



March 31, 2025

The Honorable John Thune
Majority Leader
United States Senate
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

**Re: VOTE NO on the Confirmation of Harmeet Dhillon for Assistant Attorney
General of Civil Rights**

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a civil and human rights organization that has been working as a catalyst for racial justice, we write to convey our strong opposition to the confirmation of Harmeet Dhillon to be Assistant Attorney General, Civil Rights Division, at the Department of Justice (DOJ). Ms. Dhillon's longstanding record of opposing the enforcement of civil rights laws – including her assertion that voting rights protections are no longer necessary despite unmistakable evidence of ongoing discrimination--should disqualify her from serving in this vital role where she would be responsible for enforcing the very laws she has worked to undermine.

Since 1957, the Civil Rights Division has played an invaluable role in enforcing federal civil rights laws prohibiting discrimination and working to protect the civil and constitutional rights of all people in our nation, especially the most vulnerable and



marginalized.¹ In the Deep South, the DOJ’s Civil Rights Division has often been the last—and at times, the only—line of defense to protect these rights and opportunities.² When governments and lawmakers in Southern states denied or actively obstructed their Black, Brown, and poor residents’ rights to vote, to live free from discrimination, or to work in safe conditions, federal intervention—under both Republican and Democratic administrations— was necessary to protect these rights and ensure justice was served.

Given the enormity of the duties associated with leading crucial federal offices such as this one, the SPLC sent you a letter on January 10, urging you to confirm nominees to Cabinet-level positions only if they were qualified, capable, and would protect the rights of all. ³ Given its tremendous impact on civil rights and equality, the DOJ Civil Rights Division must be led by someone who is both highly qualified and clearly committed to upholding the federal government’s responsibility to protect those rights. Ms. Dhillon fails on both fronts.

Ms. Dhillon’s Record of Undermining Civil Rights

The Civil Rights Division of the DOJ plays a critical role in protecting the rights of marginalized and vulnerable people and communities across the country. The leader of the Civil Rights Division must be someone who has demonstrated a firm commitment to that mission and will vigorously enforce constitutional rights and civil rights laws in a robust and unbiased fashion. Unfortunately, Ms. Dhillon’s record of opposing civil rights shows that she is not that person. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a broad coalition of which the SPLC is a member, stated, in opposition to Ms. Dhillon’s nomination, she “has focused her career on diminishing civil rights, rather than enforcing or protecting them.”⁴

During her confirmation hearing, Ms. Dhillon made clear that she does not intend to continue the Division’s responsibility or legacy of protecting the rights of Black and

¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, *Our Work*, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/our-work#:~:text=The%20Division%20enforces%20federal%20statutes,national%20origin%2C%20and%20citizenship%20status>.

² U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, *2021-2024 Civil Rights Division Highlights*, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/media/1384666/dl?inline>

³ Letter from Margaret Huang and LaShawn Warren, January 10, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/policies/letter-to-senators-urging-careful-evaluation-of-president-elect-trumps-administrative-nominees/>

⁴ The Leadership Conference Statement on the Troubling Selection of Harmeet Dhillon to Lead DOJ Civil Rights Division, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, December 10, 2024, <https://civilrights.org/2024/12/10/the-leadership-conference-statement-on-harmeet-dhillon/>.



Brown people and communities. Asked how her approach to enforcing civil rights laws would differ from her predecessors', Ms. Dhillon responded with the inaccurate assertion that DEI programs are a significant problem in the US because they have “been applied to use racial quotas to deny people equal access to education, employment, even potentially housing and other aspects of civil life that are covered by the Civil Rights statutes are inappropriate.”⁵ As the Leadership Conference recently pointed out in response to President Trump’s Executive Order on the subject, “programs that increase diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility are not quotas, which are illegal. Instead, they are strategies to equalize opportunities for groups of people who are unfairly disadvantaged.”⁶

Ms. Dhillon’s demonization of DEI programs and her implication that they have resulted in discrimination against white people in this country is both erroneous and extremely harmful. Careless, racially charged, misleading statements without any data to support these harmful claims demonstrate her disqualifying poor judgment and unethical conduct—especially for someone who aspires to lead the Division tasked with protecting those she has attacked with that statement. Furthermore, it suggests she may weaponize the powers of her office to pursue baseless “reverse discrimination” lawsuits aimed at intimidating organizations into abandoning efforts to address the real and persistent problem of systemic discrimination that has denied Black and brown people equal opportunities—a reality documented by thousands of reports from the 1960s to the present. The Division cannot be effectively led by someone who so clearly rejects its historic mission.

