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MEMORANDUM FOR SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, PETE HEGSETH

FROM: ROBERT SWEETMAN

SUBJECT: Weaponizing Wellness: Fueling Lethality Through Optimal Health

In peace and war, the lack of sleep works like termites in a house: below the surface, gnawing quietly and unseen to produce gradual weakening, which can lead to sudden and unexpected collapse.
—Major General Aubrey Newman (Follow Me, 1981, p. 279)

Executive Summary

Since the Cold War, the U.S. military has not faced a credible first-world threat. If that day ever comes, will we be ready? Chronic sleep deprivation undermines force readiness, reduces morale, and escalates healthcare costs, posing a significant threat to the U.S. military's operational effectiveness. High-profile incidents—such as the 2017 collisions involving the USS *Fitzgerald* and the USS *John S. McCain* that claimed 17 sailors' lives—spotlight the immediate risks of fatigue in demanding operational environments. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) confirmed these dangers in an April 11, 2024, report on combat effectiveness, echoing the findings of a comprehensive 282-page RAND Corporation study (*Sleep in the Military*, 2015).

Research consistently shows that inadequate rest endangers mission success, drives up mental health concerns (including suicidality), and decreases job satisfaction and retention—collectively costing the Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs billions of dollars (1. Effects of Sleep Deprivation, 2. Lack of Sleep, 3. Lack Sleep). Addressing this issue requires decisive leadership and a multi-pronged effort spanning policy reforms, cultural change, medical research, and technological solutions.

This memorandum identifies sleep deprivation as an urgent problem and proposes a clear path to improvement. A dedicated team—integrating leaders from diverse commands, experts in sleep science, budget specialists, and frontline operators—can spearhead solutions such as standardized rest policies, circadian-aligned scheduling, enhanced sleep environments, and data-driven interventions. By prioritizing proper rest, the U.S. government stands to save taxpayers significant funds, retain a healthier force, and ultimately increase the lethality and global competitiveness of the American military as potential first-world threats emerge.

Background

Sleep deprivation within the U.S. military results from a combination of operational demands, cultural norms, and systemic shortfalls. According to the *Defense Health Agency* (4), high operational tempos and shift work often disrupt circadian rhythms, leaving service members with insufficient rest. Scheduling 8 hours of sleep is not enough to solve the problem. There must be circadian alignment within that opportunity. Research published in *Military Medicine* (5) highlights how inconsistent duty hours and extended deployments exacerbate this issue, potentially leading to higher rates of accidents and reduced readiness.

Across all service branches, news outlets like the *Navy Times* (6) and *Marine Corps Times* (7) consistently report on tight schedules and demanding fitness standards—evident in discussions around the Army Combat Fitness Test (8)—that drive service members to sacrifice rest for physical training. In the

short term, inadequate rest impacts physical training performance as well as the sailor's ability to achieve the desired training effect, while in the long term, chronic fatigue can worsen mental health and erode overall morale, as underscored in recent studies published in *JAMA Health Forum* (9) and *JAMA Network Open* (10).

Meanwhile, the *RAND Corporation* (11) has detailed how insufficient sleep directly impairs mission effectiveness. These studies have shown that sleep-deprived pilots experience significant degradation in reaction times and situational awareness. This has been directly linked to an increased rate of aviation accidents during combat and training missions. Additional findings in *BMJ Military Health* (12) reveal that operational environments—from submarines to forward operating bases—often lack the conditions needed for adequate rest. These sleep deficits come with a hefty price tag: estimates place the Department of Defense's annual losses in the billions of dollars due to increased healthcare costs, avoidable mishaps, reduced productivity, and early separations from service.

In a Report to Congressional Armed Services Committees titled "Study on Effects of Sleep Deprivation on Readiness of Members of the Armed Forces" (13), the heavy cost of sleep deprivation is identified as:

- Increased Risk of Accidents and Injuries
- Impaired Cognitive and Physical Performance
- Higher Prevalence of Mental Health Issues
- Reduced Operational Readiness.

Despite guidance from organizations like *Health.mil* (14), *Navy Medicine* (15), *Air Force Medical Service* (16), and *Marine Corps University* (17), systemic issues persist. Even initiatives such as command resilience programs NAS Patuxent River Instruction (18) and Marine Corps Policy Letter (19) have not been able to ignite a service-wide shift.

