

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

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Opening Statement

Chairman Jamie Raskin.

Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

Hearing on “HBCUs at Risk: Examining Federal Support for Historically Black Colleges and Universities” March 17, 2022

Thank you to Chairwoman Maloney for holding this important hearing. I also appreciate Congressman Donalds’ call for this hearing and assistance in coordinating it.

On January 31st and February 1st, at the beginning of Black History Month, 24 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) received threats that bombs were going to explode on campus. Since the beginning of the year, at least 36 HBCUs have received 54 such bomb threats. On Tuesday of this week, Morehouse College in Atlanta received a bomb threat, causing students to shelter in place.

The perpetrators behind these acts obviously targeted Black colleges and universities, seeking to disrupt and terrorize the students and their families, the faculty and their families, and the staff and their families. and sow fear among their students. No other colleges or universities have been targeted and disrupted in the same fashion as HBCUs were on that day.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation announced that the threats made on February 1st are being investigated as racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism and hate crimes. No arrests have yet been made, but we can be sure at least some of the bomb threats were animated by hatred of Black Americans and the intent to terrorize them.

For example, Bethune-Cookman University in Florida received a 20-minute threatening call from a person stating they were a member of the Atomwaffen Division—a right-wing extremist and Neo-Nazi terrorist network—and had planted multiple bombs around the university and were orchestrating an active shooter. Howard University, which is just minutes from where we sit, received four bomb threats this year alone.

These violent threats against HBCUs are the continuation of a trend of rising hate crimes against Black Americans. Between 2019 and 2020, there was a nearly 50% increase in hate crimes committed against Black people. Now, there are spiking threats against what have traditionally been safe spaces for Black students and the Black community.

We can be thankful that none of these threats were actualized by a bomb exploding on campus like the ones we saw at Florida A&M University in 1999. But that does not diminish the emotional and psychological trauma inflicted on the students at HBCUs and Black communities.

I very much appreciate that the FBI has deemed its active investigation of these bomb threats the “highest priority.” As the investigation is ongoing, I know that the FBI cannot answer any questions about the status of these specific cases. But I would like to know how the FBI is coordinating with HBCUs and communities of color to address the terrifying rise in hate crimes and white supremacy in the U.S.

I look forward to hearing these answers from the FBI, as well as from our witnesses from the Departments of Education and Homeland Security as to how they are ensuring the safety and security of students at HBCUs.

Most importantly, I want to thank the student leaders who are testifying before us today, Kylie Burke of Howard University, Emmanuel Ukot of Xavier University in New Orleans, and Devan Vilfrard of Florida A&M University. We recognize how difficult and disruptive these past few years have been—between COVID and now repeated bomb threats—to these most formative and critical years of your life. We appreciate the strength and leadership you have shown throughout.

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