

April 13, 2018

Chairman Mac Thornberry
Ranking Member Adam Smith
House Armed Services Committee
2120 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Thornberry and Ranking Member Smith:

The undersigned are a broad group of organizations from across the ideological spectrum that are concerned about responsible and effective defense spending. We are writing in protest of a reported decision not to have any public hearings on the budget with Service chiefs, and to instead hold closed, classified roundtables.¹ It is extremely troubling to see this Committee backslide when it comes to making the operations of the legislative branch open and transparent to the people, particularly given the substantial amount of discretionary funding under the Committee's jurisdiction.

This decision is a marked departure from years of precedent to require both civilian and military leaders to answer the Committee's questions publicly.

The military is facing a number of national security challenges. This year the Committee will consider amendments that impact military pay and benefit policies, funding for major weapon systems, acquisition reform, national security strategy, and other issues that significantly and directly impact American national security. The public deserves to know how the views of its military leaders inform Congress's actions.

We find your apparent decision to close these hearings particularly disappointing since this Committee has long been a model for transparency by holding all of its National Defense Authorization Act markups in public. Opening those proceedings allows for citizens to see how the Committee assesses national security needs against available resources, and deepens public understanding of Congress's central role in establishing and supporting our national security strategy. Committee staff have also cited its public operations as a bulwark against corruption and conflicts of interest.²

The topic of these budget hearings—the Fiscal Year 2019 budget request—was submitted in February. Delays in enacting the current Fiscal Year 2018 budget should not be used as an

¹ Connor O'Brien, "HASC won't hear publicly from service chiefs on defense posture," *Politico Pro*, April 6, 2018. <https://www.politicopro.com/defense/whiteboard/2018/04/hasc-wont-hear-publicly-from-service-chiefs-on-defense-posture-964881>

² Mandy Smithberger, "Revolving Door Keeps Spinning with Armed Services Committee Staff," *War is Boring*, May 17, 2017. <https://warisboring.com/revolving-door-keeps-spinning-with-armed-services-committee-staff/>

excuse to keep this Committee from performing its duty in public. All congressional proceedings should be conducted in accordance with our country's highest principles of transparency and openness. Certainly, there are special exceptions when a committee can and should move to closed session to consider classified information, although this step should be taken only as needed and as infrequently as possible. Your Committee's processes to start hearings in open session and move to close it to consider classified information should be sufficient.

We urge you to reconsider this regression in transparency.

Sincerely,

Campaign for Liberty

Coalition to Reduce Spending

Council for a Livable World

Demand Progress

Government Accountability Project

Government Information Watch

National Taxpayers Union

Open the Government

Peace Action

Project On Government Oversight

Sunlight Foundation

Taxpayers for Common Sense

Win Without War