The Air Force (19) highlights the critical role of sleep in optimizing performance and ensuring mission success. Specific mandatory sleep durations for pilots are outlined in the instruction. The Air Force promotes good sleep hygiene and recognizes that most adults require between seven and nine hours of sleep each night. This is essential for coping with stress, solving problems, and recovering from illness or injury. Insufficient sleep can lead to drowsiness, irritability, and concentration issues. Understanding these root causes—cultural, logistical, and environmental—remains vital to crafting interventions that protect warfighter health and preserve billions in defense spending.

The Navy has established clear guidelines to prioritize adequate rest for its personnel. Naval Postgraduate School provides resources and guidance on implementing circadian-based watchbills to optimize crew performance (20). For example, the USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77) has implemented circadian-based watch schedules to improve sailor performance and well-being (21). Despite these guidelines, challenges remain in ensuring compliance. Reports indicate that sailors often receive less sleep than mandated due to operational demands and scheduling practices. For instance, a 2023 report highlighted that sailors in the surface fleet averaged about 5.25 hours of sleep per day, falling short of the Navy's goal of providing at least 7.5 hours of sleep per day (22).

Problem Statement

"As Dr. John Cordle, retired Navy Captain, aptly noted: 'If you showed up for watch drunk, you would likely stand Captain's Mast. Yet, we allow sailors to show up to watch underslept, which impairs cognitive performance to the same degree.'"

Chronic sleep deprivation poses a significant threat to the U.S. military's operational

effectiveness, impacting service members across the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard. High operational tempos—often characterized by shift work, nighttime missions, and insufficient recovery periods—combine with a military culture that prizes constant readiness to create conditions in which chronic fatigue becomes the norm. These factors diminish combat effectiveness, situational awareness, and contribute to a broader cluster of interrelated physical and psychological conditions known as Operator Syndrome (23). Traditionally associated with Special Operations Forces, Operator Syndrome illustrates how insufficient sleep, elevated stress, and repeated exposure to trauma erode both short-term performance and long-term health.

Poor sleep health exacerbates a range of mission-critical problems and has long-term impacts on service member well-being and readiness. From an operational standpoint, fatigued personnel experience slower reaction times, impaired decision-making, and reduced situational awareness, all of which increase the likelihood of accidents and tactical errors. Chronic sleep loss is also consistently linked to higher incidences of mental health disorders—such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress—placing additional strain on the military's medical system and support services.

Moreover, poor sleep health contributes to chronic disease and metabolic dysfunction, including obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular conditions. These health issues further undermine physical performance, endurance, and recovery, compounding operational risks and increasing medical costs. On an institutional level, the cumulative impact of sleep-related health problems reduces retention and recruitment rates, degrades unit cohesion, and erodes overall morale, ultimately weakening the military's operational effectiveness.

In the broader context of national security, the consequences of inadequate sleep reverberate far beyond individual well-being. When compounded across the entire force, reduced cognitive performance and physical readiness can diminish the lethality of America's military, resulting in strategic vulnerabilities. Indeed, costly mishaps, decreased deployability, and a shrinking pool of combat-ready volunteers can hamper the nation's ability to project power and safeguard interests around the globe. Consequently, addressing sleep deprivation is not a peripheral concern but a critical national defense priority that demands coordinated, evidence-based interventions.

Analysis

Scheduling and Policy Reforms

- Align duty rosters with natural circadian rhythms and establish service-wide minimum rest periods.
- Leverage existing fatigue management models from the Navy and Air Force.

Cultural and Leadership Initiatives

- Recognize adequate rest as a "combat multiplier," moving away from the mindset that sleep deprivation equals toughness.
- Discourage drinking alcohol (sleep disruptor) during Liberty.
- Emphasize sleep's importance at all command levels, supported by updated policies (e.g., NAS Patuxent River Instruction (18)).

Medical and Scientific Measures

- Examine screenings for *Operator Syndrome*, which combines insufficient sleep with high stress and repetitive trauma exposure.
- Expand military sleep research and clinical services, leveraging studies in *BMJ Military Health* (24) to inform preventive strategies.

Technological and Environmental Enhancements

- Use wearable sleep trackers to provide real-time fatigue data and inform scheduling.
- Collect as data/dashboard for command decisions, fitness for duty requirements.
- Improve living quarters (e.g., noise reduction, blackout curtains) and adopt alertness monitoring tools.

