



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Confronting the Rise of Domestic Terrorism in the Homeland

May 8, 2019

The issue of domestic terrorism is not new. In fact, Democrats on our Committee have been following this issue for years. Over the last eight years, Democratic Members of this Committee sent request after request asking the then-Republican majority to hold hearings on domestic terrorism in the homeland. Each and every request was either ignored or denied. Instead, the victims and survivors of domestic terrorist attacks time and time again have been offered moments of silence and prayers, rather than Congressional action.

For those of you in the hearing room, what you see on the monitor screens are the images and headlines of the domestic terrorist attacks that have torn through our nation while the Republicans were in charge of this committee and the House of Representatives. To all of the victims, survivors, and communities who have felt like the terror you suffered was ignored or minimized, know that it ends today. Today is a new day—and this Committee's silence on domestic terrorism ends now. Because in recent years, we have seen a dramatic and disturbing rise in domestic terrorism—particularly far-right extremist violence tied to white supremacist extremism and white nationalism.

The few pieces of government data we have seen confirm that domestic terrorism is an urgent and growing threat to the homeland. In the last two years, there have been more domestic terrorism-related arrests than international-terrorism-related arrests. Last year, nearly all extremism-related murders in the United States were committed by right-wing domestic terrorists.

Of course, we only need to look at the news to know that this is a serious problem. Just two weeks ago, a domestic terrorist attacked Jewish worshipers at a synagogue near San Diego, killing one woman. In February, a former Coast Guard lieutenant was indicted after stockpiling weapons and drugs and planning attacks targeting prominent Democratic politicians, including a Member of this Committee, Ms. Jackson Lee. Last October, a domestic terrorist killed eleven Jewish worshipers at a synagogue in Pittsburgh. The same month, a domestic terrorist sent pipe bombs to Democratic politicians all across the country. And that is just in the last few months.

From Charleston to Oak Creek to Charlottesville to Garden City, we have seen these violent ideologies rear their ugly heads over and over. Unfortunately, President Trump has tried to play “both sides” with domestic terrorism. On April 26, 2019, President Trump doubled down on his stance that there were “fine people” on both sides of the August 2017 Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. His unwillingness to denounce and distance himself from these extremists has been taken by many as tacit support. The President, and all of us, must be willing to stand up to all ideologically motivated violence in America.

Unfortunately, far-right violent extremism is not limited to the United States. It is evolving into a global phenomenon. Earlier this year, the terrorist who killed 50 people and wounded 50 more at two mosques in New Zealand wrote that he was inspired by American and European far-right extremists. It is well past time to take action. But in order to really get a handle on this evolving threat, we need to understand it. The lack of public information on domestic terrorism coming out of the federal agencies is nothing short of alarming. What is the nature of the threat? And what is the government doing about it?

This hearing is the first step toward transparency, but there is much more information we need. That is why I am developing legislation to require the federal government to regularly and publicly report data on domestic terrorism. I am optimistic that it will be a bipartisan effort.

Finally, I want to welcome our witnesses from the Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Department of Homeland Security. I look forward to your testimony, but I want to be clear about my frustration with your agencies. After the attacks on mosques in New Zealand, I asked to speak with FBI Director Wray about domestic terrorism. To date, the FBI Director has not made himself available for a conversation. In early April, during a classified briefing on domestic terrorism, Members of this Committee asked you for several follow-up items and get-backs. My staff followed up many times over the last month. We only received get-backs from FBI on Monday night. We received incomplete get-backs from I&A last night. It has been more than a month. In fact, while all of the witnesses have known about this hearing and topic since April 3rd—more than a month ago—we received all of your testimony late yesterday evening, mere hours before today's hearing.

Further, despite a decade-long history of bipartisan briefings on threats to our nation, including domestic threats, threats from international terrorist organizations, and counterintelligence threats, the FBI decided to stop briefing this Committee on a monthly basis after the Democrats took the majority. Stonewalling this Committee in our efforts to carry out our Constitutional oversight duties is unacceptable. I urge the Justice Department, the FBI, and the Department of Homeland to recommit to working with this Committee on behalf of the American people.

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