

**OPENING STATEMENT**

Good afternoon. Today's oversight hearing is entitled *Destroying Sacred Sites and Erasing Tribal Culture: The Trump Administration's Construction of the Border Wall*.

Before I begin, I want to thank our witnesses here today for taking the time to testify about the reckless, harmful destruction of sacred places along our Southern Border.

As we will learn today, this administration has blasted and bulldozed multiple sites – including burial grounds – along the Southern Border that are sacred to the religion and culture of the Tohono O'odham people without any kind of meaningful Tribal consultation, and often without advanced notice.

So far in my tenure as Chairman of this Subcommittee, I have been appalled at the utter lack of regard this administration has for upholding our legal trust responsibilities to Indian Tribes to protect their sovereignty, their way of life and – yes – their sacred sites.

Today, we have reached a new low.

Not only has this administration been negligent in its trust responsibility by destroying sacred sites, but DHS and the White House refused our invitation to be here today to explain their actions.

In fact, we only learned at 5pm last night – less than 24 hours in advance – that the Interior Department would be sending a witness today.

According to the testimony we received last night, the Interior Department will, in part, argue today that blasting sacred sites and cutting down hundred-year-old Saguaro cacti to build a border wall will actually, quote “help us maintain the character of these lands and resources.”

The Administration’s gaslighting argument of “we have to destroy it, in order to protect it” is as plainly ridiculous as it is offensive.

It is insult to this committee, and to the tribal leaders and advocates who traveled here today to testify.

This administration apparently has no shame for the damage it is causing to Tribal burial grounds – for the Tohono O’odham this is the equivalent of bulldozing through parts of Arlington National Cemetery.

They are so shameless that, as we speak, CBP is holding a press event in Arizona entitled “Monument Hill Controlled Detonation and Briefing,” which features a briefing from CBP personnel and a live detonation on Monument Hill.

So rather than sit before this Subcommittee, the Department of Homeland Security is detonating sacred burial grounds for a captive audience.

I want to be clear: when sacred cultural sites are destroyed in international conflict, it is considered a war crime.

Earlier this year, we saw President Trump repeatedly threaten to destroy sacred sites in Iran – to the condemnation of many, including myself, in this country.

Well today, as we speak, this White House is doing just that on American soil.

Places like Monument Hill and Quitobaquito Spring have been held sacred by the O'odham peoples since before the United States existed.

We will hear from the experts and the Tribe itself today that these physical places are critical to their culture and religion.

It is not enough to do a survey of a cultural site only to blast it anyway.

It is not enough to remove bone fragments that are found and return them to the Tribe when the burial site itself is being destroyed.

It is not enough to shoot an email to Chairman Norris mere hours before you bulldoze a site his people have held sacred since time immemorial.

These actions are disgusting as well as a flagrant violation of the requirement to consult with Tribes before decisions are made and to hold in trust the interest and wellbeing of Tribal Nations.

This behavior is not reflective of the America I have fought for, and I cannot imagine what I would do if I knew that anyone was desecrating the burial grounds of the men and women I fought with at Arlington Cemetery.

It is this committee's mission to shine a light on these atrocities and fight like hell to prevent them from continuing.

That's why I am grateful to the legal experts, Tribal leaders, and advocates here today.

I greatly look forward to your testimony and I recognize the Ranking Member for any opening remarks.