

Letters to the Editor



Letters to the Editor should be sent to letters@thetimes.co.uk or by post to 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF



Vulnerable schools

Sir, My grandson has just called me to say that his school will be closing at the end of the summer term ("Berry's old school blames taxes for closure", Jan 22). As a former headmaster and chairman of the Boarding Schools Association I am well aware of the damage to independent schools caused by the government's actions. But now this has become personal. The pupil in question has followed at Rendcomb College in the footsteps of his father, whose dyslexia was wonderfully remedied by the school's pastoral enrichment. Such schools — medium-sized, mostly boarding and incredibly decent — are particularly vulnerable to the harsh climate of rapidly imposed VAT on school fees. This week, the government urged independent schools to open satellite branches in such places as the Gulf states and southeast Asia. Apart from the rank hypocrisy, this presumes schools have the capacity to do so. The large and great independent schools will survive, but the end result will be to make private education more elitist and divisive.

Trump's affront to UK troops in Afghanistan

Sir, Sadly, in my time as HM senior coroner for Greater Manchester South, I was obliged to hold a number of inquests into some of the fallen in Afghanistan (and Iraq) and without doubt they were some of the most poignant and distressing hearings I held ("Trump: Nato troops avoided front line in Afghanistan", Jan 23).

The comrades of the fallen came to court to give evidence to me, often still bearing the effects of their own wounds, and they spoke with gravity and dignity about the "very much front line" action in which they were involved. They never sought to embellish or glamorise their role. For President Trump to suggest Nato was in some way a second-string support unit is a dreadful slur on the memory of those who died and shows a lack of respect for all the veterans. **Professor John Pollard** Congleton, Cheshire

Sir, As the consultant general surgeon at Camp Bastion Hospital in Helmand province during Prince Harry's first tour in 2008, I saw at first hand a career's worth of horrific injuries to British troops and to our allies on the front line of the US war on terror during a few short months. It is clear that we need to maintain lines of communication with our friends in the US in anticipation of

better times again, but cancellation of a royal visit this year is surely now needed to signal an end to the shaming political abasement of the White House in the past year.

David Rew Southampton

Sir, My family paid a high price during Operation Enduring Freedom, the US-led coalition operation in Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks. My brother-in-law, Squadron Leader Anthony Downing, lost his life near Kabul in 2011. For Trump to say Nato wouldn't turn up for the US is disingenuous at best. It is an offence to his memory, and that of the other 456 members of the British armed forces who lost their lives — and others who have sadly taken their own lives in the years since.

Jayne Green Perranwell Station, Cornwall

Sir, Trump's comments about UK troops in Afghanistan are a grotesque distortion of the truth. Trump routinely causes offence, but this crosses a line, and is deeply ironic for a man who deferred the draft to Vietnam on five occasions. He has shown yet again how deeply unsuited he is to high office.

Lt Col (ret'd) Martyn Thomas Raglan, Monmouthshire

Sir, Ideally Trump should be challenged by the commander-in-chief of our own armed forces, the King. Convention wisely prohibits this, but it could be done on his behalf by his prime minister, and this he must do if he is to retain the full confidence of our servicemen and women.

Air Vice-Marshal (ret'd) David Crwys-Williams Ashendon, Bucks

Sir, Canadian soldiers served in Afghanistan with British, US and Nato allies in a country where everywhere was the front line. In 2002-2003 and 2005-2011, Canadian soldiers fought alongside Afghan and Nato partners to secure Kandahar province. More than 40,000 Canadians served in Afghanistan; 158 died. **Alexander McPherson** Toronto, Canada

Sir, I had Trump stood in the rain with the crowds in Taunton in November 2010 to welcome home Royal Marines of 40 Commando from their tour of duty in the Sangin district of Helmand; he would never have made his crass comments. The Somerset-based unit lost 14 men in their six-month tour and almost 50 were wounded, some with life-changing injuries.

Tina Rowe Ilchester, Somerset

Police leadership

Sir, There would be no need to create a police leadership commission ("Police chief selection is failing, watchdog warns", Jan 22), if the procedure implemented under the 1964 Police Act had not been abolished with the arrival of the police and crime commissioners in 2012. Under that model, the local chair made the appointment, with the approval of the home secretary. The system is also failing owing to the myopic decision to close the Police Staff College at Bramshill, Hampshire, in 2015. The Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst is nearby and it is difficult to contemplate that it would suffer the same fate as Bramshill.

