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Hearing

"HELPING VETERANS THRIVE: THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER SUPPORT IN PREVENTING DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM"

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

U.S. House of Representatives
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Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, members of the Committee, thank you for your service to our country, and for providing me the opportunity to be with you.

My name is John Horgan. I am a professor of psychology at Georgia State University where I direct the Violent Extremism Research Group.[1] I speak here today not as an expert on veterans' affairs but as someone who has researched violent extremism, or *terrorism*, for over twenty-five years.[2] I believe research on these issues may help us tackle the question of why some veterans become involved in violent extremism, and moreover what we can do about it.

I study people who become involved in violent extremism. I examine their backgrounds, their behaviors, their motivations, their mindsets. I trace their pathways into, and out of these movements. My colleagues and I build databases on their activities, we analyze their statements, we dissect their memoirs, and sometimes, we can even interview them about their reasons for getting involved. In my experience, if you want to know how and why people become violent extremists, you must ask them, and you must listen to them.

These are difficult issues to talk about, let alone research. When it comes to the involvement of some veterans in violent extremism, they are often characterized as "misguided", "troubled", "broken" people that are manipulated into anti-government violence. I know that such language comes from a place of concern – a genuine worry about impugning or vilifying veterans. But if anything, we disrespect veterans by *not* addressing these issues, and if we cannot openly acknowledge the problem, we have little hope of working together to create solutions.

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[2] I define violent extremism as the use, or *threat* of use, of violence against non-combatants to achieve a social, political, religious, or other ideological activity. We most often associate the strategy of violent extremism with non-state actors but is just as likely to be employed by state actors. Violent extremism is pan-ideological - attractive to those from extreme left to the extreme right, and everything in between.

Irrespective of political affiliation, it is my sincere belief that everyone here today is deeply concerned about veterans. We will not always agree on what the solution might look like, or even who ought to have an opinion about those solutions. But we need to acknowledge that this is a problem and is a problem that is unlikely to go away. It is not the only threat facing this country, *nor* is it the only threat facing veterans. It certainly shouldn't take concerns about terrorism for us to systematically address veterans' needs.

I would like to focus on two issues.

- I want to highlight what we know from research on who becomes involved in violent extremism, and why, as well as how and why people disengage from it.

- I then want to highlight what those lessons might mean for reducing the risk of veterans' involvement in violent extremism.

What we know from four decades of research on violent extremism is the following. No clear profile has ever been found, not just across the ideological spectrum, but even within specific groups. That is not a failure of research - it is the *outcome* of it. Terrorism today is more diverse than ever before. Men, women, and children, from all walks of life, all backgrounds, all religions, become involved in different ways, and they end up doing different things within these groups. If anything, *diversity* is the profile.

We can collect data on who becomes involved in terrorism, but that data does not permit us to reverse engineer the radicalization process. Predicting who specifically becomes involved in terrorism is not currently possible. Focusing on ideas and speech alone is misleading. Expressing radical views is a symptom of a healthy democracy. Fortunately, most people who hold radical views will never become involved in terrorism. Moreover, not everyone who engages in terrorism necessarily holds radical views.

We must not resort to assumptions that of the *very* few veterans who become involved in violent extremism that they are confused, misguided individuals, led down the wrong path. At best, this

is a patronizing characterization, surely offensive to the countless veterans living each day with ongoing trauma but who choose *not* to abandon the oath they swore even after leaving military service. At worst, it is misleading and might blind us to solutions.

We know something valuable about *who* violent extremist groups want. They don't seek out the "misguided", the "troubled", the "broken", the "easily manipulated." In certain situations, these groups might take anyone they can get their hands on. The deadlier and more organized terror groups will find a role for everybody. But what they want, what they prize above all else is the recruit who is *competent* – someone who doesn't just talk, but is willing to *act*, and can be counted on to do a job. They want people who are *resilient*, who can cope with the pressures of facing down an enemy. They seek out potential recruits willing to risk their lives for something bigger than themselves. The perfect terrorist recruit is someone who will take notice, stand up and fight while others look away. This might sound strange, but terrorists want people who have the capacity to care about the plight of others. Moral outrage at some gross injustice is one of the common themes we see in radicalization narratives the world over.[3]

From the perspective of the *violent extremist*, these are the ingredients that make the ideal recruit. Recruits are taught to believe that they have a role to play in bringing about a better future through violence. That of course is little more than fantasy, but its allure is powerful to those who imagine their role in fulfilling that mission.

Perhaps the question that comes from all this is: why *wouldn't* terrorist groups go after our veterans?

But this is only half the story. We must also ask why some veterans themselves find involvement in these groups rewarding.

[3] Horgan, John. (forthcoming). *Terrorist Minds: The Psychology of Violent Extremism from al Qaeda to the Extreme Right*. Columbia University Press.

We know from previous hearings how many veterans are appearing in violent extremist activity. What we do not clearly know is their motivation for doing so. What needs do these groups fulfill? Do veterans find continued purpose in such groups? Is it the excitement, the adventure, the camaraderie of like-minded peers, a sense of once gain belonging to an exclusive club? It might be all of those, or perhaps it's as simple as having an opportunity to channel perceived betrayal by their government into revenge.

