



State of Homeland Security Address

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House Homeland Security Committee

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Remarks as Prepared

Seventy-four years ago today, Japanese forces struck the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor—described by President Roosevelt as a “day that will live in infamy.” That dark day ended up giving rise to the Greatest Generation and inspired young Americans like my father to serve our country in uniform. A long struggle between the forces of freedom and oppression followed, punctuated by many pivotal years.

Today we are engaged in another generational struggle, and this year was a turning point. Just last week terrorists struck again on American soil, attacking our nation from within—and committing their deeds in the name of ISIS, the new standard-bearer of evil.

Make no mistake: we are a nation at war. Fourteen years after 9/11, the fight against Islamist terror rages on, and our adversaries have opened up new battlegrounds across the world. Our own city streets are now the front lines. Indeed, San Bernardino was not an isolated event. Terrorists are on the offensive, working to deploy operatives to our shores and to radicalize our citizens to commit acts of violence.

So I was disappointed last night when the President failed to lay out any new steps to fight this menace. Instead, he doubled-down on a strategy of hesitancy and half-measures.

This attack should not just be a wake-up call. It should be a call to action. For far too long, we have allowed extremists to reclaim their momentum, surging from terrorist cells into full-fledged terrorist armies. As a result, I believe the state of our homeland is increasingly not secure, and I believe 2015 will be seen as a watershed year in this long war—the year when our enemies gained an upper hand and when the spread of terror once again awoke the West.

This September, my Committee held the first-ever Congressional hearing at the 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero. It sits on hallowed ground, consecrated by the loss of thousands of innocent Americans and by the sacrifice of those who worked to save their lives. In their honor, we vowed to “never forget” that day, but we are beginning to repeat the mistakes of the past.

We are not acting early enough to keep terrorist groups from spreading, and there are some in Washington who are in denial about the threat we face.

In 2013, President Obama announced the “global war on terror” was effectively over. Ironically, just weeks before his speech, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of ISIS.

In January 2014, only days after ISIS invaded Fallujah, the President dismissed the group as the “JV” team of terror. That same month, his own Secretary of Homeland Security—a man I deeply respect—agreed with me that the jihadists in Syria were becoming the largest, most significant threat to the homeland.

Earlier this year in his State of the Union Address, the President touted his drawdown of American forces overseas and declared, quote, “the shadow of crisis has passed.” Only a month later, the Director of National Intelligence announced that the previous year had been the deadliest in the history of global terrorism.

Indeed, the President’s words came only weeks after the shocking Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris. When I met with French counterterrorism officials overseas, I assure you they did not think the shadow of crisis had passed or the global war on terror was over.

Last month the President claimed ISIS was “contained,” only days before its operatives launched the deadliest attack on French soil since World War II. And last week, the President said America was safe from an ISIS attack the same morning that the San Bernardino terrorists conducted their massacre.

I have had enough. We cannot be blind to the threat before us. ISIS is not contained—it is expanding at great cost to the free world. In November, the group managed to conduct three major terrorist attacks on three separate continents in just three weeks.

This is not a terrorist group on the run. It is a terrorist group on the march, and their ability to conduct external operations is growing. ISIS has been linked to more than 60 terrorist plots or attacks against Western targets. It has established a presence in 19 countries. And it has recruited operatives from more than 100 nations—creating the largest global convergence of jihadists in history.

ISIS is now more dangerous than al Qaeda ever was under Osama bin Laden, and its tentacles have spread into the West, including into the United States. Yet the President’s National Security Strategy released this year outlines a doctrine of “strategic patience” for confronting threats.

This is reckless. America cannot adopt a wait-and-see approach while the world burns and while terrorists plot within our borders. We are called upon to lead. It was President Reagan who said that weakness invites aggression. And it was President Kennedy before him that declared America would “pay any price, [and] bear any burden” to secure our free society.

But today our allies believe we are uncertain, reluctant to lead, and eager to place the burdens on someone else. This kind of indecision is a decision itself. If the Greatest Generation had sat on its hands while fascism and communism spread, the world would not be recognizable today. Similarly, if we let Islamist terrorism gain further ground, we will be talking about a struggle that lasts more than just a generation.

From the streets of Paris to the skies of Egypt, we have been reminded of the destructive power of this movement and the insidious ideology that fuels it. We have also been reminded that delay can be deadly. When we see terror in more Western cities; when ISIS declares new provinces; and when millions of additional refugees flood the shores of our allies, it will be further proof that inaction has serious consequences.

In fact, I believe this leadership void has put the United States homeland in the highest threat environment since 9/11. The FBI is investigating nearly 1,000 homegrown terror cases—most of which are ISIS-related—across all 50 states. Already, federal authorities have arrested over 70 ISIS supporters in our country.

If you add San Bernardino to the list, there have now been 19 ISIS-connected terrorist plots or attacks here at home. These include plans to murder tourists on Florida beaches, to set off pipe bombs on Capitol Hill, to detonate explosives at New York City landmarks, and to live-stream an attack at an American college campus.

