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Hearing

“DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS AND THE RECRUITMENT OF
VETERANS”

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Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and Members of the Committee: I would like to thank you for your service to our country and for calling attention to the critical issue of veterans' recruitment to domestic violent extremism. I am honored to be here. My name is Cynthia Miller-Idriss, and I am Professor in the School of Public Affairs and the School of Education at the American University in Washington, D.C., where I also direct the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL). I have been studying the dynamics of domestic violent extremism and global white supremacist extremism for over twenty years. I am the author of *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*, along with two books focused on extremism in Germany (*Blood and Culture* and *The Extreme Gone Mainstream*). I want to acknowledge the support of my research team in PERIL, whose assistance was invaluable in preparing my testimony today.¹

SCOPE AND SCALE

Today's focus is on domestic violent extremism, which includes a diverse ideological range of actors and groups. The clearest and most pressing danger from domestic violent extremism in the U.S.-- in terms of lethality, plots foiled, recruitment, and the circulation of propaganda, as documented both by earlier witnesses today and by recent threat assessments issued by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)-- comes from white supremacist extremist and antigovernment extremism movements and groups, which sometimes overlap and mutually reinforce one another. These are also the two subsets of domestic violent extremism that pose the greatest risk to veterans in terms of recruitment and online manipulation. I will refer to these movements both by their ideological expressions-- such as supremacist, anti-government or anti-democratic-- and by their common

organizational forms, which in the U.S. includes unlawful militia movements, neo-Nazi and Identitarian groups, and related supremacist groups and movements like the self-described Western chauvinist Proud Boys and a variety of “incel” or involuntary celibate and anti-woman or anti-LGBTQ groups. As a short-hand, I sometimes refer to such groups as “far right extremist” because the most common forms are found on the far-right spectrum, while recognizing that the broader range of domestic violent extremist movements should also be acknowledged and monitored.

The pace, scope, and scale of far-right extremism have provably increased and are escalating rapidly. The past few years have witnessed an explosion of far-right violence and the normalization of the extremist ideas that drive it. In the United States in 2019, 48 people were killed in attacks carried out by domestic violent extremists, 39 of which were carried out white supremacists, making it the most lethal year for such terrorism in the country since 1995. In 2020, the number of domestic terrorist plots and attacks in the United States reached its highest level since 1994; two-thirds of those were attributable to white supremacists and other far-right extremists. In March of this year, the FBI had more than 2,000 open investigations into domestic violent extremism, roughly double the number it had open in the summer of 2017. Also in 2020, authorities nationwide arrested nearly three times as many white supremacists as they did in 2017. And last year, reports to the Anti-Defamation League of white supremacist propaganda—in the form of fliers, posters, banners, and stickers posted in locations such as parks or college campuses—hit an all-time high of more than 5,000, nearly twice the number reported in the previous year. This trend is not limited to the United States. Although jihadis still pose the biggest terrorism threat in Europe, the growth of far-right violence is increasing. The top British counterterrorism official, Neil Basu, recently described right-wing extremism as the United

Kingdom’s “fastest growing threat,” and in Germany, violent crimes motivated by right-wing extremism rose by ten percent from 2019 to 2020.²

Far right extremist groups and movements are united by an overlapping set of beliefs involving supremacist hierarchies that falsely claim inferiority and superiority between groups of people and anti-democratic beliefs that promote authoritarianism, refuse to protect minority rights, or reject other core tenets of democracy like freedoms of speech and press or the rule of law. Far right ideologies are also often rooted in conspiratorial and fantastical beliefs about a white ethnostate or a post-apocalyptic, post-race war new civilization, and call for violence as a solution to accelerate the end times through the collapse of social, political, and economic systems that will precede a Phoenix-like rebirth into a new civilization.

