

Opening Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy
“Domestic Violent Extremism in America”
May 12, 2021

The January 6th images of insurrectionists flying confederate flags as they stormed the U.S. Capitol are stark reminders that domestic violent extremism in America is hardly a new threat. Our nation’s history has been marred by the violent, deadly acts of extremists pushing a range of hateful white supremacist ideologies. From the Ku Klux Klan to Timothy McVeigh, we have witnessed – and suffered through – extremists killing innocent people in the name of their morally bankrupt causes. The violence on January 6th was simply the latest chapter in this long history of domestic extremism in America.

But the threat we face today is uniquely dangerous. Attacks and plots by domestic extremists are at historic highs, with the majority of them being planned by those on the far right espousing white supremacist and related ideologies. In 2020 alone, white nationalists and like-minded extremists conducted 67% of terrorist plots and attacks in the United States. We cannot deny we are facing a class of criminals who feel more emboldened than ever.

In asking why, we cannot ignore a simple fact. Over the last four years, extremists who were once relegated to the fringes of our society and uniformly condemned by our nation’s leaders suddenly felt they had support at the highest levels of the United States government – indeed, from within the Oval Office itself. We had a President who instead of simply condemning the violence in Charlottesville where a woman was killed during a white nationalist rally, he said to a nation there were “very fine people on both sides.” When asked to denounce white supremacy during an election debate, instead of doing so without equivocation, he told the right-wing Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by.” And he urged the crowd to “fight like hell” moments before they did just that, storming the Capitol. You cannot strike a match near gas and act surprised when it catches fire.

We need moral clarity and leadership in these troubled times, and I am hopeful that this Administration and the two witnesses before us can bring that to the difficult task before them.

Now, I believe it is critical for us to confront domestic violent extremism in all its forms. And as Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I am firmly committed to doing just that. But let’s not ignore the plain fact – as repeatedly asserted by the Department of Homeland Security, FBI Director Wray, and others – that white supremacist extremists are the “most persistent and lethal threat in the homeland.” Violent extremism in any form is wrong; however, drawing false equivalence between this form of violent extremism and others only detracts from our shared goal of focusing our resources on the greatest threats we face as Americans.

But we must confront this threat the American way. That means protecting the constitutional rights and civil liberties that define our way of life. In the wake of September 11th, we let our deep wounds occasionally blind us to the rights and liberties we sacrificed in the name of security. I steadfastly defended those liberties and rights then, even when it was highly unpopular to do so. I won’t hesitate to do so again now. If we secure our nation at the expense of our precious liberties, then we can hardly claim victory at all.

We expect to receive the President's budget by the end of May. It is my understanding that the President will seek significant resources to address the threat of domestic extremism. So let us come together – not as Republicans or Democrats, but *as Americans* – and confront this existential threat to our society. I am under no illusions that we will eliminate the threat of domestic violent extremism. But I am hopeful that, if we work together, we can force it into retreat. Let us show the world that America is capable of confronting its greatest challenges while living up to its highest ideals.

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