Training, Education and Incentives

- Embed sleep hygiene content in leadership courses and basic training, as recommended by Navy Medicine (25) and Air Force Medical Service (26).
- Offer recognition or rewards to units meeting sleep-readiness benchmarks.

Budget and Logistical Considerations

- Conduct cost-benefit analyses using *RAND Corporation* (11) and *Defense Health Agency* (4) data to demonstrate savings in healthcare and reduced mishaps.
- Fund sleep-related initiatives centrally to expedite technology adoption and infrastructure upgrades.

Fueling Lethality Through Optimal Health: Recommendations

1. Summary of the Problem

Chronic sleep deprivation undermines mission effectiveness, raises healthcare costs, and leads to expensive errors. Addressing this issue has become a critical national defense priority, backed by research from the RAND Corporation and other reputable sources.

2. Proposed Roles and Governance Structure

1. **Director of Resilience and Human Factors**
    - Serves as a central authority to coordinate and guide policy reforms, technological adoptions, and training programs.
    - Oversees data collection, liaises with each service branch, and reports directly to senior DoD leadership.
2. **Sleep and Readiness Advisory Council**
    - Composed of representatives from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and key defense agencies.
    - Includes medical professionals, logisticians, and operational experts who can tailor solutions to each service's unique needs.

3. Best Path to Success

- **Policy Alignment:** Standardize minimum rest requirements and circadian-based scheduling across all service branches.
- **Cultural Shift:** Elevate sleep to the same priority level as physical fitness, reinforcing that adequate rest is integral to combat readiness.
- **Data-Driven Decisions:** Implement wearable sleep monitoring and alertness testing to identify high-risk situations before they escalate.

Based on existing evidence, these measures have the highest potential for immediate impact on force readiness and lethality. Industry benchmarks suggest that organizations with robust fatigue-management programs see up to a 30–50% drop in error-related incidents, which can translate into millions of dollars in annual savings (27).

4. Estimated Cost Savings

- **Reduced Healthcare Expenditures:** Chronic fatigue contributes to physical and mental health issues, costing the DoD billions yearly. A sustained 10–15% decrease in sleep-related health claims could yield hundreds of millions of dollars in savings.
- **Fewer Mishaps and Accidents:** Declining accident rates minimize property damage, reduce legal liabilities, and lower expenses associated with unplanned downtime.
- **Improved Retention and Recruitment:** Service members with better work-life balance are more likely to reenlist, potentially saving millions in recruitment and training costs.

Conservatively, these combined efforts could save the DoD an estimated **$1–2 billion** (27) over the next five years, while drastically improving operational safety and combat effectiveness. This effort would be in alignment with dozens of other initiatives that need better support from the Pentagon, thereby better utilizing dollars that have already been spent.

5. Recommendation

I respectfully request your endorsement to establish myself as the **Director of Resilience and Human Factors** and create the **Sleep & Readiness Advisory Council.** These initiatives will reduce fatigue-related mishaps, improve military lethality, and save billions in taxpayer dollars.

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Supporting Resources

1. https://health.mil/Reference-Center/Reports/2021/02/26/Study-on-Effects-of-Sleep-Deprivation-on-Readiness-of-Members-of-the-Armed-Forces-Final-Report
2. https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/2023/12/12/a-lack-of-sleep-is-breaking-the-us-military/
3. https://www.gao.gov/blog/lack-sleep-has-left-our-military-less-combat-ready-and-more-prone-accidents-dire-consequences
4. https://ph.health.mil/topics/campaigns/hof/Pages/default.aspx
5. https://academic.oup.com/milmed/article/189/Supplement_3/3/7735979
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10. https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2823674
11. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR739.html
12. https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/early/2023/11/10/military-2023-002565
13. https://health.mil/Reference-Center/Reports/2021/02/26/Study-on-Effects-of-Sleep-Deprivation-on-Readiness-of-Members-of-the-Armed-Forces-Final-Report
14. https://health.mil/
15. https://www.med.navy.mil/
16. https://www.airforcemedicine.af.mil/
17. https://www.usmcu.edu/
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20. https://www.airforcemedicine.af.mil/Resources/Health-Promotion/Sleep-Optimization/
21. https://nps.edu/web/crewendurance
22. https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3161943/mission-crew-health-and-warfighter-resiliency/
23. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32052666/
24. https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/early/2023/11/10/military-2023-002565
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26. https://www.airforcemedicine.af.mil
27. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-105917