

Radicalization in the Ranks: The Military Backgrounds of the January 6 Capitol Defendants

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Introduction

On February 5, 2021, United States Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J. Austin III, announced a 60-day stand-down across the Department of Defense (DoD) to address the problem of extremism in the United States military.¹ The announcement, which directed commanding officers and supervisors to meet with their personnel to discuss impermissible behaviors related to extremism and dissident ideologies, came after it was reported that many of the individuals who breached the United States Capitol building on January 6, 2021, have U.S. military backgrounds.² The stand-down order was followed by the establishment of the Countering Extremist Activity Working Group (CEAWG), which recently provided recommendations to the Secretary for addressing extremism in the armed forces.³

The work that has been done by the DoD over the past year to tackle this problem is both timely and important. Efforts by military leadership to understand the complexity of radicalization in the ranks, as well as the appropriate ways to counter it, are critical to maintaining good order and discipline, and ultimately the combat effectiveness of a highly diverse fighting force. Further, ideologically motivated extremism among uniformed personnel risks undermining the important precept of civilian control of the military. Finally, minimizing extremism in the ranks is essential to maintaining the image of the armed forces, and by extension, recruitment into our all-volunteer military. Given the significant national security implications of these considerations, the fact that the problem of extremism in the ranks appears to be numerically small misses the point; instances of extremism in the ranks have profound and costly implications for the health of our democracy.

While recent efforts to counteract extremism in the military are laudable, much work needs to be done. As the investigation into the events of January 6, 2021, moves forward, it is imperative that part of our focus be on understanding why some military service members and veterans mobilized to the Capitol on that day. Why were individuals who dedicated themselves to protecting our democratic institutions compelled to challenge them on January 6th? What risks and vulnerabilities were associated with their radicalization and what protective factors could have prevented it? What can be done to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again? Answering these questions will require balanced, data-driven, and rigorous research on the root causes of extremism in the military and its relationship to the events of January 6th. This testimony highlights our progress in these areas, while acknowledging the many gaps that remain.

The Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military

The events of January 6th are a distressing reminder that no segment of society is immune from radicalization and the lure of extremism. The Capitol defendants come from all professional

¹ Lloyd J. Austin III, *DoD Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks* [Memorandum] (Department of Defense, 2021), available at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Feb/05/2002577485/-1/-1/0/STAND-DOWN-TO-ADDRESS-EXTREMISM-IN-THE-RANKS.PDF>

² Tom Dreisbach and Meg Anderson, “Nearly 1 in 5 Defendants in Capitol Riot Cases Served in the Military,” *NPR* (January 21, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military>.

³ Countering Extremist Activity Working Group (CEAWG), *Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2021).

walks of life, including teachers, first responders, police officers, and military service members.⁴ Although it is upsetting to learn that individuals who swore an oath to protect the constitution of the United States may have played a role in trying to subvert it on January 6th, it is important to remember that this is not the first time that the DoD has been forced to confront the problem of extremism in the ranks. After the Southern Poverty Law Center warned the DoD in the mid-1980s that Marines at Camp Lejeune were engaged in white supremacist paramilitary activity, then Defense Secretary, Casper Weinberger, ordered military commanders to crackdown on extremist activity at U.S. military bases and he barred active-duty service members from participating in hate groups.⁵ Ten years later, the senseless murder of an African American couple by members of the 82nd Airborne stationed at Fort Bragg and the devastating bombing of the Murrah Federal Building by an Army veteran prompted Congressional hearings and compelled the DoD to recommit to tackling the problem head-on.⁶ The DoD issued new directives forbidding extremism in the military and it focused on keeping recruits with links to white supremacy out of the ranks. However, as scholars have repeatedly noted,⁷ the DoD's actions in the wake of these events appear to have done little to stem the tide of extremism in the armed forces. Today, more than 25 years later, radicalization in the ranks remains a subject of significant concern.

