

Dear President-elect Biden,

We write in appreciation of your deliberative process in choosing the crucial position of Secretary of Defense, and urge you to carefully select a nominee who has shown good judgment in key foreign policy debates and has demonstrated a record that aligns with your skepticism of military-first solutions.

We are grateful for your recognition as Vice President and as the Democratic presidential nominee of the wisdom of military restraint. The restraint for which you advocated in these roles—for example in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen—has been vindicated time and again. We also appreciate the rules you have implemented for your transition team to limit the role of advisers with actual or apparent conflicts of interest, or engagement in policies that produce personal financial gain, given the way this can facilitate and entrench interventionism.

It is for this reason that we express our strong concerns regarding the widely reported candidacy of Michele Flournoy for the role of Defense Secretary. We are concerned that Ms. Flournoy has a record of ill-advised foreign policy positions that have often conflicted with your own, and has an opaque history of private-sector activity—including “shadow lobbying” for military contractors—which has raised questions about potential conflicts of interest. We urge you to carefully scrutinize Ms. Flournoy’s key foreign policy decisions, professional judgments, and investment decisions, and to ensure that she will not again be a consistent advocate pushing the Executive Branch in a more interventionist direction.

In the case of Yemen, we applaud your commitment to ending all U.S. participation in the horrific Saudi-led military campaign that has devastated the country, and we greatly appreciate your [commitment](#) to “end the sale of materiel to the Saudis [who] are going in and murdering children” in Yemen. But Ms. Flournoy reportedly [tried to influence](#) a strategy discussion by more than 50 liberal national security groups and former Obama Administration officials in January 2019, urging them not to call for a ban on U.S. arms deals with the Saudi regime. Flournoy argued that calling for such a ban would antagonize Pentagon contractors. Witnesses recounted of the meeting that it “sounded like Flournoy was working for Raytheon.”

Although Flournoy and others at WestExec have refused to confirm or deny a relationship with Raytheon, one WestExec staffer confirmed that they work for one of the top five military contractors, while WestExec’s own Robert Work—a former CEO of the Center for New American Security (CNAS), which Ms. Flournoy co-founded—has served on Raytheon’s board since 2017. Ms. Flournoy’s comments came just weeks after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and ahead of a decisive, historic Senate vote to end unauthorized U.S. military participation in the war on Yemen invoking the War Powers Act. Flournoy’s position ultimately proved at odds with the votes of every Congressional Democrat and nearly two dozen Republicans who repeatedly passed legislation to block weapons sales and stop active U.S. military involvement in the Saudi-led war. And unlike Avril Haines, Tony Blinken or Jake Sullivan, Flournoy was [notably absent](#) among senior Obama administration officials [publicly calling](#) for an end to all U.S. military involvement in the Saudi coalition’s war. Finally, her 2019 opposition to a weapons

ban against Saudi Arabia is inconsistent with your own vow to make the regime “pay the price, and make them in fact the pariah that they are.”

In contrast to Flournoy’s record on these matters, among those who have repeatedly voted to draw American involvement in the war in Yemen to a close are Senators Tammy Duckworth and Kirsten Gillibrand — both of whom serve on the Senate Armed Services Committee and have expressed interest in serving as Secretary of Defense.

Flournoy’s relationship with the similarly repressive and anti-democratic government of the United Arab Emirates—Saudi Arabia’s key military ally in its air war in Yemen—is also of serious concern. News reports indicate that in 2016, Flournoy, then CEO of CNAS, personally signed an agreement in which the UAE paid CNAS \$250,000 to write a memo that provided guidance on the legal regime governing the export of military-grade drones that the UAE sought to purchase, a public version of which argued that American “reluctance to transfer U.S. drones harms U.S. interests in tangible ways.” At that time, the UAE was fiercely engaged in aerial bombings on Yemen, deploying drones, and decimating Yemen’s civilian infrastructure while indiscriminately killing thousands. CNAS guidance to the UAE, and its public position that “U.S. drone export policy has overly prioritized limiting proliferation” laid groundwork for the Trump Administration’s November 2020 announcement of the sale of 18 drones to the UAE for nearly \$3 billion.

We also note that you were [reportedly](#) the most senior figure in the Obama Administration to oppose the troop surge in Afghanistan in 2008 and 2009, instead recommending a smaller counterterrorism force that you continue to support today. In contrast, Ms. Flournoy, as Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, sought a 30,000-troop surge in Afghanistan. In June 2020, she told the Senate Armed Services Committee that due to the surge, “we are heading in the right direction in Afghanistan.” Over 1,200 American servicemembers died during the 2010-2012 surge -- more than half of all servicemember deaths in the war. Ms. Flournoy’s claim that “we are beginning to regain the initiative and the insurgency is beginning to lose momentum” proved to be false, as the surge had no meaningful long-term impact on the dynamics of the war.

