

**Written Testimony of
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**Before the
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans Affairs**

**Regarding
“Violent Domestic Extremist Groups and Recruitment of Veterans”
October 13, 2021**

Chairman Mark Takano, Ranking Member Mike Bost, and esteemed members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify. My name is Heidi Beirich. I hold a Ph.D. in political science from Purdue University and am the co-founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GPAHE). I am an expert on white supremacist and far-right extremist movements, serving as an advisory board member of the International Network for Hate Studies, a co-founder and co-chair of the Change the Terms Coalition, which advocates for solutions to online extremism, and the author of numerous studies on extremism as well as co-editor of *Neo-Confederacy: A Critical Introduction*. My organization is a member of the Christchurch Call Advisory Network, an international body created by the governments of France and New Zealand after the 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks, which the U.S. recently joined, that advises on the handling of online terrorist content and activity. My research has been cited in hundreds of academic pieces and news reports, including many on the issue of extremism among military professionals. I am honored to appear before you today.

For two decades prior to founding GPAHE, while serving as the director of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project, my team monitored, issued reports about, and trained law enforcement and military officials on far-right extremist activity. We alerted Armed Forces officials when we identified white supremacists and other extremists serving in the military. In addition to monitoring white supremacists in the military, we urged the implementation of more vigilant practices and stronger policies to root out extremists from the ranks. In the last year, I have continued to work with members of the military on this important issue, including providing training and advice in the months since Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ordered the standdown to address extremism.

My testimony will focus on the domestic terrorist threat to our country posed by far-right extremist groups, in particular white supremacist and antigovernment organizations, and their relationship to veterans. I will address the tactics employed by these extremist groups to recruit and radicalize veterans, provide examples of how veterans have been involved in domestic terrorist plots, and suggest possible solutions for mitigating this threat. My testimony is not

intended to minimize other threats to our Armed Forces, or to veterans. It is also not intended to discredit in any way members of our Armed Forces or our veterans, who faithfully serve us with selfless dedication and uphold our country's deepest values. Even so, we cannot ignore that those who sully the good name and integrity of their fellow soldiers and veterans pose a serious security threat to our nation.

Far-Right Terrorism Rising

There is no question that the major terrorism threat to the U.S. is coming from the far right (there are other threats, but they do not predominate today). There was no greater display of this than the events of January 6, 2021, where extremists of various stripes—white supremacists, neo-Nazis, antigovernment ideologues, and conspiracists—joined forces to storm our Capitol. The Capitol insurgency was a direct attack on our democracy, as the insurrectionists aimed to stop the peaceful transfer of power. FBI Director Christopher Wray described the attack as an act of “domestic terrorism.”¹

As of late September 2021, 66 of those arrested were veterans, and another five individuals are currently serving in a military branch.² These individuals represent about 12 percent of the more than 619 arrested so far.³ As of July, approximately 40 percent of the arrested veterans were associated with domestic extremist organizations, such as the anti-government Oath Keepers, founded by a former Army paratrooper, and the racist Proud Boys. Members of both these groups have been charged with conspiracy in the Capitol attack.⁴ Information through April shows that those with military experience were four times more likely to be associated with extremist groups than those without a military background.⁵ Some also served in leadership positions in these organizations. Additional research suggests that far-right extremists disproportionately have military experience.⁶ This data is a frightening illustration of how active-duty and veteran service members can be vulnerable to extremist thinking.

January 6 is emblematic of how the far right has come to the fore as this country's main terrorism threat. Data on domestic terrorism, as well as assessments made by federal government agencies, have come to the same conclusion. The events of January 6 validated repeated warnings since

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/fbi-chris-wray-testify-capitol-riot-9a5539af34b15338bb5c4923907eeb67>

² <https://extremism.gwu.edu/Capitol-Hill-Cases>; https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/Extremism%20In%20the%20Ranks%20and%20After%20-%20Research%20Brief%20-%20July_13_2021%20Final%20accessible.pdf

³ <https://www.voanews.com/usa/rise-extremism-us-military-linked-key-mobilization-events>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/legal/litigation/us-judge-denies-bid-by-qanon-shaman-be-released-prison-pending-trial-2021-07-06/>; <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/19/979304432/4-proud-boys-charged-with-conspiracy-over-jan-6-capitol-riot>

