



WENDY VIA, PRESIDENT & CO-FOUNDER | WENDY@GLOBALEXTREMISM.ORG
HEIDI BEIRICH, PhD, CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER & CO-FOUNDER | HEIDI@GLOBALEXTREMISM.ORG

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Lloyd J. Austin
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

General Mark A. Milley
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
9999 Joint Staff Pentagon
Washington, DC 20318

Dear Secretary Austin and Chairman Milley,

Extremism in the Military Overview

Extremism in the military continues to grow. Lawmakers and Pentagon leadership must take direct action to rein in this dangerous trend. Rooting out white supremacists from the military is of the utmost importance. A growing white supremacist movement, both in the United States and abroad, is increasingly violent and involved in terrorist attacks that have killed dozens. The recent arrest of a 21-year-old Massachusetts Air National Guardsman for espionage for leaking top secret documents online is yet another stark reminder of the immediate danger far-right extremists pose to national security.

Jack Teixeira released a swath of documents in a Discord group he managed where he and a couple dozen teenagers and young men traded in pro-gun and racist materials. A shared video reportedly showed him shouting racist and antisemitic slurs before firing a rifle. Teixeira had a history of making comments that some of his high school classmates perceived as racist and showed up for school after a 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting wearing a shirt depicting an assault rifle. Reportedly, a social-media account run by a former U.S. Navy member who is pro-Russian was key to the spread of the leaked documents.

We've warned the U.S. government for years about the danger of the growing incidents of white supremacy in the military and violence. In [Congressional testimony](#), we've provided suggestions for how to stop it. We urge all levels of government to take this threat seriously and fully implement the recommendations (see below for key action steps you can take) from our testimonies and our [Transnational Agenda to Combat Rising White Supremacist Violence and Terrorism](#).

Soldiers who express racist and bigoted ideas that are pushed by the white supremacist movement, and involved in organizations driven by extremist ideology, sully the integrity of our dedicated troops. They pose a national and an international security threat when they work with far-right extremists in other countries to further these ideas. They also endanger their fellow soldiers and our military's efforts to bring peace and stability to countries where our troops are stationed. These are among the reasons Congress and military leaders need to dramatically boost their efforts to root out extremism.

In a reckless move this past summer, Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) Republicans shut down proposals to eradicate extremists even as the FBI, DHS, and other federal agencies were reporting that white supremacist and antigovernment movements are our number one domestic terrorism threat. Their rejection of efforts to identify and remove extremists from the ranks was based on bogus claims that these efforts would somehow besmirch our troops, a patently false view. Preventing and stopping extremism in our ranks no more implies that all of our brave troops are extremist than does conducting much-needed sexual harassment and assault trainings and implementing stronger conduct rules implies that all of our troops are engaged in sexual misconduct. These are simply good, common sense measures that protect our troops and our country.

Expunging extremism reduces insider threats like Teixeira, protects service members, enhances morale in our diverse forces, and protects the public from domestic terrorist threats. There needs to be zero tolerance for extremism of any kind for those serving the country. More needs to be done and you can help.

A History of Harmful Extremism in the Military

At least five active duty and about 80 veterans were arrested for their activities in the Jan. 6 insurrection, to stop a peaceful, democratic transfer of power. In the last decade, an annual average of 24 Americans with military connections were convicted of a crime of violent extremism, not including the Jan. 6 defendants. That's four times as high as in the previous decade. The recent anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, the largest loss of life in a domestic terrorist attack, is a stark reminder of the problem. Timothy McVeigh was a disgruntled veteran active in both militia and white supremacist movements.

There are many more examples, most recently:

In February, Brandon Russell, the founder of the neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen and former Army National Guardsman, was arrested for a plot to destroy Baltimore's power grid. While on active duty, Russell was imprisoned in 2018 for unlawful possession of bomb-making materials. U.S. Army Sergeant Daniel Perry, who was convicted this month of a 2020 murder of a racial justice protester and veteran, regularly expressed racist views and a desire to shoot and kill activists. Last year, a former paratrooper, who allegedly enlisted in the Army to become more proficient at killing Black people, was given a security clearance, like Teixeira, despite his Nazi ideology and ties to white supremacists. In 2020, an active-duty Air Force sergeant was sentenced to life in prison for killing a deputy to launch a second civil war, a practice known as accelerationism.

A Dangerous Precedent from Lawmakers

As the Biden Administration and the Pentagon have been working to establish programs to combat the extremist threat, the SASC this past summer issued a report that shockingly directed an immediate halt to efforts countering violent extremism within the military. It cited data from the Countering Extremist Activity Working Group (CEAWG), set up by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in 2021 to tackle this problem. CEAWG found that one in every 21,000 service members, a small percentage, committed acts of prohibited violent extremism. For the SASC, this number was deemed insignificant, but did not include those military members like Teixeira who haven't committed a violent act or been discovered. The committee determined that too many resources were invested in the effort and the incident rate did not warrant a DoD-wide effort. It called for its discontinuation citing an inappropriate use of taxpayer funds.

The SASC report had an impact: The final National Defense Authorization Act deleted seven of eight House-passed extremism provisions. Most merely sought information about the threat posed by domestic terrorists and white supremacist or antisemitic organizations. The only remaining provision was a call to screen social media usage for extremist ties, but it was limited to foreign, not domestic terrorist groups.

