

Testimony of Paul Goldenberg

Senior Fellow, Rutgers Miller Center

<mailto:paulG@cpsinc.us>

Tuesday August 2, 2021, 10:00 AM

Room

Good morning ladies and Gentlemen. My name is Paul Goldenberg, a Senior Fellow at Rutgers University Miller Center on Community Resilience and Protection. I most recently served as a senior advisor to the United States Department of Homeland Security as a member of the Secretary's Advisory Council (HSAC) and while in that capacity I headed several initiatives focused on domestic and international terrorism such as Countering Violent Extremism Sub-Committee, Foreign Fighter Task Force and more recently had the honor and privilege of serving alongside United States Marine Corps General John Allen (Ret.), where we Co-Chaired the Subcommittee for the Prevention of Targeted Violence Against Faith-Based Communities. Before that I commanded the nation's first-ever state office dedicated to the investigation and prosecution of bias crimes and domestic terrorism situated in New Jersey.

I am proud and honored to be here today speaking with you on these topics and applaud you Mr Chairman and the committee members for your steadfast commitment and unwavering support to address these serious matters impacting our nation's national security.

In framing my testimony, it is important to look first beyond America's borders. Today – across Europe, many houses of worship are currently surrounded by elite military units standing guard with automatic weapons, reinforced by heavy armored personal carriers, guard towers augment the once stately and welcoming entryways and flowerbeds have been swapped for barbed wire all at a cost of hundreds of millions of Euros and producing a dreadful impact on the psyche of Europe's people.

Europe has become --- America's canary in a mine...

In my work with Rutgers, along with former New Jersey Attorney General John Farmer, I traveled across Europe where we met and painstakingly followed the stories of those who suffered the horrific attacks on their communities and in many cases houses of worship. Here in the United States, as part of my work with the HSAC subcommittee, we had the sobering and humbling experience of meeting members of communities who had directly experienced the terror and violence of many of which were the victims of targeted attacks. Without exception, as these communities worked through their grief, they were eager and committed to helping the members of our Subcommittee with our work.

The adverse impacts that violent extremists and domestic terrorists, including those inspired by white supremacist ideologies, are having on American faith-based and other vulnerable communities, are difficult to overstate. From Oak Creek, Wisconsin to Whitefish, Montana, from Southern California to Sutherland, Texas, from Minneapolis to Pittsburgh, from Louisiana to South Carolina, targeted violent attacks against religious communities and the institutions they represent have struck at the very core of American freedoms, standing out not just for the escalating death toll, but for the cruelty of wounding

and killing people at their most vulnerable, assembled for prayer in American houses of worship. What was once unthinkable has become almost expected. The increasing influence of white supremacist, separatist, radical right and left extremist ideologies in inspiring acts of domestic terror and targeted violence is, moreover, not a matter of political opinion, but a demonstrable fact.

Most attacks have been committed primarily by lone attackers, as opposed to organized groups or through a system of cells. There are, however, similarities to the attacks once perpetrated by ISIS, jihadists, white and black separatist groups and other extremists. They are radicalized and freely communicate as part of a wide-ranging movement. The social media platforms and individuals that frequent and govern these sites have implemented a comprehensive transnational outlook like how ISIS inspired and connected with potential radical violent extremists abroad.

White supremacist and similar violent extremist groups now share manifestos, conspiracy theories, hate literature, and are connecting daily with like-minded persons online. Beyond the conventional social media platforms, white supremacists and other violent extremists are using lesser-known platforms, as well as encrypted channels. Their tactic is to exploit the openness of the instrumentalities of freedom – in this case social media and the internet – to destroy freedom itself – in this case the foundational freedom of religious conscience.

The primary inspiration behind many of these targeted violent attacks is to force us to not merely question our fundamental safety and security, as well as our ability to protect our nation, neighborhoods, and families, but to change our behaviors. Success, in the eyes of domestic violent extremists and international terrorists, comes when we depart from our daily routines, ways of living and even spiritual and political beliefs. Violent extremists understand the power of fear.

As anti-Asian, racist, anti-Semitic attacks proliferate we need to consider the fact that no, racial or religious group is being singled out exclusively. Although some are disproportionately targeted. As hatred and bigotry exists today on both the radical left and extreme right sides of the ideological spectrum. It can be observed among the affluent and the poor, the more-and less-highly educated, the fervently religious, and the devoutly secular. It is sometimes expressed crudely, other times in the language of the sophisticated and supposed high-minded.

Turning from the problem to solutions. How do we work with American law enforcement to provide them with the needed tools to address this challenge? Notwithstanding the existing framework, gaps do exist in law enforcement as they have been hampered in addressing the rise of white supremacist-and other domestic related attacks by the inability to classify such attacks as acts of domestic terror. The absence of that category has led law enforcement to treat several attacks committed by violent extremists as isolated, unconnected incidents. It has also rendered of extremely limited value the Uniform Crime Reporting and other reporting mechanisms, which may record similar events differently. In the absence of the ability to label white supremacist and other like-minded extremist groups as acts of domestic terrorism, I have been informed by state and local law enforcement that they have been unable to avail themselves of resources dedicated to countering terrorism, such as additional personnel, training, and essential technologies that are supported by federal grant programs.

The extremists who commit violent acts against Houses of Worship and religious institutions need to be prosecuted on Federal charges — such as hate crimes; and when weapons are used, federal weapons charges. Experts I have consulted with believe that designating homegrown groups as domestic

terrorism organizations is highly problematic. The reason is grounded in our constitutional values. Law enforcement may not investigate or prosecute based on First Amendment-protected activity alone. This has left the American law enforcement community with few options

Bipartisan congressional support of a domestic terrorism statute will send a powerful message to violent extremists that our law enforcement community will have the essential resources to fight threats of extremist hate with the same veracity as those inspired by foreign terrorist organizations. A rise in recruitment efforts and hate-based rhetoric has inspired racially motivated mass violence over the past few years. Individuals with blended and misguided grievances are susceptible to influences of like-minded extremists online, and they have carried out attacks against certain religious and ethnic groups they perceive as their enemies. The transformation from inspired to operationalized can be swift, and techniques for carrying out these attacks require little or no pre-operational training. I often refer to it as from FLASH to BANG!

I've come to learn that the goal of violent extremists is often not just to cause loss of life—, more perilously, it's to wear us down, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually, causing our endurance, determination, and morale to decay and ultimately disappear.

As attacks perpetrated from violent extremists and other similar separatist groups grow in number, we should be concerned that an adverse public reaction may generate something that these bad actors could never have achieved on their own.

Citizens immunized against the psychological influence of targeted violence and terrorism have a greater ability to resist such manipulation. If violent extremists believe that their assault on our communities is not likely to create mass chaos and fear and a subsequent unraveling of the values of our people to an extent that it damages the bond between a government and its citizens, they may have less reason to waste their resources on such an attack. If the American people and workforce are provided resiliency and preparedness training and are convinced the measures we will take in preparation will increase the odds of survival and successfully coping with a catastrophic event, we are then more likely to internalize personal preparedness as necessity rather than commodity.

The question of whether the American faiths community is targeted by hatred and terror is not up for debate. Houses of Worship here remain targets. Tripwires around the world can trigger an attack; global conflict serves to put the entire religious community on alert as we have just witnessed with the vast number of attacks against American Jews many of which have no connection to the conflict abroad.

By educating lay leaders, community members, staff and administrators as well as teachers, and by more effectively working with our nations law enforcement community, we have the fundamentals to empower ourselves, developing a sense of ownership among our whole community. Working with state and local authorities' moving the American public beyond "awareness" to "engaged citizenry" must be a primary goal for 2022.