⁵ https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/This-is-War_Final.pdf

⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1057610X.2013.802976?needAccess=true>

2019 by federal agencies including the FBI, Department of State, Department of Homeland Security, and the National Counterterrorism Center that far-right extremism poses the greatest threat to the homeland.⁷ In recent months, those warnings have become more vociferous. In March, FBI Director Christopher Wray told Congress, “January 6 was not an isolated event. The problem of domestic terrorism has been metastasizing across the country for a long time now and it’s not going away anytime soon.”⁸ Also in March, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence echoed Wray’s concerns, writing that the Intelligence Community is most concerned by white supremacists and militias, which “present the most lethal DVE [domestic violent extremist] threats, with RMVEs [racially-motivated violent extremists] most likely to conduct mass-casualty attacks against civilians.”⁹

These conclusions by federal authorities are wholly justified. In June 2020, the bipartisan Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) analyzed a data set of terrorist attacks in the United States occurring between January 1994 and May 2020.¹⁰ CSIS concluded that “far-right terrorism has significantly outpaced terrorism from other types of perpetrators.” CSIS found far-right extremists perpetrated two-thirds of the attacks and plots in 2019 and over 90 percent between January 1 and May 8, 2020.¹¹ The events since CSIS released its report have validated its conclusion that “terrorism in the United States will likely increase over the next year.” In 2020, there were 73 far-right incidents, an annual high since 1994.¹² There were numerous plots leading up to January 6 that targeted a wide range of communities, including Black people, Jews, immigrants, LGBTQ people, Asians, and others, as well as institutions of worship, culminating in the serious terrorist attack that directly targeted our national Capitol and democratic institutions.

Since January 6, additional plots have been disrupted. Among them were that of a Texan planning to blow up an Amazon data center,¹³ another Texan planning a mass shooting at a Walmart,¹⁴ and a plot by two men to blow up the California Democratic Party headquarters.¹⁵ There were others as well, and there will likely and sadly be more.

⁷ <https://www.globalextrmism.org/post/dangers-of-white-supremacist-movements-accelerationism-and-militias-online-recruitment-and-growth>

⁸ <https://apnews.com/article/fbi-chris-wray-testify-capitol-riot-9a5539af34b15338bb5c4923907eeb67>

⁹ <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/UnclassSummaryofDVEAssessment-17MAR21.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states>

¹¹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states>

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/>

¹³ <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/texas-man-pleads-guilty-planned-amazon-data-center-78186149>

¹⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/06/01/texas-walmart-coleman-blevins-shooting/>

¹⁵ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-07-16/two-californians-charged-in-plot-to-blow-up-democratic-headquarters>

Extremist Groups Target Veterans

Recruitment of active-duty military and veterans has been a staple tool of white supremacist and antigovernment groups for decades. In fact, many former soldiers have risen to lead violent white supremacist groups. For these organizations, military training is seen as vital to achieving their goals, whether that be a race war anticipated by many white supremacists, or to battle the federal government, seen as the enemy by antigovernment organizations. Veterans also convey legitimacy on the organizations and make further recruitment easier. The veterans who sign on with extremist groups receive respect for their service and skills and a brotherhood that can be fulfilling.

Federal agencies have long documented this nexus between far-right extremist groups and former or current military personnel. In 2008, the FBI published “White Supremacist

Recruitment of Military Personnel since 9/11.”¹⁶ The report detailed more than a dozen investigative findings and criminal cases involving veterans and active-duty soldiers engaging in extremist activity. It documented just over 200 identifiable neo-Nazis with military training. In 2009, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) report further warned that the combination of the election of the first Black president, a downturn in the economy, and an influx of unemployed veterans returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan were potential flashpoints for violent extremism, and that military personnel and veterans were being targeted by far-right extremist

groups.¹⁷ Unfortunately, this report, particularly its factual assertion that extremist groups would target veterans for recruiting, engendered a firestorm among politicians, conservative commentators, and some veterans groups who felt that it unfairly smeared veterans as susceptible to extremism. As a result, the report was rescinded by then-DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano, and the Obama administration subsequently did little to address the issues raised, including rising white supremacist terrorism and increased efforts in veteran recruitment by far-right extremist groups.

