

**Testimony of Lecia Brooks  
Chief of Staff, Southern Poverty Law Center  
before the  
Armed Services Committee  
United States House of Representatives**

**Extremism in the Armed Forces  
March 24, 2021**

My name is Lecia Brooks. I am chief of staff of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on extremism in the U.S. Armed Forces and what we can do to address this challenge.

Now in our 50th year, the SPLC is a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond, working in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance the human rights of all people. SPLC lawyers have worked to shut down some of the nation’s most violent white supremacist groups by winning crushing, multimillion-dollar jury verdicts on behalf of their victims. We have helped dismantle vestiges of Jim Crow, reformed juvenile justice practices, shattered barriers to equality for women, children, the LGBTQ+ community, and the disabled, and worked to protect low-wage immigrant workers from exploitation.

The SPLC began tracking white supremacist activity in the 1980s, during a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and other organized extremist hate groups. Today, the SPLC is the premier U.S. nonprofit organization monitoring the activities of domestic hate groups and other extremists. Each year since 1990, we have conducted a census of hate groups operating across America, a list that is used extensively by journalists, law enforcement agencies, and scholars, among others.

The SPLC Action Fund is dedicated to fighting for racial justice alongside impacted communities in pursuit of equity and opportunity for all. Along with our partners, we work primarily in the southeast United States and have offices in Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Washington, D.C. The SPLC Action Fund promotes policies and laws that will eliminate the structural racism and inequalities that fuel oppression of people of color, immigrants, young people, women, low-income people, and the LGBTQ+ community.

Right now, the white supremacist movement in the United States is surging and presents a distinct and present danger to this country and its institutions, including the Armed Forces. In February 2020, I testified before this Committee’s Subcommittee on Military Personnel<sup>1</sup> that those who are indoctrinated into white supremacist ideology present a significant threat to good order, morale, and discipline in the military,<sup>2</sup> national security, and the safety of our

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<sup>1</sup> Testimony of Lecia Brooks, Southern Poverty Law Center, Before the Subcommittee on Military Personnel U.S. House Armed Services Committee, “Alarming Incidents of White Supremacy in the Military—How to Stop It?” February 11, 2020. <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110495/witnesses/HHRG-116-AS02-Wstate-BrooksL-20200211.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, supremacist ideology is utterly inconsistent with Military Equal Opportunity, as outlined in the Department of Defense Directive on “Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity in the DoD”: “The right of all Service

communities. This fact was dramatically illustrated, once again, by the recent arrests of several veterans for their active involvement in the deadly January 6 insurrectionist siege at the U.S. Capitol.

The vast majority of those who serve in our Armed Forces have no connection to white supremacy or extremism and uphold the best traditions of our nation's democratic ideals. Though the number of extremists associated with the Armed Forces who engage in hate crimes and criminal extremist activity is relatively small, their capabilities and specialized weapons training make them prime targets for extremist propaganda and recruitment.<sup>3</sup> Recent investigations have identified dozens of veterans and active-duty servicemembers who are affiliated with white supremacist activity.<sup>4</sup>

This is far from a new problem. In fact, the SPLC has been documenting white supremacist infiltration of the military and urging officials to take substantial and systematic action since 1986. It is now clear that, despite some adjustments in policies related to recruitment and conduct within the Armed Forces, white supremacist and extremist activity continues to persist in the military.

### **Assessing the Current Threat of White Supremacist Terror**

In recent years, we have witnessed devastating violence carried out by individuals radicalized by white supremacist propaganda. This propaganda, found primarily online, is intended to recruit young people into an extremist worldview that portrays white people as being systematically replaced by nonwhite migrants—and people of color more broadly—and that demands urgent, radical, and violent action to “reset” America. This antidemocratic movement—composed of different groups with various extreme and hateful ideologies—puts a premium on the type of training afforded by the Armed Forces. It is thus no surprise that extremist groups and individuals encourage their followers to join a branch of the military and that they target existing servicemembers and veterans for recruitment. However, the rising tide of extremism within the

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members to serve, advance, and be evaluated based on only individual merit, fitness, capability, and performance in an environment free from unlawful discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including gender identity), or sexual orientation.”

<https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/102002p.pdf> NUMBER 1020.02E June 8, 2015, Incorporating Change 2, Effective June 1, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Kristy N. Kamarck, “Military Personnel and Extremism: Law, Policy, and Considerations for Congress,” Congressional Research Services, CRS Insight IN11086, May 16, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11086>.

<sup>4</sup> Military personnel are current prohibited from “active participation in ... organizations that advocate supremacist, extremist, or criminal gang doctrine, ideology, or causes; including those that attempt to create illegal discrimination based on race, creed, color, sex, religion, ethnicity, or national origin; advocate the use of force, violence, or criminal activity; or otherwise engage in efforts to deprive individuals of their civil rights.” Active participation is defined: “Active participation includes, but is not limited to, fundraising; demonstrating or rallying; recruiting, training, organizing, or leading members; distributing material (including posting online); knowingly wearing gang colors or clothing; having tattoos or body markings associated with such gangs or organizations; or otherwise engaging in activities in furtherance of the objective of such gangs or organizations that are detrimental to good order, discipline, or mission accomplishment or are incompatible with military service.” DoDI 1325.06, “Handling Dissident and Protest Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces,” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, November 27, 2009, Incorporating Change 1, February 22, 2012 <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132506p.pdf>.

Armed Forces and veterans’ communities cannot be stymied without tackling the scourge of far-right extremism in broader American society. To put it another way, as Heather Williams of the RAND Corporation noted in *DefenseOne*: “The military has a growing extremism problem because America does.”<sup>5</sup>

Analyses of two terrorism crime databases show that “rightwing terrorists” are significantly more likely to have military experience than any other category of terrorists indicted in U.S. federal courts.” Between 1980 and 2002, 18% of far-right terrorists indicted in federal courts had military experience. The same study showed that “over 40% of rightwing terrorists with military experience assumed some position of leadership within their organization,” making them more than twice as likely to end up in leadership than someone without military training.<sup>6</sup> A study by Pete Simi and Bryan Bubolz found that, in a sample of far-right extremists (FRTs) gathered from the American Terrorism Study database, open sources, and interviews, at least 31% had military experience—as compared to 10% of the U.S. population at large. “More specifically,” they wrote, “we found 17 percent of the FRTs with military experience were founders of their FRT organizations, 22 percent were leaders in their FRT organizations, and the remaining 43% were core members of their FRT organizations.”<sup>7</sup>

Other studies show that white supremacist organizations appear to have enjoyed a measure of success in their ambitions of reaching members of the Armed Forces. According to a 2019 poll conducted by *Military Times*, 36% of active-duty servicemembers who were surveyed reported seeing signs of white nationalism or racist ideology in the Armed Forces—a significant rise from the year before, when 22% reported witnessing these extremist views.<sup>8</sup> In the same survey, more than half of servicemembers of color reported experiencing incidents of racism or racist ideology, up from 42% in 2017.<sup>9</sup> These numbers jumped again in 2020, when a *Military Times* poll conducted in the midst of nationwide racial justice protests last summer found that 57% of servicemembers of color said they had witnessed these incidents in their ranks. Likewise, of all the troops who participated in the survey, 48% listed white nationalists as a major national security threat—a mere half of a percentage point below the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and other foreign terrorist organizations.<sup>10</sup> “Peers have been very vocal on how they believe that George Floyd deserved his death and are quick to point out black on black crime,” one *Military Times*

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<sup>5</sup> Heather Williams, “How to Root Out Extremism in the US Military,” *Defense One*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/02/how-root-out-extremism-us-military/171744/>.

<sup>6</sup> Brent L. Smith, Kelly Damphousse, Steven Chermak, and Joshua Freilich, “Right Wing Extremism and Military Service,” in Andrew J. Bringuel, Federal Bureau of Investigation (U.S.), Jenelle Janowicz, Abelardo C. Vilida, and Edna F. Reid, eds., *Terrorism Research and Analysis Project (TRAP): A Collection of Research Ideas, Theories and Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011), 361-362.

<sup>7</sup> Pete Simi and Bryan Bubolz, “Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism: An Exploratory Analysis,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, August 2013, 660.

<sup>8</sup> Leo Shane III, “Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism Up Again in Poll of Active Duty Troops,” *Military Times*, Feb. 6, 2020. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>.

