

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 16, 2019

The Honorable Mark Esper
Secretary of Defense
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Esper:

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly half a million Americans used heroin in 2017, resulting in more than 15,000 deaths. Even though it produces a fraction of the narcotics destined for the U.S. market, Afghanistan is reported to be responsible for 90 percent of the world's heroin supply, helping to fuel a world-wide opioid crisis.

Violent extremists like the Taliban use hundreds of millions of dollars in profits from the heroin trade to destabilize the legitimate Government of Afghanistan, and fuel a conflict that has so far cost 4,574 American lives. The Department of Defense (DoD) has consistently requested generous funding for counternarcotics activities in Afghanistan, both due to the national security implications of heroin production and to contain the high social costs attached to worldwide consumption of this dangerous narcotic.

Congress supported the 2019 request for military counternarcotics activities in Afghanistan with \$153 million in Overseas Contingency Operations funds. Last week, we learned that the DoD engaged in an unprecedented funding maneuver, in which certain costs for support of the Afghan security forces' counternarcotics efforts were quietly changed to another appropriation. This resulted in \$129 million of the congressionally-approved counternarcotics funding not being spent as originally described or intended. In turn, these funds were shifted, without prior notice to the congressional defense committees, to pay for increased costs for the President's wall on the southern border of the United States. This action brings the total military funding diverted from the troops and their families for the ineffective wall to \$6.2 billion.

We strongly object to this budgetary sleight-of-hand. To the extent that funds appropriated by Congress to combat Afghan heroin production are not spent in a timely manner, we expect the DoD to redouble its efforts to starve the Taliban of a vital funding source and reduce the scourge of heroin abuse in this country and abroad. Opium production in Afghanistan remains at near-record highs. To make matters worse, the counternarcotics funds were shifted away from support of the Afghan Special Mission Wing, the most capable aviation unit in the Afghan security forces, and the only unit with night vision capabilities. Furthermore, diverting Overseas Contingency Operations funding for domestic purposes having nothing to do with the terrorist threats inflicted on this country since September 11, 2001, is an egregious misuse of the spending authority that Congress has entrusted to the Department.

We have been informed that the DoD seeks to justify this diversion of funds because the Army Corps of Engineers failed to include a reserve fund for expected cost increases to the \$2.5 billion already reprogrammed for the President's border wall. The fact that the Corps of

Engineers is already preparing for cost increases of up to 10 percent in order to fulfill the President's campaign promises is alarming, but we also note the irony that some of these cost increases may be a result of the increase in manufactured goods stemming from the Administration's short-sighted trade wars.

At the end of the day, the Department was faced with a simple choice: either additional funds be used for their intended purpose, to accelerate our military's efforts to combat heroin production in Afghanistan; or divert these funds to pay for cost increases of a border wall project that does not have the support of the American people. We believe that the wrong decision was made.

Unfortunately, the decision to prioritize the border wall over military counternarcotics activities will have a continuing impact on law enforcement and national security matters. In addition to the \$129 million in war funding that was diverted in 2019, we have also been notified that the DoD intends to divert another \$90 million in counternarcotics funding in 2020 to pay for Army Corps of Engineers project management costs for the wall that were also never budgeted for. According to a Pentagon briefing to the staff of the congressional defense committees on October 8, the Departments plans to curtail counternarcotics efforts around the world in order to make these funds available for the bureaucratic and overhead costs of wall construction.

We strongly urge you to reconsider this wall funding strategy, and stop the diversion of funds for important counternarcotics programs and war-related spending to an ill-conceived wall project that is at growing risk of cost overruns.

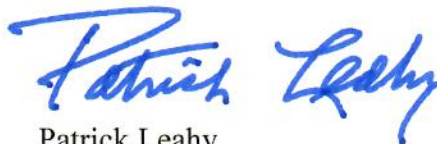
Sincerely,



Charles E. Schumer
Democratic Leader



Richard J. Durbin
Vice Chairman
Subcommittee on Defense



Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
Committee on Appropriations



Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services



Brian Schatz
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Military Construction-VA