Ms. Dhillon Worked to Subvert Voting Rights

Ms. Dhillon has devoted considerable energy to efforts to roll back voting rights.⁷ Ms. Dhillon and her law firm, the Dhillon Law Group, were involved in more than a dozen

⁵ Draft Transcript of Hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee on the confirmation of Harmeet Dhillon to be Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at the Department of Justice, February 26, 2025, at 10 (available from PoliticoPro).

⁶ The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, *Trump’s Executive Orders on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Explained*, February 12, 2025, <https://civilrights.org/resource/anti-deia-eos/>.

⁷ Democracy Docket has called Ms. Dhillon “one of the leading legal figures working to roll back voting rights across the country.” Matt Cohen, Harmeet Dhillon, Trump’s Assistant Attorney General Pick, Has a History of Attacking Voting Rights, Democracy Docket, December 10, 2024, <https://www.democracymdocket.com/news-alerts/harmeet-dhillon-trumps-assistant-attorney-general-pick-has-a-history-of-attacking-voting-rights/>.



lawsuits across the country, from challenging laws that expanded voting access to defending restrictive laws and supporting discriminatory redistricting plans.⁸ She has clearly stated her view that the protections of the Voting Rights Act are no longer needed for Black Americans, writing that “the era of Jim Crow is long gone, and it shouldn’t be up to a politicized DOJ to dictate what election integrity looks like.”⁹ Ms. Dhillon herself vigorously promoted false claims of election fraud in the 2020 election cycle, serving as co-chair of Lawyers for Trump.

Voting is at the core of our democracy. The power to elect our leaders—whose decisions impact our lives, families, and communities—is fundamental to what it means to be an American. In a true democracy, voting should be a simple, convenient process that allows every eligible voter to participate easily. It is the primary tool through which the American people influence the decisions made by policymakers on their behalf. The history of voting in the United States has been one of hard-fought progress: the Fourteenth, Fifteenth, Nineteenth, and Twenty-Sixth Amendments expanded voting rights to African Americans, women, and young people, respectively; the Indian Citizenship Act expanded it to Native Americans; and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 along with its subsequent reauthorizations brought the nation significantly closer to making the right to vote real for African Americans, other people of color, language minorities, and people with disabilities. Strengthening our democracy requires increasing voter turnout, challenging restrictive voter freedom measures, ensuring representational diversity, and preventing political violence. At a minimum, anyone nominated to lead the Civil Rights Division must have demonstrated a genuine commitment to these critical elements of advancing (and preserving) democracy and the rights of freedoms of everyone in our society, especially those who have been historically locked out of the political process.

The DOJ has called the Voting Rights Act (VRA) “the most effective piece of civil rights legislation ever enacted.”¹⁰ But, over the last decade, the VRA’s protections have been steadily eroded. With its 2013 decision in *Shelby County v Holder*,¹¹ the Supreme Court significantly impaired those protections and the DOJ’s investigatory powers, but the Civil Rights Division nevertheless continued to prioritize protecting voting rights. This is particularly true in the Deep South, which has a legacy of voter suppression against

⁸ Id.

⁹ Harmeet K. Dhillon, The Politicization of the Justice Department, *Imprimis*, Vol. 51, No. 8, August 2022, https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Imprimis_Aug_9-22_8pgweb.pdf.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, August 6, 2024, *The Enduring Work of Protecting Voting Rights: 59 Years and Counting*, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/blog/enduring-work-protecting-voting-rights-59-years-and-counting>

¹¹ *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013).



Black voters and whose state governments have seized upon the *Shelby County* decision to pass many new voter suppression laws.¹² Since 2021, the Civil Rights Division has begun or participated in voting rights litigation to challenge discriminatory measures.¹³ For example, it challenged voter suppression measures in Georgia, such as banning the distribution of absentee ballot applications, shortening the deadline to request a ballot, and prohibiting the distribution of water to people waiting long periods of time to vote. The Division also challenged actions in Alabama that violated the National Voter Registration Act by removing eligible voters from the rolls within 90 days of the election.¹⁴

Ms. Dhillon Defended Hate and Extremism

Ms. Dhillon cannot be relied upon to address hate and extremism as the leader of the Civil Rights Division. Legal organizations she founded have regularly represented and associated with people and organizations who espouse extremist ideologies. For example, the Dhillon Law Group represented the extremist-friendly social media site, Gab¹⁵ and its founder Andrew Torba against Google after the tech giant banned Gab's app from its Play Store in the wake of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. Additionally, the Center for American Liberty (CAL), a legal nonprofit founded by Dhillon, associated with and represented extremists. CAL was listed by the Ruth Institute, an anti-LGBTQ hate group,¹⁶ as an "allied organization." The same list included Alliance Defending Freedom, another anti-LGBTQ hate group.¹⁷ CAL represented Andy Ngo, a far-right internet personality whose body of work "largely consists of publishing anti-antifa, Islamophobic and transphobic tweets and articles to his sizable Twitter following, along with disseminating the arrest records and personal details of left-wing demonstrators."¹⁸

