

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

August 6, 2025

The Honorable Troy Meink
Secretary of the Air Force
Department of the Air Force
1690 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330

Dear Secretary Meink:

We write with concerns about how the Air Force is managing nuclear modernization funds, including whether those funds are being raided to retrofit a personal gift to President Trump that likely violates the emoluments clause of the Constitution.

On May 11, the Trump administration announced it was planning to accept a \$400 million luxury Boeing 747-8 jumbo jet from the Qatari royal family.¹ As we previously wrote, accepting this gift likely violated the Constitution's prohibition on accepting foreign emoluments² and was likely to require taxpayers to pay at least \$1 billion to retrofit the jet to be able to safely transport the president.³ Even more concerning, the jet would only be used by the U.S. government for a few years at most, and then would be donated to President Trump's presidential library.⁴ Press reports indicate that Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has signed a memorandum of understanding stating that the jet is an "unconditional donation" and a "bona fide gift," and that the exchange does not involve "an offer, promise, or acceptance of any form of bribery, undue influence, or corrupt practice."⁵ However, by providing the president with a "palace in the sky" it clearly appears that Qatar is trying to curry favor with the administration.⁶

¹ ABC News, "Trump administration poised to accept 'palace in the sky' as a gift for Trump from Qatar: Sources," Jonathan Karl and Katherine Faulders, May 11, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-administration-poised-accept-palace-sky-gift-trump/story?id=121680511>.

² Letter from Senators Elizabeth Warren, Adam Schiff, Richard Blumenthal, et. al. to Acting Department of Defense Inspector General Steven Stebbins, May 13, 2025, <https://www.schiff.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/2025.05.13-Senator-Schiff-Letter-to-DOD-IG.pdf>.

³ Letter from Senators Elizabeth Warren, Tammy Duckworth, Jacky Rosen, et. al. to Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Secretary of the Air Force Troy Meink, May 14, 2025, <https://www.duckworth.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/20250514lettertododoperationalsecurityrisksofqatarplane.pdf>.

⁴ NPR, "Trump administration officially accepts jet from Qatar for use as Air Force One," Kat Lonsdorf, May 21, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/21/nx-s1-5406420/trump-accepts-qatar-plane-air-force-one>.

⁵ CNN, "Qatari plane that could be new Air Force One will be 'unconditional' gift to the Pentagon, agreement says," Natasha Bertrand, July 27, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/27/politics/qatar-air-force-one-gift-agreement>; CBS News, "Preparations underway for Qatari jet that will be used as Air Force One," Kristin Brown, Eleanor Watson, and Caroline Linton, July 28, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/qatar-jet-trump-air-force-one-preparations>.

⁶ ABC News, "Trump administration poised to accept 'palace in the sky' as a gift for Trump from Qatar: Sources," Jonathan Karl and Katherine Faulders, May 11, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-administration-poised-accept-palace-sky-gift-trump/story?id=121680511>.

As you testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee, this plane needs “significant modifications” to meet Air Force One standards.⁷ Those likely include “defenses against a range of threats, from surface-to-air missiles to a nuclear blast,” secure and reliable communications systems, and protections against counterintelligence.⁸

We were concerned by reports that the funds to retrofit the Qatari jet are coming from the “massively-over-budget, behind-schedule” Sentinel nuclear missile program.⁹ According to this report, the Air Force assessed that \$934 million previously appropriated for the Sentinel program was actually in “excess to need”¹⁰ and could be used instead to pay for other classified programs, including the retrofits for the Qatari jet.¹¹ Already, the Sentinel program is set to be delayed several years and costs 81 percent more than initial estimates.¹² The Government Accountability Office has cautioned that the program “costs could swell further” and that “developing a reliable schedule” is critical for understanding the program’s full price tag.¹³

There has been bipartisan concern about the mismanagement of the Sentinel program. Senator Fischer raised concerns that the Air Force was positioning itself to be able to “raid Sentinel budget lines to pay for other programs,”¹⁴ and Senator McConnell similarly raised concerns that putting funding for the Sentinel program in both the reconciliation bill and annual appropriations bills would “function like a shell game.”¹⁵ Now, our concerns, and those of other members, appear to be prescient as part of the Sentinel program’s bloated budget is being redirected to an unintended purpose: retrofitting the Qatari luxury jet to serve as Air Force One — and subsequently, after he has left office, as the Trump library’s private plane.

