

Don't let the Pentagon silence Stars and Stripes

BY ERNIE GATES

Stars and Stripes ombudsman

As Stars and Stripes ombudsman, I have two distinct roles, one conventional and one unique to Stars and Stripes. The conventional role of a news organization's ombudsman is to hold the newsroom accountable to journalism values, such as accuracy, fairness and impartiality — the things that add up to credibility. The unusual role stems from the fact that generations after U.S. soldiers created Stars and Stripes, it continues to be the soldiers' independent news source within the maze of the American military.

To emphasize that unique role, here's the first thing listed under "Duties and Responsibilities" in my formal job description: "Protects the Stars and Stripes' First Amendment rights and its ability and obligation to provide a free flow of news and information to the DoD military community."

So, while I take that journalism values role seriously — and I look into concerns from dodgy headlines to political bias to insensitive coverage of fatalities — this column is about protecting Stars and Stripes' *ability and obligation* to perform its mission.

As you may have heard, the Defense Department wants to shut down Stars and Stripes. In the FY21 budget submitted to Congress, which would take effect Oct. 1, the expected \$15.5 million appropriation for Stars is zero. Wiped out.

What graver threat to Stars' mission could there be?

The straightforward solution is for Con-

gress to restore the appropriation and let the Pentagon leadership know that Stars and Stripes is not to be silenced. I take it as my duty to work for that, and you may want to give your representatives your views, too. Historically, Stars and Stripes has had strong, bipartisan support in Congress, and it may come through again.

The stakes are clear. In a proposed Pentagon budget of \$705.4 billion, \$15.5 million may sound like a rounding error, as the bean counters say. But in Stars' annual expense budget of about \$28.5 million, it's a fatal cut.

Here's how that \$15.5 million appropriation divides up, using the DOD comptroller's accounting for the current year:

- \$6.1 million is Overseas Contingency Operations funding, which fluctuates with the operational posture downrange. These days, it's spread across reporting, printing and distribution in Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan, the Persian Gulf and expanded forces in Eastern Europe. Without that appropriation, Stars can't report and distribute the paper downrange.

- The remaining \$9.4 million covers part of Stars' Operations and Maintenance costs, including basic journalism, web services and business operations where troops are deployed elsewhere around the world.

To cover the rest of its expenses, Stars earns revenue from advertising and subscriptions, as commercial news organizations do. But to argue, as some do, that it should be 100% self-funding is to misunderstand the costly challenge of providing reliable, independent news and information to troops spread wide across the globe

— not only downrange, but also in isolated posts such as Guam or Diego Garcia. No commercial business model could wind up in the black against that challenge. It's not a market, it's a mission.

And what's the purpose of that mission? To provide the credible news the troops, dependents and DOD civilians overseas deserve, so they can better exercise their own rights as they serve democracy far from home. Some say the mission is obsolete, that there's plenty of news available from other sources today, especially online. But internet access is poor or restricted on many posts, especially away from work areas, and troops are sometimes not allowed to bring their own mobile devices.

Just as important, most of Stars reporting is unique content, not covered by other news organizations. Where others focus on big-picture geopolitics, Stars reporters are on bases and in the field. Sometimes that's local news, both good works and bad behavior. Or DODEA sports and academics, which would go uncovered otherwise. It's often about troops in harm's way. Lately, the coronavirus threat has highlighted Stars reporters' unmatched reach, with timely and exclusive on-the-scene coverage from Daegu, Iwakuni, Aviano, Kaiserslautern and many other locations.

Stars also publishes useful guides that help PCS-ing troops and families get set in a new location; community-oriented weeklies with local events, notices and advertising; and service-oriented content about such topics as financial planning, educational opportunities and transitioning to civilian life.

Stars audiences can get all of that in print, on the web, or on the screens of their mobile devices. Started by soldiers during the Civil War and published continuously since World War II, Stars today is a contemporary multimedia news organization.

Congress has long supported Stars and Stripes. I've talked with House and Senate staff members already, and hope to talk with their bosses. If you want to tell your own members of Congress to keep the Pentagon from silencing Stars and Stripes, go to <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials> for help with contact information.

Restoring the \$15.5 million before Oct. 1 is essential, but that's only one budget cycle. Long term, this is a question of value. What's Stars and Stripes' value to you? Please give me your answers by email (ombudsman@stripes.com), on Facebook or on Twitter.

So I'll keep responding to readers' concerns and holding the newsroom accountable. And I'll keep making the case to PAOs to live up to the DOD Principles of Information and respect Stars reporters' access and opportunity. Those are the responsibilities of my job, too.

But none of that adds up to much, does it, if this budget cut stops the presses and makes the screens go blank?

Ernie Gates is the independent ombudsman for Stars and Stripes, a congressionally mandated position in which his charge is to hold the newsroom accountable to journalism values and to defend it from command interference or censorship. He worked as a reporter and editor for more than 30 years in Virginia, where he lives today.