

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****DHS in Today's Dangerous World: Examining the Department's Budget and Readiness to Counter Homeland Threats***

March 16, 2016 (WASHINGTON) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “DHS in Today’s Dangerous World: Examining the Department’s Budget and Readiness to Counter Homeland Threats”:

“Today’s hearing title, “DHS in Today’s Dangerous World: Examining the Department’s Budget and Readiness to Counter Homeland Threats” invites us to take a broad look at the threats that we face in the United States and how DHS is positioned to challenge them.

Mr. Secretary, the current threat posed by foreign terrorist organizations such as ISIL and Al Qaeda is significant and rightfully receives extensive attention. However, at the same time, anti-government and militia groups grew by one-third in 2015. In a study by the Triangle Center at Duke University, 74 percent of law enforcement identified anti-government groups as the top terrorist threats in their jurisdictions. Last year, we also witnessed a troubling surge of domestic terrorist groups.

Mr. Secretary, you have stated that we have moved to a world that includes the threat of terrorist-inspired attacks—where terrorists are motivated by something on the Internet. Both right-wing extremists and foreign-inspired terrorists have used the Internet to organize and plan attacks. For instance, just this weekend, a militia group organized on Twitter to attend presidential campaign events.

Mr. Secretary, I want to hear from you how the Department is maintaining situational awareness and response capabilities during this increasingly violent and volatile presidential campaign season. I know that the Department has long recognized the threat from violent extremism and in 2015 established the Office for Community Partnerships.

In its budget, the Department requests 49 million dollars for Countering Violent Extremism grants for emergent threats from “violent extremism” and “complex coordinated attacks”. To date, the Department has provided Congress with little information on how these grants will be distributed. I would hope that contained within forthcoming grant guidance are instructions for some of the funding to be directed at the prevention of right-wing extremist attacks.

Mr. Secretary, as you have stated, and as both sides of the aisle agree, it is the state or local cop on that may prevent the next terrorist attack. With right-wing attacks on the rise and ISIL recruiting within our borders, it is baffling that cuts to the state and local grant preparedness grants programs are in this budget. Nearly 500 million dollars are slated to be cut under your budget request. I do not believe the Department’s budget should be so focused on being balanced on the backs of first responders. I want to hear from you, Mr. Secretary, about how you expect the proposed cuts to affect the ability of State and local response capabilities.

Another area of concern is the staffing level at our nation’s airports. The Federal Aviation Administration is projecting passenger growth at a rate of two percent a year, making this summer one of the busiest in recent years. I continue to hear from large airports that have the infrastructure for many security lanes, but due to staffing shortages, they can only use a small number of lanes.

Given the forecast of increased passenger volume, along with underutilized checkpoints, I am concerned that congested screening lines will create another vulnerability.

I need to hear more from you than encouragement that travelers join PreCheck. I need to know how you intend to tackle this problem. I am also concerned that your budget still requests funds for TSA's behavioral detection program, which still has not been scientifically proven to disrupt terrorist activity. Additionally, I remain concerned about the Secret Service. I am supportive of the budget requests that reflect the recommendations of the Protective Mission Panel and the Office of Inspector General. However, I cannot stress enough that the Secret Service can not enter a new chapter with an ugly cloud of a decades long racial discrimination suit hanging over its head.

Finally, Mr. Secretary, the Department has the third-largest workforce in the Federal government and faces low employee morale. You have personally committed to improving morale and workforce satisfaction. It seems as if we still cannot get out of the planning phase. Low retention rates are concerning, especially within the Border Patrol. CBP does not anticipate reaching its staffing goal in the current fiscal year. This has an impact on the Department's readiness. We have a shared goal of moving the Department forward. By working with you and across the components, the Department should be ready to counter homeland threats."

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