The DHS report was simply restating something that had long been true: the connection between veterans, violent far-right extremist groups, and domestic terrorism is well established. Going back to the 1970s, many leaders of domestic extremist organizations served in the military. One of the most prominent white supremacist figures, and an advocate of lone actor violence, is former Klansman Louis Beam, who enlisted in the Army as a teen and fought in Vietnam. Beam later advocated that his fellow white supremacists wage war at home using guerrilla tactics and lone actor violence.²³ Members of The Order, a 1980s white supremacist terrorist group whose members assassinated Jewish talk show host Alan Berg in his Denver driveway, had military backgrounds. Other prominent far-right extremist veterans include Randy Weaver, a racist and

¹⁶<https://documents.law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/White%20Supremacist%20Recruitment%20of%20Military%20Personnel%20Since%209-11-ocr.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/us/politics/white-supremacy-homeland-security.html>

antisemitic Christian Identity adherent at the center of the Ruby Ridge standoff in 1992, and Richard Butler, head of the Aryan Nations.

In 1999, the neo-Nazi National Alliance, whose members have a long track record of violence,¹⁸ established a “military unit coordinator” headed by a retired non-commissioned Special Forces officer. In his announcement of the new unit, National Alliance leader William Pierce, author of *The Turner Diaries* which inspired Timothy McVeigh’s Oklahoma City bombing, wrote that the new coordinator, “will advise members on recruiting activities in the armed forces, on appropriate conduct, and on security matters.”¹⁹ The unit would go on to attract active-duty soldiers and veterans into the National Alliance, including other members of elite military units.²⁰ This kind of coordinated recruitment is found across white supremacist groups. This past March, the former head of the National Socialist Movement (NSM), now an ex-white supremacist, spoke of how NSM sought out military personnel and veterans specifically for their military training and leadership capabilities. The group rebranded specifically for this purpose, pushing traditional patriotic American themes and slogans, which raised the numbers of former military to about half of the group’s membership. NSM was particularly interested in those just leaving military service.²¹ In July 2009, my research team documented 130 members on an NSM social media site with military links.²²

These recruiting efforts by extremist groups continue apace. Certain groups, particularly antigovernment outfits like the Oath Keepers, prize military experience above all else. The reasons are obvious: the training soldiers have in tactics, weapons, and bombmaking, and the legitimacy they convey to the organization. The military is one of the most trusted institutions in our society, and these extremist organizations aim to leverage that trust for their own ends and to further all forms of recruitment.²³ These organizations also offer veterans important psychological benefits, including renewed membership in a fraternal organization, respect for their skills, and according to one researcher on this topic, the “promise of restoration of dignity.”²⁴ This can be a potent attractant. Other research suggests that these recruitment efforts target veterans when they are vulnerable or suffering from other psychological issues. In February, co-founder of Veteran and First Responder Healthcare, Eric Golnick, a veteran himself,

¹⁸ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/alliance-and-law>

¹⁹ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/1999/national-alliance-reveals-new-leaders-including-military-unity-coordinator>

²⁰ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2006/several-high-profile-racist-extremists-serve-us-military>

²¹ <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/03/bum-rushing-extremists-military-might-not-help/172740/>

²² <https://www.stripes.com/news/pentagon-tightens-restrictions-on-hate-group-participation-1.100856>

²³ https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/This-is-War_Final.pdf

²⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/veterans-extremism-capitol-attack/2021/04/19/3597018a-9651-11eb-8e42-3906c09073f9_story.html

wrote, “When in these vulnerable mental states, coupled with substance use and a loss of ‘tribe’ or sense of belonging, veterans become a prime target for extremist groups.”²⁵ Research has found that extremist groups exploit vulnerabilities, especially when individuals experience involuntary exits from the military or when individuals perceive that personal achievements earned while enlisted are unrecognized or unappreciated.²⁶

The tactics, particularly online efforts, work.²⁷ According to one estimate, veterans and active-duty members of the military currently make up roughly 25 percent of active militia members.²⁸ Organizations like the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, and the Boogaloo Bois movement include active-duty personnel, reservists, and veterans. This is not an accident. These groups spend considerable time reaching out to the community. For example, in mid-July, a chapter of the Proud Boys had planned to hold a “poker run” for veterans with the assistance of the local VFW, which cancelled the event as soon as they became aware of who was involved.²⁹ Earlier in the month, members of the Proud Boys participated in a Fourth of July parade alongside veterans groups in Creswell, Oregon.³⁰ The leader of the Oath Keepers directly appeals to his fellow veterans, saying in a video hosted by the conspiracy site InfoWars, “All you veterans out there, you’ve got to stand up...Lead your local community in watching over their own backyards, over their own neighborhoods, and over their own towns.”³¹ Groups intent on disrupting or overthrowing our political system, whether guided by white supremacist or antigovernment ideology, are particularly keen on having the capacity to achieve their ends. Veterans are seen as key to that success.