However, due to the absence of high-fidelity data on the scope and nature of the problem, it has been difficult for policymakers, military leadership, and researchers to assess whether past instances of extremism in the armed forces are the exception or the rule. While the DoD has repeatedly acknowledged that extremists are present in the military, it has struggled to get a sense of how widespread the problem is and to devise effective solutions.⁸

Capturing metrics on the extent and nature of extremist sympathies in the military is undoubtedly difficult, but it is not impossible. Over the past 12 months, our team at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland has endeavored to provide a data-centric analysis of the issue and one of its more important facets: criminal extremism.⁹ Our research suggests that extremist criminal activity with a nexus to the U.S. military is a limited, but growing, problem. According to our analysis, from 1990

⁴ Robert A. Pape, "The Jan. 6 Insurrectionists Aren't Who You Think They Are," *Foreign Policy* (January 6, 2022), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/06/trump-capitol-insurrection-january-6-insurrectionists-great-replacement-white-nationalism/>

⁵ Mark Potok, "Due to Recruiting Shortages, the Military is Relaxing Bans on Extremists Joining the Armed Forces," *Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report* (August 11, 2006), <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2006/extremism-and-military>.

⁶ Ibid. Cassie Miller, *Testimony Before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee* (October 11, 2021), https://www.splactionfund.org/sites/default/files/SPLC_Action_statement_Veterans_Affairs_Committee_hearing_on_Domestic_Violent_Extremist_Groups_and_the_Recruitment_of_Veterans_final.pdf

⁷ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Rachel Goldwasser, "Extremism Among Active-Duty Military and Veterans Remains a Clear and Present Danger," *Southern Poverty Law Center Hate Watch* (October 12, 2021), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/10/12/extremism-among-active-duty-military-and-veterans-remains-clear-and-present-danger>; Miller, *Testimony*.

⁸ Marek N. Posard, Leslie Adrienne Payne, and Laura L. Miller, *Reducing the Risk of Extremist Activity in the U.S. Military* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2021).

⁹ Michael A. Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane, *Radicalization in the Ranks: An Assessment of the Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military* (College Park; NC-START, 2022), <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/radicalization-ranks>.

through the end of March 2022, 486 individuals with U.S. military backgrounds committed criminal acts, including acts of violence, that were motivated by their political, economic, social, or religious goals. This includes 133 individuals with military backgrounds who have been accused of committing crimes at the Capitol on January 6th.

The subjects we have reviewed represent a minority (11.5%) of all extremists who have committed crimes in the United States since 1990. While it is undeniably true that the overwhelming majority of U.S. service members and veterans have no links to extremism and will never radicalize, this figure on criminal extremism in the military should be unsettling. We hold our service members to the highest ethical standards, and it is not unreasonable for us to expect radicalization in the military to be far less common than it is. Moreover, our analysis shows that the intersection of criminal extremism and U.S. military service has increased at an alarming rate. For example, while an average of 6.9 subjects per year with U.S. military backgrounds committed extremist crimes from 1990-2010, over the last decade, that number has more than quadrupled to 31 subjects per year.

Perhaps as troubling, our findings reveal that criminal extremism is a problem that has touched all branches of the U.S. military. Approximately 53% (257 individuals) of the subjects included in our data served in the U.S. Army, Army Reserves, or Army National Guard. Just over 27% (133 subjects) served in the Marine Corps or Marine Corps Reserves.¹⁰ Given its smaller overall size, this figure makes the Marine Corps the branch of service with the highest per capita rate of criminal extremists. And while the numbers are considerably smaller, our data show that criminal extremism has been present in the U.S. Navy and Navy Reserves (72 subjects); the U.S. Air Force, Air Force Reserves, and Air National Guard (36 subjects); and the U.S. Coast Guard (3 subjects).¹¹

We have also uncovered important aspects of the nature of extremism in the military. For instance, our data show that much like the broader social landscape, extremism in the military is not limited to a single group, movement, or set of ideas.¹² Criminal extremists, including those with military backgrounds, profess a range of ideological views and over the years they have aligned themselves with hundreds of extremist organizations, movements, and online communities. Nearly half of the criminal extremists with military backgrounds that we studied promoted ideologies rooted in the anti-government movement, and many were members of organized armed militias. This includes 35 individuals who were affiliated with the sovereign citizen movement, 25 subjects who were members of the Oath Keepers militia, 16 subjects who were affiliated with the Boogaloo movement, and 15 individuals who described themselves as Three Percenters. In addition to affiliations with national anti-government and militia movements, the offenders in our data were also tied to more than two-dozen local anti-government organizations and armed militia groups.

¹⁰ Three subjects served in both the Army and Marine Corps.

¹¹ Given subjects with multiple branch affiliations, these figures total more than 100%.

¹² Michael A. Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane, *Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States* (College Park: NC-START, 2020), <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus-0>.

