

AS PREPARED
Remarks of U.S. Senator Elissa Slotkin
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Good afternoon, everyone, and thanks for having me. I'm Elissa Slotkin, Michigan's newest Senator.

By way of introduction, before I got into politics, I was in the national security world. I'm what's called a 9/11 baby. I happened to be in New York City on my second day of grad school when 9/11 happened. And by the time the smoke cleared, I knew I wanted to go into national security. I went on to serve as a CIA officer, to do three tours in Iraq, to work at the Pentagon, and the White House under two presidents. But before all that, the day after 9/11, I was busy switching all my classes to focus on national security. And one of my professors was Michael O'Hanlon, who now holds about five titles here at Brookings. I was lucky enough to get into his class, and we're all lucky to have him convening this forum today.

I know a lot of you are here to talk about the forthcoming National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and America's role in the world. It's a timely discussion, since word on the street is that these strategies have been rewritten to reorient around "homeland defense," rather than competition with countries like China. Sounds reasonable enough. But here's the thing: in 2025, homeland threats aren't being defined by the Pentagon, or based on what the intelligence community deems our greatest threats — but by one man, Donald Trump, and Donald Trump alone. And he is showing the world just how willing he is to use force against his enemies.

Now, our system is set up to give the President—any president—real power to make decisions on national security and foreign policy. And that's because when it comes to keeping us safe from attack, a Commander-in-Chief needs the power to make quick decisions. As someone who worked for both a Republican president and a Democratic president in the White House, I saw critical decisions made up close, and you need the power to act when it's about life and death. But Trump has laid out a whole lot of enemies that are American citizens. And if he's willing to use lethal force against enemies abroad, what's stopping him from using lethal force against his enemies at home?

That question should chill every American to the bone. And I'm giving this speech today because I believe that's exactly his plan. I believe that Trump is ready to bring the full

weight of the government against Americans he perceives as enemies. Why? Because he has one goal: making sure he and his ilk never have to give up power.

Now to be clear, I don't say this lightly. But I think, between the strikes in the Caribbean, his efforts to identify domestic terrorists, and his deployment of force in American cities, that seems to be where we're headed.

I want to start with what's happening in the Caribbean. Let's review the bidding: Since early September, the Trump Administration has announced attacks on 14 ships. The strikes have killed at least 57 people.

The Trump Administration notified Congress that we as Americans are in an armed conflict with a number of cartels, which they call "designated terrorist organizations." They argue that strikes are fair game because the boats are filled with drugs being smuggled into American cities.

On the surface, this makes sense to a lot of Americans. And I'm sympathetic to going after these types of groups, given what drugs do to Michiganders every day. But here's what's different about these strikes and what is precedent-setting: The President and Secretary Hegseth are refusing to tell the American people who we are fighting. They won't tell us their names or why they're being targeted.

A few weeks ago, the Senate Armed Services Committee received a briefing on the strikes. During that briefing, members from both sides of the aisle asked the Defense Department for the name and number of the organizations the United States is currently at war with. They refused to provide it. We asked for a copy of the memo from the Justice Department that lays out the legal case for these strikes. They refused to provide it.

Whatever our differences are these days, I think it's safe to say that the American people deserve to know who we are at war with, especially if people are being killed in our name. And just for reference, for those of us who worked during the Global War of Terror, we named the groups we were going after. Think Al Qaeda or ISIS. Congress knew the name of every targeted group. The Administration at the time provided the intelligence that justified going after those groups, and why it was legal to do so.

But as much concern as I have about the Caribbean strikes, it's nothing compared to my concern over Trump's full reorientation towards the "enemy within." That reorientation has major implications about his use of force inside the United States.

Last month, the President quietly put out a new Executive Order directing the Department of Justice to create a list of “domestic terrorist organizations.” The order lays out a broad definition: groups that are accused of anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism, anti-Christianity; or hostility toward those who hold “traditional American views on family, religion, and morality”. And these groups don’t have to be violent to be on the list; the order suggests the DOJ could look at chat groups, in-person meetings, social media, and even schools.

To be clear, U.S. law on domestic terrorism is squishy, mostly because of the First Amendment. But it seems clear from his own order that Trump plans to see how far he can stretch the law before someone tells him no. And if the Administration won’t publicly name drug cartels in the Caribbean, you can bet they’ll keep their new list of domestic terrorist organizations a secret, as well. Only this time, the secret lists won’t be made up of supposed drug traffickers in international waters. It’ll be Americans, on American streets, and in American homes.

So let’s play this out: what happens to the people on the secret list? The next logical step is that the President would use the full power of the federal government to target those American citizens. In theory, people on this list could be wiretapped; their homes could be searched; or they could be arrested, just for disagreeing with President Trump’s agenda. I never thought I’d have to lay this out about my own government. This kind of stuff is fundamentally un-American, and strikes at the heart of who we are as a people.

And we’ve already seen anecdotal evidence that this is happening. Trump has created at least two “Weaponization Working Groups”---his name---that bring together people from across the federal government, including the intelligence community, to go after Trump’s perceived enemies. As a CIA officer, the idea that intelligence officers could be asked to target Americans turns my stomach. And it would shift us into a modern day surveillance state.