<sup>9</sup> Leo Shane III, “One in Four Troops Sees White Nationalism in the Ranks,” *Military Times*, Oct. 23, 2017. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/10/23/military-times-poll-one-in-four-troops-seeswhite-nationalism-in-the-ranks/>.

<sup>10</sup> Leo Shane, III, “Troops: White nationalism a national security threat equal to ISIS, al-Qaida,” *Military Times*, Sept. 3, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/09/03/troops-white-nationalism-a-national-security-threat-equal-to-isis-al-qaeda/>.

poll participant noted in their 2020 survey. “They complain that every ethnicity has an observance month but have nothing to celebrate ‘white pride.’”<sup>11</sup>

These findings track with the SPLC’s own reporting and research on extremist activity in America throughout the Trump era. In 2019, the SPLC documented the highest number of active hate groups—1,020— since it began its annual census of these groups in 1990. Most alarming, the number of white nationalist groups rose by nearly 50%.

While the SPLC’s most recent *Year in Hate* report identified 838 hate groups active in 2020—an 11% decline from 2019—it is important to understand that the number of hate groups is merely one of many metrics for measuring extremist activity in the United States. A decline in hate group numbers, in other words, does not equate to a drop in extremist activity.

During this same period, the SPLC has documented an alarming, upward trend in white supremacist violence. Three major factors have contributed to this increase: rising anxiety over rapid demographic change in the United States; toxic rhetoric that singles out and demonizes specific communities based on their immutable characteristics; and the unchecked proliferation of hateful propaganda and extremist disinformation on social media and the broader internet. Attacks in El Paso, Texas, Poway, California, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2019 are stark reminders of the threat posed by white supremacist ideology and those it motivates to act. Each of these attacks was inspired by white supremacist conspiracy theories, particularly those that stoke animosity toward nonwhite migrants. The alleged perpetrators of these brutal acts of terror were demonstrably influenced by the propaganda of white supremacist organizations and their leaders. However, they were not known to be members of a hate group.

While this violence may have been inspired by the propaganda and rhetoric of hate groups, such as those included in SPLC’s annual hate count, these terrorist attacks are indicative of two disturbing shifts within the far right. These factors affect our servicemembers, just as they do the broader population in the United States.

First, they show the movement as a whole has become more violent. In addition to acts of domestic terrorism, these trends have manifested in other ways as well. As SPLC analysts noted in our 2020 *Year in Hate* report, there are many on the far right who “are no longer satisfied with letting the state maintain a monopoly on violence.”<sup>12</sup>

Second, the movement’s growing propensity for violence has happened alongside a transition within far-right communities away from traditional organizing structures and toward diffuse systems of decentralized radicalization.<sup>13</sup> Increasingly many adherents to far-right

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<sup>11</sup> Leo Shane, III, “Troops: White nationalism a national security threat equal to ISIS, al-Qaida,” *Military Times*, Sept. 3, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/09/03/troops-white-nationalism-a-national-security-threat-equal-to-isis-al-qaeda/>.

<sup>12</sup> Cassie Miller & Intelligence Project staff, “At the End of the Trump Era, White Nationalists Increasingly Embrace Political Violence,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Feb. 16, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/16/end-trump-era-white-nationalists-increasingly-embrace-political-violence>.

<sup>13</sup> Cassie Miller and Hannah Gais, “Capitol Insurrection Shows How Trends on the Far-Right Fringe Have Become Mainstream,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Jan. 22, 2021,

extremist ideologies are not members of any hate group, but this fact does not stop them from engaging in real-world actions.<sup>14</sup> Extremists have instead turned to internet platforms, such as Telegram, that enable them to cohabitate with other individuals across various extremist ideologies, creating what researchers at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue have called a “post-organisational paradigm.”<sup>15</sup> Here, organized hate groups, such as the ones tracked by the SPLC, have become nodes linked to more nebulous radical milieus. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the insurrection on January 6, where researchers have identified that members of organized hate or antigovernment groups have made up a minority of the arrests.<sup>16</sup>

The Boogaloo movement, a predominantly white and heavily armed subculture, exemplifies this general shift from traditional hate group structures to diffuse movements oriented toward violence.<sup>17</sup> The movement, named after the 1984 breakdancing movie “Electric Boogaloo,” began as a racist meme online but has since spawned loosely affiliated real-life networks of supporters. Boogaloo adherents, often identified by their distinct style of wearing Hawaiian shirts under tactical gear, have become more visible at rallies and events in the last two years. While ideological boundaries appear to be muddled within the movement, it does represent a clear overlap between the hard-right antigovernment movement and the larger hate ecosystem. Its adherents are united in their advocacy for a second civil war and revolution against the current democratic system.<sup>18</sup> Individuals associated with the Boogaloo movement have been involved repeatedly in acts of violence, including murder.

In June 2019, federal prosecutors in Las Vegas, Nevada, charged three members of the Boogaloo movement—Stephen T. Marshall, Andrew Lynam, and William L. Loomis—with crimes related to a terrorism plot.<sup>19</sup> According to the criminal complaint, the men, all of whom previously served in the U.S. military, conspired to use gas-filled canisters and Molotov cocktails as explosives to manufacture chaos and violence at a local protest against the unlawful killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man killed by police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota.<sup>20</sup>

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<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/01/22/capitol-insurrection-shows-how-trends-far-rights-fringe-have-become-mainstream>.

<sup>14</sup> Rachel Janik and Keegan Hanks, “The Year in Hate and Extremism 2020,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Feb. 1, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/01/year-hate-2020>.

<sup>15</sup> Jakob Guhl and Jacob Davey, “A Safe Space to Hate: White Supremacist Mobilisation on Telegram,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, June 26, 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/A-Safe-Space-to-Hate2.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> The George Washington University Program on Extremism, “This is Our House: A Preliminary Assessment of the Capitol Hill Seige Participants,” March 2021, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/This-Is-Our-House.pdf>; and The University of Chicago, Program on Security and Threats, “Capitol Hill Insurrectionists,” [https://cpost.uchicago.edu/research/domestic\\_extremism/](https://cpost.uchicago.edu/research/domestic_extremism/).

<sup>17</sup> Cassie Miller, “The ‘Boogaloo’ Started as a Racist Meme,” Hatewatch, Southern Poverty Law Center, June 5, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/06/05/boogaloo-started-racist-meme>.

<sup>18</sup> Hatewatch staff, “Who are the Boogalooos, Who Were Visible at the Capitol and later Rallies,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Jan. 27, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/01/27/who-are-boogalooos-who-were-visible-capitol-and-later-rallies>.

<sup>19</sup> Michelle L. Price and Scott Sonner, “Prosecutors: 3 Men Plotted to Terrorize Vegas Protests,” The Associated Press, June 3, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/6223153093f08fa910c4ab445771b773>.

<sup>20</sup> Criminal complaint: U.S. v. Stephen T. Marshall, Andrew Lynam, and William L. Loomis, June 2, 2020, [http://www.seditionists.com/parshall\\_complaint.pdf](http://www.seditionists.com/parshall_complaint.pdf).

In addition to the attempt to foment violence at a peaceful protest, federal prosecutors learned that the group also considered targeting federal buildings, including a fee station on federal land and a U.S. Forest Service ranger station, and firebombing a power substation. This case powerfully highlights both the fervent antigovernment nature of the Boogaloo movement as well as its increasingly violent modus operandi.

On June 15, 2020, federal prosecutors charged U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Steven Carrillo with murder and the attempted murder of two security guards outside of a federal courthouse in Oakland, California, a month earlier.<sup>21</sup> Carrillo was on active duty at the time and stationed at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, California. He previously received training with an elite Air Force security unit.

Carrillo and his accused accomplice, Robert Alvin Justus Jr., were linked to Boogaloo ideology, according to the criminal complaint.<sup>22</sup> Carrillo reportedly wrote in a Facebook group chat: “It’s on our coast now, this needs to be nationwide. It’s a great opportunity to target the specialty soup bois. Keep that energy going.” The phrase “soup bois” is thought to be in reference to federal law enforcement agencies whose acronyms may resemble alphabet soup. Justus reportedly replied to Carrillo, “let’s boogie.” Carrillo is also accused of killing a Santa Cruz County sheriff’s deputy in a shootout when officers tracked down the van thought to be associated in the courthouse attack. He was apprehended after fleeing and being pursued by authorities. In the van, authorities uncovered a vest with a patch featuring a logo of an igloo and Hawaiian-style print, which is often attributed to the Boogaloo movement. Carrillo is also said to have written “BOOG” and “stop the duopoly” on the hood of a car claimed to be stolen by him during the pursuit.

