

Recruiting from the Ranks

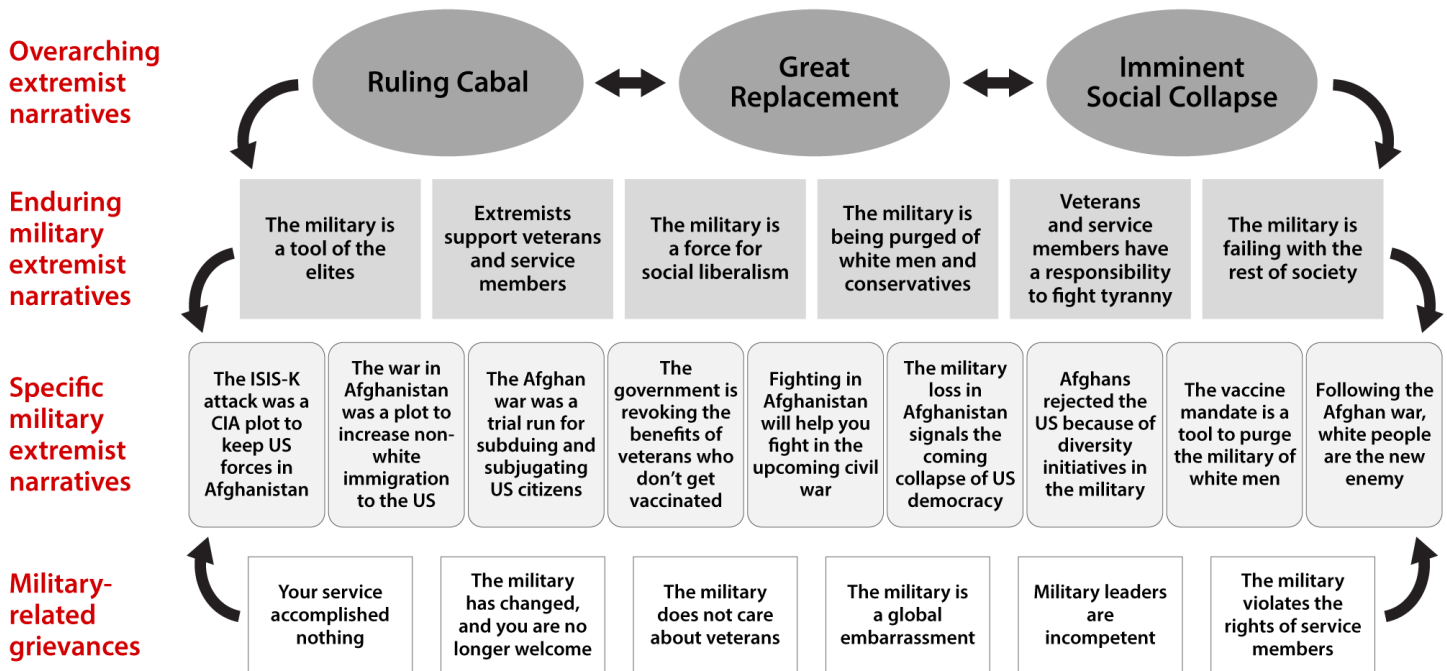
A Typology of Recruitment Narratives Targeting the U.S. Military Community

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Narratives are stories that extremists tell to advance a particular worldview and/or encourage a set of actions. Research suggests that narratives are effective tools for radicalization and recruitment because they can be used to reframe conflicts, encourage new or existing identities, and justify violent organizations and activities.¹ Through the use of narratives, extremists identify and/or foster the anxieties, fears, and angers of a target population—including elements both real and imagined—and offer responses that depict their agenda as the only feasible solution.² To those who are already committed to extremist ideologies, narratives encourage loyalty, identity, and action on behalf of the movement. For newer audiences, narratives evoke an emotional response that encourages further exploration of, and engagement with, extremist belief systems and their associated groups.