The overall uptick in extremist activity has made 2015 the single most active year for homegrown terror we have ever tracked. In fact, there were more homegrown terror cases in the first six months of 2015 than any full year since 9/11. Our intelligence and law enforcement professionals have stopped many attacks. However, in a world where terror has gone viral, we are struggling to monitor every threat.

As we saw in Garland, Texas, the first sign of a hatched plot might be an internet hashtag, tweeted only minutes before an attack. Or as we saw in San Bernardino, it might be a Facebook status pledging allegiance to terrorists, posted online with little notice. Or it might be like the Chattanooga terrorist rampage, where the shooter gave no hints before taking the lives of U. S. service members.

This is why we need to focus on preventing radicalization as much as we need to focus on stopping acts of terror themselves. The message of groups like ISIS is either “come to Syria to join the fight” or “kill where you are.” Yet the Administration is not doing enough to keep Americans from being brainwashed by groups like ISIS.

There is too little outreach to vulnerable communities, there is virtually no effort here at home to combat terrorist propaganda directed at our citizens, and there are few credible “off-ramps” to peel radicalized young people away from the path to terrorist violence.

This is unacceptable. Americans are being recruited by terrorist groups at the speed of broadband, while we are responding at the speed of bureaucracy. Our Committee unanimously approved bipartisan legislation to accelerate prevention efforts in the homeland. In the wake of the shooting in California, I am working to get this bill passed quickly.

We also need to do everything we can to block terrorist pathways into our country and to keep Americans away from terrorist safe havens. That is why earlier this year I launched a bipartisan Congressional *Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel*. In their final report, the Task Force concluded that the U. S. government has largely failed to stop Americans from going overseas to join extremists, and they identified gaping security weaknesses which allow terrorists to cross borders undetected.

More than 30,000 individuals from around the world have become foreign fighters in Syria, and over 5,000 of them have Western passports, which make it easier to get into America. As we saw in Paris, some are being sent back to conduct attacks. More than 250 Americans have also sought to join the fight, and close to 50 have already come home. Some have been arrested on terrorism charges, while others could be ticking time bombs.

We must do more—urgently—to shut down the jihadi superhighway to and from the conflict zone. It is too easy to get there. One American who fought on the frontlines said, quote, “I just went online and bought a ticket. It was that easy. It was like booking a flight to Miami Beach.” It is also disturbingly easy to get back. The mastermind of the Paris attacks bragged in ISIS’ online magazine, quote, “I was able to leave and come...despite being chased after by so many intelligence services.”

I led a Congressional delegation to the Middle East and Europe and saw these security loopholes firsthand in places like Istanbul airport—a transit hub for foreign fighters—and throughout Western Europe. We found widespread failures. Many countries were not screening travelers against terrorist watchlists, were not checking passports for fraud, or didn’t have access to the intelligence they needed to stop extremists.

Our Task Force issued over 50 recommendations for fixing such security vulnerabilities in America and overseas, and today I am pleased to announce that we are turning these recommendations into law.

We are starting with a bill this week to tighten the Visa Waiver Program, which allows travelers from 38 countries to come to the United States for 90 days without getting a visa. Our bill is strong, bipartisan, and will address problems identified by the Task Force. We know that a number of the Paris attackers came from visa-waiver countries, which could have allowed them to enter the United States. That is why this bill is so important.

It will force high-risk individuals who have been to terrorist hotspots to go through a more rigorous screening process before coming to America. It will strengthen intelligence information sharing with our allies. It will crack down on passport fraud. And it will force Visa Waiver countries to ramp up counterterrorism screening of travelers.

But this is just the beginning. Over the coming weeks, we will introduce a slate of new bills based on the findings of the Task Force to keep terrorists from crossing borders. This will include enhancing the security of the visa process, developing a national strategy to combat terrorist travel, improving information sharing here at home, and helping foreign partners address security weaknesses.

We will push forward as well with legislation to enhance airport security and to streamline the Department of Homeland Security into a more focused counterterrorism organization.

Our government must also move swiftly to improve the screening of Syrian and Iraqi refugees. ISIS has said in their own words that they want to exploit the refugee process to infiltrate the West, and they did exactly that to attack Paris. I can also reveal today that the U. S. government has information to indicate that individuals tied to terrorist groups in Syria have already attempted to gain access to our country through the U. S. refugee program.

Accordingly, I drafted legislation to create the most robust national security vetting process in U. S. history to screen Syrian and Iraqi refugees, and it passed the House with a bipartisan, veto-proof majority. In light of the threats we face, I urge the Senate to act on our legislation and the President to sign it.

Extremists are not only disguising their travel to evade detection, they are also concealing their communications. No longer do terrorists plot using couriers and caves. Today they hide their messages in “dark space,” using encrypted applications and other secure platforms to evade law enforcement. This is one of the greatest counterterrorism challenges of the 21st Century, and it is one of the biggest fears that keeps me up at night.

