

August 30, 2023

President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We, the undersigned good governance, foreign policy, faith, and taxpayer groups write to request that you urge Congress to repeal the statutory requirements for unfunded priority lists (UPLs).

These extra-budgetary wish lists threaten national security by distorting Pentagon strategy. Requiring the Pentagon to request nice-to-have items outside of the formal budget process shields the department from making difficult, but sorely needed, budget tradeoffs integral to effective and responsible planning for the future of U.S. forces. The wish lists allow military services, combatant commands, and other military components to request funding for programs without producing the budget justification documents required for formal funding requests.¹ As a result, there is little understanding of how wish lists impact the Pentagon's long-term costs and force structure. They inhibit the department from making strategic budgetary decisions, which are increasingly critical to maintaining force readiness.²

Department of Defense leadership agrees that UPLs complicate their ability to prioritize. In March, Comptroller Mike McCord wrote that "The current statutory practice of having multiple individual senior leaders submit priorities for additional funding absent the benefit of weighing costs and benefits across the department is not an effective way to illuminate our top joint priorities."³ Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in a congressional hearing confirmed his support for eliminating Pentagon wish lists,⁴ and it's time for the White House to publicly back him.

Secretary Austin is the first department head to push back on UPLs since then-Secretary Robert Gates scaled back wish list requests by about 90% in 2009.⁵ Then-Secretary Gates' success was unfortunately short-lived, and this year wish list requests total at least \$17 billion.⁶ Moreover, Congress failed to advance efforts to get rid of Pentagon wish lists in the fiscal year 2024

¹ Press Release, "Warren, Braun, Lee, King Introduce Bipartisan Legislation to Reduce Wasteful Pentagon Spending, Repeal Unfunded Priorities List," December 15, 2022, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/warren-braun-lee-king-introduce-bipartisan-legislation-to-reduce-wasteful-pentagon-spending-repeal-unfunded-priorities-list>.

² Government Accountability Office, *Military Readiness: Improvement in Some Areas, but Sustainment and Other Challenges Persist*, GAO-23-106673 (2023) <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-106673>.

³ John M. Donnelly, "Pentagon comes out against law requiring military wish lists," *Roll Call*, March 28, 2023, <https://rollcall.com/2023/03/28/pentagon-comes-out-against-law-requiring-military-wish-lists/?ref=com.devaary.cqrc.rollcall.v01>.

⁴ Connor Echols, "SecDef Austin calls on Congress to end wasteful 'wish list' gimmick," *Responsible Statecraft*, March 28, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/03/28/secdef-austin-calls-on-congress-to-end-wasteful-wish-list-gimmick/>.

⁵ Mark Thompson, "Gates Takes Aim at the Military's Spending Wish Lists," *TIME*, July 17, 2009, <https://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1911152,00.html>.

⁶ "Delisting the Pentagon's Unfunded Priorities List," *Taxpayers for Common Sense*, May 16, 2023, <https://www.taxpayer.net/national-security/delisting-the-pentagons-unfunded-priorities-list/>.

National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). It's clear that eliminating these wish lists requires a whole of government approach.

As a matter of national security and sound fiscal policy, we urge you to publicly state your strong support for eliminating Pentagon wish lists and to push Congress to take immediate action outside of the NDAA process.

Sincerely,

CODEPINK

Council for a Livable World

Demand Progress Action

Friends Committee on National Legislation

National Priorities Project at the Institute for Policy Studies

National Taxpayers Union

Peace Action

Public Citizen

Project On Government Oversight

Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

R Street Institute

Taxpayers for Common Sense

Taxpayers Protection Alliance

United Church of Christ, Justice and Local Church Ministries

Win Without War