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January 18, 2007

The Honorable Robert M. Gates  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Gates,

On behalf of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and its international arm, Humane Society International (HSI), representing over 10 million members and constituents worldwide, I would like to call your attention to a disturbing video depicting US soldiers taunting and throwing rocks at a crippled stray dog. This video has prompted many concerned HSUS members to contact us, and we felt it was imperative that we once again bring the issue of cruelty to animals to the attention of the Department of Defense.

Nearly two years ago, The HSUS sent two letters to Secretary Donald Rumsfeld asking him to address a number of concerns surrounding American soldiers and their interactions with animals in the war zone. Unfortunately, we received no reply to these letters, copies of which are enclosed for your review.

The issues that continue to trouble us involve indiscriminate killing of animals as part of poorly conceptualized rabies prevention programs, the enforcement of General Order 1A (GO-1A) as it concerns the keeping of animals and mascots by soldiers, and the reports, fortunately still rare, of US soldiers killing and abusing street animals, as we witnessed in the aforementioned video: <http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=6445f9fdd7>.

In our letters to Mr. Rumsfeld, we sought clarification of current DoD-sponsored animal control programs based upon indiscriminate killing of strays, loose running animals, and soldiers' pets, in the interests of controlling rabies. Our position, backed by available scientific evidence, is that such programs are a waste of resources and no substitute at all for intensive vaccination campaigns that have proven successful at curtailing or eradicating the outbreak and incidence of rabies. We would like to know what the DoD has done since we wrote to your predecessor, to shift its resources toward this demonstrated method of dealing with the problem.

As you would expect, HSUS/HSI is deeply disturbed that US soldiers would tarnish our national image by committing abhorrent acts such as the one depicted in the video clip against defenseless and harmless creatures. As you likely know, there is an established, well-documented relationship between cruelty to animals and interpersonal violence. It is not without relevance that Steven D. Green, the soldier convicted of raping and killing a 14-year-old Iraqi girl and her family, had an alleged record of animal abuse, and that reports surfaced of his apparently having thrown a puppy from a rooftop in Iraq and set it on fire. We would like to know whether you would support the insertion of an explicit prohibition and punishment for such cruelty to animals within the Universal Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), and, in the alternative, what steps you would be willing to take in the meantime to discourage such objectionable behavior.

Promoting the protection of all animals

2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037 ■ 202-452-1100 ■ Fax: 202-778-6132 ■ [www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org)

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Finally, there is also a brighter side to the relationship between animals and US troops abroad that deserves your strong support. Despite the threat of GO-1A enforcement actions, we have received many letters and emails from soldiers embracing the responsible keeping of pets on bases as a morale booster. Nearly all of these soldiers had their adopted strays vaccinated, sterilized and taken care of, and some of them have been able to find homes for them in Iraq or a way to bring them to the US when their tours of service were over.

It is still our belief that a program of allowing some soldiers to transport their pets stateside could be feasible, and we would like to renew our offer to assist the DoD with the execution of such a program. At the very least, enforcement of GO-1A against those soldiers who have behaved responsibly and compassionately with regard to the animals they encounter should be halted. As stated in our previous letters, HSUS/HSI is willing to assist in the planning and execution of humane animal control and ownership programs in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the past, we have commended the DoD for allowing military working dogs to be adopted by their handlers, and we have always celebrated the service of animals in war as mascots and in other capacities. We would welcome the opportunity to celebrate the introduction of a better defined and more humane approach to the problems that we have identified.

We look forward to a prompt response.

Sincerely,



Wayne Pacelle  
President & CEO

Enclosures