Other plots by white supremacists active in the military have luckily been thwarted, including the one hatched by Lt. Christopher Paul Hasson, a 49-year-old serving in the Coast Guard.<sup>23</sup> Hassan, who had also spent time in the Marine Corps and the Army National Guard, pleaded guilty to federal gun and drug charges—including unlawful possession of unregistered silencers; unlawful possession of firearm silencers unidentified by a serial number; possession of a firearm by an addict and unlawful user of a controlled substance; and possession of a controlled substance—in October 2019.<sup>24</sup> He was sentenced to more than 13 years in prison in February 2020.<sup>25</sup> Hassan identified as a white nationalist and advocated for “focused violence” against journalists, Democratic politicians, professors, U.S. Supreme Court justices, and “leftists” in

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<sup>21</sup> Katie Shepherd, “An officer was gunned down. The killer was a ‘boogaloo boy’ using nearby peaceful protests as cover, feds say,” *The Washington Post*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/17/boogaloo-steven-carrillo/>.

<sup>22</sup> Criminal complaint U.S. v. Steven Carrillo, June 15, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1285706/download>.

<sup>23</sup> Dave Philipps, “Coast Guard Officer Plotted to Kill Journalists, Prosecutors Say,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/us/christopher-hasson-coast-guard.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Christine Hauser, “Coast Guard Officer Called a ‘Domestic Terrorist’ Pleads Guilty to Gun and Drug Charges,” *The New York Times*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/03/us/christopher-hasson-coast-guard-white-supremacist.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Levenson, “Former Coast Guard Officer Accused of Plotting Terrorism is Sentenced to 13 Years,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/31/us/christopher-hasson-coast-guard-terrorism.html>.

order to establish a white ethnostate. He had been engaged with white supremacist ideologies before he joined the military in the 1980s.

### **Radicalization in Military Largely Ignored, Despite Alarms**

There is no single radicalization narrative. An individual's pathway toward extremism is invariably complicated and can involve the combined factors of their life circumstances, outside influences, personal relationships, individual psychology, and the larger political climate. However, researchers have recognized that major changes in a person's identity, as well as changes in how they believe they are perceived by society, can contribute to far-right radicalization. Simi and Bubolz showed, for example, that individuals with a military background who become far-right extremists often get there through two different pathways. In the first, a person makes an involuntary exit from the military because they are unable to advance into specialized units or are discharged—honorably or dishonorably—for other reasons. While they want to remain in the military and advance their careers there, the institution has rejected them. As a result, they lose a defining part of their identity and seek validation elsewhere, especially in settings that allow them to reclaim their identity as a warrior or soldier. A far-right extremist group may feel like a welcoming and familiar place because of its congruities with the military, the appreciation for a veteran's specialized skills, the sense of camaraderie, and the value placed on traditional notions of masculinity.

In the second pathway identified by Simi and Bubolz, a person returning from the military finds that they don't receive the recognition or appreciation they feel they deserve for their service, leaving them with a sense of anger that could end up directed at an out-group or the government they once served.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, feeling betrayed by the government is an unfortunately common feeling among veterans of the nation's recent wars. In a 2019 poll, 64% of veterans said the war in Iraq was not worth fighting, and 58% said the same of the war in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> Many veterans also feel that the country abandoned them after their service. Sixty percent of veterans said in a 2014 poll that they thought the Department of Veterans Affairs was doing an "only fair" or "poor" job addressing the problems they faced.<sup>28</sup> It's no coincidence that a veteran who feels betrayed by their government might join a movement that sees the federal government as their enemy, as the white power movement does.

These are, of course, not the only connections between military service and right-wing extremism. Others develop extremist beliefs before they enter service, doing so in some cases to receive specialized training. Others become radicalized while serving, possibly by coming into contact with another servicemember who holds extremist beliefs. If those holding the extremist beliefs are superior in rank, or the commanding officer of your unit, the potential for radicalization without external oversight is much greater, we have been told by veterans. The military justice system is simply not set up to deal with a national security problem—such as the

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<sup>26</sup> Simi and Bubolz, "Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism: An Exploratory Analysis," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Aug. 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Igielnik and Kim Parker, "Majorities of U.S. veterans, public say the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not worth fighting," Pew Research Center, July 10, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/10/majorities-of-u-s-veterans-public-say-the-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-were-not-worth-fighting/>.

<sup>28</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "A Legacy of Pain and Pride," *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2014/03/29/a-legacy-of-pride-and-pain/>

one posed by white supremacists—within its ranks. There is a need to examine how the particular command structure of the military, which differs from civilian life, can contribute to a culture where speaking out is not only difficult but career threatening.

Despite the fact that the path between the military and the white power movement is well worn, the U.S. military has consistently chosen to ignore the problem, passed insufficient policy changes, not enforced policies already on the books that restrict people with extremist views from serving in the Armed Forces, and failed to take action to deradicalize service members who are discovered to hold extremist beliefs. Discipline is often left to commanders, making enforcement of policies uneven.<sup>29</sup>

Michel Paradis, a senior attorney in the U.S. Department of Defense’s Office of the Chief Defense Counsel, argues that it may be time for a major overhaul of the system of military justice and the convening authority of commanding officers, but that this would be a radical, not incremental, change. As he discusses, “ordinarily, and historically, commanders have had the discretion to enforce or disregard the verdict and sentence rendered by the tribunal based on their judgment as to what will best serve their broader mission.”<sup>30</sup>

The Department of Defense cannot claim ignorance; Pentagon officials have been alerted to the problem of extremism in the ranks repeatedly and over many years. In fact, the SPLC first raised the issue in 1986 when we urged then-Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger to investigate the participation of servicemembers involved with Glenn Frazier Miller’s KKK paramilitary activities.<sup>31</sup> Secretary Weinberger did issue a directive instructing servicemembers that they “must reject participation in white supremacy, neo-Nazi and other such groups which espouse or attempt to create overt discrimination.” He told military personnel they were barred from “active participation” in these groups. However, as University of Chicago assistant professor Kathleen Belew explains in her book *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, “[T]he directive said nothing about other kinds of actions that undergirded white power activity—such as membership excluding ‘organizing or leading,’ distributing propaganda, or displaying white power symbols.” As a result, “Active-duty personnel continued both passive and active participation in the white power movement.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1994, six months before the Oklahoma City bombing by Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh, we wrote to Attorney General Janet Reno to warn of the growing threat of domestic terrorism. In the wake of Oklahoma City and the murder of a Black couple by skinheads serving as active-duty paratroopers with the 82nd Airborne in 1995, the Defense Department tightened regulations on the participation of active-duty servicemembers in extremist activities.

But the increased scrutiny on white supremacist affiliation did not last. Facing recruitment shortages during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military relaxed recruitment

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<sup>29</sup> Elliot Setzer, “Experts Recommend Changes to Structure of Military Justice System,” Lawfare, April 22, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/experts-recommend-changes-structure-military-justice-system>.

<sup>30</sup>Michael Paradis, “Is a Major Change to Military Justice in the Works?” Lawfare, May 4, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/major-change-military-justice-works>.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/images/dynamic/intel/weinberger.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 137.



standards and largely turned a blind eye toward the extremist beliefs or affiliations of potential recruits. As Matt Kennard wrote in *Irregular Army: How the U.S. Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gang Members, and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror*, the military itself admitted that recruitment had become lax. According to a 2005 report from the DoD's Defense Personnel Security Research Center, military recruiters "were not aware of having received training on recognizing and responding to possible terrorists who try to enlist." The report concluded: "Effectively, the military has a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy pertaining to extremism. If individuals can perform satisfactorily, without making their extremist opinions overt ... they are likely to be able to complete their contracts." A report the next year from the National Gang Intelligence Center also raised the problem of extremists serving in the Armed Forces, noting that "various white supremacist groups have been documented on military installations both domestically and internationally."<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, when the SPLC highlighted the continued presence of white supremacists in the military that same year, then-Undersecretary of Defense David S. C. Chu dismissed our reporting as "inaccurate and misleadingly alarmist."

