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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 7, 2008

Major General Rick Lynch, USA
Commanding General
Multi-National Division – Center
3rd Infantry Division

Dear General Lynch:

I am writing to appeal for clemency for Sergeant Evan Vela, a constituent from the state of Idaho assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, based at Fort Richardson, Alaska.

As I understand the facts of the case, Sgt. Vela followed an order from his superior on the reasonable premise that his unit's position would be compromised. Yet, he received the harshest punishment among the co-accused. In addition to conflicting accounts of the rules of engagement, I have strong concerns over reports of Sgt. Vela's physical and mental conditions at the time of the incident. There are a number of mitigating factors and extenuating circumstances in this case that make a compelling argument for clemency, and that I urge you to reconsider in your post-trial review.

As you well know, the unique nature of the current conflict in Iraq has introduced new challenges for the United States government and military. Too often and to the detriment of our troops, the same political considerations of nation-building weighed by elected officials and commanders on the ground are also shouldered by military men and women carrying out day-to-day security and stabilization missions in combat zones. The safety and success of our men and women in uniform would be seriously jeopardized if every service member was subjected to the same scrutiny for their actions during combat as in Sgt. Vela's case.

While citizens of Iraq and Iraqi leaders may have strong interest in the outcome of this case, I urge you to consider the compelling message sent to fellow soldiers on the ground as they continue in their mission. Most of us cannot imagine the stress that those in uniform undergo when they have to make a split-second decision whether to fire or be fired upon, to kill or be killed. This War, especially one characterized by dangerously close combat scenarios, insurgent warfare, and constant uncertainty and confusion about friend or foe, does not provide the luxury of clear circumstances or marked enemies that better afford more identifiably right or wrong decisions to exercise deadly force.

WASHINGTON, DC
239 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 224-6142

IDAHO STATE
251 East Front Street
Suite 205
Boise, ID 83702

SOUTHWESTERN
524 E. Cleveland Blvd.
Suite 220
Caldwell, ID 83605

NORTH IDAHO
610 Hubbard
Suite 209
Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814

EASTERN IDAHO, NORTH
490 Memorial Drive
Suite 102
Idaho Falls, ID 83402

NORTH-CENTRAL
313 D Street
Suite 105
Lewiston, ID 83501

EASTERN IDAHO, SOUTH
275 S. 5th Avenue
Suite 225
Pocatello, ID 83201

SOUTH-CENTRAL
202 Falls Avenue
Suite 2
Twin Falls, ID 83301

Furthermore, soldiers are trained to follow orders issued to facilitate order and safety on the battlefield. When orders issued in high stress situations, such as Sgt. Vela found himself, contravene order, safety and perhaps the Rules of Engagement, more than one individual must be held accountable for the outcome, and the responsibility for errors in judgment must be shared by all involved. The outcome of this case could create an environment where under fire or in a threatening situation could hesitate to defend themselves or their comrades from a perceived threat. In my view, the final judgment in Sgt. Vela's case calls into question the standard evaluation of basic rules of engagement, creating uncertain and dangerous operational environments for commanders and soldiers involved in day-to-day combat missions.

Just as you and Sgt. Vela wear the same uniform, Sgt. Vela and I share a state and community identity. I trust you will give this decision all the fairness and consideration that Sgt. Vela, as a member of the United States military, deserves and has earned with his service. While Evan Vela may never again wear the uniform of a soldier in the U.S. Army, I urge you to consider granting Sgt. Vela the ability to continue service to his country. The discipline and dedication which served him in the Army will continue to serve him in future years.

On behalf of Idaho and the United States, I would like to express my sincere gratitude and respect for your service to our country. I appreciate your attention and consideration of this request for clemency for Sgt. Vela.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mike Crapo". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mike Crapo
United States Senator