This project captures the effort to link commonly held, and often genuine, grievances to extremist ideologies and actions via online narratives, focusing specifically on efforts by white supremacist and anti-government groups to target current and former members of the United States military. Telegram posts were analyzed with the goal of identifying the implicit and explicit narratives through which extremists attempt to recruit and radicalize veterans and active service members. The data for this project were collected in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the issuance of the COVID-19 vaccination order by the Department of Defense to understand how extremists weaponize geopolitical events and local politics to produce narratives designed to appeal to individuals with military backgrounds.

OVERARCHING EXTREMIST NARRATIVES



¹ Kurt Braddock and James Price Dillard. 2016. "Meta-analytic evidence for the persuasive effect of narratives on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors," *Communication Monographs*. 83, no. 4: 446-467.

² J.M. Berger. *Extremism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, (2018).

Efforts by extremists to recruit past and current service members are often tied to several broader narratives that lay the foundation of white supremacist and anti-government rhetoric. They are:

Ruling Cabal: In this narrative, the U.S. government (and often the entire world) is depicted as being secretly run by a cabal of elites who manipulate and exploit the public for their own ends. Among white supremacists, this cabal is typically described as “ZOG,” or “Zionist Occupied Government,” reflecting the movement’s deep anti-Semitism. Among many anti-government extremist movements, including the QAnon conspiracy theory, the cabal is described as an eclectic group of people across the political spectrum, but especially Democrats and liberals, who they believe are involved in a variety of coordinated criminal schemes. Anti-government extremists often argue that ruling elites are secret communists or socialists who seek to disarm and enslave Christian and conservative men.

The Great Replacement: This narrative claims there is a malicious conspiracy by which people of European descent are being systemically eliminated (in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere) and replaced by immigrants, Muslims, and/or people of color.³ The conspiracy theory revolves

around the idea that demographic changes are being orchestrated by the “ruling cabal,” with the goal of creating populations that will comply with their demands. The Great Replacement Theory is central to white supremacist ideology, but versions of this theme also permeate anti-government narratives, often in the form of perceived threats of social liberals and urbanites dominating the government, and especially with respect to increased immigration.

Imminent Social Collapse: White supremacists often view pluralistic democracy as inherently weak, claiming that it is rendered irrecoverably unstable by the tensions that result from divisions in race, ethnicity, ideology, and religion. According to this narrative, the U.S. government (and all social and public institutions) face imminent collapse, and will inevitably be replaced by a stronger, more centralized, and often fascist government. Anti-government extremists also often claim that the United States is facing imminent collapse, but they typically point to non-racial drivers, such as socialist economic policies or a lack of Christian values. Although there are many versions of this narrative, most extremists argue that imminent social collapse compels adherents to prepare for the inevitable violence that will emerge in the process.

MILITARY-FOCUSED EXTREMIST NARRATIVES

In our review of Telegram posts, we found that extremists deployed six central, enduring narratives that directly or indirectly targeted members of the military community. Each of these narratives had clear links to one or more of the overarching extremist narratives described above.

Tool of Elites: In this narrative, the U.S. military is depicted as being exploited and manipulated on behalf of the interests of a ruling cabal. White supremacists claim it is a Jewish cabal, “the System,” or “ZOG” - Zionist Occupied Government.

Linked To: Ruling Cabal; Great Replacement

Example from the withdrawal from Afghanistan:

The war in Afghanistan was a “ZOG” plot by ruling elites to justify the acceptance of Afghan refugees and increase the non-white population in the United States.

Purge of Those Willing to Stand Up: This narrative claims that the military is being purged of white men, Christians, and conservatives, who are willing to stand up to the

malicious cabal that runs the world. In many versions, this purge is to facilitate the U.S. military being used against the U.S. population in a future civil war or through the imposition of martial law.

Linked To: Ruling Cabal; Great Replacement

Example from the withdrawal from Afghanistan:

With the end of the war in Afghanistan, the corrupt U.S. government will now turn its attention to domestic enemies, including white people, conservatives, and Christians.