This reality made extremely welcome the Biden administration’s “National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism,” the first ever White House whole-of-government strategic plan to address domestic extremism, specifically white supremacist and antigovernment organizations.³² Recognizing the central issue of active-duty military and veterans in domestic extremist violence, the new plan announced that the Department of Defense would be creating training for service members separating from the military “on potential targeting of those with

²⁵ <https://www.military.com/daily-news/opinions/2021/02/25/why-so-many-veterans-find-path-extremism.html>

²⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1057610X.2013.802976?needAccess=true>

²⁷ <https://www.military.com/daily-news/opinions/2021/02/25/why-so-many-veterans-find-path-extremism.html>

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/us/politics/veterans-trump-protests-militias.html>

²⁹ https://helenair.com/news/local/proud-boys-poker-run-to-benefit-veterans-canceled/article_12eebb7e-6b61-51ca-aa9b-678511144e3d.html

³⁰ <https://www.registerguard.com/story/news/2021/07/04/proud-boys-help-lead-unpermitted-july-4th-parade-creswell/7860487002/>

³¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/extremism-in-the-ranks-military-insurrection-oath-keepers/>

³² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf>

military training by violent extremist actors” as well as a “mechanism by which veterans can report recruitment attempts by violent extremist actors.”³³ The plan includes specific proposals to combat white supremacist and militia groups that target veterans for recruitment. For active-duty military, it promises enhanced screening of recruits, improved processes for awarding security clearances and other powers for those in a position of trust, and a commitment to diversity that reflects our nation’s population. The Department of Defense is also “reviewing and updating its definition of prohibited extremist activities among uniformed military personnel and will consider appropriate policy recommendations and options to address such activity by and among civilian employees and contractors.”

Domestic Terrorism Involving Veterans

This hearing addresses far more than the horrifying events of January 6, but the data on veterans involved in the Capitol insurrection is instructive. At this point, 66 veterans have been charged for their roles in the Capitol siege. There is other data to back up the notion that former and current military are tied to domestic extremism. For example, in 2020, the FBI told the Department of Defense that it had opened 143 criminal investigations involving current or former service members and that 68 were related to domestic extremism, most involving veterans.³⁴

We should not be surprised by these numbers. Veterans have often been a key demographic involved in domestic terrorism plots. The largest domestic terrorism attack to take place on American soil before 9/11 was by Timothy McVeigh, a veteran, who in 1995 set off a truck bomb that destroyed an Oklahoma City federal building. The attack killed 168 people, including several children, and injured hundreds more. Additional terrorist attacks committed by veterans include the 1996 Olympic Park bombing, the 2012 Wisconsin Sikh temple shooting, and the 2014 shootings at two Jewish facilities in Kansas. According to New America, 21 military veterans were identified as having committed or attempted an act of far-right extremist violence between 2001 and 2013.³⁵ Other very serious recent attempts at violence involving veterans include the October 2020 plot by militia adherents to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and the May 2020 Las Vegas plot by three veterans connected to the accelerationist movement, Boogaloo Bois, who conspired to firebomb a U.S. Forest Service building and a power substation to sow chaos during Black Lives Matter protests held in response to the murder of George Floyd.³⁶

³³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf>

³⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/us/lloyd-austin-extremism-military.html>.

