

Remarks
The Honorable Raúl M. Grijalva, Ranking Member
Forum - Countering Extremism on America's Public Lands
Wednesday, June 15, 2016

Good afternoon.

Before we start today's forum, I'd like to take just a minute to talk about the very upsetting news we all woke up to on Sunday. The shooting in Orlando was hateful. It was an act of terror. I know we all grieve for the victims of this hate crime, and for their loved ones.

The killing of forty-nine people demands more from us than sympathy and prayers. The American people trust us to act on their behalf. We need to respond to that trust with some action. We need to stop the wrong people from getting their hands on tools of destruction. Since the Newtown attack in 2012 killed twenty children and six adult school staff, there have been nine hundred and ninety-four mass shootings in the U.S., including almost three hundred this year alone. Faced with that kind of violence and easy access to deadly weapons, I hope I'm not alone in saying that prayers truly are not enough. We need Congress to act.

As we gather here today, we face a disturbing threat of another kind on our public lands – an extreme antigovernment philosophy that rejects the rule of law and seeks to overturn more than a century of American conservation achievements. The people who follow this dangerous ideology often put communities and hardworking public servants at risk. We saw it clearly in Oregon earlier this year. We saw it at the Bundy ranch in 2014. We've seen it before, and unfortunately we'll see it again. I believe Congress needs to understand this philosophy in order to defeat it.

In opening today's forum, I want to be clear on one thing: Federal lands exist specifically so that everyone can access them and enjoy them. Our national forests, wildlife refuges, parks and public lands are part of our national identity. These public lands were created so all Americans – regardless of wealth or social status – can experience our shared natural world in perpetuity.

This powerful idea of sharing our land has been defended by generations of bipartisan leaders. Today, I'm sorry to say, it is under attack from armed militant groups and their apologists in Washington.

Anti-government extremists intimidate and sometimes attack public servants. They destroy public property. They desecrate the cultural resources of Native American nations. More than once, they have led armed insurrections against the federal government.

Since 2014, when Cliven Bundy and hundreds of militants threatened violence against federal law enforcement officials, anti-government activists have organized and led at least four other armed confrontations on public lands. Republican Congressional leaders have done nothing to combat this growing threat. Indeed, they ignored a Democratic request last month to hold a Natural Resources Committee hearing on this issue.

Instead, some Republican leaders have chosen to support elements of this anti-government ideology. Not long ago, eliminating federal protection for our country's most sensitive natural areas was a fringe idea held by a few anti-government fanatics. Today it has powerful congressional advocates like the Federal Land Action Group, an organization of members of Congress who advocate handing federally protected lands over to states and counties that cannot afford to manage them. If this plan is adopted, many sensitive areas will quickly be sold to the highest bidder and the American people will lose access to lands they have traditionally owned as a community.

This vision of selling off our public lands has no support in law. Even if it did, there is no chance the American people will ever support it. That has not stopped the growth of the sometimes violent opposition to the federal government that we're here to examine today.

I am grateful to have the Southern Poverty Law Center, the George Washington Program on Extremism, Friends of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Conservatives for Responsible Stewardship and the Vet Voice Foundation working with us to tackle one of today's most pressing national security threats.

Thank you, and I yield to my good friend and colleague Bennie Thompson, Ranking Member of the House Committee on Homeland Security.