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) also downplayed the seriousness of the problem and even ignored the insights of its own analysts. In 2009, a DHS analysis warned that the economic downturn and election of the nation's first Black president might provide fuel for right-wing extremists and that, amid the war on terror, right-wing extremists might "attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans in order to boost their violent capabilities."<sup>34</sup> Despite the report's accuracy and prescient warnings, then-Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano retracted it under pressure from conservatives who claimed, falsely, that it portrayed *them* as a security threat.<sup>35</sup> The report did not contain anything that should have been surprising to anyone in federal law enforcement or the DHS. Indeed, the FBI identified 203 veterans involved in white supremacist incidents between 2001 and 2008, according to Kennard, most of whom were associated with groups seeking "the overthrow of the U.S. government." The SPLC also found that antigovernment groups spiked during the Obama presidency, jumping from 149 in the final year of George W. Bush's presidency to 512 in the first year of Obama's and eventually peaking at 1,360 in 2012.

The fact that one in five of those arrested in connection to the Capitol insurrection on January 6 is partly a legacy of the military's long-running failure to adequately monitor for extremist links, address the presence of extremists in its ranks and to inoculate veterans against adopting extremist ideologies.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Matt Kennard, *Irregular Army: How the US Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gang Members, and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2015), Pages 19, 40, 46

<sup>34</sup> "Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment," Extremism and Radicalization Branch, Homeland Environment Threat Analysis Division of the Department of Homeland Security, April 7, 2009, [https://web.archive.org/web/20110927124641/http://rogerhedgecock.com/resources/HSA\\_RightwingExtremism\\_Report\\_april2009.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20110927124641/http://rogerhedgecock.com/resources/HSA_RightwingExtremism_Report_april2009.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> Eric Marrapodi, "Napolitano Apologizes to Veterans over 'Extremist' Flap," *CNN*, April 24, 2009. <https://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/24/napolitano.am.legion/>.

<sup>36</sup> Tom Dreisbach and Meg Anderson, "Nearly 1 in 5 Defendants in Capitol Riot Cases Served in the Military," *NPR*, Jan. 21, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military>

## A Long History of Military Training for White Supremacist Leaders

Right-wing extremists poisoning the ranks of the military, or extremists using their military training to further their racist and often-violent ambitions, are not new problems. Historically, many of the white power movement's most infamous leaders have served in the military.

The Vietnam War and concomitant expansion of paramilitary culture domestically played a crucial role in the growth and mobilization of the white power movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The loss of that war was a major blow to the nation and, especially, the men asked to fight a losing war on its behalf. Not only was America's power abroad in question, but so was white men's dominance at home. The civil rights movement, federal legislation passed to advance racial equality, and the newly energized feminist movement appeared to pose a threat to white men, especially when combined with economic turmoil and a rapidly shifting economy. "American men—lacking confidence in the government and the economy, troubled by the changing relations between the sexes, uncertain of their identity or their future—began to *dream*, to fantasize about the powers and features of another kind of man who could retake and reorder the world," the sociologist and historian James William Gibson wrote in *Warrior Dream: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America*.<sup>37</sup> For some men, that meant reestablishing the country's racial order, and doing so by using the military tools and cultural narratives they learned in Vietnam. For others, the shame of having not served helped propel them to take up arms on this new battlefield.

Indeed, many men within the white power movement explicitly spoke of "bringing the war home." But this war would be fought against the state, which was working to codify racial and gender equality. Paramilitary organization was the only path forward: White power activists saw a wide gulf between President Ronald Reagan's campaign promises and what he delivered. His "moderation, as activists saw it, revealed conventional politics as unsalvageable and signaled a state of emergency that could not be resolved through political action alone," historian Kathleen Belew has argued.<sup>38</sup>

For these men, the battle at home was an extension of the one they fought abroad. Both were crusades against communism, which they blamed for shifting racial hierarchies and larger changes in American (and global) culture that were seen as detrimental to white male privilege. Harold Covington, a veteran and leader in the American Nazi Party who would go on to found the white nationalist group Northwest Front, lamented that "[A]lmost all of my men have killed Communists in Vietnam and I was in Rhodesia as well, but so far we've never actually had a chance to kill the home-grown product."<sup>39</sup> But some of Covington's comrades in the American Nazi Party *would* go on to kill communists on American soil in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1979. At a "Death to the Klan" rally, neo-Nazis and Klansmen killed five members of Communist Workers Party. At a criminal trial, an all-white jury acquitted the white supremacists.

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<sup>37</sup> James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (Hill and Wang, 1994), 11.

<sup>38</sup> Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 76.

“Anytime you defeat communism, it’s a victory for America,” said Jerry Pridmore, one of the men found not guilty.<sup>40</sup>

The focus on fighting a war on American soil, the shared anti-communist focus, and the perception of the state itself as the primary enemy of white men created a great sense of unity within the white power movement and pushed it toward more violent ends. Many veterans came into positions of leadership. Frazier Glenn Miller served for 20 years in the U.S. Army, including two tours of duty in Vietnam and 13 years as a Green Beret. Afterward, he founded the Carolina Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and, with the help of active-duty soldiers, began to amass illegal weapons and conduct military training. Miller, who also founded the White Patriot Party, had ties to The Order, a white supremacist terrorist organization whose members carried out armored car robberies and assassinated Denver radio show host Alan Berg. During a trial for criminal contempt in 1986, a witness testified that he had procured weapons and explosives for Miller, including 13 armor-piercing anti-tank rockets, from military personnel. Miller later served three years in prison for his involvement in a plot to kill SPLC founder Morris Dees. He and other Klansmen were flushed out of a mobile home in Missouri, where the FBI found C-4 explosives, hand grenades, automatic weapons and ammunition. In November 2015, Miller was sentenced to death on murder charges after he killed William Corporon, 69, Reat Underwood, 14, and Terri LaManno, 53, during an April 13, 2014, attack on Jewish facilities in Overland Park, Kansas.

Another well-known white supremacist, Louis Beam, who popularized the “leaderless resistance” model of white supremacist terrorism that is experiencing a revival, served as a helicopter gunner in the Army during the Vietnam War. Shortly after his return, he joined the United Klans of America and went on to become one of the most influential leaders in the white power movement during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>41</sup> He maintained a close relationship with Richard Butler, the head of the Aryan Nations, who was himself an Army veteran.<sup>42</sup> Michael Tubbs, the leader of the Florida chapter of the neo-Confederate group League of the South, is a former Green Beret with expertise in demolitions. In 1990, Tubbs was arrested on charges related to a huge cache of weapons and explosives he had amassed, including 45 pounds of C-4 explosive, an anti-aircraft machine gun, and 25 pounds of TNT.<sup>43</sup> Authorities believed the arsenal was stolen from the military. A letter found by authorities suggested that Tubbs was planning to use the arsenal to outfit his group, Knights of the New Order, which was dedicated to “fostering the welfare of the white Aryan Race.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Shaun Assael and Peter Keating, “The Massacre That Spawned the Alt-Right,” *Politico*, Nov. 3, 2019.

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/11/03/greensboro-massacre-white-nationalism-klan-229873/>

<sup>41</sup> “Louis Beam,” Extremist Files, Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremistfiles/individual/louis-beam>.

<sup>42</sup> “Richard Butler,” Extremist Files, Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremistfiles/individual/richard-butler>.

<sup>43</sup> Heidi Beirich, “League of the South to Protest ‘Southern Demographic Displacement,’” Aug. 21, 2013.

<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2013/08/21/league-south-protest-%E2%80%9Csouthern-demographicdisplacement%E2%80%9D>.

<sup>44</sup> “Michael Ralph Tubbs,” Extremist Files, Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremistfiles/individual/michael-ralph-tubbs>.

Veterans and servicemembers bring social capital, legitimacy, specialized training, and an increased capacity for violence<sup>45</sup> to white power groups, which makes them highly sought-after recruits.<sup>46</sup> In one effort to appeal to veterans, William Luther Pierce, who founded the violent neo-Nazi group National Alliance in 1970, bought the subscribers list for *Soldiers of Fortune* magazine. Founded by a Vietnam veteran who served in the Special Forces, *Soldiers of Fortune* catered to veterans and young men fascinated by war and weaponry and contained ads for mercenary soldiers. In 1981, Pierce sent subscribers—who numbered around 35,000—copies of his magazine *National Vanguard* and an offer to purchase his novel *The Turner Diaries*.<sup>47</sup> The novel told the story of a future race war against the “Zionist Occupied Government” (ZOG) in which white people ultimately slaughtered nonwhites, Jews, journalists, and “race traitors.”

