

Statement by Christopher J. Buckley

Mr. Chairman, the Honorable Members of the Committee,

It's an honor and a privilege to testify here, even though I will be sharing some difficult things from my life. My name is Chris Buckley, and I served as an E5 Sargent, in the 201st Engineer Battalion, of Kentucky Army National Guard.

I joined the army as part of the Delayed Entry Program, while I was still in high school. I remember how proud I was to have the honor to be on the frontlines of defending my country, as that Tuesday morning I saw on the TV in my high school cafeteria the collapse of the Twin Towers. Of course, I had never been to New York City, and actually had never even left Ohio before. But the way I saw my country rally around its suffering made me proud to be an American soldier. You could call me an idealist. How did I go from that to becoming a KKK member? This is a strange tale, but one that is sadly not that uncommon among our veterans.

I was not born racist. In 2008 when I was deployed to Afghanistan, I made friends with a generous and kind local Afghan named Abdullah. Abdullah looked quite different from anybody I ever knew. Following the local Muslim customs, he wore an eyeliner and stained his hands red. But in the afternoons, as we sipped tea together and exchanged stories of our lives before the war – he spoke some English – I could see how we were not so different after all. Abdullah was later caught sneaking an improvised explosive device into our bunker. Abdullah, my friend, wanted to kill me and my buddies just because I was an American.

There were a lot of days like that in Afghanistan. But none shook me as much as losing my best friend a few months later.

His name was Daniel Wallace. Father of two. Of Dry Ridge, Kentucky. On October 31, 2008, somewhere in Eastern Afghanistan, we were chatting and had just left our vehicle to fix a piece of equipment, when we were ambushed by Taliban. I saw Daniel get hit by a bullet under his left eye, and his skull get shattered by the impact of the bullet. Daniel died in my arms while I was trying to push his brain back into his skull.

I came back from Afghanistan a different man. I had developed a deep sense of resentment against all Muslims. In fact, I tattooed the word *Kafir*, infidel, in Arabic script, on my arm, as a warning to Muslims, but also as my way of remembering who my enemies were who had taken away my best friend.

My psychological damage in Afghanistan was accompanied by a crippling physical injury in the US, when on a humanitarian mission to Kentucky during a tornado in 2009, the axle on my army vehicle broke and I severely injured my back. Although I received workers' compensation, I was never given a line of duty determination, even though, to this day, I cannot put on my socks without grimacing in pain.

Following the accident, I was put on opioids, which I became quickly addicted to, just as I was developing a habit of numbing my psychological pain by resentment directed against my growing list of enemies, Muslims, gays, Blacks and Jews.

You see, my trauma opened other wounds that had never healed and I had simply repressed. Like that time when I was sexually molested by a family member. Or that other time when a group of Black kids in my elementary school attacked me, urinated on me, and stole the pair of Jordan Jumpman sneakers that my grandmother had bought me after saving every penny, on the very first day of the 6th grade, the very first day I wore them.

When I was discharged from the army, I received no treatment for PTSD from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. Instead, there was a loving group eager to embrace me and acknowledge my pain. It was KKK. And they did not approach me with pitchforks and burning crosses, but with a plate of BBQ ribs, a Bible, and the promise of a brotherhood I missed from my days in the army.

In fact, I would still have been a KKK member had it not been for the intervention of my wife. My 4-year-old son had started asking for his own KKK outfit. And My wife had just had enough. She suffered as I suffered, and I was about to pass my sufferings to my young innocent son too. She gave me an ultimatum: it was going to be *either* her and my son *or* KKK and the drugs. In the meanwhile, she reached out to a former extremist online, who in turn put me in touch with Parents for Peace, an organization that aims at preventing extremism by offering a helpline to families concerned about a loved one.

The road to recovery was neither easy nor quick. In order to take back my life, I had to quit my drug addiction. I had a few relapses, all of them on Halloween, the day I lost my best friend in that ambush in Afghanistan. But as difficult as it was to give up the drugs, giving up my addiction to hatred and resentment was not any less challenging. I *wanted* to blame others. I *wanted* to remain an angry victim rather than take responsibility for my own actions. And I wanted a quick fix to numb my pains right then and there. At the end, the help and support I received from people I used to either hurt or hate, allowed me to open a new chapter in my life, where not only I could heal myself, but also help others heal themselves.

Prevention of radicalization is always better than treatment. We need to prepare our troops not only for being soldiers, but also for the civilian life. We need preventive solutions to help our soldiers deal with the trauma of active duty in healthier ways. I am very proud to have contributed to one such solution at the Trauma and Recovery Program, which we piloted with Aurora Police at Denver with very promising results. I'll be delighted to work with you and the VA to see how we can expand from this initial resource into a program for the veterans.

As part of working on myself, I pledged that for every person that I recruited in KKK, I would pull 10 others out of extremism. While I am ashamed about my past in KKK, I am proud to be an interventionist, and helping in extremism cases at Parents for Peace, from KKK, to Islamism, and eco-terrorism.

The last part needs a bit of emphasis. Extremism is not a political problem, but a public health issue. This is not simply a Republican problem or a Democrat problem. It is not a Black problem or a White problem. A Muslim problem or a Christian problem. It's a *human* problem. By politicizing the issue, by confining extremism to only one group of people, by using it as yet another weapon to use against our political rivals, we do not heal our wounds, but inflame them.

Perhaps my story could tell you something about what happens when we as a society make a habit of resorting to quick and easy fixes that leave all of us worse off. Perhaps my story could be a warning for what's at stake when we get too comfortable with our status as victims of each other's actions. When we prefer to assign blame rather than take responsibility. But that's not why I am here. I'm here to tell you that bad things happen, but it's up to us to choose what we do with our wounds.