³⁵ <https://psmag.com/social-justice/does-the-american-military-have-a-problem-with-far-right-extremism>

³⁶ <https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/3-alleged-boogaloo-members-charged-in-las-vegas-protests-2044384/>

Ample evidence continues to document the key role veterans play in extremism today. A July 2021 study by the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) analyzed the military service backgrounds of individuals who committed extremist crimes in the U.S. from 1990 through the first six months of 2021.³⁷ The data shows at least 354 individuals with military backgrounds committed criminal acts that were motivated by extremism. Of those, nearly 80 percent were no longer serving when they were radicalized and/or arrested for committing these crimes. The data also shows a recent spike in cases involving individuals with a military background. It found the average number of cases jumped from six per year from 1990 through 2010 to almost 21 cases per year over the past decade. The increase was largely driven by spikes in 2017, 2020, and 2021 (the authors note the Charlottesville riots in 2017 and the recent Capitol attack contributed to two of the spikes).³⁸ The predominant ideological affiliations of these individuals was either antigovernment or white supremacist, which accounted for more than 80 percent of the cohort. In the dataset, 77 individuals were associated with antigovernment groups and 78 with organized white supremacist organizations (the data allows for overlap, so some individuals are assigned to more than one ideology). Of the entire pool, 63 percent of offenders were connected to organized extremist groups or movements.

In April 2021, CSIS released a report that evaluated the presence of active-duty troops and veterans in terrorist attacks and plots in the prior three years. In 2020, active-duty troops, reservists, and National Guard members were linked to more than six percent of all domestic terrorist incidents, making up seven of 110 counted by CSIS. This was up from one and a half percent in 2019 and zero in 2018. The data thus indicates that U.S. military personnel have been involved in a growing number of domestic terrorist plots and attacks. While these individuals represent a tiny percentage of all current active-duty and reserve personnel, the increased number of incidents is concerning.¹¹ More importantly, the data showed that veterans consistently committed more attacks and plots than active-duty and reserve troops, including 10 percent of all domestic terrorist attacks and plots since 2015.³⁹

The presence of veterans in these organizations is additionally concerning, as their training may increase the possibility of a successful attack. The combat skills and other military training that extremist groups crave, such as tactical knowledge, were on display during the January 6 insurrection, where members of the Oath Keepers used military formations to assault the

³⁷https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/Extremism%20In%20the%20Ranks%20and%20After%20-%20Research%20Brief%20-%20July_13_2021%20Final%20accessible.pdf

³⁸ <https://www.voanews.com/usa/causes-extremism-spike-us-military-examined-new-study>

³⁹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-police-and-rise-terrorism-united-states>

building and sophisticated communications to plan their activities.⁴⁰ High levels of organization that day by the Proud Boys showed similar sophistication. Their efforts were led by a veteran.⁴¹ This means the presence of veterans in extremist groups can make their attacks or other activities more successful and potentially more deadly. Magistrate Judge Michael Harvey made this exact point in a recent ruling regarding an Army veteran who played a leadership role during the Capitol attack. Harvey said that the defendant was “willing to use his training or experience to organize with the rioters on January 6...thereby making their actions more effective, more forceful and more violent.”⁴² The judge added that the rioters “appeared disorganized” until the defendant, whom he described as “in his element” as a former Army Ranger, began issuing instructions.⁴³

These incidents and individuals represent a small minority of the veteran community. We should not forget the sacrifices veterans have given repeatedly to protect our country. They did so again on January 6, when veterans defended the Capitol. Capitol Police Officer Eugene Goodman, who served in Iraq, has been honored for his heroism in drawing a mob away from members of Congress.⁴⁴ Air National Guard veteran and Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick died from injuries sustained while responding to the attack.⁴⁵

Mitigating the Threat Going Forward

Need for Reforms at All Stages of Service

Any efforts to root out extremism in the ranks of veterans must be part of a whole of service approach, starting with screening procedures for those joining the military. In February 2020, I testified in front of the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee Military Personnel Subcommittee about mitigation factors for extremism in the military.⁴⁶ My testimony suggested several steps for removing extremists from active duty. Many of those suggestions—such as speaking out forcefully against extremism in the ranks—have already happened. Others, such as

⁴⁰ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/extremism-in-the-ranks-military-insurrection-oath-keepers/>; <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/02/15/veterans-used-their-military-training-plot-violence-capitol-riot-feds-say.html>

⁴¹ <https://ctc.usma.edu/pride-prejudice-the-violent-evolution-of-the-proud-boys/>

⁴² <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/21/politics/robert-morss-army-ranger-capitol-riot/index.html>

⁴³ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/21/politics/robert-morss-army-ranger-capitol-riot/index.html>

