Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs

"The Internet: A Portal to Violent Islamist Extremism"
May 3, 2007

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Mr. Chairman, radical movements bent on violence are nothing new. The Internet, however, has dramatically expanded the ability of radical groups to recruit, train, motivate, and coordinate terrorists over vast distances without direct contact.

No matter how secure we make our borders, no matter how effectively we track traditional communication methods, the Internet provides terrorists with a powerful tool to reach new recruits and to spread a message of violence and hatred. Just

last week, for example, three British Muslims went on trial in London on charges that included using Web sites and e-mails to urge terrorist acts both inside and outside the United Kingdom. The prosecutor said, "Each of them was adept at the use of computers and the Internet, and primarily by that means they each demonstrated ... an avid adherence to the need for violent holy war." At the same time, a federal court in Toledo, Ohio, heard charges against five men that included distributing information on bomb making that they had downloaded from the Internet. They await trial.

Since the development of browser software in the early 1990s that allows easy access to text, image, sound, and video files, the Internet has become a potent tool for delivering radical materials to target audiences in distant or hostile locations.

These materials can be stored on any server connected to the Internet, ready for instant access by the curious or the committed.

The recruiting and reference materials on the Web for violent extremists are truly disturbing. Our enemies can consult Web sites to learn techniques for shooting down helicopters, to watch videos of hostage beheadings, to read letters left by suicide bombers, or to listen to messages from militant leaders.

Most of the 42 groups on the U.S. State Department's 2005 list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations have Web sites to promote their violent message. Those Web sites can also serve terrorist groups as forums to plan and coordinate operations, as well as to finance their murderous

attacks. And, even if there were no Web sites, the Internet would still allow radicalizing messages as well as operational instructions to be passed along by e-mail.

We do not yet know if the use of the Internet rivals or even exceeds the importance of community-based and personal recruitment. It does, however, represent a troubling extension of their reach – easy, inexpensive, immediate, and powerful. As journalist Tina Brown has observed, "The conjunction of 21st-century Internet speed and 12th-century fanaticism has turned our world into a tinderbox."

Our witnesses today can help this Committee understand some urgent questions: What is the role of the Internet in radicalizing, recruiting, and financing terrorists? What techniques and appeals

are used? Are Internet sites targeting potential recruits in our country? How can we shape effective countermeasures?

Mr. Chairman, I hope that what we learn today will help us resist the perversion of the World Wide Web into a weapon of worldwide war.

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