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March 29, 2005

The Honorable Donald Rumsfeld
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Rumsfeld,

I am writing about two issues of paramount concern to The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and its 8.5 million constituents--the U.S. Central Command's policy of confiscating and euthanizing animals taken in by soldiers, and the participation of service members in gratuitous cruelty toward animals. Both issues fall within General Order 1A (GO-1A) and have been the source of numerous complaints sent to The HSUS.

As you know, GO- 1A prohibits conduct that compromises character and morale. We consider it ironic that GO-1A includes a prohibition on the keeping of mascots and pets, because the bond between humans and animals does not compromise character or morale; rather, it enhances them. In our view, it is the policy of confiscating and destroying unit mascots and rescued animals who have become pets, via euthanasia or gunshot, that may undermine the spirit of our fighting men and women. The destruction of these animals betrays the humane instincts of the service members who rescued them.

While conceding that soldiers have a primary duty to focus on their war zone missions, I would like to point out that our soldiers form bonds with the animals they have rescued, and take comfort in their presence. Admittedly, the circumstances in Iraq and Afghanistan are very difficult, but this does not mean that a solution is impossible. As our own recent experience in the tsunami-devastated areas of the Indian Ocean Rim nations has shown, public health considerations alone demand that an intelligent animal care and control system be implemented even in the most dangerous and disordered situations. This is something we ought to be doing in every nation where we have a significant military presence, however temporary.

Moreover, there is a strong relationship between a standard of compassionate care for animals and the development of a civil society. Our soldiers' good instincts may serve a broader purpose consistent with our national commitment to the building of healthy, democratic, and humane polities. That is why we celebrated the participation of American military veterinarians in the formation of an Iraqi animal welfare society.

It is also the reason we now ask you to rescind GO-1A's prohibition on keeping of animals.

Promoting the protection of all animals

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We would ask you to consider the shipment home of healthy, vaccinated, spayed/neutered and veterinary-certified animals (one per soldier, one time only) on a bi-weekly or a monthly basis, directly from Iraq and Afghanistan to one central location stateside for pick-up by designated family members and friends of military personnel. We are willing to assist the DOD with the operation of a veterinary depot, and our international division, Humane Society International, stands ready to assist with planning and execution of strategies for humane animal care and control institutions in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mr. Secretary, we have an additional concern about the prevention and punishment of (thankfully rare) acts of cruelty to animals by American soldiers, prompted by our review of disturbing footage of servicemen repeatedly shooting a stray dog, on the website http://www.ogrish.com/archives/dog_shooting_in_iraq_for_fun_Mar_16_2005.html. The individual who submitted this footage wrote, "Hi, my name is M.D., formally of A TRP 1-10 CAV 4ID and while in Iraq we had a sport of killing dogs whenever the Iraqis weren't shooting us. So when I shot this one at about 50 yards with my M4 and it ran yelping to lower ground, we had to finish it so my friends and I went to it and started shooting it. I've never seen a dog take as many shots to the head at least 4 as this one did and then after we thought it was dead we dug a hole and when I picked it up with the shovel it came back to life, so we shot it a couple more times... its pretty funny."

Plainly, this situation presented no exigent circumstances. The actions of these soldiers comprise blatant and gratuitous cruelty to animals, unpardonable in either peace or war, and violate the spirit if not the letter of General Order Number 1A (GO-1A), being "prejudicial to the maintenance of good order and discipline." We believe that the Department of Defense should take steps to prevent such misconduct by issuing a direct statement that cruelty to animals will be neither permitted nor tolerated under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Central Command.

Mr. Secretary, I know that you are a kind man with a strong commitment to boosting the morale of our brave and patriotic service members. It is a goal that I personally share, and one that I know would resonate with the millions of Americans who seek to voice their humane concerns through the agency of The HSUS. Our active service personnel deserve the very best we can offer in this situation, and I urge you to take steps toward a more positive framework for resolving the challenges raised by the rescue of animals by our servicemen in the war zones. I also ask you to promulgate appropriate penalties for acts of wanton cruelty toward animals in the war zones.

Sincerely,

Wayne Pacelle
President and CEO

cc: General John P. Abizaid
Commander, United State Central Command