A significant percentage (33%) of the subjects in our analysis also espoused views of white supremacy, white nationalism, and/or xenophobia. These offenders were affiliated with no fewer than 50 extremist groups, including 23 subjects who were members of the Proud Boys, 16 individuals who were affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan, and 11 subjects who were members of the Aryan Nations. Importantly, over half (50.6%) of the 77 individuals in our data who committed extremist crimes while they were actively serving in the U.S. armed forces were linked to white supremacist groups and/or movements.

Our research has also shown that radicalization in the ranks is not limited to domestic extremist ideologies. Approximately 10% of the offenders in the data we collected were connected to, or inspired by, Salafi Jihadist groups abroad. This includes 22 subjects who were connected to, or inspired by, al-Qaeda and its affiliated movements (e.g., al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Shabaab, the Taliban, etc.) and 19 individuals who were inspired by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Exactly 16% of the 77 offenders in the data who committed extremist crimes while they were actively serving were linked to Salafi-Jihadist groups.

Overall, 305 of the 486 offenders in our data were affiliated with more than 120 organized extremist groups or named movements and they adhered to ideological views that ran the gamut from organized white nationalism to fringe conspiracy theories.

Finally, our data also indicates that criminal extremism is primarily a problem in the veteran community. Of the 486 criminal extremists with military backgrounds that we have studied, 84.2% were no longer active in the armed forces when they committed their crimes. On average, the subjects in our data had been out of the military for 15 years before they offended. While there may be a growing public perception that most veterans who commit extremist crimes do so shortly after leaving the military, only 15.4% of the offenders that we studied committed their crimes within two years of separating from the armed forces.

All of this suggests that our response to radicalization in the ranks cannot be singularly focused on countering the messaging or recruitment efforts of a particular group or ideological milieu, and it cannot be limited to active service members. Extremism in the military is a complex and diverse problem that spans multiple communities.

The Military Backgrounds of the January 6 Capitol Defendants

A primary factor driving the recent upward trend in cases of criminal extremism with a nexus to the U.S. military is the comparatively large number of individuals with U.S. military backgrounds who participated in the breach of the Capitol building on January 6, 2021. According to our data, approximately 17% (133 individuals) of the more than 800 defendants who have been accused of committing crimes at the Capitol on that day served in the U.S. military. To put that figure into context, the rate of military service among the Capitol defendants is more than double the rate of military service in the general U.S. adult population, which is estimated around 8 percent.¹³

¹³ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2018, approximately 7% of the U.S. adult population had previously served in the U.S. military, while an additional 1% of the population was actively serving. Jonathan E. Vespa, *Those Who Served: America's Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror*, American Community Survey Report (Washington DC: United States Census Bureau, 2020).

As a research community, we are just beginning to ask ourselves why a disproportionate number of individuals with military experience mobilized on January 6th, but reports indicate that most of the Capitol defendants were motivated by the desire to overturn the results of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election,¹⁴ and this is certainly true for some, if not most, of the defendants with military service backgrounds. However, it is important to note that a number of Capitol defendants with U.S. military backgrounds had ties to anti-government, white supremacist, and conspiracy theory groups. This includes 20 defendants who are members of the Proud Boys, 17 individuals who expressed support for the QAnon conspiracy theory, and 16 members of the Oath Keepers. Moreover, early evidence suggests that defendants with military backgrounds may have played an outsized role in coordinating the violence on January 6th. At least 20 of the 57 defendants who have been charged with some form of conspiracy have military backgrounds. This includes Elmer Stewart Rhodes, the leader of the Oath Keepers, and five of his co-defendants, all of whom have been charged with seditious conspiracy.

The Capitol defendants with military backgrounds reflect most of the central characteristics of the offenders that we reviewed in our larger study on radicalization in the ranks. For instance, while the Capitol defendants come from all but one of the branches of service, they are primarily affiliated with the Army and Marine Corps. Specifically, 66 of the Capitol defendants served in the Army, Army National Guard, or Army Reserves, while 46 served in the Marine Corps or Marine Corps Reserves.¹⁵ Collectively, affiliations with the Army and Marine Corps account for 82% of the Capitol defendants with military backgrounds.¹⁶ Moreover, our data unequivocally show that it was primarily veterans, not active service members, who allegedly committed crimes at the Capitol. In fact, 91.7% of the Capitol defendants with military backgrounds were no longer serving on January 6th. Most of the defendants had been separated from the military for several years, and many for several decades, before the events of that day. Perhaps as important, our research suggests that most of the Capitol defendants with military backgrounds left the military in good standing. Approximately 93% of the defendants received honorable discharges, general discharges under honorable conditions, or retired from military service. Many of them held advanced ranks in the armed forces and several of them received medals and official commendations for their service.

