



SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000

Mr. Thomas Curley
President and Chief Executive Officer
Associated Press
450 West 33rd Street
New York, NY 10001

Mr. Curley:

Today I learned that the Associated Press plans to publish a graphic photograph of Lance Corporal Joshua M. Bernard taken shortly after he received mortal wounds. I understand that you have decided to do this over the objection of Lance Corporal Bernard's grieving father. Out of respect for his family's wishes, I ask you in the strongest of terms to reconsider your decision.

I do not make this request lightly. In one of my first public statements as Secretary of Defense, I stated that the media should not be treated as the enemy, and made it a point to thank journalists for revealing problems that need to be fixed – as was the case with Walter Reed. I have long been committed to more transparency with regard to media access – even when that means showing war's terrible human costs. Earlier this year I lifted the ban on images of the return of the fallen at Dover Air Force Base. I did so with one overriding thought in mind: to give families the opportunity to honor their fallen however they saw fit and for the American people to understand, to see, and to appreciate the enormity of their sacrifice.

The American people understand that death is an awful and inescapable part of war – a fact driven home to me in a very personal way each time I write a condolence letter. Those of us who have not lost loved ones in war can never know what it feels like. All we can do is pay tribute to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice, and respect the wishes of their families. Publication of this image will do neither and will mark an unconscionable departure from the restraint that most journalists and publications have shown covering the military since September 11th.

I cannot imagine the pain and suffering Lance Corporal Bernard's death has caused his family. Why your organization would purposefully defy the family's wishes knowing full well that it will lead to yet more anguish is beyond me. Your lack of compassion and common sense in choosing to put this image of their maimed and stricken child on the front page of multiple American newspapers is appalling. The issue here is not law, policy or constitutional right – but judgment and common decency.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert M. Gates".