⁴⁴ <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/national/capitol-riots/capitol-riot-13-of-military-arrestees-have-ties-to-domestic-extremist-groups-jeffrey-mckellop-jessica-watkins-oath-keepers-proud-boys-thomas-caldwell/65-b6c41c04-8052-4483-b98f-eae6d6eabbf5>

⁴⁵ <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/national-veterans-groups-plan-to-purge-members-found-guilty-in-capitol-attack-1.658114>

⁴⁶ <https://www.globalextrremism.org/post/alarming-incidents-of-white-supremacy-in-the-military>

improved data collection, screening procedures, training, and revisions to military regulations, are currently being addressed or are actively under consideration. Preventing extremists from entering the military and the radicalization of active-duty troops is obviously key to reducing the ranks of veterans in extremist organizations.

Additionally, the military should evaluate how it handles separation from the institution and whether the possibility of radicalization because of how a separation took place should be a consideration. There is evidence from those arrested on January 6 that discharges may play a role in later radicalization. The service records of at least seven veterans who participated in the Capitol insurrection reveal they had been involved in forms of misconduct, resulting in lowered rank at discharge and truncated enlistments. At least one plotter had been stripped of rank and expelled from the Army with a punitive discharge after going absent without leave.⁴⁷

The military must also create programs for those who are found to be flirting with extremism. By catching the problem early, and redirecting military personnel through evidence-based interventions, the radicalization process can be curtailed, and the personnel involved shepherded to a successful period of service rather than driven out and into the embrace of extremist groups. There is some evidence that a quick removal from service might simply drive individuals into the arms of extremist groups.⁴⁸

There is no time to waste in tackling this problem and the Department of Defense's recent commitments are most welcome. Polling of active-duty personnel by the *Military Times* in 2017,⁴⁹ 2018,⁵⁰ and 2019,⁵¹ indicated that evidence of white supremacy appears to be widespread. The 2019 poll, which surveyed 1,630 active-duty troops, found that more than one-third of all active-duty troops and more than half of minority service members say they have personally witnessed examples of "white nationalism or ideologically-driven racism within the ranks." As in prior years, troops responding to the poll indicated white nationalism is a greater security threat than extremist strains of Islam or other threats. Poll participants reported witnessing racist language, swastikas drawn on service members' cars, tattoos affiliated with white supremacist groups, stickers supporting the Klan, and Nazi-style salutes.

⁴⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/veterans-extremism-capitol-attack/2021/04/19/3597018a-9651-11eb-8e42-3906c09073f9_story.html

⁴⁸ <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/03/bum-rushing-extremists-military-might-not-help/172740/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/10/23/military-times-poll-one-in-four-troops-sees-white-nationalism-in-the-ranks/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/02/28/white-nationalism-remains-a-problem-for-the-military-poll-shows/>

⁵¹ <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>

To attack the root causes of extremism, the military must deepen its diversity efforts and improve its anti-racist training.

Improved Programs for Transitioning to Civilian Life

The Department of Defense should also consider how its programs for transitioning to civilian life can be harnessed to protect veterans from susceptibility to extremist recruitment. Research on current programs and an investigation into how they can bolster veteran resiliency are clearly needed, as is basic information about the fact that extremists target veterans. Experts seem to agree that this period of transition is particularly fraught. Arie Kruglanski, an expert on the psychology of radicalization at the University of Maryland, said that leaving the military can challenge a person's identity.⁵² "There is a big disparity between being glorified, feeling respected in the military, and your status as a veteran," Kruglanski said, noting that there is often a big "letdown" associated with the transition to civilian life.

Though far more research is needed, some veterans' groups and experts point to veterans' need for community as an easily exploitable sentiment by extremist groups. Civilian organizations such as Team Rubicon and the Mission Continues have organized around the principle that veterans desire community and a sense of purpose after leaving the military, so these organizations create opportunities to satisfy those positive emotions through other forms of active service. Kori Schake, of the American Enterprise Institute, has said, "So many people choose military service for connectedness and community."⁵³ He noted that conspiracy-laden beliefs such as QAnon may also appeal to veterans looking for answers in an often-challenging post-military life.

