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January 18, 2012

The Honorable Leon Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Panetta:

In light of the video showing a group of U.S. Marines urinating on dead Taliban fighters, I am certain you agree that these actions in no way reflect the selflessness, commitment and courage of Marines in Afghanistan. With an investigation now underway, it is my hope that you, as Secretary of Defense, will not allow this incident to draw aspersions on the Marine Corps, its achievements and the continuation of the Afghan mission.

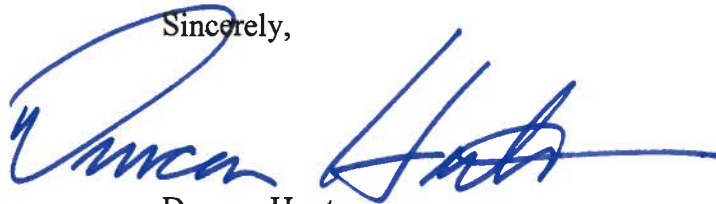
The actions of the Marines were wrong. Consistent with the normal and appropriate course of action available to the Marine Corps, specifically for non-judicial punishment, these individuals should be disciplined accordingly. What is particularly concerning to me, as a Marine who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, is the reported potential legal focus of the investigation and your promise that the Marines in question will be "held accountable to the fullest extent," which could include prison time under military law.

The realities of combat are often difficult and sometimes impossible to explain. Most people will never know what our Marines endure unless they see it or experience it for themselves. In Afghanistan, our Marines see recurring acts of brutality by the enemy, directed toward them and the Afghan people, and they see their friends wounded or killed. In the case of the video, we do not know the full extent of the situation or the shared experiences of these Marines. Regardless, we owe it to these individuals and others, who put their lives on the line every day, to take into account the extraordinary conditions and danger they face when judging their actions, and put things in the proper context. As unnecessary as these actions were, the most extreme and final outcome for the Taliban fighters had already occurred—they were killed by U.S. Marines.

There is no question that diplomatic and military cooperation is essential to mission success. However, in terms of potential punishment, the Marines depicted in the video should not be used for the purpose of making a statement to our partners in the region, especially when the U.S. military has sacrificed so much over ten years of combat in Afghanistan. Despite their actions, these Marines are sons of America.

At the conclusion of your investigation, I strongly urge you and others reviewing this matter to only consider and recommend disciplinary action that is appropriate and fair under the circumstances.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Duncan Hunter". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Duncan Hunter
Member of Congress