

Testimony of Frank J. Cilluffo

**Director, Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI)
The George Washington University**

**“Assessing and Addressing the Threat: Defining the Role of a National Commission
on the Prevention of Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism”**

June 14, 2007

Chairwoman Harman, Ranking Member Reichert, and distinguished Members of the Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk Assessment Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. The prevention of radicalization and homegrown terrorism is surely one of the most pressing issues of our time, and your leadership in examining these matters – and, more importantly, in *acting* on them – is to be heartily commended.

As Director of the Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) at The George Washington University, much of my time and energy over the last eighteen months has been directed towards studying the phenomenon of radicalization in various contexts: in prisons, over the Internet, here at home in the United States, and also abroad. Sadly, recent events have only reinforced the importance of this task and driven home the sense of urgency that should accompany both examination of and action against radicalization. The Fort Dix case and the JFK airport plot revealed just days ago, serve as only the latest reminders that there is no basis for complacency. The threat is real and plainly, our shores will not act as a failsafe against it. Yet it is something of a misnomer to speak of “homegrown terrorism” for the term is suggestive of watertight compartments that do not in fact exist. To the contrary, we live in a borderless world and the threats that we face are similarly transnational. That said, the United States remains in some respects reasonably well situated. Other countries are currently experiencing a more full-blown manifestation of certain dimensions of the problem such as the United Kingdom. In a sense therefore, we have an opportunity to get ahead of the curve and deal proactively with these elements before they have the chance to flourish more vigorously in this country. Fortunately, the domestic plots that we have seen in the U.S. to date have evidenced intent but not much in the way of capability – but we would be foolish to think that the two cannot or will not come together in future.

Testifying before this Subcommittee in September 2006,¹ I presented the key findings and recommendations of a special report produced jointly by HSPI and the University of Virginia’s Critical Incident Analysis Group (CIAG), and entitled *Out of the Shadows: Getting Ahead of Prisoner Radicalization*.² That report was informed by a dedicated volunteer task force of subject matter experts in law enforcement, intelligence, behavioral science, and religion (including imams, chaplains, and scholars). The study reached the fundamental conclusion that Congress should establish a commission to investigate in depth the matter of prisoner radicalization by conducting an objective risk assessment in order to better understand the nature of the threat, and calibrate and formulate our prevention and response efforts accordingly. We emphasized the complexity of the problem and the associated need to take a multidisciplinary approach to analysis, and further urged that the commission seek to balance the practice of religious freedom while preventing the spread of radical ideology. A number of the priority issues we recommended be addressed by the commission were specific and targeted to the prison setting, such as the need for more data and greater study of prisons outside the

¹ Frank J. Cilluffo, “The Homeland Security Implications of Radicalization,” testimony before the Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Terrorism Risk Assessment Subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Homeland Security, delivered on September 20, 2006.

² Frank Cilluffo, Gregory Saathoff, *et al.*, September 19, 2006.

jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Others were more wide-ranging, including for example the identification of broader areas of dialogue with the Muslim community to better facilitate cultural understanding, mutual respect, and trust. Prisoner radicalization is of course but one subset of the battle of ideas, and the former cannot be divorced from the larger context in which it is embedded. Effective response requires strategies and tactics that extend not only beyond bars but beyond borders. A commission with a broader mandate than that described above is therefore to be welcomed.

Like the nation's prison system, cyberspace constitutes another understudied but fertile ground for radicalization in the United States. With the twin aims of redressing the dearth of research in this area and offering powerful prescriptions for action, HSPI and CIAG jointly undertook a study of Internet-facilitated radicalization titled *NETworked Radicalization: A Counter-Strategy*, a copy of which is submitted along with this statement.³ That report, supported by a task force of highly regarded subject matter experts from a range of disciplines, found that Internet chat rooms are now supplementing and replacing mosques, community centers and coffee shops as venues for recruitment and radicalization by terrorist groups like al Qaeda. The real time, two-way dialogue of chat rooms has enabled extremist ideas to be shared, take root, be reaffirmed and spread exponentially. By incorporating and manipulating local political grievances – some of which are legitimate – extremists have woven an effective tale of an imaginary “clash of civilizations.” The extremists’ compelling “call to action” based partly on myths and falsehoods begs for the development of an effective counter-narrative that forcefully refutes and responds to the extremists’ own. One wonders how it is that the nation that gave rise to Silicon Valley and the Internet itself, came to be outplayed in this realm. In part the answer lies in the fact that we have not channeled our collective talents and energies into that end. Irrespective of the reason, it is clear that the U.S. needs to catch up in this cyber-battle of words and ideas. However, unless elements of the counter-narrative emanate from within the Muslim community and are conveyed by voices that are trusted and credible within those communities, the opportunity to achieve impact will be limited at best.