The goals of the extreme far right lead to non-democratic ends. Far right groups undermine democracy globally, through extreme actions that include disinformation campaigns, election interference, attacks on freedom of the press, violating the constitutional protections of minority rights, or using violence and terrorism to achieve political goals. The events of January 6 reflected a growing trend across extremist milieus more broadly, in which previously fragmented groups and ideologies are coalescing around shared objectives related to the violent overthrow of the United States’ existing political and social order.³

SUPREMACIST EXTREMISMS

Far-right extremism is currently the fastest-growing and most lethal form of extremism in the United States and throughout the West overall—that is, in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Western Europe. In 2019, far-right terror represented 46 percent of terror attacks in

the West, causing 82 percent of terror-related deaths, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace's 2020 Global Terrorism Index (GTI). In the United States, between 1994 and 2020, right-wing terrorists were responsible for the majority (57 percent) of all attacks and plots, with left-wing terrorists perpetrating 25 percent and religious terrorists 15 percent, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The most lethal far-right extremist threat to civilians is white supremacist extremism, as we have seen globally and nationally in repeated terrorist attacks-- just in the past decade, for example, in mass white supremacist terrorist attacks in Norway, New Zealand, Germany, and across the U.S. in Charleston, Pittsburgh, Poway, and El Paso, among others. But we are seeing growing forms of extremist supremacism in related areas, such as male supremacy, Christian supremacy, and Western supremacy. The Proud Boys—recently declared a “terrorist entity” in Canada—are self-described “Western chauvinists.” We have seen rising incel (involuntary celibate) extremism and other forms of mass targeted violence against women.⁴

Another dangerous form of extremism in the domestic violent extremist spectrum is rooted in antigovernment and antidemocratic beliefs. This includes beliefs and movements that refuse to respect the tenets of our democracy, including the protection of minority rights or core freedoms such as the freedom of speech or of the press. They often promote authoritarianism and advocate for violence against elected officials or law enforcement who are depicted as traitors to the nation. In their most typical form, these movements take the organizational expression of unlawful militias and paramilitary movements.

Unlike in prior generations, the vast majority of extremist content and radicalization today is experienced online. This poses a particular challenge for intelligence and law enforcement, because the strategies designed to combat jihadi terrorism—surveilling and

monitoring hierarchical groups of leaders and cells—are a poor fit for the post-organizational nature of far-right extremism. Formal groups play a diminishing role in far-right recruitment and radicalization, which more typically take place in a vast and ever-expanding online ecosystem of propaganda and disinformation. Only 13 percent of the far-right terrorist attacks in North America, western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand between 2002 and 2019 that resulted in at least one death were attributable to a specific group. Today’s far-right extremism involves fewer backwoods initiation rituals and attacks by cells and more self-directed training and solo operations, live-streamed for a global audience.⁵

Across the entire domestic violent extremist spectrum, an increasing trend is support for the concept of accelerationism and revolutionary civil war. Accelerationist groups and movements desire and anticipate a breakdown of civil society and the existing governmental structure, and are seeking to position themselves to not only take advantage of such a dystopian scenario – but to actually help instigate this breakdown. Speeding up polarization and societal discord is a way to accelerate the undermining of social stability. Violence is foundational to this approach because it creates societal panic and encourages reciprocal or revenge attacks – perpetuating a spiral of more violence and instability.

Under accelerationism—as a goal and a tactic—individuals with disparate beliefs are united in the goal of hastening the cataclysmic end of economic, political, and social systems so as to more rapidly bring about what is seen as an inevitable end-times collapse and subsequent rebirth into a utopian afterworld. Accelerationism is best understood as an *anti-ideology*, directed toward the destruction of the current ideological order and the political-economic system that expresses and creates that order. But in its anti-ideological thrust, accelerationism makes possible

what had once been so difficult: to move the many varieties of extreme far-right tendencies in unison.⁶