Peter Williams Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing, Liverpool John Moores University

Brits at the Oscars

Sir, The Oscar nominations ("Wildcard turns favourite at Oscars", Jan 23) give us the chance to celebrate some remarkable British achievements. In the original score category three of the five nominations are for Brits: for Jerskin Fendrix (*Bugonia*), Jonny Greenwood (*One Battle After Another*) and Max Richter (*Hamnet*). Another Brit, Nina Gold, is nominated in the inaugural best casting category for her work on *Unsettled*. She has already won five

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Donald Trump has a unique knack for grabbing the global headlines on a daily basis. The more offensive or outrageous the headlines, the greater is the press coverage. It is nevertheless important that we maintain perspective and good relations with the many American friends and wellwishers who will outlive the present US administration.

The anger that was caused by his comments on military service for the American cause of which he has no personal experience, on January 22nd 2026, caused predictable offense in the UK, and I suspect that The Times had a very large postbag in the subject.

It was therefore very kind of the Letters Editors to post my own contribution, along with that of my good friend Martyn Thomas from my Brecon life, who is also a regular contributor to the letters column.

Trump: NATO troops avoided the front line in Afghanistan

Larisa Brown - Defence Editor The Times Page 1 23rd January 2026

President Trump has angered veterans by falsely claiming European troops stayed “off the front lines” in Afghanistan, despite hundreds from Britain and other allied countries dying in combat.

In an interview with Fox News, Trump appeared to mock the role that the Europeans played in the conflict, saying: “We’ve never needed them.

They’ll say they sent some troops to Afghanistan ... and they did, they stayed a little back, a little off the front lines.”

He said the US had “been very good to Europe and to many other countries”, adding: “It has to be a two-way street.”

Britain lost 457 troops in Afghanistan, while another 2,000 military and civilian personnel were wounded.

France, Germany and Italy also suffered deaths. Denmark lost 44 soldiers, one of the highest per-head death tolls among coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Families of loved ones killed in Afghanistan noted there was no front line as such in Helmand because the Taliban planted improvised explosive devices and hid among the public. Ian Wright’s son Gary, 22, a Royal Marine from Scotland, was killed in 2006 when a suicide bomber detonated a device by his patrol vehicle in Lashkar Gah. He said: “There was no such thing as a front line ... the Taliban were not in any form of unit and not identifiable.”

Lord Sedwill, the former British ambassador to Afghanistan, told Times Radio that Trump's claim was "simply wrong" and that Afghanistan veterans and the families of those who died would be right to feel deeply offended.

He said: "The Americans took the burden but the UK and Denmark, for example, had a higher rate of casualties than the Americans ... and [they] were engaged in some of the most vicious fighting in some of the most dangerous areas ... It is simply wrong and there will again be many American veterans, including American veterans in Congress, who know that it's wrong."

Ben Hodges, a former commanding general of the US army in Europe, called the remarks sickening. He told Times Radio: "This is about as angry as I've been in quite some time. Look, I was in Kandahar from 2009 to 2010 ... when the bodies of soldiers from all those nations who've been killed were being flown home. There's no American soldier that believes what our president just said."

The Duke of Sussex, who was in the army for ten years, was deployed twice to Afghanistan. The King is expected to go to the United States for a state visit in April.

Matt Terrill, former chief of staff to Marco Rubio, the secretary of state, defended Trump's comments. He told Times Radio: "I think what the president is saying is he recognises what Nato has done, but he also recognises what Nato needs to do going forward.

And that is to be strong. And part of that is national defence spending."

Richard Williams, a former commanding officer of 22 SAS who led soldiers in Afghanistan, said it was worth remembering that none of the British or Nato operations could have happened without "vast quantities of US support".

Pete Hegseth, the secretary of war, has previously made light of the contributions of allies to the war in Afghanistan.

A veteran himself, he has said his fellow army national guardsmen would joke that the ISAF acronym on their shoulder patches — for International Security Assistance Force — really stood for "I saw Americans fighting".

Asked if Trump was aware of the 457 British deaths in Afghanistan or would acknowledge the sacrifice made by UK forces, Anna Kelly, the White House's deputy press secretary, said: "President Trump is right: he has done more for Nato than anyone. America's contributions to Nato dwarf that of other countries."

Sir Ed Davey, the Liberal Democrat leader, tweeted: "457 British troops lost their lives in Afghanistan. Trump avoided military service five times. How dare he question their sacrifice. [Nigel] Farage and all the others still fawning over Trump should be ashamed."