



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

Righting The Ship: The Coast Guard Must Improve its Processes for Addressing Harassment, Bullying, and Retaliation

December 11, 2019

This is a critical hearing, and I thank the Members and witnesses for being here. Lieutenant Commander Young-McLear, in particular, deserves the Committees' gratitude for appearing before us. It is not easy for any whistleblower to come forward publicly, but doing so after having already suffered retaliation requires exceptional courage, determination, and a commitment to the well-being of fellow service members.

Today's hearing is the result of the tireless work and leadership of the late Chairman of the Committee on Oversight and Reform, Elijah Cummings, and his dedicated staff. Throughout his tenure in Congress, Chairman Cummings was a staunch supporter of the Coast Guard. Chairman Cummings served as Chairman of the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure from 2007 to 2010, and pushed the Coast Guard Academy to increase its recruitment and retention of cadets from minority communities. He also was a fierce defender of civil rights and pressed the Coast Guard to root out bullying, harassment, and discrimination in its ranks. Chairman Cummings knew that the Coast Guard workforce needs to reflect the diversity of this great nation—and I couldn't agree more. Congress will greatly miss his leadership in ensuring that the Coast Guard truly is "Semper Paratus"—always ready.

I would like to thank Chairwoman Maloney and her staff for picking up and carrying forward Chairman Cummings' work on these issues. I, too, have long been invested in the success of the Coast Guard and its critical homeland security missions, which include maritime law enforcement, drug and migrant interdictions, port security, and the protection of U.S. security and sovereignty throughout the world. I have also advocated for the Coast Guard to do more to better represent the country it serves, and perhaps nowhere is that more important than at the Coast Guard Academy. The Academy shapes the future leaders of the Coast Guard, as the largest source of its officer corps. That is why I am pleased that this year's Coast Guard Authorization Act incorporated language based on my bill, the Coast Guard Academy Act, which I introduced in June of this year with Chairmen Cummings, Correa, and Richmond as co-sponsors.

The language requires the Coast Guard to develop a plan to improve the recruitment and retention of minority cadets at the Academy and assess how to implement a congressional nominations process, among other measures. Creating an equitable climate at the Coast Guard Academy—for both cadets and faculty—is critical to the future success of the institution and the greater service. Such a climate can exist only if allegations of harassment and bullying are investigated appropriately and when whistleblowers are free to come forward without fear of retaliation. As such, I am dismayed that Academy leadership retaliated against Lieutenant Commander Kimberly Young-McLear after she made complaints about workplace bullying and harassment for years while serving as a faculty member at the Academy.

The DHS Office of Inspector General substantiated that retaliation occurred in a report issued last December. The complaint processes failed her, as Coast Guard leadership failed to truly investigate her allegations, which ultimately contributed to the retaliation she experienced. To date, the Coast Guard has not held anyone accountable for failing to investigate the Lieutenant Commander's claims or for the retaliation she suffered. Unfortunately, her story is not an isolated incident. The Committee has been made aware of similar recent occurrences of bullying, harassment, and

inequitable treatment across the service, including two other instances of whistleblower retaliation substantiated by the DHS Inspector General.

Lieutenant Commander Young-McLear, again, I am grateful to have you here today to share your story with us. I admire your bravery in coming forward and continuing to share your experiences despite the Coast Guard's repeated efforts to simply turn the page. It is time for the service to take your experiences and the findings of the DHS Office of Inspector General seriously. Repeated instances of substantiated retaliation demand the Commandant's immediate attention. It is unfortunate that Admiral Schultz refused our repeated requests to testify before our Committees today. His refusal to testify today is the latest in a series of actions by the Coast Guard and the Department of Homeland Security to stonewall the investigative efforts of our Committees over the past 18 months.

The Coast Guard has produced incomplete and heavily redacted documents related to our Committees' investigation, without any explanation for the redactions—which is unacceptable. This document is unacceptable. The lack of transparency and the resistance exhibited by the Coast Guard and its leadership during the course of our investigation has been truly troubling. Lieutenant Commander, it is telling that you have the courage to join us today to share your story, despite more than four years of adversity and retaliation—and yet, the Commandant is not here to speak for the Coast Guard. His absence is telling.

I would like to close by noting that the Coast Guard's biggest asset is not its fleet—but its people. If the service does not know how to take care of its own people, it cannot execute its critical mission to protect our homeland. The climate and cultural challenges at the Coast Guard Academy should not solely alarm the leadership at the Academy—but also Coast Guard headquarters. The culture at the Academy permeates the rest of the service. That is why it is critical that Coast Guard leadership address these serious matters now.

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Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978