We are also concerned that, because the total price tag is classified, policymakers cannot discuss and the public still does not know whether additional retrofit costs will eat into other Air Force

⁷ Senate Committee on Armed Services, “To Receive Testimony on the Posture of the Department of the Air Force in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2026 and the Future Years Defense Program,” May 20, 2025 p. 107, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/5-20-25-full-transcript.pdf>.

⁸ NPR, “Graphics: Here’s what it will take to transform the Qatari jet into Air Force One,” Kat Lonsdorf and Connie Hanzhang Jin, May 23, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/23/nx-s1-5406188/qatar-gift-plane-trump-air-force-one-overhaul-explained>.

⁹ New York Times, “What Will It Cost to Renovate the ‘Free’ Air Force One? Don’t Ask.” David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, July 27, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/27/us/politics/air-force-one-trump-cost.html>.

¹⁰ Senate Committee on Appropriations, Defense Subcommittee, “To receive Testimony on the Fiscal Year 2026 Air Force and Space Force Budget Request,” June 26, 2025, <https://plus.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-8275714?2>.

¹¹ New York Times, “What Will It Cost to Renovate the ‘Free’ Air Force One? Don’t Ask.” David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, July 27, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/27/us/politics/air-force-one-trump-cost.html>.

¹² Air Force Materiel Command, “Department of Defense announces results of Nunn-McCurdy review,” July 8, 2024, <https://www.afmc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3831061/departement-of-defense-announces-results-of-sentinel-nunn-mccurdy-review/>.

¹³ Government Accountability Office, “Weapon Systems Annual Assessment,” June 11, 2025, p. 32, 80, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-25-107569.pdf>.

¹⁴ Senate Committee on Armed Services, “To receive Testimony on the Posture of the Department of the Air Force in review of the Defense Authorization Request,” May 20, 2025, p. 34, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/5-20-25-full-transcript.pdf>.

¹⁵ Senate Committee on Appropriations, Defense Subcommittee, “To receive Testimony on the Fiscal Year 2026 Air Force and Space Force Budget Request,” June 26, 2025, <https://plus.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-8275714?2>.

programs beyond Sentinel.¹⁶ Senior U.S. officials are currently reviewing floor plans and schematics for the Qatari jet, and the Air Force should provide Congress with the information it needs to ensure that taxpayer funds are not being wasted and that the Qatari jet retrofit is not endangering funds needed for other critical national security priorities.¹⁷ The Air Force has yet to provide the necessary information.

While it is critical to keep the President and his communications safe from any future adversaries, we have serious concerns that this unconstitutional payoff is now wasting taxpayer dollars. It appears that funds for programs that the Air Force has continually claimed are among its top national security priorities are now being used as accounts for presidential whims, while the egregious lack of transparency hides the true costs of these programs from taxpayers.

To provide Congress more clarity on these Air Force priorities, we request answers to the following questions by August 20, 2025:

1. Has the Air Force assessed whether shifting funds out of the Sentinel program will increase the program's costs or risk further delaying the program's schedule?
2. Did or will any of the \$934 million from the Sentinel program go to retrofits for the Qatari Boeing 747-8, or were or will those funds be diverted to other programs?
3. In June, you told Congress that the cost of retrofitting the Qatari Boeing 747-8 "wouldn't be anywhere near" the reported \$1 billion estimate.¹⁸ Do you still believe this to be the case?
4. How does including Sentinel funding in the reconciliation bill impact the Sentinel program's cost and schedule estimates?
5. Does the Air Force have an independent cost estimate for the costs of retrofitting the Qatari Boeing 747-8? If so, please provide us with this information.
6. Will future retrofit costs for the Qatari Boeing 747-8 come out of the Sentinel program? If not, what accounts will they be drawn from?
7. Does the Air Force plan to outsource the retrofitting of the Qatari Boeing 747-8 to a defense contractor? If so, will that contract be competitively bid?
8. Will the Air Force delay the deployment of the Qatari Boeing 747-8 if it needs more time to ensure that all the sufficient security measures for the aircraft are in place?
9. If the retrofitting is more than 15 percent behind schedule or 15 percent over the initial cost estimate the Air Force gave it, will the program be reviewed for cancellation in accordance with President Trump's April 9 executive order?
10. Will the Air Force commit to fully cooperating with any independent investigation into the acceptance of the Qatari jet and/or the Qatari jet's retrofitting?
11. When will the Air Force have an updated cost estimate for the Sentinel program?
12. Does the Air Force expect the Sentinel program's cost not to rise any further, now that officials say the program was funded in excess to need in 2024?


¹⁶ New York Times, "What Will It Cost to Renovate the 'Free' Air Force One? Don't Ask." David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, July 27, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/27/us/politics/air-force-one-trump-cost.html>.

¹⁷ CBS News, "Preparations underway for Qatari jet that will be used as Air Force One," Kristin Brown, Eleanor Watson, and Caroline Linton, July 28, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/qatar-jet-trump-air-force-one-preparations>.

¹⁸ U.S. House Committee on Armed Services, "Full Committee Hearing: Department of the Air Force Fiscal Year 2026 Posture," June 5, 2025, ts: 1:19:00, <https://armedservices.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=5173>.

13. Have Air Force officials identified how much excess funding was originally included for Sentinel in the last year?
14. How is the Air Force working to ensure the Sentinel program is not overfunded in future year budget requests?
15. Does the Air Force have an integrated master schedule for the Sentinel program? If not, when will there be one?
16. Is Sentinel under consideration for cancellation given President Trump's April 9 executive order that calls for "any program more than 15% behind schedule...[or] 15% over cost...[to] be considered for potential cancellation"?¹⁹
17. Given that Milestone B approval is needed for a program to enter the engineering and manufacturing development phase, when do the Air Force and the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment believe that approval will be given?²⁰
18. How will the Air Force and the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment ensure that the cost and schedule estimates in the Milestone B report are high-quality estimates?
19. How will the Air Force ensure that the potential to "reduce costs" mentioned by Northrop Grumman's CEO Kathy Warden in an earnings call on July 22 are materialized for the Sentinel program?²¹

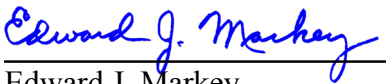
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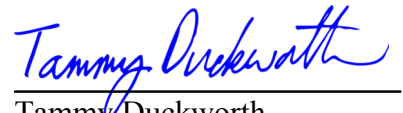
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



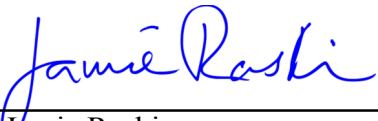
John Garamendi
Member of Congress




Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress



Adam B. Schiff
United States Senator

¹⁹ Executive Order 14265, "Modernizing Defense Acquisitions and Spurring Innovation in the Defense Industrial Base," April 9, 2025, p. 2, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2025-04-15/pdf/2025-06461.pdf>.

²⁰ Federation of American Scientists, "The Two-Hundred Billion Dollar Boondoggle," Matt Korda and Machenzie Knight-Boyle, June 24, 2025, <https://fas.org/publication/the-two-hundred-billion-dollar-boondoggle>.

²¹ Breaking Defense, "Northrop back at work on Sentinel ICBM missile silo design: CEO," Valerie Insinna, July 22, 2025, <https://breakingdefense.com/2025/07/northrop-back-at-work-on-sentinel-icbm-missile-silo-design-ceo/>; Northrop Grumman, "EDITED TRANSCRIPT NOC.N - Q2 2025 Northrop Grumman Corp Earnings Call," July 22, 2025, p. 11, <https://investor.northropgrumman.com/static-files/7fdede9b-b18c-415b-9eb9-e474cbce608f>.