Force for Social Liberalism and Multiculturalism:

In this narrative, the U.S. military is portrayed as a force for social liberal values, such as feminism and LGBTQ+ acceptance, as well as democratic principles, including multiculturalism and pluralism. These values are argued to be unnatural, and therefore have a negative effect on the armed forces and society at-large. According to this narrative, the adherence to these values causes other

³ Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner. “The Great Replacement’: The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism.” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* 7 (2019).



cultures and nations to reject U.S. military support. Furthermore, diversity initiatives in the U.S. military weaken the force. In some versions of this narrative, these initiatives are designed to facilitate the replacement of white men with feminists, people of color, and non-Christians.

Linked To: Great Replacement; Imminent Social Collapse

Example from the withdrawal from Afghanistan:

As in Afghanistan, LGBTQ+ acceptance in the military means the force will be weak and easy to defeat in the coming civil war.

Extremists Understand Servicemember Suffering:

Through this narrative, extremists claim that U.S. politicians and government officials do not care about veterans and service members and are only focused on the interests of elites. Extremists, on the other hand, are depicted as understanding the malicious exploitation of service members and veterans and are argued to be the only ones who can alleviate their suffering.

Linked To: Ruling Cabal

Example from the withdrawal from Afghanistan:

Elites killed U.S. soldiers and ruined lives in Afghanistan so they could enrich themselves.

Military and Societal Collapse: This narrative claims that the U.S. military will soon collapse, along with the rest of the American democratic, multiracial, pluralistic, and capitalist system.

Linked To: Imminent Social Collapse; Great Replacement

Example from the withdrawal from Afghanistan:

The United States' defeat in Afghanistan is evidence that the military is weak and cannot prevent the imminent collapse of American society.

Responsibility to Fight: According to this narrative, although all white men have a responsibility to fight for their race, country, faith, and culture against a tyrannical government and dangerous leftist movement, men with military experience have the best ability – and thus the greatest responsibility – to lead the effort in the coming race war or civil war.

Linked To: Imminent Social Collapse; Great Replacement

Example from the withdrawal from Afghanistan:

The withdrawal from Afghanistan is a tremendous opportunity to recruit veterans who are frustrated with the U.S. military and who have the skills to fight along with extremists.

EXPLOITATION OF MILITARY GRIEVANCES

In our review of Telegram, we found that extremist posts seldom targeted specific veterans or service members, but rather, spoke generally about the military, encouraging opposition to it as an institution, thus indirectly appealing to those who are, or have been, affiliated with the military and harbor grievances about their experiences in the armed forces.

The recruitment narratives implicitly or explicitly referenced six common grievances related to military service:

Your service accomplished nothing: This was the most common grievance identified among the posts, and most frequently linked to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Extremists repeatedly encouraged service members and veterans to see their service in Afghanistan as having achieved nothing, potentially playing on a heightened sense of moral injury among U.S. service members. Extremists further suggested that wasted service was not an accident or mistake, but rather the inevitable outcome of a war driven by enemy interests.

The military has changed, and you are no longer welcome:

The second most common grievance reflected potential discomfort and/or resentment with recent social changes in the military, especially with respect to women and LGBTQ+

service members, but also sometimes regarding non-white service members. Frequently, this was an implicit assumption, expressed in general homophobic, sexist, and racist rhetoric. However, as extremists used posts to foster grievances and offer extremist solutions, they linked changes in the armed forces to threatening conspiracy theories, positing that straight, white men were being intentionally excluded from the military.

The military doesn't care about veterans or service members: This grievance was most frequently referenced with respect to the suffering of veterans and service members due to their experiences in the military. Again, the narratives that were offered described the military as dominated by enemy interests who were unconcerned with the plight of the rank and file, and in fact, likely wished them harm.

The U.S. military is a global embarrassment: This grievance emerged in the context of the U.S. military's failure to defeat the Taliban, as well as the growth in the military strength of potential U.S. adversaries, such as China. In response, posts frequently mocked the military, and claimed that any failures were evidence of the institution's imminent collapse, and/or transformation into a weapon of tyranny against American

citizens. The only solution, extremists contend, is to join them in fighting the institution itself.

Military leaders are incompetent: This grievance was also frequently associated with the U.S. withdrawal in Afghanistan. Although extremists typically argue that failures in the military are due to malicious intent, rather than incompetence, they recognized that potential recruits view events from a less conspiratorial angle. Posts often suggested military incompetence and, again, suggested that the institution will soon collapse.

