



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

January 6, 2020

The Honorable Donald J. Trump  
President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

In recent statements made on social media, you indicated that should Iran retaliate against the U.S. for the killing of General Qassem Soleimani, your administration would respond in turn by striking Iranian sites, including “some at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture[.]” Such an act, in addition to being a war crime under international law, would run opposite of the long-standing U.S. military policy of avoiding intentional damage to, and destruction of, cultural heritage sites.

SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to the research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With more than 7,500 members, SAA represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. SAA has members in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world.

Intentional destruction of cultural sites is a war crime, and for good reason. To engage in such activity is to attempt the erasure of entire peoples and their history from the world. The negative consequences of such policies to the world’s cultural heritage cannot be overestimated. It is an act that only the worst type of regimes have undertaken, including Nazi Germany, the Khmer Rouge, the Taliban, and the Islamic State.

The American military has a proud history of protecting places of cultural importance. In May of 1944, General Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force that was poised to invade the Continent on D-Day, issued a directive ordering the preservation of “centers of historical and cultural significance” except in cases of absolute military necessity. This was done, as Eisenhower noted, because those historical monuments and cultural centers symbolized to the entire world the very civilization that the Allies were fighting to save.

The U.S. Department of Defense made this core principle part of its Law of War Manual (Section 5.18.5), which specifically prohibits “acts of hostility ... directed against cultural property” in the absence of imperative military necessity. In addition, the preservation of cultural resources in areas of armed conflict is not just U.S. military policy. It is part of international law to which the U.S. is a party. In 2009, the U.S. ratified the 1954 Hague Convention on the

Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which reiterates the Department of Defense's provision.

The present-day nation of Iran encompasses lands that hold the physical remnants of human societies dating back more than 10,000 years—monuments universally considered to be of central importance in the shared heritage of all humanity. If the goal is to prevent widespread conflict in the region, to threaten that heritage with violence is the height of folly; to actually strike at their historic sites in the absence of military necessity would absolutely constitute not only a violation of long-standing U.S. military doctrine, but also a war crime.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joe Watkins".

Joe E. Watkins, Ph.D., RPA  
President