

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 15, 2007

The Honorable Robert M. Gates
Secretary of Defense
The Pentagon

Dear Mr. Secretary:

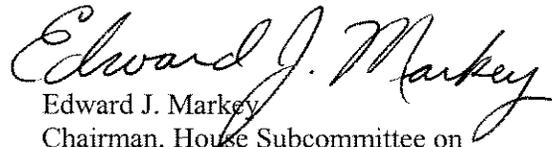
I am writing with respect to the recent decision by the Defense Department to block access by military personnel to approximately a dozen websites. As you know, the blocked websites are some of the most popular utilized by U.S. troops abroad, including those in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, the military itself has used several of the blocked sites to convey messages and images.

According to media reports, the Defense Department announced the new policy by citing concerns over excessive strain to network capabilities and operational security. Obviously protecting classified information is of paramount importance in the field and my understanding is that the Defense Department has a longstanding policy of prohibiting computer use that would compromise military plans and operations. I do not see how the selective blocking of these sites, however, will achieve the goal of ensuring operational security, as countless other sites have not been blocked.

While I understand concerns about bandwidth strain on the network, I fail to see how blocking these particular sites is consistent with achieving network efficiency. If network congestion was an issue, for instance, it is surprising that no bandwidth-intensive gaming sites are on the list of prohibited sites. I believe the military should have opted to ration any scarce bandwidth resources it was encountering rather than summarily blocking access by U.S. troops completely. Rationed bandwidth between official and recreational use of military networks abroad would have been far preferable to the action the military has chosen to take, which has raised issues of censorship.

Given the fact that many of the blocked sites are used by troops overseas to communicate with their family and friends back home, and given that such social support is critical to morale, I urge the Defense Department to reverse its policy of blocking such sites. I thank you for your time and attention to this matter and look forward to hearing any thoughts you may have on this subject.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
Chairman, House Subcommittee on
Telecommunications and the Internet