National Alliance later placed a billboard outside of Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina. “Enough! Let’s Start Taking Back America!” it read and listed the group’s telephone number. Stationed at the base was the 82nd Airborne Division, which was itself home to a skinhead gang.<sup>48</sup> In December 1995, two of its neo-Nazi members murdered a Black couple, who they chose at random while driving the streets of Fayetteville. When police later searched their barracks, they found a bombmaking manual, a Nazi flag, pamphlets on Adolph Hitler and other white power literature.<sup>49</sup>

The murders of the Black couple at Fort Bragg came only months after the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City by Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh, which left 168 people dead.

Wade Michael Page was also stationed at Fort Bragg in 1995. According to his military service record, the Army administratively discharged Page in 1998 after demoting him from sergeant to specialist, ending his nearly six years of service. During his time at Fort Bragg, Page

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<sup>45</sup> “Having members with military backgrounds may increase a group’s propensity towards violence in several ways. First, former members of the military may have particular technical and leadership skills that can be used by the group to commit violence. ... This skill set includes extensive training in the use of weapons, explosives, and combat strategies. Second, military veterans turned activist may have specific grievances directed at the government. Thus, we hypothesize that groups that have members with previous military training will be more likely to be involved in violence.” See Steven M. Chermak, Joshua D. Freilich and Michael Suttmoeller, “The Organizational Dynamics of Far-Right Hate Groups in the United States: Comparing Violent to Non-Violent Organizations,” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Dec. 2011. [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/944\\_OPSR\\_TEVUS\\_Comparing-Violent-Nonviolent-Far-Right-Hate-Groups\\_Dec2011-508.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/944_OPSR_TEVUS_Comparing-Violent-Nonviolent-Far-Right-Hate-Groups_Dec2011-508.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> “Extremist leaders seek to recruit members with military experience in order to exploit their discipline, knowledge of firearms, explosives, and tactical skills and access to weapons and intelligence.” FBI Intelligence Assessment, “White Supremacist Recruitment of Military Personnel since 9/11” (unclassified), July 7, 2008, <https://documents.law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/White%20Supremacist%20Recruitment%20of%20Military%20Personnel%20Since%209-11-ocr.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (Hill and Wang, 1994), 7, 212.

<sup>48</sup> David Holthouse, “Several High Profile Racist Extremists Serve in the U.S. Military,” SPLC *Intelligence Report*, Summer 2006, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2006/several-high-profile-racist-extremists-serve-us-military>.

<sup>49</sup> William Branigin and Dana Priest, “3 White Soldiers Held in Slaying of Black Couple,” Dec. 9, 1995, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/12/09/3-white-soldiers-held-in-slaying-of-black-couple/1f11ca9f-9fe2-4e28-a637-a635007deaf/>.

already had a tattoo of a white supremacist slogan and openly expressed his virulently racist views and his desire for “a homeland for white people,” according to one man who served with Page.<sup>50</sup> Two years after his discharge, in 2000, Page attended a music festival held annually by one of this country’s oldest and most violent racist skinhead crews. From there, Page plunged headlong into the white power music scene and 11 years later earned his full membership “patch” in that same crew, the Hammerskin Nation. About a year later, on August 5, 2012, Page entered the Sikh gurudwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. The sounds of worshippers preparing the day’s communal meal on that Sunday were shattered by the crack of gunfire, as Page began a shooting spree that left six people dead: Sita Singh, 41; Ranjit Singh, 49; Prakash Singh, 39; Paramjit Kaur, 41; Suveg Singh, 84; and Satwant Singh Kaleka, 65. Baba Punjab Singh was shot in the face, which caused brain trauma that led to permanent paralysis.<sup>51</sup> Singh survived for nearly eight years before succumbing to complications related to his injuries on March 2, 2020. He was 72.

Page had received specialized training as a psychological operations, or “psyops,” specialist—a skillset that could have made him a prized asset to any number of the white power movement’s leaders. Many of these leaders spoke candidly about the value U.S. military training added to their racist organizations. Tom Metzger, an Army veteran who founded the neo-Nazi group White Aryan Resistance (WAR), told Matt Kennard that he estimated about “10 percent of the army and Marines ... are racist extremists of some variety.” Of his followers, Metzger said, “I would encourage them to join the military, if they have a scratch they can’t itch. Then go in to bring some training back to the US and make the federal government aware of our existence.” Neo-Nazi Billy Roper revealed that within his group, White Revolution, there were about a dozen members who served in the military. “Some of them have tattoos” of racist symbols, he said, “because anyone can walk in and get in the military now.” Two military members of his group were reprimanded for having swastika tattoos, he said. But when they had them altered and made into Sonnenrads—a widely used symbol among neo-Nazis—both were allowed to reenter the military.<sup>52</sup>

### **Some Violent White Supremacists Use the Military as a Training Ground**

Over the last several years, the SPLC, researchers, and journalists have identified dozens of former and active-duty military personnel among the membership of some of the country’s most dangerous and violent white supremacist groups. Those groups include the Atomwaffen Division, a now-defunct terroristic neo-Nazi group<sup>53</sup> whose members have allegedly been responsible for five murders since mid-2017. One of the people killed was a gay, Jewish college student named Blaze Bernstein who was stabbed more than 20 times.

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<sup>50</sup> Rick Romel, “Shooter’s Odd Behavior Did Not Go Unnoticed,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Aug. 6, 2012, <http://archive.jsonline.com/news/crime/shooter-wade-page-was-army-vet-white-supremacist-856cn28-165123946.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Marilyn Elias, “Sikh Temple Killer Wade Michael Page Radicalized in Army,” SPLC *Intelligence Report*, Winter 2012, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2012/sikh-temple-killer-wade-michael-page-radicalized-army>.

<sup>52</sup> Matt Kennard, *Irregular Army: How the US Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gang Members, and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2015), Pages 24-25.

<sup>53</sup> “Atomwaffen Division,” Extremist Files, Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division>.

Brandon Russell, who launched Atomwaffen in 2015 from an online forum called Iron March, served in the Florida Army National Guard. After his roommate Devon Arthurs allegedly killed the pair's two other roommates—who were also members of Atomwaffen—police found a stash of explosive materials and homemade fuses. Inside a cooler labeled with Russell's name, they found hexamethylene triperoxide diamine, or HMTD, a homemade explosive used in past terror attacks, including the London bombing in 2005. A framed photo of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh was found in Russell's bedroom. Police released Russell after questioning, but only hours later he was arrested by Florida sheriff's deputies who found an AR-style assault rifle and more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition in his car. He also possessed flyers that read "Don't prepare for exams, prepare for race war."<sup>54</sup>

According to Arthurs, Russell joined the National Guard in order to receive the kind of skills he would need to prepare for that potential race war. "He joined specifically for the knowledge and the training, and he wants to use that training against the government," Arthurs said during a police interrogation. He also told them that Russell had acquired guns and trained other Atomwaffen members in their use.<sup>55</sup>

Atomwaffen Division specifically targeted members of the armed services, and its members were encouraged to enlist in the military to acquire specialized training. "The US military gives great training ... you learn how to fight, and survive," Joshua Beckett, an Atomwaffen member who formerly served as an Army combat engineer, told other members in the group's online chat.<sup>56</sup>

While Beckett had left the military when he joined Atomwaffen, other members were still active in the Armed Forces while they were involved in the neo-Nazi group. Vasilios Pistolis was a Marine lance corporal when he became a member of the group's North Carolina cell. The search history of Pistolis's computer was highly disturbing; it included searches for information about the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik (who killed 77 people in 2011), the specific firearms equipment Breivik used in his attack, and manuals for building explosives and rifles.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> A.C. Thompson, "An Atomwaffen Member Sketched a Map to Take the Neo-Nazis Down. What Path Officials Took is a Mystery," ProPublica, Nov. 20, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/an-atomwaffen-member-sketched-a-map-to-take-the-neo-nazis-down-what-path-officials-took-is-a-mystery>; "Florida Neo-Nazi Leader Gets 5 Years for Having Explosive Material, Associated Press, Jan. 9, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/floridaneo-nazi-leader-gets-5-years-having-explosive-material-n836246>.