More also needs to be known about injuries or psychological trauma that could make veterans susceptible to the appeals of extremist groups. Researchers at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center found that while 44 percent of military arrestees in the Capitol attack had deployed at least once during their service, there did not appear to be any clear link between deployment and attraction to extremist ideologies. But the researchers did note that deployment and combat-related injuries, both physical and psychological, have been mentioned by defendants' attorneys as a defense in court filings. They warned that their analysis should not be used to draw sweeping conclusions, but rather be a consideration for future lines of inquiry into such connections.⁵⁴

Need for Better Data and Research

⁵² https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/veterans-extremism-capitol-attack/2021/04/19/3597018a-9651-11eb-8e42-3906c09073f9_story.html

⁵³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/veterans-extremism-capitol-attack/2021/04/19/3597018a-9651-11eb-8e42-3906c09073f9_story.html

⁵⁴ https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/This-is-War_Final.pdf

There is a need for more and better research into how active-duty troops and veterans are radicalized. Evidence-based interventions to tackle this problem need the backing of good data to be successful. This research can be conducted by government agencies or solicited from academic experts and others knowledgeable about these issues. To start, baseline data on extremists in the military and among veterans is needed. There is still insufficient research to ascertain an accurate picture of how many active-duty troops and/or veterans are members of, or associate with, far-right or other extremist groups. This makes it impossible to discern the scale of the problem.

There are so many important questions that need answering. In February, RAND researcher Heather Williams proposed the following ideas for exploring the link between radicalization and veterans: “Was trauma left untreated? Are some veterans predisposed to these beliefs because they are more tolerant of violence than the general population? Were some individuals separated from the military precisely because they held extremist views? And could discharge — with its loss of a job and sense of identity — put them at greater risk of radicalization?” She also suggested that information be collected on extremist networks targeting troops and veterans, to better counteract those efforts.⁵⁵

A good example of important research that is already underway is the 2019 grant by the National Institutes of Justice (NIJ) to the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work for a three-year study focusing on how extremist views develop in troops and veterans. At its announcement two years ago, project leaders said the research would ultimately inform the development of an assessment tool to identify former military service members who are at risk for engaging with homegrown violent extremism. At the time, this was the first such study focused specifically on military veterans funded by NIJ.⁵⁶ There should be more.

There are several avenues for research and the creation of useful data sets that could be conducted by government agencies themselves. For example, though the military does not have as much influence over the behavior of veterans, the Department of Defense could pull service records for all military-affiliated perpetrators of recent extremist violence and see if there are patterns that could help explain this phenomenon. If they exist, these patterns could inform efforts to disrupt radicalization pathways before individuals leave the military. Congressionally directed or agency-initiated efforts by the Department of Veterans Affairs could also help identify and counter extremist activity among veterans. Data-sharing agreements between the Department of Defense and other agencies could strengthen deradicalization efforts.

⁵⁵ <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/02/how-root-out-extremism-us-military/171744/>

⁵⁶ <https://dworakpeck.usc.edu/news/new-grant-to-research-connection-between-military-service-and-violent-extremism>

Of broader concern, the U.S. government does not publicly release data on terrorist attacks and plots, nor on the characteristics of perpetrators. However, if a centralized data collection effort were established, data analysis could offer a better understanding of the role of both active-duty service members and veterans in these activities.

The Role of Veterans Service Organizations

One vital tool for combatting the radicalization of veterans is the power of veterans' organizations. It is important that several major veterans' organizations spoke out against members who may have participated in the January 6 Capitol insurrection. The American Legion, the largest veterans' organization, condemned the violence. "An attack on the Capitol is an attack on all of us," the group's national commander said on January 6.⁵⁷ The organization is leaving disciplinary action up to its individual posts. A spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars said last January that they were unaware of members involved in the insurrection, but that this would qualify for "conduct unbecoming to the organization."⁵⁸ AMVETS pledged to expel members associated with January 6.⁵⁹ AMVETS, which has 250,000 members, said it was "shocked, saddened and outraged" by the riots at the Capitol.

The Disabled American Veterans (DAV) also condemned the riots and announced its intent to remove any members found guilty in the attack.⁶⁰ The national commander said, "Such behavior is a disgrace to our national values and must not be tolerated" and that members involved would be barred. For DAV, each time they hear of a veteran identified as a participant in the riots, their names are run through the membership database. Other veterans' organizations that condemned the attack include the Vietnam Veterans of America and the Wounded Warrior Project.⁶¹ These statements against extremism are critical in pushing back at the appeal of far-right extremist groups.