This is the wrong path given the outsized impact extremists in the military and among our veterans have in terms of terrorism and the chilling effect writ large. It also doesn't match findings from independent sources. A [Military Times poll in 2017](#) found that nearly 25 percent of actively serving military personnel have encountered white nationalism and racism in the Armed Forces. Active-duty troops were about 1.3 million at the time, meaning some 325,000 soldiers had encountered white nationalism in some form. Follow up surveys in 2018 and 2019 [by the same publication](#) found similar troubling results on white nationalism and racist ideologies.

Prominent military leaders have made promises: After the violent 2017 white supremacist protests in Charlottesville, Va., which featured both active-duty white supremacists and veterans, then [Joint Chiefs Chairman General Joseph Dunford said](#), “there is no place for racism and bigotry in the U.S. military or in the United States as a whole.” [Then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis said](#) the military is a “widely diverse force” that does not tolerate extremism and hatred.

Topline Recommendations

Secretary of Defense Austin should be lauded for the efforts he has spearheaded, including:

- Department-wide stand down in 2021 to educate DoD personnel on the threat posed by extremist activity. Austin issued another memorandum to implement immediate actions identified by subject-matter experts and established the Countering Extremist Activity Working Group.
- Creation of the Countering Extremist Activity Working Group (CEAWG) and the issuance of its December 2021 [report](#) which authorized several lines of action including:
 - Updating service member transition checklist. Reviewing standardized screening questionnaires.
 - Plans to commission a study on extremist activity across the DoD.
 - Plans to develop regular training and education on prohibited extremist activity.
 - Review and update policies to convey to contractor personnel on prohibited extremist activity.

It is unclear where these actions now stand, though they are clearly necessary.

The DoD's [report on countering military extremism](#) noted: “Extremist activity within the Department of Defense is rare, but even the actions of a few can have an outsized impact on unit cohesion, morale and readiness – and the physical harm some of these activities can engender can undermine the safety of the Total Force.”

Heidi Beirich, Chief Strategy Officer and Co-founder of the [Global Project Against Hate and Extremism](#) (GPAHE) and international expert on far-right extremist movements, testified in front of Congress on the issue of rooting [extremism from the military](#) and [reducing recruitment of veterans by extremist groups](#). Beirich's written [February 2020 testimony](#) for the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, Military Personnel Subcommittee included concrete actions that should be taken.

GPAHE recommends that leaders such as you can foster the following changes:

- In its forthcoming study, the government should evaluate the adequacy of the policies and procedures currently in place, including revise its command climate surveys of active-duty soldiers to ask whether they have seen “extremist activity” by white supremacists and other forms of bigotry, antigovernment extremists, and other far-right organizations in the workplace to get an accurate reflection of the problem. *The Military Times* should not be the main source of this information.

- Develop clearly laid out mechanisms and procedures to investigate the social media accounts and online activities of prospective recruits and for those with security clearances, at a minimum. It is unclear how well this works now, though the DoD claims those with clearance are under constant monitoring. The case of Teixeira warrants a review of how well that is done. The Department of Defense has [balked](#) at reports that it was piloting a monitoring program in other circumstances.
- Develop stronger screening measures including a bolstered tattoo database.
- Improve screening and psychological and health tests to address potential extremist leanings.
- Provide training to members at all levels on the nature and threats of far-right extremism, including the commanders at all levels, and how to recognize it.
- Intervention training when white supremacy and other forms of bigoted activities are identified is critical, as are separation procedures if warranted. Currently, military regulations do not bar troop membership in extremist and supremacist groups but prohibit so-called “active participation” in the groups. Instead, the DoD should create educational programs for those who are “mere” members to off-ramp them from extremism. We understand that the DoD is working to clarify the definition of prohibited extremist activity and role of commanders to address online activity. We urge this to be expedited.
- Procedures addressing the vulnerability to extremist recruitment of the dishonorably discharged and those with a forced separation must be developed.
- Establish more rigorous and uniform enforcement procedures and mandate the reporting and collection of data on how procedures are enforced. An investigation of how enforcement currently works and the priority it is given by investigators and unit commanders is advised to determine the effectiveness of these regulations. Additionally, the military must fulfill its legal requirement to track and report hate crimes data to the FBI.
- In January, when the Senate cut the phrase “white nationalist” from the NDAA, it nixed an opportunity to be more proactive on the problem. This needs to be readdressed.
- The DoD must work more closely with other federal agencies in tracking extremism.
- The provisions on extremist activities that were struck from the most recent NDAA should be reincorporated. Additionally, appropriate legislation that enables our armed forces leaders to implement and fund these recommendations should be enacted.

If significant action is not taken to bring combating extremism in the military to the forefront, we are definitely looking at more violence and likely another mass casualty event. As we witnessed with Timothy McVeigh, today’s racist extremist may become tomorrow’s domestic terrorist. The U.S. military cannot permit extremists to exist among its ranks.

Sincerely,



Wendy Via



Heidi Beirich

The [Global Project Against Hate and Extremism \(GPAHE\)](#) was founded in 2020 by Heidi Beirich and Wendy Via to confront far-right extremism and its associated violence transnationally, as white supremacy and other bigotry-fueled movements are no longer confined by national borders.