<sup>55</sup> A.C. Thompson, "An Atomwaffen Member Sketched a Map to Take the Neo-Nazis Down. What Path Officials Took is a Mystery," ProPublica, Nov. 20, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/an-atomwaffen-member-sketched-a-map-to-take-the-neo-nazis-down-what-path-officials-took-is-a-mystery>.

<sup>56</sup> A.C. Thompson, Ali Winston and Jake Hanrahan, "Ranks of Notorious Hate Group Include Active-Duty Military," ProPublica, May 3, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/atomwaffen-division-hate-group-active-duty-military> 15; Shawn Snow, "The neo-Nazi boot: Inside one Marine's descent into extremism," *Marine Corps Times*, Sept. 4, 2019, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2019/09/04/the-neo-nazi-boot-inside-one-marinesdescent-into-extremism/>.

<sup>57</sup> Shawn Snow, "The neo-Nazi boot: Inside one Marine's descent into extremism," *Marine Corps Times*, Sept. 4, 2019, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2019/09/04/the-neo-nazi-boot-inside-one-marinesdescent-into-extremism/>.

Others joined the military after being involved in the group. David Cole Tarkington, who went by the username “The Yank” on Iron March, recruited or attempted to recruit at least 12 members of the forum into Atomwaffen. Among some of the members Tarkington brought into the group were John Cameron Denton, known online as “Vincent Synder” and “Rape.” Denton would go on to become a co-leader of the group, while Tarkington would go on to join the Navy as an aviation’s mate’s apprentice with Strike Fighter Squadron VFA-41. Following a Gizmodo investigation, Tarkington is no longer a member of the squadron or the U.S. Navy.<sup>58</sup>

“Soldiers, criminals and workers make the best Nazis just a fact,” Corwyn Storm Carver, then an active-duty member of the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso, wrote in a chat with other Atomwaffen members in 2018. Carver also praised the actions of white supremacist terrorist Dylann Roof, who killed nine Black worshippers in a Charleston, South Carolina, church in 2015, but added, “Shooting up a geriatrics in a church is a soft target.”<sup>59</sup>

Altogether, investigators have found seven members of Atomwaffen who have served in the military—a significant number considering the group has likely ever had, at most, about 100 members at a time.<sup>60</sup> Because of their sophisticated weapons and explosives training, those members significantly increased the group’s potential to carry out deadly attacks.

Despite the Defense Department’s insistence that it is taking all the necessary actions to prevent extremists from operating within the ranks, Russell’s case demonstrated that military officials at times were ignoring—either willfully or through neglect—clear signs of extremist activist among servicemembers. Indeed, in an investigation launched after Russell’s arrest, the Florida National Guard found that Russell had an Atomwaffen Division tattoo but that it apparently failed to prompt any action on the part of the Guard. The investigation, acquired by ProPublica, also found that Russell had expressed “hatred for homosexuality and ‘faggots’” and “seemed very anxious to receive body armor, and keep his military issued gear.” Nevertheless, investigators concluded that the Guard had not neglected its duties by allowing Russell to continue to serve.

Russell has since been sentenced to five years in prison on charges related to the explosive materials found in the apartment he shared with Arthurs and other Atomwaffen members.<sup>61</sup> From prison, he has attempted to send instructions for building explosives to another member of the neo-Nazi group.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Tom McKay and Dhruv Mehrotr, “Leak Exposes U.S. Navy Sailor as Once-Prolific Recruiter for Neo-Nazi Group [Updated],” Gizmodo, March 12, 2020,

<https://gizmodo.com/leak-exposes-u-s-navy-sailor-as-once-prolific-recruite-1841149776>.

<sup>59</sup> Christopher Mathias, “Exclusive: Army Investigating Soldier’s Alleged Leadership In Neo-Nazi Terror Group,” *Huffpost*, May 3, 2019, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/atomwaffen-division-army-soldier-investigation-corwyn-stormcarver\\_n\\_5ccb5350e4b0e4d7572fde38](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/atomwaffen-division-army-soldier-investigation-corwyn-stormcarver_n_5ccb5350e4b0e4d7572fde38).

<sup>60</sup> A.C. Thompson, “An Atomwaffen Member Sketched a Map to Take the Neo-Nazis Down. What Path Officials Took is a Mystery,” *ProPublica*, Nov. 20, 2018. <https://www.propublica.org/article/an-atomwaffen-member-sketched-amap-to-take-the-neo-nazis-down-what-path-officials-took-is-a-mystery>.

<sup>61</sup> Tamara Lush, “Florida Neo-Nazi leader gets 5 years for having explosive material,” *Associated Press*, Jan. 9, 2019, <https://apnews.com/6380120849a4470f9e569676718889c9>.

<sup>62</sup> Janet Reitman, “How Did a Convicted Neo-Nazi Release Propaganda From Prison?” *Rolling Stone*, May 25, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/how-did-a-convicted-neo-nazi-release-propaganda-from-prison628437/>.

Atomwaffen Division was one of a growing number of groups that embraced violence as a tool that would ultimately help them foment a race war. They were one of many groups that believed society should be pushed to collapse, providing them the opportunity to build an all-white, non-Jewish ethnostate. These groups organize themselves into networks of clandestine cells, each charged with committing targeted acts of violence they believe will sow societal discord and ultimately attract more white people to their ranks.

It is worth noting that not all white supremacist extremists who promote revolutionary violence belong to hate groups. In fact, the numbers radicalized through online extremist communities and propaganda likely far outnumber those who belong to formal groups.

We are especially concerned that terroristic, cell-style white supremacist groups that embrace paramilitarism, conduct tactical training camps for members, and continually encourage members to carry out attacks against both people and the nation's infrastructure will attract veterans and active-duty servicemembers to their ranks. The recent arrests of two trained soldiers—one from the United States and one from Canada—who belonged to a terroristic white supremacist group called the Base have only heightened our concerns.

Brian Mark Lemley Jr., who was previously a Cavalry scout in the U.S. Army, and Patrik Jordan Mathews, a combat engineer in the Canadian Army Reserve until last August, were both arrested in January on federal gun charges in Maryland.<sup>63</sup> According to an FBI investigation, on an encrypted chat, members of the Base “discussed, among other things, creating a white ethno-state, committing acts of violence against minority communities (including African-Americans and Jewish Americans), the organization's military-style training camps, and ways to make improvised explosive devices.” Lemley once wrote, “I daydream about killing so much that I frequently walk in the wrong [sic] direction for extended periods of time at work.” Mathews told members they should be prepared to “Derail some fucking trains, kill some people, and poison some water supplies.” He continued, “If you want the white race to survive you're going to have to do your fucking part.”<sup>64</sup>

One day after Lemley and Mathews were arrested along with another Base member, authorities arrested three other members of the group in Georgia for conspiring to murder a couple involved in antifascist activism.

Lemley and Mathews were not the only members of the Base that had military training. The SPLC analyzed more than 80 hours of calls between Base recruits and the group's leadership, which included more than 100 white supremacists, and found that roughly 20% of recruits claimed to have military experience.<sup>65</sup> The group's founder, Rinaldo Nazzaro, also

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<sup>63</sup> Department of Justice press release, “Three Alleged Members of the Violent Extremist Group, ‘The Base’ Facing Federal Firearms and Alien-Related Charges,” Jan. 16, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-md/pr/three-alleged-members-violent-extremist-group-base-facing-federal-firearms-and-alien>.

<sup>64</sup> Motion for Detention Pending Trial: U.S. v. Brian Mark Lemley, Jr., Patrik Jordan Mathews, and William Garfield Bilbrough IV, Jan. 21, 2020, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6664597-Motion-for-Detention-The-Base-Maryland.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Sounds Like Hate podcast, Baseless: Part I, <https://soundlikehate.org/season-one/baseless/transcript/part1/>.



worked as a military contractor.<sup>66</sup> Earlier this year, the Department of Homeland Security confirmed to Vice News that Nazzaro worked at the department from 2004 to 2006.<sup>67</sup>

In addition, in the spring of 2019, 11 servicemembers associated with Identity Evropa, a white nationalist hate group, were identified and reported to be under investigation by military officials. Those servicemembers included a lance corporal in the Marines, a master sergeant in the Air Force, a specialist and a physician in the Army, National Guard members in Minnesota and Texas, and two Army ROTC cadets.<sup>68</sup> Their affiliation with white supremacy came to light only after online correspondence among Identity Evropa members was released, underscoring both the widespread presence of white supremacists and the inconsistent nature of efforts to detect and weed out extremists from the Armed Forces.