Turning the federal government against Trump’s enemies goes hand in hand with his use of force in American cities---both federal law enforcement and the military. As of today, the president has attempted to deploy more than 7,000 National Guard members across five cities, including right here in Washington. In August, the Administration ordered the creation of two new National Guard units---a standing quick reaction force that can deploy anywhere in the country, and then separately, National Guard units in all 50 states focused on quelling so-called civil disturbances.

At this point, Trump has been very clear about his intent. At Quantico, speaking as Commander-in-Chief, he instructed his military brass to use U.S. cities as “training grounds”. And many times, he has floated the idea of invoking the Insurrection Act, so that military units can raid, detain, and arrest Americans.

The President has already deployed ICE and other federal law enforcement to these same cities and across America. In some cases, these federal officers are playing fast and loose with their tactics—which sooner or later could lead to a deadly escalation. The videos out of Chicago are shocking—federal agents pulling their weapons on highways, firing tear gas into neighborhoods right before a kids’ Halloween parade, injuring and even killing civilians. Many are masked, not wearing uniforms, and driving unmarked cars. For those of us who have served abroad, it feels like I’m in another country. And it’s only a matter of time before things get worse. By estimation, we’re about two weeks away from a bloody incident that spirals out of control. And this is just the kind of incident that Trump could use to justify more force coming in.

So, what’s the endgame with all this? If the President is going to fundamentally redefine the use of force in America, what is it all for?

What I’m about to say—and my theory of the case—is something I never imagined saying. I believe Trump is reshaping the country to hold on to power.

Trump is following the same playbook as almost every authoritarian in history. The playbook is: first, get elected to address legitimate issues—in our case, the cost of living. Once in office, surround yourself with people loyal to you. Accumulate power and influence, and then start using it against your perceived enemies.

But here’s the kicker: there comes a time in every authoritarian playbook where you hit a tipping point. You accumulate so much power that you realize, if you ever lose and your opponent gets elected, they could use that very power against you. So you hold on to it with everything you have.

That seems to be Trump’s approach right now. And from everything we’ve seen so far—the Caribbean strikes, the lists of domestic terrorists, military and law enforcement deployments on American streets—he seems to be laying the groundwork to stay in power.

There are two ways this could happen – both straight out of the same playbook.

The first: A scenario in which Trump finds a pretext, invokes the Insurrection Act, and tries to impose martial law. Elections could therefore be canceled—or if they happen, he could surround polling places with military and federal law enforcement to intimidate voters.

The second option is harder to track, but can still swing an election: labeling opposition groups, candidates, and elected officials as terrorists and criminals, and going after the infrastructure that allows for competitive elections. For instance, Trump could use the IRS to make it impossible for Democrats to fundraise. He could sue left-leaning organizations, and sow disinformation around our elections. He could discredit, defund, and silence his opposition until they have no chance of winning an election.

The point is, there's more than one way to destroy an election. There's more than one way to lose our democracy. I'm popping a flare that we're in danger of that happening here at home.

Now let me just say again: I am not an alarmist. Some of you in this room worked with me directly—you know that I don't say these things casually. And I want to tell you why I'm making a point of saying it today.

Think back to April of 2020. Trump started tweeting about election fraud, signaling that if he lost the 2020 election, it could only be because of fraud. I was in the House of Representatives at the time. I remember being shocked. But back then, I was pretty polite about it. I sent a bunch of letters, I talked about it in hearings, but I didn't make a big enough stink about it.

Fast forward to January 6, 2021. As rioters stormed the Capitol, I barricaded myself in my office. The thing I thought was unthinkable was happening. I had a failure of imagination back then. But my imagination is working just fine now. I'm not going to make that mistake again.

But here's what Trump hasn't planned for: the will of the American people. Americans have an internal barometer for things that sound and smell authoritarian. I've seen this in Michigan—where even ardent Trump supporters don't like what they're seeing on their phones. That should give us hope. And there's still time to turn the tide.

First, Congress needs to reclaim our power—like, yesterday—over the use of force. To my Republican colleagues, I'm looking at you. In the spirit of John McCain, we need to start pushing back when we don't agree with how force is being used. Leadership is about the actions you take, not the things you say behind closed doors. To that end, I'm

introducing a bill—the No Troops in our Streets Act, that gives Congress the ability to immediately end a military deployment in an American city.

To the military: you, too, have a critical role to play. According to the law, there is such a thing as an illegal order—and the military does have the ability, though difficult, to push back. Because in the choice between loyalty to the Constitution and loyalty to one man, there is only one right answer. Every one of you takes that oath.

To our veterans: you can also exercise your political power to call out Trump's dangerous use of our military. I saw a lot of veterans show up to the No Kings rally—don't ever underestimate the power of your voice, and how impactful it can be when you speak up. And let me just say: if there's a veterans group out there that wants to get involved in a positive way, DM me. We're getting the band together.

To our state leaders: you have a responsibility to hold the line, protect the integrity of our elections, and withstand the pressure that the Trump Administration is already starting to apply. Ordinary citizens can help stiffen those spines at home, too—your local elections are going to be more important than ever.

To regular Americans: you can also speak out about what you're seeing, and organize, peacefully, against it. Throughout history, grassroots movements have been the only thing that have pushed back on government overreach.

And lastly, to everyone watching: don't give up the ship. Generations before us have fought against impossible odds to build the country we have today. And I'm living proof, as a female Senator. I would not be here if generations of women before me had not fought for 100 years to get the right to vote. We don't have the luxury of deciding that this is too hard.

This is the country we all love. And our country needs us right now.

Thank you so much.

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