Veterans for Responsible Leadership has taken its commitment to root out extremism further in an effort that could potentially be a model for the entire sector. The organization wants to counteract the draw of extremist groups to veterans by providing the sense of community that they might find in groups like the Oath Keepers. "These extremist organizations are providing something to these veterans," said its President Dan Barkhuff, a former Navy SEAL. "Which is

⁵⁷ <https://www.legion.org/commander/251500/american-legion-condemns-violence-us-capitol>

⁵⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/13/us/national-veteran-groups-members-capitol-riots-trnd/index.html>

⁵⁹ <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/national-veterans-groups-plan-to-purge-members-found-guilty-in-capitol-attack-1.658114>

⁶⁰ <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/national-veterans-groups-plan-to-purge-members-found-guilty-in-capitol-attack-1.658114>

⁶¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/13/us/national-veteran-groups-members-capitol-riots-trnd/index.html>

number one, a sense of belonging. And number two, kind of this camaraderie. So, our goal is to redefine patriotism and to compete with these organizations in their own communities."⁶²

Many veterans' organizations have programs for trauma, alcoholism, and suicide prevention, which could perhaps be used to inform new efforts targeting extremism. For example, the American Legion has a program to address suicide among veterans, and they have legion posts inside prisons to help rehabilitate veterans. They don't have similar programs to confront extremism directly, but this could be a direction for these organizations to take.⁶³

Expanding the Role of the VA

In a welcome, albeit lukewarm, development, this past April, Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Denis McDonough said that the agency would "take a look" at what the VA could do to combat extremism among veterans.⁶⁴ In a statement, the VA said that it is "among a group of agencies meeting on the topic." As of now, the VA has no program dedicated to combatting extremism among veterans. In the past, the department resisted calls to address factors that contribute to domestic radicalization, such as online disinformation targeting veterans."⁶⁵

Members of Congress are pushing the VA in this direction. The House Appropriations Committee's proposed VA budget includes language focused on "the unique vulnerabilities that veterans face online" and the targeting of veterans by extremist organizations. "Efforts to spread extremist views and conspiracy theories among the veteran community have had severely damaging effects, such as spreading conspiracies that may have motivated participation in the Capitol insurrection on Jan. 6," states a report describing the budget proposal.⁶⁶ It also calls for the department to "establish a comprehensive, evidence-based program to educate veterans about malign influences, transition assistance to include specialized counseling services, as well as research into operations and methods to discern against disinformation."⁶⁷

⁶² <https://www.publicnewsservice.org/2021-07-01/civic-engagement/veterans-raise-concerns-about-far-right-group-membership/a74847-1>

⁶³ <https://www.kpbs.org/news/2021/jan/22/vet-groups-only-slowing-coming-terms-violent-extre/>

⁶⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/veterans-extremism-capitol-attack/2021/04/19/3597018a-9651-11eb-8e42-3906c09073f9_story.html

⁶⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/veterans-extremism-capitol-attack/2021/04/19/3597018a-9651-11eb-8e42-3906c09073f9_story.html

⁶⁶ <https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2021/07/07/proposal-would-push-va-leaders-to-address-issue-of-extremism-in-the-veterans-community/>

⁶⁷ <https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2021/07/07/proposal-would-push-va-leaders-to-address-issue-of-extremism-in-the-veterans-community/>

The VA is key to ameliorating this issue. As Jeremy Butler, chief executive of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America said in April, the VA can “foster a culture...that disavows extremism and promotes racial justice.”⁶⁸

Reducing Extremism Online

It should be noted here that the social media companies have a responsibility as well when it comes to the radicalizing materials that are used to recruit troops and veterans. Social media companies have consistently failed to take sufficient action against groups that violate their terms of service and to apply standards in a consistent manner to the violative, extremist materials hosted on their platforms. Removing extremist groups from social media is a critical component in reducing recruitment into extremism, including veterans, and disrupting these groups’ ability to plot, raise funds and operate.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/veterans-extremism-capitol-attack/2021/04/19/3597018a-9651-11eb-8e42-3906c09073f9_story.html

⁶⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/21/how-to-counter-right-wing-armed-groups-in-the-united-states/>