The SPLC has tracked hate and extremism for decades, repeatedly raising the alarm to military leaders about white supremacists and other far-right extremists within the ranks. The time is now to work together to address extremism and hate that comprise a small but dangerous threat within our Armed Forces.

### **Recommendations for the Department of Defense and Congress**

The military's unique command structure makes the need for leadership in rejecting extremism and bigotry essential. Instructors, officers, and upper-class students at service academies have virtually absolute command authority over their students and subordinates, creating a potential for undue pressure on an individual to conform—or not to complain or report bigotry, extremist activity, or race-based intimidation—in order to not jeopardize his or her military career. Commanding officers have the authority—and the responsibility—to address problems within their ranks before they escalate and, where necessary, to discipline or separate those who participate in extremist activity.

As the service branches pause to consider how to address hate, bias, and extremism during Secretary Austin's announced 60-day stand-down on the issue and beyond, we urge the Department of Defense and Congress to take actions needed to address this problem.

1. It is impossible to overstate the importance of military leaders speaking out against hate and extremism—from the Commander in Chief, to the Secretary of Defense, to the squad

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66 Daniel De Simone and Ali Winston, "Neo-Nazi Militant Group Grooms Teenagers," BBC, June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53128169>.

67 Ben Makuch, "Department of Homeland Security Confirms Neo-Nazi Leader Used to Work for It, Vice, Feb. 17, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/epd7wa/departement-of-homeland-security-confirms-neo-nazi-leader-used-to-work-for-it>.

68 Christopher Mathias, "Exposed: Military Investigating 4 More Servicemen For Ties To White Nationalist Group," HuffPost, April 27, 2019. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/white-nationalists-military-identityevropa\\_n\\_5cc1a87ee4b0764d31dd839c](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/white-nationalists-military-identityevropa_n_5cc1a87ee4b0764d31dd839c).

leader.<sup>69</sup> Words matter. Military leaders must exercise leadership and use their command positions to condemn hate and extremism. Failure to do so emboldens extremists.<sup>70</sup>

2. Consistent with the First Amendment, the Department of Defense should expand and clarify existing prohibitions against advocating for, or involvement in, supremacist or extremist activity,<sup>71</sup> including updating and revising the provisions of Department of Defense Instructions Number 1325.06.<sup>72</sup> To the greatest extent possible, these extremism-related institutional reforms should be made uniform from service to service.

In addition, the Department of Defense must ensure that recruiters and commanders responsible for identifying and addressing prohibited activities and discriminatory harassment have the education and training to recognize behaviors (social media or chat group activity<sup>73</sup>), indicators (tatoos, symbols, or paraphernalia), or other indicators of involvement with supremacist ideology and activity.<sup>74</sup> The Department of Defense should

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<sup>69</sup> “Stand-down to Address Extremism in Ranks,” Memorandum for Senior Pentagon Leadership, Defense Agency and DOD Field Activity Directors, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, Feb. 5, 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Feb/05/2002577485/-1/-1/0/STAND-DOWN-TO-ADDRESS-EXTREMISM-IN-THE-RANKS.PDF>; SPLC wrote to Secretary Austin, offering support for his initiative and a number of policy recommendations.

[https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/splc\\_letter\\_to\\_sec.\\_of\\_defense\\_lloyd\\_austin\\_2.10.21-final.pdf](https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/splc_letter_to_sec._of_defense_lloyd_austin_2.10.21-final.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> An outstanding example of this type of leadership occurred after racial slurs were scrawled outside black students' doors at the U.S. Air Force Academy's (USAFA) preparatory school. USAFA Superintendent Lt. Gen. Jay Silveria called all 4,000 cadets together with faculty and USAFA staff and delivered an unmistakable message: “If you can't treat someone with dignity and respect, then you need to get out. If you can't treat someone from another gender, whether that's a man or a woman, with dignity and respect, then you need to get out. If you demean someone in any way, then you need to get out. And if you can't treat someone from another race, or different color skin, with dignity and respect, then you need to get out.” Though investigation later revealed that the slur was a hoax perpetrated by one of the targets, Gen. Silveria demonstrated model leadership in seizing the teachable moment to condemn hate and promote respect. See Bill Chappell, “‘You Should be Outraged,’ Air Force Academy Head Tells Cadets About Racism on Campus,” NPR, Sept. 29, 2017, [https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/09/29/554458065/you-should-be-outraged-air-force-academy-head-tells-cadets-about-racism-on-campu\\_](https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/09/29/554458065/you-should-be-outraged-air-force-academy-head-tells-cadets-about-racism-on-campu_).

<sup>71</sup> In its December 2020 report, “Recommendations to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Military,” the Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion, at 51, included a recommendation to prohibit extremist or hate group activity, emphasizing that “[t]his recommendation sends a clear and forceful message that DoD is committed to improving inclusivity. Service member participation in hate groups not only erodes the public's trust in their defense institution but also compromises our organization's lethality.” <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/18/2002554852/-1/-1/0/DOD-DIVERSITY-AND-INCLUSION-FINAL-BOARD-REPORT.PDF>.

<sup>72</sup> DoDI 1325.06, “Handling Dissident and Protest Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces,” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, Nov. 27, 2009, Incorporating Change 1, Feb. 22, 2012. <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132506p.pdf>.

<sup>73</sup> On Jan. 29, 2021, Representative Jackie Speier wrote to President Biden, Secretary of Defense Austin, and Director of National Intelligence Haines urging more extensive social media screening for new recruits and servicemembers seeking security clearances for white supremacist and violent extremist ties. <https://speier.house.gov/cache/files/9/2/9260a8a5-70e8-4a5a-b803-63762ce719ee/0DC836C67FFBB4841B15B7D7FE5295EB.2021-1-29-letter-to-potus-secdef-dni---social-media-clearance-recruiting.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> An October 2020 report mandated by the FY 2020 NDAA examined the security and effectiveness of existing screening for individuals who seek to enlist in the military. Among other things, the report recommended closer cooperation with the FBI, including expanded use of its database of extremist tattoos and more attention to potential recruits' social media presence. “Reports to Armed Services Committees on Screening Individuals Who Seek to Enlist in the Armed Forces,” <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/20486018-congressional-report-hasc->

also expand and more clearly define protections for whistleblowers,<sup>75</sup> chain of command oversight responsibilities, and reporting and transparency requirements.

3. Congress should update the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) to define and address extremist activity. The House of Representatives had included a provision to create a new UCMJ article on violent extremism in its version of the FY 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The Senate did not agree, and it was removed in conference.<sup>76</sup>

Amending the UCMJ was one of the recommendations included in a recent report by the Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion.<sup>77</sup> An accompanying Memorandum to Pentagon leaders and commanders in the field included assignments, a specific plan of action, and milestones required to amend and update the UCMJ.<sup>78</sup>

4. The Department of Defense should tighten recruitment and screening processes for military enlistees to prevent induction of individuals with white supremacist and racist

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[study-regarding-screening-individuals-who-seek-to-enlist-in-the-armed-forces\\_pl\\_116-92-14-oct-20](#). Legislation has now been introduced by Rep. Pete Aguilar (D-CA) (H.R. 1088, Shielding our Military from Extremists Act) to require the Pentagon to implement the report's recommendations.

<https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hr1088/BILLS-117hr1088ih.pdf>

<sup>75</sup> Although Department of Defense Directive NUMBER 7050.06 April 17, 2015, "Military Whistleblower Protection," describes a range of protected communications, including, crucially, protection for whistleblowing *outside* the chain of command ("lawful communications to a member of Congress or an inspector general (IG)"), protections for reporting white supremacist and extremist activity should be made more explicit.

[https://www.dodig.mil/Portals/48/Documents/Policy/DoDD\\_7050\\_06.pdf](https://www.dodig.mil/Portals/48/Documents/Policy/DoDD_7050_06.pdf). "A command climate that supports awareness and early intervention may provide opportunities to identify early signs of recruitment, radicalization, or participation in prohibited activities," Kristy N. Kamarck, "Military Personnel and Extremism: Law, Policy, and Considerations for Congress," Congressional Research Services, CRS Insight IN11086, May 16, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11086>.

