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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney Hearing on “Accountability and Lessons Learned From the Trump Administration’s Child Separation Policy” February 4, 2021

Today’s hearing will examine the Trump Administration’s role in one of the darkest chapters in our country’s history as the entire world watched in horror while the United States government literally ripped children from the arms of their parents.

The Trump Administration’s child separation policy was intentional, demoralizing, and infuriating all at once. It was, in a word, evil. We’re still living with the consequences of this disastrous policy today. As we convene this morning, hundreds of children still have not been reunited with their families. Thousands more will forever carry the trauma of being pulled away from their parents with no idea if they would ever see them again.

Inspector General Horowitz’s report on this policy is an important contribution to a much-needed reckoning. I’d like to thank Mr. Horowitz for appearing before the Committee today, and for the work he and his office have done on this investigation.

As you know, Democrats on this Committee have been demanding accountability for these child separations for years. In May 2018, shortly after the Trump Administration started separating these children, I led a letter with our late colleague, Elijah Cummings, to then-Chairman Gowdy seeking an investigation. He declined. In June 2018, then-Ranking Member Cummings pleaded with our Republican colleagues to stand up to President Trump and stop these separations. He was begging for help. Elijah’s appeal that day to our nation’s better angels was powerful, and I’d like to play some of his words today from that hearing.

In the years since Elijah’s plea, the inhumanity of this policy has only deepened. As the Inspector General’s report makes strikingly clear, the trauma inflicted on these children and their families was not an accident. It was the point. The Trump Administration chose to use these children as weapons against their own families.

Attorney General Sessions and his top political appointees pursued their brutal zero tolerance policy knowing full-well that it would forcibly separate children from their parents. Separating children from their parents was meant to deter immigration, no matter how valid their claims of asylum. When U.S. Attorneys at the border expressed concern about what was being asked of them, Sessions ignored their pleas for help. He responded, and I quote, “We need to take away children.” Let me repeat that: “We need to take away children.” That’s what he said.

The Inspector General’s findings complement our Committee’s own investigation, which revealed that the Trump Administration misled the public about their rationale for the policy, while actively downplaying the harm caused by child separations. The IG’s report makes clear that Trump Administration compounded the harm of this policy through incompetence. They recklessly disregarded the objections of experts and failed to coordinate among agencies to track these kids. They ignored obvious warnings from an earlier pilot program that experienced many of the same problems. It was a disaster from start to finish.

Now, we need answers. And we need to finally reunite these children with their families. On Tuesday, President Biden announced a task force to do just that. It is astonishing to me that we had to wait for a new president to finally take this step. It is long, long overdue, and we commend President Biden for rejecting the inhumanity of continuing to allow these children to live without their families.

You may hear that child separations started not under the Trump Administration, but under the Obama Administration, and that immigrants were kept in so-called cages long before President Trump came into office. It’s true that during a particularly massive influx of refugees from Central America in 2014, temporary facilities were used to house migrants for 72 hours as they were processed and placed with family members or others. But what the Trump Administration did was significantly worse. It was an intentional policy to separate kids and jail everyone—for weeks and months before they were deported without their children. And it was meant to inflict trauma, so that others wouldn’t come here. The message was clear: don’t come here, and if you do, don’t bring your children, because we will take them away from you, and you may never see them again.

Although we can never undo what the Trump Administration did, we must do everything in our power to ensure that it never happens again. We must also heal the wounds—both physical and emotional—that the Trump Administration inflicted on these children. It’s the very least we can do, and I intend to pursue that goal vigorously.

Before I close, I want to let everyone know that out of an abundance of caution, I’m currently quarantining after being exposed to someone with COVID. So after the Ranking Member gives his opening statement, I’ll be turning the hearing over to Ms. Tlaib, who has generously agreed to manage the hearing on my behalf. I’ll still participate in the question and answer portion of the hearing, but Ms. Tlaib will be managing the remainder of the hearing.

So with that, I now recognize the distinguished Ranking Member, Mr. Comer, for his opening statement.

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