

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 8, 2021

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf
Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

The Honorable Christopher Wray
Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
935 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20535

Dear Mr. Wolf and Director Wray:

We write today regarding the violent insurrectionist acts that took place at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, and for information into your agencies' actions leading up to and understanding of the digital environment surrounding the attack. While it is clear that the mob of domestic terrorists, neo-Nazis, and white supremacists was directly incited by President Trump at his preceding rally on the National Mall, many of these extremists were already communicating online and on social media about potential violence and plans to occupy the United States Capitol building in the days and weeks before it unfolded.¹

Since the president lost re-election, he has stoked false and unsubstantiated claims that the election was stolen from him and that actions must be taken to overturn the results. This disinformation spread across digital platforms, fomenting a sharp uptick in reactionary calls for violence. Just from January 1st, there were more than 1,250 posts from QAnon conspiracy theorists on Twitter containing terms of violence. And violence was also specifically directed at Congress. For example, on Facebook, one user wrote in a far-right private group entitled "Joe Biden is not my President" on January 5, "There will be a BIG Civil War if Congress allows the election to be stolen."² On TikTok, videos were posted with close to 279,000 views that promoted violence at the Capitol, calling for people to bring their "mother-[expletive] guns".³ Several threads on mainstream platforms like Reddit and Twitter, and alternative platforms friendlier to those on the far-right like Gab and Parler, contained content for weeks that specifically alluded to planning the violence that took place on January 6. Those at the helm

¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-07/trump-supporter-rage-simmered-on-social-media-before-dc-violence>;
<https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/06/tech/protest-violence-online/index.html>

² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-07/trump-supporter-rage-simmered-on-social-media-before-dc-violence>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/06/tech/protest-violence-online/index.html>

planning this insurrection even had enough time to create merchandise to wear for the event labeled with things like, “MAGA, Civil War, January 6, 2021”.⁴

While this latest sharp increase in violent chatter online is a result of the president’s stoking of proven falsehoods, we have seen a steady increase in online extremist and domestic terrorist coordination over the past several years. In 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation labeled fringe political conspiracy theories as a domestic terror threat and an intelligence bulletin from the Agency warned of “*anti-government, identity-based, and fringe political conspiracy theories very likely to motivate some domestic extremists to commit criminal, sometimes violent activity*”.⁵ The Department of Homeland Security and Federal Bureau of Investigation are both tasked with operations to track online extremist developments and prevent their enactment. However, there have been some notable failures when it comes to preventing violent extremists from orchestrating events that lead to violence, such as at the “Unite the Right” Neo-Nazi rally that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 and resulted in a domestic terror attack which caused loss of life.⁶ January 6 is as another such failure, and one that placed the foundation of democracy under threat.

Fundamentally, we are concerned that law enforcement was seemingly unprepared for the mob that descended on the Capitol on January 6, despite the hundreds of thousands of posts spread about it publicly online. It is implausible that the federal law enforcement agencies tasked with defending the United States against acts of terrorism would not have been aware of and tracking the online ecosystem leading up to this attack. To that end, we respectfully request a response to the following questions by January 15, 2021, and include, if necessary, a classified addendum:

1. Did your agencies anticipate a credible threat of violent activity based on the social media posts leading up to the January 6 attack? If so, what groups were involved and how were they organizing?
2. Describe the nature of communication with the White House or any political appointees regarding the online threat landscape leading up to January 6.
3. Did your agencies notify the relevant law enforcement entities of the threats of violence, including through the dissemination of intelligence bulletins, to other law enforcement agencies? If so, when did this occur?
4. Have your agencies adequately shifted resources, personnel, and training to monitor and find domestic extremism in the online ecosystem?
5. The members of the mob were livestreaming their activities on social media. What was the level of monitoring and information sharing in realtime that your agencies provided to local law enforcement and other authorities?
6. Did your agencies have any communication with the online platforms regarding the violent extremist content? If so, what did this communication entail and when did it occur?
7. What cooperation, if any, have you received from online platforms regarding the violent extremist content shared across their sites?

⁴ <https://twitter.com/misstessowen/status/1346932836704653314>

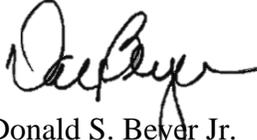
⁵ <https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/420379775-fbi-conspiracy-theories-domestic-extremism.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.propublica.org/article/white-supremacists-joked-about-using-cars-to-run-over-opponents-before-charlottesville>

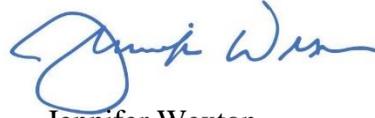
8. How are your agencies mobilizing between now and the Presidential Inauguration on January 20 to prevent a similar act from occurring, and what resources are you dedicating to the evolving online ecosystem?

We thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress



Jennifer Wexton
Member of Congress

/s/
Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

/s/
Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress

/s/
Jared Huffman
Member of Congress

/s/
Derek Kilmer
Member of Congress

/s/
André Carson
Member of Congress

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Danny K. Davis
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Jackie Speier
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Jim Himes
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Frank Pallone, Jr.
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Jamie Raskin
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Earl Blumenauer
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Madeleine Dean
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Grace Meng
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Kathy Castor
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Abigail D. Spanberger
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A. Donald McEachin
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Jake Auchincloss
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James P. McGovern
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Ilhan Omar
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Charlie Crist
Member of Congress

/s/

Darren Soto
Member of Congress

/s/

Elaine G. Luria
Member of Congress