<sup>76</sup> It is notable that the Conference Report accompanying the approved legislation (H.R. 6395) expressed support for the removed provision: "The conferees are increasingly concerned with the number of recent violent extremist activities which involve members and former members of the military. The conferees believe that a punitive article under the Uniform Code of Military Justice to prohibit violent extremist criminal acts may be appropriate to deter and prosecute this behavior within the Armed Services." <https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20201207/CRPT-116hrpt617.pdf>.

<sup>77</sup> "Creating a clear definition of extremism and extremist activities can also aid in combating targeted recruitment of Service members by extremist organizations while counteracting young adult vulnerabilities. A clear definition of extremism may also better position the Services to provide training on extremist organizations' recruitment tactics, thus mitigating recruitment efforts." "Recommendations to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Military," Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/18/2002554852/-1/-1/0/DOD-DIVERSITY-AND-INCLUSION-FINAL-BOARD-REPORT.PDF>, Page 53, December 2020.

<sup>78</sup> "Recommendation 15: Update the Uniform Code of Military Justice to Address Extremist Activity. The DoD Office of the General Counsel (OGC), in coordination with the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs, will draft legislative language for consideration within the Executive Branch, to propose to Congress to update the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) to address extremist activity within the military. By July 30, 2021, based on the findings and recommendations of the report on extremist and hate group activity directed above, DoD OGC will provide a plan of action and milestones required to modify the UCMJ." "Actions to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Military," Dec. 17, 2020, [https://diversity.defense.gov/Portals/51/ACTIONS%20TO%20IMPROVE%20RACIAL%20AND%20ETHNIC%20DIVERSITY%20AND%20INCLUSION%20IN%20THE%20U\\_S\\_%20MILITARY%20OSD011769-20%20RES%20Final.pdf](https://diversity.defense.gov/Portals/51/ACTIONS%20TO%20IMPROVE%20RACIAL%20AND%20ETHNIC%20DIVERSITY%20AND%20INCLUSION%20IN%20THE%20U_S_%20MILITARY%20OSD011769-20%20RES%20Final.pdf).

beliefs. All service branch recruiters should receive uniform training on how to detect extremist activity among recruits and newly inducted servicemembers, including training on identifying symbols and tattoos associated with hate groups and extremists that should raise red flags about a particular recruit. Consistent with privacy protections, steps must be taken to ensure procedures are in place for documenting disciplinary actions and sharing that information as a servicemember moves from one duty station to another.

5. The Department of Defense should immediately rename the 10 U.S. Army bases named for Confederate leaders.<sup>79</sup> Despite a veto threat from former President Donald Trump,<sup>80</sup> under the leadership of Senator Elizabeth Warren and Representatives Anthony Brown and Don Bacon, the FY 2021 NDAA included a provision requiring the Secretary of Defense to establish a commission “relating to assigning, modifying, or removing of names, symbols, displays, monuments, and paraphernalia to assets of the Department of Defense that commemorate the Confederate States of America or any person who served voluntarily with the Confederate States of America”—and to complete that work in not more than three years.<sup>81</sup> However, there is no reason to wait three years to rename these 10 Army bases, along with two dozen other ships, roads, buildings, and memorials named after Confederate leaders.<sup>82</sup>
6. Expand existing Marine Corps<sup>83</sup> and Navy<sup>84</sup> prohibitions against the display of the Confederate battle flag and other racist symbols in workspaces, offices, vehicles, and vessels to apply across all service branches.
7. Establish and integrate anti-racist programming, courses, and training against white supremacy and extremism for all students, faculty, and administrators at U.S. service academies—designed to facilitate a culture of respect where expressions of hate speech or other hateful behaviors are unacceptable and clearly responded to by leadership.
8. Institute annual service branch voluntary, confidential climate surveys to enable military personnel to anonymously report their exposure to white supremacy and extremist views during their service. A report based on the surveys, focused on the erosion of unit cohesion and the impact exposure to white supremacy and extremism has on good order,

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<sup>79</sup> The 10 U.S. Army posts named in honor of Confederate generals are Camp Beauregard and Fort Polk in Louisiana; Fort Benning and Fort Gordon in Georgia; Fort Bragg in North Carolina; Fort A.P. Hill, Fort Lee and Fort Pickett in Virginia; Fort Rucker in Alabama, and Fort Hood in Texas.

<sup>80</sup> John M. Donnelly, “Lawmakers line up showdown with Trump over Confederate base names,” *Roll Call*, Dec. 2, 2020, <https://www.rollcall.com/2020/12/02/lawmakers-line-up-showdown-with-trump-over-confederate-base-names/>.

<sup>81</sup> H.R. 6935, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6395/text>.

<sup>82</sup> “Whose Heritage? SPLC reports over 160 Confederate symbols removed in 2020,” Feb. 23, 2021, Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/presscenter/splc-reports-over-160-confederate-symbols-removed-2020>.

<sup>83</sup> Removal Public Displays of the Confederate Battle Flag, U.S. Marine Corps, MARADMINS Number: 331/20, June 5, 2020, <https://www.marines.mil/News/Messages/Messages-Display/Article/2210513/removal-public-displays-of-the-confederate-battle-flag/>.

<sup>84</sup> Geoff Ziezulewicz, “CNO Says No More Confederate Battle Flags in Public Spaces and Work Areas,” *Navy Times*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2020/06/09/cno-says-no-more-confederate-battle-flags-in-public-spaces-and-work-areas/>.

discipline, morale, and readiness, should be made available to the public annually, like the Department of Defense's Annual Report on Sexual Harassment and Violence at the Military Service Academies.<sup>85</sup>

9. There is a significant shortage of research focused on a holistic, whole-of-government examination of extremism in the military.<sup>86</sup> The Department of Defense should allow vetted academic researchers with strong track records on radicalization and extremism access to enlisted servicemembers, so they may research this dangerous phenomena and produce reports offering empirical guidance and lessons learned.<sup>87</sup> These reports, along with the expanded, anonymous climate surveys and incident data collected and made public on both hate crimes (under the Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990<sup>88</sup>) and violations of existing policies related to white supremacy or other forms of extremism, should be used to inform the creation of evidence-informed trainings intended to inoculate against radicalization at entry, throughout one's military career, and as veterans reenter into civilian life.
10. Expand recruitment efforts to underrepresented communities and dismantle barriers to equality and advancement opportunities for all service branches and military academies. Last summer, the Navy undertook a widescale review of issues "that detract from Navy readiness, such as racism, sexism and other structural and interpersonal biases to attain significant, sustainable I&D [Inclusion and Diversity]-related reform." The Navy's recently published Task Force One Navy report<sup>89</sup> promotes a series of recommendations designed to improve equality in the service and promote productive and honest conversations about race, diversity, and inclusion. That comprehensive effort is worthy of replication by other service branches.
11. Implement a promotion system that ensures a more transparent, equitable, and diverse path to senior positions. Part of that promotion review process should include an updated evaluation of any affiliations or expressions of extremism, racism, and discrimination by the candidate.

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<sup>85</sup> Department of Defense press release, "DOD Releases Annual Report on Sexual Harassment and Violence at the Military Service Academies," Jan. 30, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2069838/dod-releases-annual-report-on-sexual-harassment-and-violence-at-the-military-se/>.

<sup>86</sup> "At a strategic level, the military is fighting this battle blind. Only two studies have been commissioned to look at this problem specifically—one in the active-duty Army and one in the Air National Guard—and both are more than two decades old. Like sexual harassment, extremism among the troops may not be reported; its pervasiveness may not be evident until one goes looking." See Heather Williams, "How to Root Out Extremism in the US Military," *Defense One*, Feb. 1, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/02/how-root-out-extremism-us-military/171744/>.

<sup>87</sup> Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Daniel Koehler, "A Plan to Beat Back the Far Right: Violent Extremism in America Demands a Social Response," *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 3, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-03/plan-beat-back-far-right>.

<sup>88</sup> Hate Crime Statistics Act, 28 USC § 534 (1990).

<sup>89</sup> Task Force One Navy, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/26/2002570959/-1/-1/1/TASK%20FORCE%20ONE%20NAVY%20FINAL%20REPORT.PDF?fbclid=IwAR2Nd3W27VxCSRdV99frV8fZiygNNRSUZIQCqFPVKHcr9PUUKW7eqR63CU>.

Thank you for holding this hearing. We deeply appreciate the Committee's attention to the issue of extremism in the Armed Forces and look forward to working with you as you continue to focus on this important issue.