The military violates rights: Fears and resentment of veterans' and service members' rights in the military were most frequently linked to opposition to the COVID-19 vaccine mandate. Some posts referenced this grievance merely by sharing news stories capturing such opposition, while others articulated more dramatic narratives, suggesting it was part of a ploy to purge the military of white men or other "victims." Occasionally, posts suggested that service members' and

veterans' rights were threatened by diversity initiatives. Either way, the proffered solution to the loss of rights was to oppose the military as an institution.

All first- and second-order narratives described above were used to exploit these grievances. However certain narratives were commonly paired with particular grievances:

- The "Tool of Elites" narrative was often used to exploit the grievances of "your service accomplished nothing" and "the military doesn't care about veterans or service members."
- The "Military and Societal Collapse" narrative was often paired with the grievance "The U.S. military is a global embarrassment."
- The "Force for Social Liberalism and Multiculturalism" narrative was paired with the grievance "The military has changed, and you are no longer welcome."
- The "Purge of Those Willing to Stand Up" narrative was paired with the grievance "The military violates rights."

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to these narratives and the threats they pose to American veterans' well-being and our national unity, We the Veterans and Military Families has outlined a series of interventions that can be invested in to mitigate extremist disinformation and radicalization. As a veteran and military family-led organization, WTVMF made these recommendations based on existing programs and best practices within a public health violence prevention framework.

The recommendations are organized as both specific interventions and systemic, wrap-around solutions to improve the short-term and longer-term resilience of the VMF community to extremist recruitment.



Recommended Specific Interventions for Military-Focused Extremist Narratives

1. **Support research:** First, we must more fully understand the scope and scale of the problem of extremist groups attempting to recruit active duty and reserve military members and veterans of our armed forces. Both the U.S. Government and academic and private organizations interested in defending our democratic constitutional republic should increase research funding in this important area. The narratives that are used to recruit veterans and service members are not static. They change as groups evolve and political dynamics change. Thus, continuing to monitor the narrative space will be an important part of countering veteran recruitment.
2. **Provide transition assistance.** We must improve our efforts to prevent veterans from joining extremist organizations. Both the Commander in Chief and the Congressional committees with oversight responsibility of the Department of Defense (DOD) should direct the DOD to modify its Transition Assistance Program to include a class on the threat of domestic terrorists and violent extremist groups and their efforts to recruit. Veterans in the process of military to civilian transition are particularly vulnerable to extremist recruitment as they navigate re-entry to the civilian world. This class should also provide FBI recommendations on what to do if approached by these groups.
3. **Educate vets about propaganda:** Propagandists' manipulative techniques often fail once the mechanisms and purposes are made clear to their targeted audiences. A "pre-bunking" communication campaign and inoculation programs should be developed to help the veteran community identify mis/dis-information and the manipulative techniques used by extremist groups and their supporters. Much of human decision-making is done by fixed-action patterns initiated by trigger features (like fear appeals) often at the subconscious level. When people are educated about their automatic pattern behaviors and triggers, they are better able to recognize when profiteers are trying to manipulate them to attain compliance.

4. **Promote critical thinking:** With the proliferation of news and opinion outlets following the advent of the Internet, it is often difficult for members of the public, veterans included, to determine what organizations are disseminating factual information. Better educating veterans in critical thinking, how to spot mis-, dis- and mal-information and news media selection can help improve the quality of their decisions. In 1947, the U.S. War Department released a film called *Don't Be A Sucker* to counter extremists targeting military members and veterans. A modern update to this film would be a welcome addition to the effort to help veterans protect themselves from extremist targeting.⁴

Recommended Systemic Interventions to Inoculate the Veteran and Military Family Community