¹² Southern Poverty Law Center, *A Decade Long Erosion* (2024), <https://www.splcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/files/report-impact-shelby-decision-10-years-later.pdf>; Daniel Perez, *Voter suppression makes the racist and anti-worker Southern model possible*, October 1, 2024, <https://www.epi.org/publication/rooted-racism-voter-suppression/>

¹³ U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, *Recent Activities of the Voting Section*, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/recent-activities-voting-section>.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ For example, Robert Bowers announced his mass shooting on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA on Gab.

¹⁶ SPLC Extremist Files, Ruth Institute, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/ruth-institute/>.

¹⁷ SPLC Extremist Files, Alliance Defending Freedom, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/alliance-defending-freedom/>.

¹⁸ SPLC Hatewatch, Poland Paid Andy Ngo a Pittance for Anti-antifa Speech, June 6, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/hate-watch/poland-paid-andy-ngo-pittance-anti-antifa-speech/>.



The DOJ has long prioritized both preventing and prosecuting hate crimes--priorities that align with our work in the Deep South.¹⁹ In response to increasing rates of hate crimes, the previous administration had elevated hate crimes to a Level 1 National Threat.²⁰ In 2024, the Justice Department announced that \$30 million had been awarded "to help communities improve the investigation and prosecution of hate and bias crimes, solve hate crime cold cases, serve victims of these offenses, and support related research." In recent years, the Civil Rights Division secured a conviction against a Florida man for attacking multiple Black women because of their race, a conviction of another Florida man who assaulted a Muslim postal worker by pulling her out of her truck and grabbing her neck while attempting to pull off her hijab, a conviction of a South Carolina man for murdering a transgender woman, and a conviction of a Mississippi man who cyberstalked and made antisemitic threats targeting synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses.²¹

The DOJ's Civil Rights Division plays a vital role in combatting the spread of hate and extremism that leads to increased numbers of hate crimes. The Division cannot be adequately led by Ms. Dhillon—someone who, instead of combatting hate and extremism, has supported the purveyors of extremist ideologies.

Ms. Dhillon Lacks Familiarity with the Criminal Legal System

Ms. Dhillon lacks any background or experience regarding the criminal legal system and is ill-equipped to understand and work to uphold the constitutional and civil rights of those entangled in it. For example, in responding to Questions for the Record about the Division's role in addressing unconstitutional conditions in prisons, Ms. Dhillon indicated her complete lack of familiarity with the subject matter.²² Her demonstrated lack of regard for the constitutional rights of marginalized people and communities in other contexts does not offer any reason to hope that she will be interested in the crucial role the Division plays. We are concerned that under her leadership the Division's work in this context will be limited or abandoned.

¹⁹ See: U.S. Department of Justice, *Fact Sheet: Combatting Hate Crimes*, last accessed February 10, 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/press-release/file/1557076/dl?inline=>; and Office of Justice Programs: *Office of Justice Programs Fact Sheet Research, Programs, and Initiatives that Address Hate Crimes*, last accessed February 10, 2025, <https://www.ojp.gov/doc/ojp-hate-crimes-fact-sheet.pdf>

²⁰ Attorney General Garland Issues Statement on 2020 FBI Hate Crimes in the United States Statistics.

²¹ Id. Office of Public Affairs | South Carolina Man Found Guilty of Hate Crime for Killing a Transgender Woman Because of Her Gender Identity | United States Department of Justice

²² U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Written Questions for Harmeet Dhillon, Questions from Senator Coons, 21-22, February 27, 2025*, https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2025-02-26_qfr_responses_dhillon.pdf



The Civil Rights Division of the DOJ investigates and prosecutes cases of law enforcement misconduct such as the use of excessive force, false arrest, or other Constitutional violations.²³ This work is critical, especially to ensure protections for Black and Brown people. Black people in the U.S. are three times more likely to be killed by the police than white people.²⁴ Black and Brown people are also more likely to be the victims of the use of excessive force by law enforcement.²⁵ Additionally, the Division historically worked to protect the rights of incarcerated people when state or local government violated their rights.²⁶ This federal agency intervention is incredibly important for communities of color who are disproportionately more likely to experience incarceration.²⁷