Radicalization in the Veteran Community and the Path Forward

The Capitol defendants vividly illustrate the difficult challenge of tackling radicalization in military communities. The stark reality is that without a greater understanding of the scope and nature of the problem, it would be hard for a decision-maker within the DoD to justify allocating resources to prevent the future criminal extremism of a veteran, even if that criminality is understood to be damaging to our national security. To make the challenge even more vexing, until recently, neither the DoD nor the research community paid much attention how

¹⁴ Pape, “The Jan. 6 Insurrectionists Aren’t Who You Think They Are.,” Scott Tong and Serena McMahon, “White, Employed and Mainstream: What We Know about the Jan. 6 Rioters One Year Later,” *WBUR* (January 3, 2022), <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2022/01/03/jan-6-rioters-white-older>.

¹⁵ Three Capitol defendants have past service affiliations with both the Army and Marine Corps.

¹⁶ Thirteen (10.8%) Capitol defendants served in the Navy or Navy Reserves, while 12 individuals (10%) were affiliated with the Air Force. No past or current members of the U.S. Coast Guard have been charged for participating in the Capitol breach. Twenty-five Capitol defendants have affiliations with multiple branches of military service. These defendants are counted for each of their affiliations in the statistics above and, thus, the overall sum is more than 100%.

radicalization occurs among U.S. military veterans. We are only beginning to learn about the particular configurations of radicalization risk factors and vulnerabilities that may be unique to past service members.¹⁷ These gaps in our collective understanding make it difficult to devise an effective and timely response to the problem, let alone defend expending scarce resources to implement it.

With that said, it is important to note that progress is being made. Our preliminary analysis suggests that individuals who are no longer in the armed forces when they radicalize are more likely to face challenges associated with poor social mobility, including job loss; past criminal convictions; and certain types of anti-social relationships, such as having extremist family members.¹⁸ Early evidence suggests that this may be true of the Capitol defendants with military backgrounds as well. For instance, our data shows that approximately 23% of the defendants with military experience were unemployed on January 6th, which at the time, was nearly four times the national unemployment rate.¹⁹ Moreover, we have found that some veterans and past service members may be vulnerable to radicalization because of their previous military experiences and related mental health concerns. While the links between mental illness and radicalization are not well understood, it is telling that in court filings, at least 20 of the Capitol defendants have associated their actions on January 6th with their struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder from military service.

One of the more critical gaps in our current understanding of radicalization in the ranks, especially as it pertains to the Capitol defendants, concerns the extremist narratives that are designed to appeal to people with military backgrounds. We know that extremist groups and movements covet current and past service members because of their knowledge of weapons and military tactics, their ability to plan military operations, their prestige and influence in U.S. communities, and their experiences as effective leaders.²⁰ However, we know comparatively little about how they attract individuals with these skills to their causes. What grievances do extremists play on to recruit members with military experience? Do the promises of comradery and a sense of mission offered by extremist groups act as effective radicalization mechanisms in veteran communities?²¹ What personal vulnerabilities do extremists exploit to attract recruits with military backgrounds? As extremist narratives have increasingly found their way into mainstream political discourse,²² reaching millions of Americans along the way, finding answers to these questions is critical to preventing future radicalization in military communities.

¹⁷ Håvard Haugstvedt and Daniel Koehler, “Armed and Explosive? An Explorative Statistical Analysis of Extremist Radicalization Cases with Military Background,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2021); Jensen, Yates, and Kane, *Radicalization in the Ranks*.

¹⁸ Jensen, Yates, and Kane, *Radicalization in the Ranks*.

¹⁹ United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Unemployment Rate Lowers in January 2021 in 33 States,” *TED: The Economics Daily* (March 19, 2021), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2021/unemployment-rates-lower-in-january-2021-in-33-states.htm>.

²⁰ Anne Speckhard, Molly Ellenberg, and TM Garret, “The Challenge of Extremism in the Military is Not Going Away without a New Perspective,” *Military Times* (November 16, 2021), <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2021/11/16/the-challenge-of-extremism-in-the-military-is-not-going-away-without-a-new-perspective/>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “How Extremism Went Mainstream,” *Foreign Affairs* (January 3, 2022), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2022-01-03/how-extremism-went-mainstream>.

