

**Testimony of J. Richard Cohen
President, Southern Poverty Law Center
before the
Committee on Homeland Security
United States House of Representatives**

**World Wide Threats: Keeping America Safe in the New Age of Terror
November 30, 2017**

My name is Richard Cohen. I am an attorney and the president of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a civil rights organization founded in 1971. For more than three decades, my colleagues and I have been monitoring, issuing reports about, and training law enforcement officials on far-right extremist activity in the United States. I have litigated numerous cases against hate groups and their leaders and am currently representing the mother of Heather Heyer, the young woman who was killed in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017. I have served on the Department of Homeland Security's Countering Violent Extremism Working Group, am a past recipient of the FBI Director's Community Leadership Award, and have testified befo* [(r)u befo* [(()-2(f(f)3

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On September 14, the President signed the joint resolution. Now, the questions are what will the President and his administration do to fulfill the commitments the President made by signing the resolution and, just as importantly, what will Congress do to ensure that the President and his administration live up to those commitments and have the necessary resources to do so. Before turning to these questions, however, it will be useful to describe the nature of the threat of white supremacist violence that the country is facing and the bipartisan failure in recent years to devote more attention to it.

The White Supremacist Movement, a Domestic Terror Threat Since Reconstruction, Has Been Energized by President Trump's Campaign Rhetoric

Although the threat of terrorism from extremist forms of Islam may be the most acute one the country currently faces, the threat from white supremacists is undoubtedly the most persistent one in our country's history. Indeed, since the founding of the Ku Klux Klan in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, our country has faced terrorism – including thousands of lynchings – from those determined to preserve white hegemony. Those who marched in Charlottesville this summer chanting “You will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us” were motivated by the same goal. Even if some of the new energy in the white supremacist movement were to wst f r

Since the turn of the century, we have documented an increase in the number of hate groups – the majority of which have white supremacist beliefs or leanings.⁵ In our view, the most important factor driving the increase has been a backlash to our country’s changing demographics. For many on the radical right, President Obama – our nation’s first president of color – represented the kind of “change” they feared.⁶ The day after President Obama was first elected, for example, Stormfront – a popular neo-Nazi web forum whose members have been responsible for many deadly attacks⁷ – reported that it was getting six times its normal traffic. “There are a lot of angry White people out there looking for answers,” added the Stormfront publisher, a former Klansman.⁸

During the last two years – a period that coincided with the presidential campaign – we documented a surge in the number of hate groups.⁹ The growth in the number of hardline anti-Muslim groups last year was particularly dramatic, a near-tripling.¹⁰ At the same time, hate crimes targeting Muslims have doubled over the last two years, according to the FBI.¹¹ As former President George W. Bush noted during a speech last month, “bigotry seems emboldened.”¹²

Although the growth in hate groups began before President Obama took office, his election did coincide with another phenomenon: the dramatic resurgence of a far-right, antigovernment movement that has been responsible for numerous terrorist attacks and plots. Many of the beliefs prevalent in this movement are rooted in the racist, anti-Semitic ideology that animated the *Posse Comitatus* (Latin for “power of the county”) in the 1970s. Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, for example, held both white supremacist and radical, antigovernment beliefs. For a number of reasons, including law enforcement crackdowns, the movement declined significantly after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, only to re-emerge during the Obama administration. Although the number of groups has once again fallen, the movement remains a threat. On the same day that Heather Heyer was killed in Charlottesville, the FBI arrested a man in Oklahoma City who was attempting to detonate what he believed to be a 1,000-pound truck bomb outside a bank

⁵ The SPLC identified 917 hate groups in 2016, up from the 457 groups documented in 1999. Out of those in 2016, 471 groups subscribed to white supremacist ideologies. Mark Potok, “The Year in Hate and Extremism,” *Intelligence Report*, Spring 2017, at [splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/year-hate-and-extremism](https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/year-hate-and-extremism); “Active Hate Groups,” *Intelligence Report*, Spring 2017, at [splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/active-hate-groups-2016](https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/active-hate-groups-2016).

⁶ In addition to the growth in hate groups, President Obama’s election coincided with the resurgence of a far-right antigovernment movement that produced numerous acts and plots of domestic terrorism targeting federal officials and facilities in the 1990s. In 1996, we counted 858 conspiracy-minded antigovernment groups; in 2008, 149. But by 2012, we counted 1,360 such groups, an increase of more than 800 percent.

⁷ Heidi Beirich, *White Homicide Worldwide*, Southern Poverty Law Center, March 2014, at <https://www.splcenter.org/20140401/white-homicide-worldwide>.

⁸ Stormfront website, at <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t521647/>.

⁹ “Hate Groups Increase for Second Consecutive Year as Trump Electrifies Radical Right,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Feb. 15, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2017/02/15/hate-groups-increase-second-consecutive-year-trump-electrifies-radical-right>.

¹⁰ Mark Potok, “The Year in Hate and Extremism,” *Intelligence Report*, Southern Poverty Law Center, Feb. 15, 2017, at <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/year-hate-and-extremism>;

¹¹ “2015 Hate Crime Statistics,” FBI, at https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015/topic-pages/incidentsandoffenses_final.pdf;
“2016 Hate Crime Statistics,” FBI, at <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2016/topic-pages/incidentsandoffenses>.

¹² Rebecca Savransky, “George W. Bush: ‘Bigotry seems emboldened in U.S.’,” *The Hill*, Oct. 19, 2017, at <http://thehill.com/homenews/news/356212-george-w-bush-bigotry-seems-emboldened-in-us>

building.¹³ The suspect reportedly was attempting to replicate McVeigh's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.¹⁴

President Trump's campaign energized the white supremacist movement – “unearthed some demons,” to borrow Representative Mark Sanford's words.¹⁵ Although white supremacists typically eschew the political process, seeing both parties as irredeemably corrupt,

Like the Justice Department, DHS cut resources devoted to countering the threat of domestic terrorism after 9/11. In April 2009, the

protecting the civil rights of all Americans. Violence perpetrated against vulnerable populations based on factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, or sexu