The Civil Rights Division often acts as a backstop when state and local agencies fail to hold law enforcement officials accountable for rights violations or when the Division has reason to believe local authorities will not robustly seek justice after law enforcement misconduct has been identified. Since January 2021, the Division has secured convictions of over 180 law enforcement officials who deprived citizens of their rights and opened 12 new investigations of law enforcement agencies for their pattern-or-practice of civil rights violations.²⁸

When Louisville, Kentucky police officers killed Breonna Taylor, local prosecutors failed to bring charges to hold the officers accountable.²⁹ The Civil Rights Division brought criminal charges related to causing the death of Ms. Taylor against four of the officers.³⁰ In another example, the Division secured prison sentences for six law enforcement

²³ Civil Rights Division U.S. Department of Justice, *Law Enforcement Misconduct*, Last accessed February 27, 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/law-enforcement-misconduct>

²⁴ Taryn Merkl, *Protecting Against Police Brutality and Official Misconduct*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/protecting-against-police-brutality-and-official-misconduct>

²⁵ Susan Scutti, *Police More Likely to Use Force on Blacks Than Whites*, Study Shows, July 12, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/07/12/health/police-use-of-force-on-blacks/index.html>

²⁶ Civil Rights Division U.S. Department of Justice, *Rights of Persons Confined to Jails and Prisons*, Last accessed February 27, 2025,

²⁷ Adriana Rezal, *The Racial Makeup America's Prisons*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2021-10-13/report-highlights-staggering-racial-disparities-in-us-incarceration-rates>

²⁸ U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, *2021-2024 Civil Rights Division Highlights*, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/media/1384666/dl?inline> U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, *2021-2024 Civil Rights Division Highlights*, at 12, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/media/1384666/dl?inline>

²⁹ Fabiola Cineas, *Why the Justice Department made a move in the police killing of Breonna Taylor*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/23293923/breonna-taylor-police-charged-justice-department>

³⁰ U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, *2021-2024 Civil Rights Division Highlights*, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/media/1384666/dl?inline>



officers known as the “goon squad” in Mississippi, who unlawfully entered the home of two Black men – assaulted, tortured, and shot one of them while using racial epithets.³¹

In addition to holding law enforcement officers accountable, the Division works to hold corrections officials in the Deep South responsible for violating the rights of people they have sworn an oath to protect. In one example, the Civil Rights Division brought criminal charges against a county jail administrator from Crenshaw County, Alabama for assaulting a compliant and handcuffed detainee.³² The Division investigated the Fulton County, Georgia jail and determined it failed to protect people from violence, housed people in unsanitary and dangerous conditions, and failed to provide adequate medical services to people it held in detention.³³ The Division similarly found that the Georgia Department of Corrections failed to protect incarcerated people from physical and sexual violence.³⁴

Conclusion

The decision to confirm a nominee is a Senator’s solemn responsibility which requires measured evaluation and consideration of suitability for the chosen role. The framers of the Constitution established the Senate’s “Advice and Consent” role for a reason: to ensure that the nation’s and the public’s interests—not those of any political party or president—are protected. The confirmation process serves as a crucial check on presidential power, protecting our nation by preventing the appointment of unqualified or unsuitable individuals to lead agencies that impact the everyday lives of millions of Americans.

In this era of hyper-partisanship and rising inequality, all Americans must be assured that the Department of Justice will act when civil rights are violated, especially the rights of those who have historically been marginalized. Founded in Alabama in 1971 to continue the work of the Civil Rights Movement, the SPLC uniquely understands the essential role the federal government plays in safeguarding the rights and opportunities promised to all Americans. Harmeet Dhillon’s record makes clear that she is unfit to lead the DOJ’s Civil Rights Division; therefore, the SPLC strongly opposes her selection for this role. We urge you to vote NO on her confirmation. If you have any questions or

³¹ *Id.*

³² Office of Public Affairs, Department of Justice, January 28, 2025, *Former Alabama Jail Administrator Charged with Federal Civil Rights Violation, Falsifying a Report and Making False Statements to Investigators*, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/former-alabama-jail-administrator-charged-federal-civil-rights-violation-falsifying-report>

³³ U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, *2021-2024 Civil Rights Division Highlights*, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/media/1384666/dl?inline>

³⁴ *Id.*



need additional information, please contact Senior Policy Counsel Aiden Cotter,
aiden.cotter@splcenter.org.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "LaShawn Warren".

LaShawn Warren
Chief Policy Officer

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sakira Cook".

Sakira Cook
Federal Policy Director

cc: Members of the United States Senate