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Opening Statement

Chairman Jamie Raskin (MD-08)

Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Hearing

“Confronting Violent White Supremacy (Part V): Examining the Rise of Militia Extremism”

May 26, 2021

Good afternoon. Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today and thank you to Chairwoman Maloney for lending your support to this critical hearing. I also want to take a moment to recognize that yesterday was the one-year anniversary of the murder of George Floyd. This hearing is part of our Subcommittee’s ongoing work to expose the depths of white supremacist violence in this country and our legislative efforts to counter it.

On January 6th, domestic extremists invaded the Capitol and laid siege to the Congress to overthrow our election and our Constitution. They threatened to hang Vice-President Mike Pence and Speaker Nancy Pelosi, caused five deaths and injured more than 140 police officers, who lost fingers, lost an eye, suffered a heart attack, and endured traumatic brain injuries. The insurrectionists disrupted the peaceful transfer of power and threatened to bring about a bloody end to American democracy. The insurrection should have been a wake-up call to all those who had spent years minimizing and whitewashing the violence of the far-right. The people who stormed the Capitol were not “patriots” or “tourists.”

If January 6th was a tourist visit, the Civil War was a Nature Hike.

In this hearing, we are going to focus a spotlight on the organized paramilitary groups—such as the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters—that helped to plan the violent coup at the center of the insurrection and lent military-grade tactical knowledge and strategy to the mob violence that overtook Congress.

Both groups are part of the expanding network of militia violent extremists—referred to in federal law enforcement as “MVEs”—that have become the nationwide organizational backbone of far-right violent extremism. In a March 2021 report, the Director of National Intelligence identified MVEs as one of the most lethal domestic terror threats facing our Nation and warned that they would “take overt steps to violently resist or facilitate the overthrow” of our government.

Militia-based violent extremists established themselves as a key force in the far-right extremist coalition well before January 6. The same militia groups that later scaled the walls of the Capitol spent the past year organizing opposition to public health measures designed to curb the spread of COVID-19. Their armed demonstrations resulted in multiple hostile takeovers of state capitols. Lawless militia extremists even plotted the kidnapping and murder of Governor

Gretchen Whitmer. As I said at the impeachment trial of Donald Trump, this Michigan conspiracy was a dress rehearsal and dry run for the January 6th insurrection against America.

The militia groups like to depict themselves as part of a so-called “Patriot Movement” standing up to tyrannical federal overreach. They often assert they are not racist and can point to the fact that the FBI and DHS categorize militia extremists separately from white supremacists.

But this artificial division totally ignores the history of the militia movement, which arose out of the vigilante gangs of the Jim Crow South and coalesced into a “Christian Patriot” movement that fused anti-government activism with racist conspiracy theories.

Historian Kathleen Belew, a witness at one of our earlier hearings on violent white supremacy, wrote that the growth of the modern militia movement in the 1990s was “framed by the same worldview, logic, and symbols that had long structured white power activism and violence.” She has also observed that it is a mistake to draw too many fine ideological distinctions among different factions of far-right extremists instead of treating them as all part of broader racist “social movement.”

We saw that racist social movement in action this summer, when militia groups and white supremacists acted together to assault activists at racial justice protests. Militias made at least 55 appearances at racial justice rallies last year, illegitimately claiming authority to patrol American streets. Their vigilantism sometimes turned deadly—as we saw in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where 17-year-old self-proclaimed militia member Kyle Rittenhouse traveled from Illinois with an assault weapon and killed two protesters, grievously wounding another.

The case of Mr. Rittenhouse also exposes the alarming intersection between militia extremists and law enforcement. Kenosha police reportedly told Rittenhouse and his fellow militiamen that they “appreciated” their presence, even though they were all heavily armed and flagrantly violating a curfew order. Elsewhere in the country, police acquiesced to vigilante activity by militias. **Recruitment of law enforcement is a key strategic objective of major militias like the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters. Leaked data from the Oath Keepers shockingly suggests that two-thirds of its members are retired or active duty law enforcement.**

This morning, I sent a [letter](#) to Secretary Mayorkas seeking information about DHS’ strategy to combat militia extremism. But we also need to examine structural reforms more seriously, including whether the overly complex taxonomies of far-right extremism undermine our ability to respond to the broad movement of vigilantes who have organized to violently oppose our multiracial constitutional democracy. We have also spoken to several state attorneys general who emphasize that there is not enough federal support for coordinating regional responses to militia extremism or sharing information about potential threats.

The so-called “Patriots” who stormed the Capitol are domestic extremists whose paramilitary activities are not protected by any part of the Constitution. We need a coherent strategy that provides state law enforcement with adequate resources to coordinate regional responses to this threat and appropriately addresses the sweeping dangers of an organized paramilitary movement against American democracy.

I hope that today we will improve our understanding of militia extremism today and its place in the overall movement of violent white supremacy. The hearing should also yield information on how we can work together to improve our response to better defend American democracy.

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