5. **Provide VSO/MSO Situation Update Briefs:** It is difficult to motivate America's more than 17 million veterans if they are unaware of the very real threats extremist groups pose to our country – one every veteran swore an oath to support and defend. The federal government, specifically the Department of Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Office of the Director of National Intelligence should engage with We the Veterans and Military Families as well as directly with America's 48 Congressionally-chartered veteran service organizations and 14 other veteran (VSO) and military (MSO) organizations affiliated with the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs to provide regular threat briefings on what extremist groups are targeting veterans, how extremist groups are attempting to manipulate veterans, and what veteran leaders can do to help reduce extremist influence. The combined membership of the "Big Six" (largest VSOs by membership) is more than 5.1 million veterans and the combined social media reach of the Military Coalition exceeds 6 million followers. These groups have tremendous reach, and their leaders should be directly asked by executive branch leadership for their help. Our nation needs their unequivocal support to address the threat of violent extremism.
6. **Elevate veteran organizations' capabilities:** Strong veteran service organizations focused on providing veterans stable mental, physical, and economic health and wellness combined with an ethos of continued service to community, state, and nation are among our greatest weapons in creating protective factors against veteran recruitment by violent extremist groups. Veteran service organizations have the means to reach out to and assist individuals at risk to help connect them with physical, mental, and economic health and wellness support programs. They can also provide positive social networks, help reduce political tension, and improve veterans' social and economic integration. Members of these VSOs are also respected members of their communities. As such, they are positioned to execute community-based countering violent extremism strategies by:
 - a. Helping community members understand and identify violent extremism and risks
 - b. Assisting community leaders in countering violent extremist ideology
 - c. Leveraging their experiences in the military to set the example of people from myriad walks of life, cultural groups, and religions coming together to unite our communities
 - d. Promoting policies that address political grievances
 - e. Strengthening the government's capacity to curtail violent extremism
 - f. Educating our fellow citizens, especially our youth, on the way our democracy is supposed to work through civic literacy programs
7. **Identify vets at risk:** The veteran and prevention communities should equip veterans with resources necessary for the veterans to look after each other - just like they did while they were in the service. The veterans should be able to identify if their battle buddies are walking down a potentially perilous path, and have the knowledge and resources to help their battle buddies from continuing down that path.
8. **Promote opportunities for positive patriotic civic engagement:** Sometimes recruitment narratives highlight legitimate grievances and individuals are attracted to them because they offer a way of addressing those. Promoting legal political engagement is a way of offering an alternative that can provide the same sense of empowerment and resolution of grievances.

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42X_eAOU4DU

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The findings discussed in this brief are part of a larger effort by the Radicalization and Disengagement team at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism to understand of the processes and patterns of radicalization in the United States military and to identify tools that can mitigate radicalization risks. As one component of this project, we documented and analyzed the extremist narratives that were designed to recruit and radicalize service members and military veterans. As sample data, we collected 181 threads pertaining to the military community on 16 separate white supremacist and anti-government extremist channels on Telegram over a period of approximately three months. Prior research indicated white supremacist and anti-government ideology were the most commonly held extremist ideologies in radicalized individuals with military backgrounds.⁵

We assessed the posts to identify what narratives they advanced with respect to the military, as well as what presumed grievances relating to military service they were attempting to exploit, with the goal of identifying the implicit and explicit narratives through which extremists attempted to recruit/radicalize veterans and active service members. Narratives were identified using a combined inductive and deductive approach, relying first on existing themes based on researchers' previous knowledge of domestic extremism, and later by using grounded theory to identify themes as they emerged from the extremist content we collected. The result was a typology of narratives related to the military, as well as a related typology of grievances expressed in the posts that were associated with military experience.

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START ▶▶ The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is a university-based research, education and training center comprised of an international network of scholars committed to the scientific study of terrorism, responses to terrorism and related phenomena. Led by the University of Maryland, START is a Department of Homeland Security Emeritus Center of Excellence that is supported by multiple federal agencies and departments. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and effects of terrorism; the effectiveness and impacts of counterterrorism and CVE; and other matters of global and national security. For more information, visit start.umd.edu or contact START at infostart@umd.edu.

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⁵ Jensen, Michael, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane. 2022. "Radicalization in the Ranks," START: College Park, MD (April). https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Radicalization%20in%20the%20Ranks_April%202022.pdf