When the Administration says there are no known, credible threats to the homeland, it means less today than it once did—because we cannot stop what we cannot see. Paris was the perfect example. The terrorists reportedly used secure communications, and they managed to stay under the radar.

We should be careful not to vilify “encryption” itself, which is essential for privacy, data security, and global commerce. But I have personally been briefed on cases where terrorists communicated in darkness and where we couldn’t shine a light, even with a lawful warrant.

Unfortunately, there are no simple answers. This is more than a “privacy vs. security” challenge. It’s “security vs. security.” A legislative knee-jerk reaction could weaken internet protections and privacy for everyday Americans, while doing nothing puts American lives at risk and makes it easier for terrorists and criminals to escape justice. It is time for Congress to act because the White House has failed to bring all parties together—transparently—to find solutions.

That is why today I am calling for the creation of a national commission on security and technology challenges in the digital age. I plan to unveil legislation soon which would establish this commission under Congressional authorization and would bring together the technology sector, privacy and civil liberties groups, academics, and the law enforcement community to find common ground.

This will not be like other blue ribbon panels, established and forgotten. The threats are real, so this legislation will require the commission to develop a range of actionable recommendations that protect privacy and public safety.

Finally, and most importantly, we must recognize that the best homeland defense is a good offense.

We will not win the war against Islamist terror until we take fight to the enemy and deprive them of their safe havens. This was the top recommendation of the 9/11 commission, yet we have failed to live up to it. We need to drain the swamp in Syria and Iraq, or the swamp will come to us. Unfortunately, the President lacks a coherent military strategy, and he has tied our general's hands behind their backs.

Indeed, right now we have a policy of containment. A winning strategy is to defeat and destroy ISIS—and to provide the resources to do exactly that. These are the immediate steps we need to take to turn the tide:

First, we must remove the limitations that have kept us from hitting ISIS as hard as we can. This means loosening the rules of engagement from the air, letting our special operations forces get directly involved in the fight, and arming opposition groups more quickly and completely.

Second, we must carve out the space needed to protect the moderate opposition and to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. I've spoken with ambassadors from Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, and they agree with me that we need a no-fly zone over part of Syria and safe zones where refugees can be relocated and protected.

Third, the United States must lead a broader global coalition on the ground to destroy ISIS in Syria, one that includes NATO and features deeper involvement from our regional allies. This includes Sunni Arab partners who must help build an indigenous ground force to clean up their own backyard and to protect their religion from these fanatics.

We must also deal with Russia. After the downing of the Russian airliner, I hope Putin chooses to engage more constructively. He has serious homeland security challenges of his own, and we have a shared interest in fighting Islamist terror.

But before we think about working more closely with the Russians, strict conditions need to be met. Putin needs to push Assad toward the exit door, cease military operations against moderate rebels, and bring an end to Russia's provocations against NATO allies. Only then can Moscow become a potential partner in destroying ISIS.

In the end, though, our military strategy must be combined with a political strategy to end this conflict. Last month, negotiators in Vienna brokered an 18-month timeline for free elections in Syria. While I am deeply skeptical about whether this plan will succeed, we cannot give up. This crisis only ends when the Syrian people have retaken their country and can provide the level of security needed to clear extremists from their territory.

Sadly, we will still need to go further. Since the President failed to develop an "on-the-ground" plan to confront ISIS, we now need an "around-the-globe" strategy to defeat them.

This is no longer just about Syria and Iraq. It is about stopping the march of ISIS across North Africa, keeping it from getting a foothold in South Asia, and preventing countries like Afghanistan from falling back into darkness. Yet in all of these places, President Obama is more inclined to tell us what he won't do, rather than what he will.

That is why we need a global strategy to win the war against Islamist terror—and a president prepared to commit the resources and political will to make it a reality. The callous threats of terrorists and the targeting of our people cannot stand. In return for barbaric violence, we must be prepared to deliver justice.

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It has been said that who we are is who we were.

Everyone in this room is tied to the Greatest Generation, an era of Americans who showed unflappable courage while staring down evil as it spread across the globe. We cannot forget: their courage is our heritage. It is a distinct element of the American spirit.

It is not enough though for us to have inherited their valor. As we embark on another long struggle, we must also summon their resolve. And that means we cannot be satisfied with quick victories and temporary safety in the war against Islamist terror. We must be prepared to keep radicals on the run and stop them from passing the torch to a new generation of terrorists.

My father was a bombardier in World War II and flew missions against the Nazis in preparation for the D-Day invasion. While I know it was the bravery of men like him that won the war, he taught me that it was our nation's fortitude that won the peace.

Last month the President said that he was, quote, "not interested...[in] pursuing some notion of 'American leadership' or 'America winning'" in this long war. He thinks these are mere slogans.

I differ with our Commander in Chief. Because what I do know—what I do believe in deeply—is that the security of our homeland and the free world depend on our determination to lead. In this ideological battle, I know we will prevail. Because in the final analysis, our ideas prevail.

Thank you.

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