Change as a Threat to Readiness,” press release, April 16, 2019, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/senator-warrens-sasc-hearing-questions-reveal-unanimity-of-military-leaders-on-climate-change-as-a-threat-to-readiness>.

⁴ Department of the Navy, “Task Force Climate Change,” Memorandum for Distribution, J.W. Greenert, Admiral, U.S. Navy, October, 30, 2009, <https://navysustainability.dodlive.mil/files/2010/09/Task-Force-Climate-Change-Charter.pdf>.

⁵ *Id.*

Operations stated the obvious: “Scientific evidence indicates that the Earth’s climate is changing, and the most rapid changes are occurring in the Arctic.”⁶ That was ten years ago. By now, the debate is over – the climate crisis is real and it poses a threat to our military.

Pursuant to Section 335 of the Fiscal Year 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the Department of Defense submitted a report to Congress on the vulnerabilities of U.S. military installations to climate change.⁷ That report cited 18 naval bases across the United States that are vulnerable to recurrent flooding or drought. Earlier this year, in response to concerns from members of the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) that these and other bases were not ranked based on their climate change vulnerability as required by Congress in the NDAA,⁸ the Navy released to the Committee a list of 16 bases – from coast to coast as well as Guam – that are the most vulnerable to climate change risks.⁹ Moreover, when you were nominated in 2017 to serve as Secretary of the Navy, you agreed that climate change is a threat to our military:

Senator Warren: Mr. Spencer, do you believe that climate is changing and that climate change will continue to affect the Navy’s installations and missions?

Mr. Spencer: Senator, the Navy, from my briefings to date, is totally aware of rising water issues, storm issues, et cetera. We must protect our infrastructure. And I will work hard to make sure that we are keeping an eye on that because without the infrastructure, we lose readiness.

Senator Warren: So I take that as a yes?

Mr. Spencer: Yes, all about readiness.

Senator Warren: Good. And if confirmed, under your leadership, will the Navy prepare for climate change? I think this is where you were going about readiness. And I want to say that both in terms of preparing our own bases and installations and preparing for the crises and the insecurity that climate change will exacerbate around the world.

Mr. Spencer: Yes, Senator.¹⁰

The climate crisis threatens our military’s infrastructure and operations, and adapting to this threat is a necessary component of maintaining the readiness of our sailors. As the Fourth

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, “Report on Effects of a Changing Climate to the Department of Defense,” January 10, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/29/2002084200/-1/-1/1/CLIMATE-CHANGE-REPORT-2019.PDF>

⁸ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2810/text>.

⁹ Defense One, “These Are the US Military Bases Most Threatened by Climate Change,” Ben Watson, June 12, 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2019/06/these-are-us-military-bases-most-threatened-climate-change/157689/>.

¹⁰ Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Richard V. Spencer to be Secretary of the Navy,” July 11, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-72_07-11-17.pdf.

National Climate Assessment, released by the federal government in 2018, found, “Climate change and extremes increase risks to national security through direct impacts on U.S. military infrastructure and by affecting factors, including food and water availability, that can exacerbate conflict outside U.S. borders... Climate change is already affecting U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) assets by, among other impacts, damaging roads, runways, and waterfront infrastructure.”¹¹ Moreover, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph F. Dunford, said in a letter to me earlier this year, “I agree with the intelligence community’s assessment of current and future national security risks posed by climate change,” that the effects of climate change “breed instability and are historically proven to be sources of conflict,” and that “I expect extreme weather associated with a warming globe to result in the U.S. military being tasked to assist with an increasing number of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions.”¹²

Unfortunately, the Navy’s decision to terminate Task Force Climate Change appears inconsistent with your commitment to treat climate change as a readiness issue and the Navy’s own acknowledgment of the significant climate change vulnerabilities of its bases.

In order to better understand the Navy’s reasoning for shutting down its Task Force Climate Change, I request answers to the following questions by September 27, 2019:

1. To what extent, if any, has the work of Task Force Climate Change been incorporated into the Navy’s operational plans?
2. Who ordered the termination of Task Force Climate Change? In the answer to this question, please provide unclassified copies of any Navy memoranda or other documents memorializing the termination of the Task Force.
3. According to news reports, a Navy spokesperson justified the termination of the Task Force because it is “now duplicative as functions have been transitioned to existing business processes; therefore, the original components of the task force are no longer needed.” Furthermore, news reports indicate “[t]he task force did not release a final report, nor has the Navy indicated the exact offices that will be taking over the task force’s area of responsibility.”¹³ What other components or entities within the Navy are replicating the functions of the shuttered Task Force Climate Change?
4. Was there any involvement by White House officials in the termination of the Navy’s Task Force Climate Change? Please describe the nature and extent of any oral or written communications in which a White House official is a participant regarding TFCC since January 20, 2017.
5. News reports indicate that Task Force Climate Change “released several reports on the strategic challenge climate change poses, taking a close look at what the melting Arctic means for strategic planning, and the dangers sea-level rise and extreme

¹¹ U.S. Global Change Research Program, Fourth National Climate Assessment, “Chapter 16: Climate Effects on U.S. International Interests,” 2018, <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/16/>.

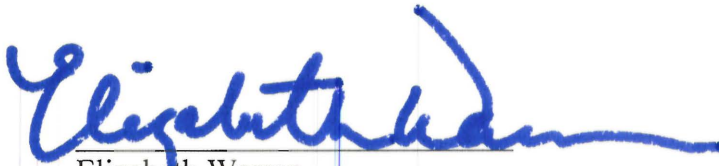
¹² Letter of Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., General, U.S. Marine Corps, to Senator Warren regarding climate change, May 6, 2019 [on file with office of Senator Warren].

¹³ E&E News, “Navy quietly shut down climate change task force,” Philip Athey, August 7, 2019, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060877355>.

weather pose to many naval installations.”¹⁴ Would you agree to publish the full, unclassified reports of Task Force Climate Change since its inception on a publicly available website? If you will not make this commitment, please explain why not.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

¹⁴ *Id.*