

December 2, 2025

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Chairman
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Need for Immediate Public Hearings on Lethal Strikes on Boats Off Venezuela, Including on Thursday with Adm. Frank M. Bradley; Need for Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth to Testify at an Immediate Public Hearing

Dear Chairman Wicker and Ranking Member Reed:

The American Civil Liberties Union is grateful for your joint public commitment to investigate recent lethal strikes against small boats in waters off Venezuela. Recognizing the importance of the committee's investigation for all Americans concerned about what appear to be murderous acts ordered by government officials, we write today to strongly urge you, as part of the committee's investigation, to hold immediate public hearings to begin to bring transparency and accountability, with the objective of ensuring an end to illegal strikes.

In particular, we urge the Committee to hold an open hearing in conjunction with the closed-door briefing reportedly scheduled for Thursday with Adm. Frank M. Bradley, who was the commander for the strikes against a boat on September 2. He reportedly directed one or more additional strikes after an initial strike had left a damaged boat with two survivors. There is no reason why the Committee needs to close to the public the entirety of its briefing with Bradley. There is ample precedent for the Committee to hold public hearings on militarily, diplomatically, or legally sensitive topics, while beginning or ending the hearing with a closed session to discuss classified matters. Along with Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, Bradley appears to be one of the two most important potential witnesses, and his testimony and questions by senators should be in

a public hearing, even if there may be a need for any responses that include classified information to be reserved for a closed-door portion of the hearing.

Moreover, the Committee should invite and require Secretary Hegseth to testify in an immediate public hearing on the strikes, including in particular on the strikes of September 2. When confronted more than twenty years ago with reports of horrific and criminal conduct in a military operation—with publication of photos of torture being used by U.S. personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, your predecessors, then-Chairman John Warner and then-Ranking Member Carl Levin, called immediate public hearings. Then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld testified at the first public hearing in the Committee, which was held on May 7, 2004, just nine days after the photos were first shown on *60 Minutes*. That public hearing was the first of many held by the Committee. The Committee should follow on that precedent and bring in Secretary Hegseth to testify about the boat strikes within the next several days.

While there may be an array of topics to raise in public hearings on the boat strikes, ranging from operations to objectives to the law, it is important to highlight here that the Committee should not limit its oversight to the second strike on September 2. As horrific and criminal as the second strike would be even in times of war, the first strike as well was criminal, given the absence of an armed conflict. While addressing the unfathomable cruelty and criminality of ordering and carrying out a strike on survivors clinging to a damaged boat is important, upholding the rule of law and ensuring the military is not using lethal force against alleged drug runners or others when there is no armed conflict is also urgent.

Again, the ACLU thanks you and the Committee for initiating an investigation, and we urge you to commence public hearings as a way to ensure an end to illegal killing. Please do not hesitate to contact Christopher Anders at canders@aclu.org with any questions.

Sincerely,

Christopher Anders
Director, Democracy and Technology Division