

Examining the Weaponization of the Quiet Skies Program
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Opening Statement as delivered

In mid-2024, as she grew increasingly critical of the Biden administration and increasingly involved with the Trump campaign, Tulsi Gabbard noticed changes as she went to the airport, she had more screening federal agents with dogs showing up for her flights. Other federal agents followed her on the plane and reported back on her activity.

When I learned of this, I launched an investigation into the TSA's Quiet Skies Program and the Biden administration's weaponization of watch list against everyday Americans

Under public scrutiny the Biden administration removed now Director of National Intelligence Gabbard from the program, but they spent the remainder of their time in office stonewalling any investigation.

Thankfully, that era is over. President Trump, himself a victim of government weaponization, set out to reverse the previous administration's targeting of the very citizens it has sworn to protect.

Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem has taken decisive action to eliminate bureaucratic obstacles resisting transparency. We are finally getting answers, and now we know exactly why the previous administration fought so hard to keep us in the dark.

Director Gabbard was surveilled on at least five domestic flights by Federal Air Marshals under Quiet Skies. Internal records for her targeting show her congressional portrait and that she was a former congresswoman from Hawaii.

So, there was no doubt they knew who they were monitoring.

Multiple concerns were raised internally, and one air marshal asked a colleague, why the heck is she a Quiet Skies suspect? If this can happen to a combat veteran, a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve, and now Director of National Intelligence, it can happen to anyone. And it did.

Today, for the first time, you will hear directly from a Federal Air Marshal whose wife was labeled a domestic terrorist simply for engaging in protected First Amendment activity. Records show the FBI labeled her as a domestic terrorist for unlawful entry into the Capitol on January 6th.

But she didn't enter the Capitol. She came for a public, support of the President, and they knew it. Her phone location data did not put her inside the Capitol. Facial recognition did not identify her inside. She had no criminal record and no history of extremist views.

What they did know is that this Catholic schoolteacher from Texas supported President Trump and went to Washington to attend his rally at the Ellipse. That was not enough for the government. That was not enough to label her a suspected domestic terrorist for two years.

Her family was surveilled when they flew. This was not an isolated case. It happened to hundreds of Americans. It happened because the TSA used First Amendment protected activity as a predicate for watch listing Americans. That's unconstitutional, of course. First Amendment activity cannot be the sole basis for watch listing someone, but sole basis is an important caveat and it's an opening the TSA exploited.

Today we will release internal TSA records that reveal how the agency authorized First Amendment activity to be used to justify the surveillance of Americans with no evidence and no recourse.

Using broad and vague authorities, TSA deemed hundreds of Americans as threats to national security simply for holding opposing political views. The federal government used its investigative authorities, anonymous tips and university research institutions to build a flimsy case to put them on the watch list.

They didn't just coincidentally watch list hundreds of people who attended the same Trump rally. They did it intentionally and obscured the process to create plausible deniability. For example, documents obtained in my investigation reveal that TSA relied on data collected by the George Washington University Project on Extremism.

Consider this first, DHS funds the Project on Extremism. An external partner not bound by the same laws and regulations as federal agencies. Then, the Project on Extremism identifies supposed domestic threats by meticulously tracking January 6th defendants. DHS then uses the Project on Extremism reporting as evidence, sometimes the only evidence for putting someone on a watch list.

But the abuses weren't limited to January 6th. The TSA also viewed skeptics of COVID mandates as threats.

Simply removing a mask on an aircraft got 12 Americans watch listed. Records also show three current members of Congress, all Republicans, were included in the companion Silent Partner Program either as a sitting member or while seeking elected office.

A cursory review would have revealed them to be either a member of Congress or decorated active or former US Military members. And in fact, they were surveilled, likely for activities that were official duties during their time in the military or in Congress.

All of this was wrong, and I'm glad that these abuses are beginning to be exposed.

I commend Secretary Noem for ending Quiet Skies, but our work is not done. We must make sure that this program does not come back under another name.

Every official who directed or approved surveillance of Americans for protected speech must be removed from office.

Full transparency must become the rule rather than requiring a year of investigation. The result will be a process that respects the Constitution, ends real life shadow bans against Americans and gives all of us the assurance that our government is focused on protecting us, not on chasing political ghosts.