In the absence of research, we can only speculate, but this is in my view a missing piece of the puzzle. We must be prepared to listen to accounts of why some veterans choose violent extremism. We must learn if their grievances (assuming they have some) are legitimate, and if so, what we are prepared to do about that, if anything? If those grievances are not legitimate, we must also plan responses around that. But not knowing why they want to become involved means we only have a partial picture of what is happening.

This puts us in a bind. As an academic, I will always argue for more research, more data, and yet, we don't have the luxury of waiting around for it to emerge. Until it does, we have some starting points.

The subject of this hearing concerns peers. For the most part, radicalization to violent extremism isn't the product of brainwashing, or passively consuming online content. It's a slow, subtle process of gradual disengagement from mainstream society that works most efficiently when conducted at a peer level, whether online or off. Yet, it is also peers who may be the *most* effective weapon in reducing the risk of radicalization to violent extremism in the first place, as well as facilitating *disengagement* from such movements. There is evidence to suggest that peers are best placed to spot changes in baseline behavior. One of the most important discoveries about terrorist behavior is that it is far more *detectable* than people imagine.[4] But just because it is detectable doesn't necessarily mean it is preventable.

[4] Paul Gill, John Horgan, and Paige Deckert. (2014). "Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 59 (2): 425-435.

A feature of domestic violent extremism is a pronounced *bystander* effect. It is often friends and family who become aware of early-stage plotting. Yet, for reasons we are just beginning to understand, there is reluctance to report such activity to the authorities. We all know the mantra 'if you see something, say something'. Research on domestic terror plots suggests it is no longer an issue that things are not being "seen." The problem is that not enough is being *said*. At least part of this disconnect is that bystanders are neither aware of what to say, nor where to go to discuss or report such concerns.

Another important development in recent years has been increased knowledge around the process of disengagement from violent extremism – in other words, how and why people walk away from terrorism. Involvement is not a one-way street. People can and do leave all the time. For some, their exit comes at the point of arrest by law enforcement. For others, they seek ways to leave on their own terms. We know that many violent extremists remain in their groups despite being disillusioned with them because they see no way out. Having knowledgeable and available *peers* to help with the exit process is part of a disengagement strategy we see demonstrating effectiveness in the world of violent extremism. It is a strategy we must explore for potential application in the context of veterans' involvement.

Importantly, people can leave violent extremism behind without necessarily being forced to abandon even the most radical views. In other words, someone can disengage without necessarily having to de-radicalize. We can help people leave these groups behind without necessarily having to police their thoughts, or restrict their views.

In conclusion, I respectfully offer areas for your consideration that could be informed by research.

1. Taking prevention work seriously must involve thinking more systematically about early intervention. This includes (but is not limited to) better screening of violent extremist beliefs in the military. Beliefs alone will never reliably predict involvement in violent extremist acts but identifying sustained beliefs in extremist propaganda and violent ideation (irrespective of political ideology) offers a starting point for early intervention.

Part of better screening involves education and training on key issues – acknowledging there is a problem, considering avenues for dealing with it, warning service members of the potential risks, and creating awareness around how, why, where and when violent extremist groups attempt to exploit veterans. Helping to make veterans, indeed our military, better consumers of material both online and offline, can help inoculate them against propaganda.

2. Closely related to this is the issue of what to do about violent extremist ideation or behavior when it is observed. We must help the military develop clear guidelines and procedures for reporting extremist activity within the ranks. It is a mistake to assume that service members are *most* vulnerable to violent extremism at the point of transitioning out. This seems intuitive, but it is likely just a small part of what is happening. Indeed, evidence from other countries suggests it is while serving that many veterans are first radicalized. There is also historical evidence to suggest that some violent extremist groups intentionally send members to join the military for the expressed purpose of acquiring certain skills. Again, this points to the need for much earlier intervention than we might anticipate.

3. We must continue to make known the *negative* consequences of involvement in violent extremism. Our research has shown that of the most common results of getting involved in violent extremism is a profound sense of disappointment and disillusionment. Harnessing this reality can be a useful element for peer-based early prevention efforts – if we continue to see more veterans become involved in violent extremism, we will also subsequently (and eventually) see veterans express remorse for their actions. They may even be willing to share their stories. We must be ready for that, and we must be ready to illuminate those accounts so that they can constitute a warning to their peers.

4. As we continue to conduct evidence-led research to better understand the problem, we can continue to be informed from research on other issues. At present, the Department of Homeland Security's Science and Technology Directorate is working to develop best practices of reintegration programming for women and children of foreign fighters. As

part of this study, S&T and its performers hopes to incorporate an understanding of the role of trauma in facilitating rehabilitation and reintegration. The research team supported by that effort has established a Trauma-Informed Expert Advisory Group which has international subject matter experts, employing multi-disciplinary approaches across a range of partners and service sectors – their goal is to help find the best ways to harness knowledge of trauma to help guide rehabilitation efforts. DHS S&T has also funded University research into how American law enforcement agencies are infiltrated and subverted by white supremacist and far-right extremist groups. The data from this research will better inform what factors leave police susceptible to recruitment or infiltration. Research is currently underway at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, to discover what policies and practices are in place in law enforcement agencies to screen for insider threats. As we develop baseline research on the issues surrounding veterans' involvement in violent extremism, we would do well to closely pay attention to what this other research reveals.

I thank you for your time, for all you are doing to address this challenging issue, and I look forward to your questions.