As in the case of prisoner radicalization, the challenge in cyberspace should be appreciated in larger context. Granted, where appropriate we should seek to deny or disrupt extremist access to and extremist efforts through the Internet via legal and technical means and covert action. At the same time however, it is crucial that we bear in mind wider and deeper goals and themes such as the need to offer an alternative to those who feel alienated and marginalized. Another example is the importance of intelligence work to inform counterterrorism. These underlying or foundational elements merit special consideration as they are critical components of our efforts concerning radicalization writ large. By way of illustration, our report therefore offers a cluster of recommendations intended to foster intra- and cross-cultural dialogue and understanding to strengthen the ties that bind together communities at the local, national and

³ Frank Cilluffo, Gregory Saathoff, *et al.*, May 3, 2007. See also Frank J. Cilluffo, “The Internet: A Portal to Violent Islamist Extremism,” testimony before the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, delivered on May 3, 2007.

international levels. Likewise, we emphasize that the need for additional behavioral science research into the process of radicalization both online and offline, must be recognized and addressed.

Radicalization is not a well understood phenomenon, hence greater study of the life cycle of a terrorist – specifically, the process by which an individual becomes motivated to listen to radical ideas, read about them, self-enlist or respond to terrorist recruiting efforts, and ultimately, undertake terrorist activity – is needed in part to identify trigger points and possible points of intervention. Against this background, your proposal to establish a National Commission on the Prevention of Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism is a necessary step to meet and defeat existing and potential threats to the United States. The stated primary purposes of the Commission – (1) to “[e]xamine and report upon the facts and causes of radicalization and homegrown terrorism in the United States...”; and (2) “to [b]uild upon and bring together the work of other entities...,” both domestic and foreign⁴ – are suggestive of both a sorely needed initiative and a well thought out methodology. Rigorous scrutiny of radicalization undertaken by academics and practitioners alike, as mandated by this legislation, should go a long way towards pulling together what is known in this area, identifying the gaps in our knowledge, and moving forward. In turn, that foundational research may then be used to better inform and shape policies, which should prove to be all the more effective as a result of this evidence-based tailoring. To date, some work has been done, but not under a broad rubric or with the active engagement of the federal agencies necessary. To the extent that solid work on these critical areas has already been done, it should not be discarded or ignored. Collaborative endeavors undertaken by HSPI and CIAG, and projects undertaken by other similar entities such as the Center of Excellence for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) based at the University of Maryland, offer a starting point for more in-depth investigation and analysis by the Commission and its staff.

The importance of drawing upon knowledge and experience that may reside in both the public sector, at all levels of government, and the private and nongovernmental sectors must be emphasized – as must the value of looking beyond our borders to the work done and lessons learned (or at least observed) by other countries. While there is no one size fits all approach to the challenges under study, since each country setting derives its experience and response from a different set of political, economic, social and cultural circumstances and history, there remains substantial value in carefully examining whether certain elements may be relevant to the U.S. context. Put differently, in a borderless world such as ours, we would be acting at our peril if we failed to take into account “foreign government studies of, reviews of, and experiences with radicalization and homegrown terrorism,” as required by the legislation.⁵ This is an area where HSPI has been particularly active. Our Ambassador Roundtable Series on International Collaboration to Combat Terrorism and Insurgencies, co-sponsored by the Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies, builds upon and institutionalizes efforts to engage ambassadors, heads of state and cabinet level officials in an ongoing dialogue on

⁴ Manager’s Amendment to H.R. 1955 Offered by Ms. Harman of California, Section 899C(b).

⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 899C(b)(2)(C).

counterterrorism efforts of multiple nations. This coming Monday, in fact, HSPI will be hosting the United Kingdom's Home Secretary, Dr. John Reid, who leads the UK's effort to protect the public from terrorist attack. His address will speak to the future of terrorism, the "battle of ideas," international law, and recent developments in the U.K. Secretary Reid will offer insights on radicalization and potential methods to counter it.

Yet the role of government whether foreign or domestic is perforce limited in this context, as the solution sets for the problem under discussion must emanate principally from the grassroots, from local communities, their leaders and the citizens that reside there. Governments at the federal, state, local and tribal levels certainly have a contribution to make however, and there is also a measure of interplay between the public and private sectors that is and will continue to be crucial to combating radicalization at home and elsewhere. For instance, law enforcement at the local level should develop new relationships and deepen existing ones within Muslim communities as local figures are best placed to identify radicalization at its earliest stages. Cultivated mutual respect and understanding between officials and communities, founded on a solid education about Muslim cultures and Islam, is critical. Notably, in the Fort Dix case, the mosque attended by three of the plotters quickly called an "emergency town hall meeting" to invite law enforcement, other officials, and members of the public "to ask anything they want about the mosque or about Islam, and to publicize a ringing denunciation of terrorism and violence of any sort..."⁶

Let me emphasize that radicalization is not unique to Islam nor is it a new phenomenon. Historically, extremist beliefs have been used to subvert the ideals of every major religion in the world and Islam is only one of several that terrorists may invoke to justify acts of violence (though such acts run counter to the very tenets of Islam). In cyberspace, extremist organizations of all stripes, adhering to any number of radical belief systems, are present and have used the Internet to radicalize and recruit others. Likewise, in addition to radical Muslim influence, U.S. prisons have borne the imprint of right-wing extremist groups and cults known to participate in criminal activity. Unfortunately, there exists a certain symbiosis between the two and some radical right-wing groups have found common ideological cause with extremists identifying themselves as Muslim. Moving forward, it is imperative that due care be accorded to the sensitivities and perceptions of those who may feel that they, their religion and entire community are being targeted as a result of the egregious and extremist action of but a few. Section 899F of the legislation, which speaks to the protection of civil rights and liberties while preventing ideologically-based violence and homegrown terrorism, recognizes the delicate balance that is required here.

