

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Claire McCaskill
Wednesday, September 27, 2017
“Threats to the Homeland”

Thank you very much Mr. Chairman. Directors Wray and Rasmussen, thank you for being here today. Secretary Duke, I welcome you to the Committee for the first time as the Department’s Acting Secretary. I want to let you know that I appreciate the efforts that you and FEMA are making to assist the victims of hurricanes in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico. I will have to say, though, we are very concerned about what we are seeing in Puerto Rico. I know there have been logistical challenges because of the devastation in Puerto Rico, but I am looking forward to the briefing that we are going to receive today from FEMA about what is actually occurring on the ground. Those Americans are very deserving of whatever it takes for us to address the humanitarian crisis that is impacting 3.5 million American citizens in Puerto Rico as we speak today.

The hearing today is about threats to the homeland. Heartbreakingly, just last month, we suffered a terrorist attack here at home. The violence perpetrated by white supremacists and neo-Nazis at the Charlottesville rally was tragic, vile, and evil. It stunned many of us who thought the chants of “Blood and Soil” belonged on the film footage of a Nuremberg rally, not a 21st century American college. The boldness and the outspokenness of something that is so evil, the proudly marching under a Nazi flag, is something that many of us did not think we would see in this country, but we have now seen it. I direct your attention to a document that is on the easel. I don’t think many Americans understand the level of threat that we have in this country from white supremacists, anti-government, and other violent extremists. If you look at the comparison—and this data comes from the GAO, this isn’t from a think tank or anybody who has bias—we’ve had 62 incidents since 9/11 and 106 fatalities by the white supremacist, anti-government, and other violent extremists. Compare that to 23 acts of violence by Islamic violent extremists. The fatalities are almost equal. So one of my goals at this hearing today is to get specific responses as to whether or not the level of investigation and response matches the level of threat as it relates to these two types of terrorists that want to do harm to American citizens. I’m worried that we have—this committee is a good example—we’ve had multiple hearings on the threat of ISIS as it relates to homeland security. We have had zero hearings about the threat of domestic terrorists and the threat they pose in our country and our response to it.

We also face the threats from foreign terrorist organizations, like ISIS, and those inspired by them. We only need to look overseas over the past four months to see what our allies have suffered. The suicide bomber in Manchester, England, in June; the pedestrians on London Bridge in August; a van in Barcelona, Spain; and just this month a bucket bomb on a London subway. We know these organizations aren’t just targeting Europe.

We know that, in addition to domestic terrorists, there are foreign terrorists who want to kill Americans and who want to, importantly, radicalize Americans here at home to do so.

That's why we depend on you, the men and women of the DHS, the FBI, and the NCTC. We rely on you to identify threats, prevent attacks, and keep America safe.

That's why I am so concerned about some of the budget choices made by this administration. For instance, mass transit locations and other "soft targets" where large groups of people gather have served as prime targets. In addition to aviation security, the TSA helps secure mass transit, passenger rail, freight rail, highways, busses, pipelines, and sea ports. According to the TSA, more than 10 billion passenger trips are taken on mass transit systems each year.

Yet, the President's budget plans to cut critical TSA programs at a time when we cannot afford to let up when it comes to security measures. A large portion of this cut is taken from the Visible Intermodal Prevention and Response ("VIPR") teams. The VIPR teams deploy all across the country to provide critical assistance with securing airports, subways, and bus terminals. By the way, they also deployed to Houston to assist with recovery. But the President's budget would cut them by \$43 million, reducing VIPR teams from 31 down to just 8 teams to cover the entire country.

The President's budget will also slash other DHS programs that provide critical security to our transportation systems. In July, DHS announced 29 awards through the Complex Coordinated Terrorist Attacks (CCTA) Grant Program, including one that would help Kansas City local preparedness plans and enhance communications systems, and another that would allow St Louis to build an integrated response structure among first responders. This is the type of assistance we should be providing our cities in the face of threats like London, Barcelona, and Manchester. But the President's budget will eliminate all of these grant programs for next year.

There unfortunately is not enough time to discuss in seven minutes or a single hearing all the threats our country faces. We face cyber ransomware attacks. We have Russia trying to hack our elections. This month, DHS ordered agencies to remove cybersecurity software from federal computer systems because of its manufacturer's ties to Russian intelligence. We have border security issues. We even have potential threats to agriculture—just last month I had a roundtable in Kansas City to learn what agro-terrorism could do to the nation's confidence in its food supply.

So I am glad you are all here today to talk about what the greatest threats are that America faces, what we are doing about them, and, most importantly, what we can do to help you in your most important work. Thank you very much.