



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Senator Joseph I. Lieberman

Opening Statement
Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
“Terrorists and Guns: The Nature of the Threat and Proposed Reforms”
May 5, 2010

Good morning and thanks to the witnesses who have come to testify today.

I want to extend a special thanks to Mayor Bloomberg and Commissioner Kelly, and all who work with them and live in their great city, for their grace under pressure and the brilliant investigative work they and their colleagues in the federal and state law enforcement communities did to bring Faisal Shahzad to justice 53 hours after his attempted terrorist attack on Times Square.

This hearing on what Congress and the federal government can do to keep firearms out of the hands of terrorists was scheduled long ago but its urgency has certainly been made clear by the events of the past four days.

Our growing understanding of the plot to attack Times Square reminds us that Islamist extremists have declared war on America. In fact, they have attempted attacks on America more than a dozen times in just the last year. Most have been stopped by our counter terror forces before any damage could be done. But four broke through our homeland defense, including the failed attempts on Christmas Day over Detroit, and last Saturday night in New York.

And here is the fact that should focus our concentration this morning: The only two terrorist attacks on America since 9/11 that have been carried out and taken American lives were with firearms.

The most lethal was in November of last year when an Army doctor, Nidal Hasan, opened fire with a 5.7 millimeter, semi-automatic pistol and an older Smith and Wesson revolver at a processing center at Fort Hood, Texas, killing 13 Americans and wounding 30 others. Fort Hood was the deadliest terrorist attack in the U.S. since September 11 and the deadliest domestic terrorist attack against U.S. troops in the history of our country. It was carried out by one man with two guns.

In June of last year, Carlos Bledsoe, who changed his name to Abdulhakim Muhammad, shot and killed a U.S. Army recruiter and seriously wounded another in Little Rock, Arkansas, with an SKS semiautomatic rifle. In another recent case, homegrown terrorist cells stockpiled firearms while planning attacks against personnel at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and at the Marine Corps Base in Quantico, Virginia.

Thankfully, great law enforcement work stopped both plots. But had these planned attacks succeeded, many other Americans would have lost their lives, as over 160 did in the attacks in Mumbai, India, in 2008, which were also carried out largely with firearms.

The threat is all too real. Terrorists armed with semi-automatic and high-powered weapons can inflict heavy casualties in seconds. While it is true that homegrown terrorists are generally less sophisticated than those sponsored and trained overseas by Al Qaeda, they may also – particularly if acting alone - be harder to detect and stop. And the easy availability of lethal weapons ensures that these homegrown terrorists can legally obtain sufficient firepower to cause terrible damage.

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As Senator Lautenberg, Congressman King, Mayor Bloomberg and Commissioner Kelly will make clear today we are simply not doing all we can do to stop terrorists from buying guns.

The stark fact is that the U.S. Department of Justice has no authority to block the sale of firearms to terrorist when DOJ knows they are about to do so.

This unfortunately is not a rare occurrence. The number of times suspected terrorists have been allowed to buy guns in recent years is stunning and infuriating. This morning, the Government Accountability Office will testify that in the last six years, terrorist suspects on watchlists have tried to buy guns more than 1,200 times, and in 91 percent of those cases, they were allowed to buy guns.

In the other 9 percent, they were stopped by some other factor such as a criminal record.

Most Americans understand this has to change, and it can be done without compromising Second Amendment rights. In fact, a recent study done by Frank Luntz showed that over 80 percent of NRA members believe that suspected terrorists should not be allowed to buy guns.

In 2007, the Bush Administration proposed legislation to give the Attorney General the discretion to prevent the sale of firearms to watchlisted terrorists. It was not enacted. Senator Lautenberg and Representative Pete King have re-introduced that legislation in this Congress. It is a straightforward, bipartisan bill supported by mayors all over the country whose cities are prime targets of terrorists, including the coalition of mayors that Mayor Bloomberg has led. In my opinion, the bill should be enacted as quickly as possible to close this dangerous loophole before another suspected terrorist is able to buy firearms legally and use them to kill Americans.

Senator Collins?