Whether it happens in the military or somewhere else, extremism is a complex process that is driven by a host of individual, group, and structural risks and vulnerabilities.²³ There is not a one-size-fits-all response to the problem that can effectively address the myriad ways it manifests in military communities. Rather, countering extremism in the military will require a holistic approach that includes (1) an accurate appraisal of the causes of the problem and its inherent complexity; (2) an understanding of the range of possible responses and their anticipated effects; (3) an assessment of critical services and the ability of actors to provide them; and (4) a long-term plan for evaluating the effectiveness of policies and programs. Given the challenge of accessing veteran communities, combating extremism in the ranks should emphasize preventing the problem rather than simply treating it when it appears. Our team has provided a series of recommendations for achieving this goal and they warrant being repeated here.²⁴

First, programs should be initiated during entry-level training to inoculate incoming service members (and future veterans) against extremist recruitment. Inoculation theory is based on the belief that people can resist persuasion if they understand the dangers associated with messages that attempt to change their beliefs and if they are given the tools to effectively counter radicalizing narratives on their own.²⁵ Inoculation in the military would involve using respected voices to educate service members on the dangers of extremism and to provide them with a foundation of knowledge that is rooted in evidence that they can use to challenge recruitment narratives if and when they encounter them later on.

Second, preventing extremism in the armed forces will require continuing education at all stages of military service. Tailored awareness briefs about extremist narratives and recruitment techniques should be a normal part of the professional military experience. Moreover, education that focuses on extremism in the U.S. veteran community should be a standard part of exit programs as individuals leave the armed forces.

Third, a prevention model would focus on building organizational cultures that enhance trust and incentivize pro-social norms. In hierarchical organizations, there is often a disincentive to report concerning behaviors out of a fear of punishment or ridicule. Thus, establishing and promoting non-punitive responses to extremism can help overcome the bystander problem by incentivizing individuals to come forward when they witness concerning behaviors. Moreover, the option to use non-punitive responses to extremism opens the possibility for early interventions to help individuals who are flirting with extremist beliefs but who have not yet altered their behaviors.

Finally, a prevention model would include strong educational and public advocacy partnerships between the DoD, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and community-based veterans' organizations. As this study has shown, the nexus between extremism and the U.S. military is strongest in the veteran community. Utilizing Public Affairs Officers to promote alternative narratives that highlight the positive, prosocial empowerment of veterans can help in countering

²³ Michael A. Jensen, Anita Atwell-Seate, and Patrick A. James, "Radicalization to Violence: A Pathway Approach to Studying Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018).

²⁴ Jensen, Yates, and Kane, *Radicalization in the Ranks*.

²⁵ Kurt Braddock, "Vaccinating Against Hate: Using Attitudinal Inoculation to Confer Resistance to Persuasion by Extremist Propaganda," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019): 1-23.

the violent, anti-social narratives that are offered by extremist movements. The DoD should also support external partners who are in a position to access and influence former service members. Veterans' organizations may be particularly effective at delivering messages that seek to counter radicalizing narratives that target past service members for extremist recruitment.

None of this will be easy and it will require significant resources. Fortunately, recommendations made recently by the CEAWG to the Defense Secretary reflect many of these principles;²⁶ and there is reason to be hopeful that the DoD will take significant action to stem the problem of radicalization in the ranks. Significant challenges remain, however.²⁷ Implementing policies is always harder than writing them, and the DoD needs to think critically about how it can turn the CEAWG's recommendations into actions across the armed forces. It must also consider the gaps that remain, most important of which is how it can strengthen its relationships to veterans, military families, and veteran serving organizations and support their work through partnership, public education, and the provision of resources.

The men and women of our armed forces routinely set aside partisan politics and the pursuit of their own self-interests to serve the greater good and strengthen our democracy. Our political leadership owes it to them to do the same. The investigation into the events of January 6th is an opportunity to work together, ask difficult questions, and design effective responses to extremism in the armed forces. It is also an opportunity to reiterate our commitment to peaceful transitions of power and weaken the narratives of those who will seek to use January 6th to radicalize future generations of military service members and veterans.

²⁶ CEAWG, *Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense*.

²⁷ Andrew Mines, "The Military Is Making Progress in Its Counter-Extremism Efforts, but Gaps Remain," *Lawfare* (March 30, 2022), <https://www.lawfareblog.com/military-making-progress-its-counter-extremism-efforts-gaps-remain>.