November 15, 2017

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Paul Ryan
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable John McCain
Chairman
Senate Armed Services Committee
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mac Thornberry
Chairman
House Armed Services Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Speaker Ryan, Leader Pelosi, Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, Chairman Thornberry, and Ranking Member Smith:

As former Secretaries of Defense, we have witnessed the negative impact of arbitrary budget cuts in defense, diplomacy and intelligence since the passage of the Budget Control Act of 2011.

In particular, we have seen military readiness erode as a result of deep sequester cuts in funding for training, maintenance, force structure, flight missions, procurement and other key programs. The result is the growing danger of a "hollowed out" military force that lacks the ability to sustain the intensive deployment requirements of our global defense mission. The Navy's recent report on the causes of the two destroyer collisions with civilian cargo ships that took the lives of 17 seamen confirms the lack of adequate training.

Contributing to this crisis is a broken budget process in Congress that relies heavily on temporary, short-term continuing resolutions on spending. The consequence is increasing deficits and a mounting national debt that threatens the resources needed for our national security. It is difficult, if not impossible, to properly plan for future budget contingencies when there is a lack of certainty as to what budget resources will be provided for defense and other national security requirements in the next year.

Now added to all of this uncertainty is a tax bill under consideration by Congress that is estimated to add anywhere from $1.5 to $2 trillion dollars to the national deficit over the next decade. In the absence of a comprehensive budget that provides essential fiscal discipline on entitlement spending, and enforces a tough "pay-go" requirement that pays for both additional spending and tax relief, the burden of increased future debt will fall – as it always does – on the discretionary accounts of the federal budget, with the largest being defense and national security.

A wise fiscal policy that is necessary to support the U.S. defense community and its mission must address these long-term fiscal challenges. Unfortunately, the tax bill being considered by Congress appears to be moving in the opposite direction. It is not part of a disciplined process that addresses all parts of the budget. Indeed, the budget resolution recently adopted by Congress allows the bill to add $1.5 trillion to the deficit over the next decade. If the bill fails to achieve optimistic economic growth numbers or if controversial tax reform provisions are not enacted, the debt will exponentially increase. Further, if the across-the-board sequester cuts are allowed to remain in effect, those reductions will continue to damage American national security policy in military, diplomatic and intelligence areas. The result will further exacerbate the already destabilizing uncertainty surrounding future budgets.

We recognize the importance of providing tax relief to the American people. Our intent is not to criticize tax relief itself, but to raise the concern that tax relief without fiscal discipline will inevitably add to the national debt. That increase in the debt will, in the absence of a comprehensive budget that addresses both entitlements and revenues, force even deeper reductions in our national security capabilities.

As Secretaries of Defense, we deeply appreciate the bipartisan support we have received in protecting the safety and security of our nation. We are proud of the men and women in uniform who bravely serve our nation and recognize the sacrifices that so many others have made for their country. Our goal is to make sure that those who volunteer to serve in our military will never have to experience the consequences of a "hollowed out" national defense system.

For these reasons, we respectfully ask Congress to adopt a tax bill that will be paid for and will not further contribute to the uncertainty of future budgets. We believe Congress has a responsibility to the American people to pass an honest budget that will enable the national security community to make the long-term investments necessary to keep America safe and secure in the future.

Sincerely,

Secretary Leon Panetta | Secretary Ash Carter | Secretary Chuck Hagel