

National
Coalition
Against
Censorship

The Honorable James N. Mattis
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

January 16, 2018

Dear Mr. Secretary,

The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and the undersigned organizations are extremely troubled by new policies that block the release of artworks created by detainees held at Guantanamo Bay. The abrupt change to standard operating procedure, made in November 2017, prevents detainee artworks from leaving the base. The new policy amounts to blanket censorship of materials that pose no threat to national security and possess clear value to the American public. We are additionally alarmed by statements by government officials asserting that these materials may be destroyed or held indefinitely by the government, which infringes upon the rights of individuals to reclaim ownership of their artwork upon release.

This policy change appears to have been provoked by an art exhibition, “Ode to the Sea”, held at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. The artworks in the exhibition —predominantly watercolors of seascapes—were created by current and former detainees. As all art that leaves Guantanamo is subject to intense scrutiny and security clearance by military officials, these pieces contain no threats to national security. It appears, therefore, that the policy change is a flagrant attempt to stifle public discussion that could arise from an encounter with the artistic and human side of Guantanamo detainees. Absent security concerns, this policy also violates the human rights of the detainees under international norms. Further, the directive suppresses documents of clear political and historical importance to the American public.

NCAC and the undersigned organizations vigorously assert the American public’s right to access these artworks. We condemn this attempt to obstruct the public discourse essential to a democratic and open society, and strongly urge you to reverse the new policies on Guantanamo detainee artwork.

Sincerely,



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National Coalition Against Censorship

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NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Professors
American Association of University Women
American Booksellers for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Jewish Committee
American Library Association
American Literary Translators Association
American Orthopsychiatric Association
American Society of Journalists & Authors
Americans United for Separation of Church & State
Association of American Publishers Authors Guild
Catholics for Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
The Creative Coalition
Directors Guild of America
The Dramatists Guild of America
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
Free Speech Coalition
International Literacy Association
Lambda Legal
Modern Language Association
National Center for Science Education
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of the Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National Youth Rights Association
The Newspaper Guild/CWA
PEN American Center
People For the American Way
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Project Censored
SAG-AFTRA
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators
Student Press Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ
Office of Communication
United Methodist Church,
United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

P.T.O.

National Coalition Against Censorship

Association of University Presses

College Art Association

Defending Rights & Dissent

Electronic Frontier Foundation

Free Speech Coalition

Harvard Islamic Society's Anti-Islamophobia Network

Media Freedom Foundation

PEN America

Project Censored

Vera List Center for Art and Politics

The Woodhull Freedom Foundation

Cc:

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