You were among the strongest voices in the Obama Administration to rightly oppose military action in Libya, raising prescient [questions](#) about what would happen in the aftermath of the war. Flournoy was among those in the administration pushing Obama to support military action and regime change in Libya. She [continued](#) to argue in September 2012 that “we were clearly on the right side of history in Libya” and that those expressing concerns about U.S. efforts after Gaddafi’s death were “just misinformed” as the U.S. was “helping them build their counterterrorism capacity, helping to undertake security sector reform, [and] helping with stabilization programs.” These efforts largely failed, and Obama later called the lack of planning for Libya post-regime change the [worst mistake](#) of his presidency.

In Syria, you were [reportedly](#) not among those inside the Obama Administration campaigning to supply weapons and training to Syrian combatants, which you later correctly [noted](#) had contributed to a sectarian war that included extremist elements. You [pushed back](#) against critics

of President Obama's policy of diplomacy and military restraint for failing to present a viable plan. Ms. Flournoy, in contrast, [argued](#) in 2016 that the U.S. should use what she termed "limited military coercion" -- which she described as including targeting the Assad regime with airstrikes -- to promote regime change in Syria, despite the fact that Congress had consistently declined to authorize military action.

Ms. Flournoy's private sector work appears to have implications for U.S. foreign policy, and we urge you to secure a commitment to transparency in Ms. Flournoy's private sector activity to allow the public and Congress to weigh the potential for conflicts of interests that could influence the top official tasked with defending our nation. A New York Times report observed that in addition to serving on military contractor Booz Allen Hamilton's board of directors, Flournoy is also a member and adviser to Pine Island Capital Partners, which raised \$218 million in November 2020 for a new fund to finance investments in military firms. In her role at WestExec, a "strategic partner" to Pine Island which features "an overlapping roster of politically connected officials," Flournoy helped surveillance drone manufacturer Shield AI develop guidelines for artificial intelligence use. Shield AI secured a multi-million-dollar contract to provide artificial intelligence tools for U.S. Air Force combat drones earlier this year. The current lack of transparency around Ms. Flournoy's consulting work, public policy [papers](#) advancing deeper Pentagon reliance on private firms, and her business dealings with repressive Gulf regimes, appear to be at odds with your campaign's policy of limiting the role of those who have "both actual and apparent conflicts of interest." Moreover, Flournoy and others who seek to serve in key posts must not be allowed to appeal to the existence of nondisclosure agreements to obscure such potential conflicts.

In conclusion, on matters of foreign policy judgment over the years, Ms. Flournoy's record raises serious questions regarding her appropriateness for Secretary of Defense. In light of her divergence from you on key policy decisions where, had you prevailed, untold lives and resources would have been saved, we ask that you thoroughly probe her record and receive satisfactory answers to the following questions:

Why did she not publicly join other senior Obama officials in calling for an end to U.S. involvement in the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which produced the worst humanitarian crisis on Earth? Was her opposition to a weapons ban on Saudi Arabia related to a client for whom she "consulted?" Does she regret her decisions over her career that seemed to invariably initiate or accelerate military hostilities across the world? Will she respect the active role of Congress in declaring and determining war? Will she be transparent with you, Congress, and the general public regarding her various roles, contracts, and arrangements with industry groups? And, given her private-sector and industry-backed think tank career advocating for military expansion, championing the interests of weapons manufacturers, consulting with companies and countries seeking lucrative Pentagon contracts, and profiting from financial investments made in military firms and technologies, will she serve as Defense Secretary without being susceptible to undue private influence?

We appreciate the enormous significance of selecting the next Secretary of Defense, and respectfully note that advocates for greater oversight, transparency, and restraint--such as Senate Armed Services committee members Sens. Duckworth and Gillibrand--have records of service, voting, advocacy, and policy development that may comport more closely with your vision for the Department of Defense. We thank you for your consideration of these vital issues as you come to a decision on nominating the next Secretary of Defense.

Sincerely,

*****LIST IN FORMATION*****

Current signatories:

Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation

Yemeni Alliance Committee

Peace Action

Justice Democrats

Just Foreign Policy

Demand Progress

Veterans for Peace

RootsAction.org

Project Blueprint