Turning to the more specific aspects of your proposal, in particular the nature of the composition of the Commission and the proposed qualifications of its members, it is suggested that two members each shall be appointed by various officers of government and that in these instances those two members "shall not be members of the same

⁶ Chris Newmarker, "Mosque where Fort Dix suspects struggles with suspicion in wake of plot," *International Herald Tribune*, May 15, 2007, <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/05/15/america/NA-GEN-US-Fort-Dix-Plot-Mosque.php>.

political party.”⁷ Without wading too far into comment on this particular clause, it bears reiterating that homeland security is a national endeavor that should be pursued collectively and collaboratively with vigor and determination, drawing on the tremendous reservoir of talent, imagination and energy that exists in this country. If ever there was an issue or challenge that should be considered and acted upon in nonpartisan fashion, this is it. The stakes are simply too high for any other approach. Section 899C(e) is also reflective of this understanding as the section calls for Commission members to be “selected solely on the basis of their professional qualifications, achievements, public stature, expertise, and relevant experience in the areas of sociology, terrorism, religion, counterterrorism, cultural anthropology, sociology, juvenile justice, education, and corrections.” At the risk of offering an overly “micro-level” comment, I would suggest adding to the foregoing passage the phrase “including but not limited to,” so that the clause would read in relevant part as follows: “. . .in the areas including but not limited to sociology,” et cetera. This is more than mere word-smithing as there may be other disciplines that could provide trenchant insights into the matters at hand and yet those disciplines may not be referenced in the list cited above. The behavioral sciences constitute one such example.

Continuing on at the structural level of analysis, the Amendment requires the Commission to issue within 18 months of its first meeting “a report of its findings and conclusions, and any recommendations for immediate and long-term countermeasures to homegrown terrorism and ideologically based violence and measures that can be taken to prevent violent radicalization and homegrown terrorism from developing and spreading within the United States.”⁸ However, terrorists do not adhere to artificial timelines. Given the seriousness of the Commission’s endeavors and the potential consequences that could result should an incident materialize in the U.S., it may in fact be desirable to embed a greater sense of urgency by imposing one or more interim reporting requirements that would set in motion the sharing of key ideas with relevant partners at an earlier stage of the process. Those parties should be in a position to feed the Commission’s preliminary thoughts into key channels that could have real impact – as they identify areas of missing information/data and matters of concern – and potentially change outcomes. Even if this concept is not accepted, the requirement to issue recommendations should be firm and broad, and should be highlighted more so than is the case at present, as the ultimate objective of the legislation is to solve a remarkably complex problem and the way to achieve that end is through action. Further study, reflection and planning are all crucial tasks, but it must be remembered that they are in essence merely precursors to our fundamental aim, which is to *act* effectively so as to defeat the challenge posed.

Although I have focused my remarks on the Commission itself, H.R. 1955 also establishes a grant program to prevent radicalization and homegrown terrorism in the United States.⁹ The text accords eligibility to any State to apply, and funds granted may be awarded by States to “agencies and organizations, including but not limited to, social

⁷ Manager’s Amendment, *supra* note 4 at sec. 899C(c).

⁸ *Ibid.*, sec. 899C(r)(1).

⁹ Section 899C(a).

services agencies, community-based groups, educational institutions and non-governmental organizations...”.¹⁰ Conceptually, this passage cuts two ways. On the one hand, it reflects an appreciation of the fact that an array of entities and actors must be involved in prevention efforts. On the other hand, the possibility of taint or “blowback” (in the lay sense of the term) inheres in this grant proposal as the credibility of the programs and messages being delivered by private and non-governmental entities may be impugned or challenged simply due to the fact they are funded by the government. By noting this conundrum, it is not to suggest that the grant program should be abandoned altogether. To the contrary, it could enable a range of productive initiatives that could yield real impact and that might otherwise never get off the ground for lack of funding. That said, our expectations of what may be achieved through this particular mechanism should be realistic and should discount from the get-go the fact that government is but one player of many in this area and it is neither the most crucial nor without drawbacks even in terms of limited involvement. Further and more importantly however, there is an issue of sequencing: it may in fact be best for the Commission to complete its work first so as to better inform the proposed grant program.

In light of the most recent developments with the Fort Dix and JFK airport plots, it is my sincere hope that quick action is taken to establish this Commission, so that this critical work can get underway. Thank you again for according me the privilege of testifying before you on this issue of fundamental national importance. The work of the Subcommittee and its staff in driving this matter forward is a genuine public service. Should it be possible to assist your efforts in any way in days ahead, HSPI stands ready to do so. I would now be pleased to try to answer any questions that you may have.

¹⁰ Section 899C(e).