Domestic violent extremist beliefs and objectives are problematic for many reasons. One of the most worrying trends is the increasing number of Americans who were not previously affiliated with any of the above groups but are now increasingly drawn into the large tent of the networked extreme far right. The paramount concern is these movements' proclivity and explicit calls for violence. Boogaloo-type groups, for example, are loosely organized groups and scenes organized around the mobilizing concept of the "boogaloo," which is a code for an impending second civil war. Support for these civil-war type movements is not insignificant. In my research lab's 2020 testing of a video-based intervention about these Boogaloo scenes, we found that 15% of our sample of over 500 people either reported that acquaintances or they themselves were part of the Boogaloo movement. Notably, military veterans in our study expressed statistically significant higher levels of anti-establishment views, which includes skepticism or resistance to government authority, compared to non-veterans.⁷

VETERANS

Our focus today is on a specific subset of these groups and movements that prioritize and value the recruitment of veterans into their ranks - ostensibly to take advantage of the military training, expertise, organizational skills, and operational experience of veterans that can be deployed in furtherance of the violent tactics of these groups. We are talking primarily about patriot militias, sovereign citizen groups, and paramilitaries – groups that include the Oathkeepers, Three Percenters, and the Boogaloo scenes.

Veterans are demonstrably more vulnerable to recruitment and engagement in the extremist fringe, compared to the civilian population. This is not a recent phenomenon. Nearly a third of far-right terrorists in the American Terrorism Study Database between 1980-2002 had military experience, for example.⁸ We suffer from a significant lack of data on veteran attitudes and support for extremist movements, although we do know from repeated incidents that veterans are frequently and disproportionately engaged in violent extremist action in the U.S. Army. Veteran and white supremacist Timothy McVeigh was responsible for the worst domestic terrorism attack in U.S. history, taking the lives of 168 people in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.⁹ In more recent years, we have seen similar problems. In 2020, an Army reservist and two veterans were arrested in Las Vegas for plotting violence against a Black Lives Matter protest there, while an active-duty Air Force sergeant with ties to the “boogaloo” scene—a movement of gun-rights activists and white supremacists who seek to start a civil war—went on an eight-day rampage of shootings and attacks, in which he murdered a federal security guard.¹⁰ Seventy-one of the 620 people facing federal charges for the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol have military experience, representing 12% of those arrested so far.¹¹

There have been repeated efforts within the U.S. Congress to gather better data about the extremist engagement of armed forces personnel. A 2020 congressional hearing before the House Armed Services Committee interrogated incidents of white supremacy in the military, and members of Congress have called for more transparency from military leaders.¹² In July 2020, more than three dozen lawmakers from both parties wrote to then Defense Secretary Mark Esper to ask him to review and clarify his department’s policy on the involvement of active-duty personnel “in extremist and white supremacist ideology and activity.”¹³ After the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ordered a military-wide stand

down within sixty days, requiring all armed forces to stop other work and spend a day learning about extremism.

Why are Veterans Vulnerable to Extremist Recruitment?

Veterans have specific vulnerabilities that put them at risk of targeted recruitment by extremist groups. The experience of soldiering may make some veterans susceptible to far-right rhetoric and persuasive tactics. This includes the effects of two decades of post-9/11 military action in the Middle East, which helped carry Islamophobic sentiment among some active-duty troops from the front lines into civilian life back home. For example, merchandise for sale on military supply and veteran-targeted websites allows American soldiers and veterans to proudly identify as “infidels,” and displays Arabic text with the phrase “stay back 100 meters or you will be shot.” Like the relatively small subset of returning Vietnam War veterans who helped launch the white power movement in the U.S. in the 1970s, some veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq returned home with a sense of anger and betrayal. Others grappled with post-traumatic stress, which research suggests can increase one’s vulnerability to extremist recruitment.¹⁴ The dehumanization and binary “us versus them” view of conflicts that soldiers are trained to embrace as battlefield tactics may not automatically turn off upon reentry into civilian society, and can leave them vulnerable to extremist propaganda in the civilian world. Against this backdrop, the United States has seen significant growth of unlawful militias in the antigovernment extremist movement over the past fifteen years—including some that actively recruit from active-duty troops and veterans’ communities.

That recruitment takes place in part through far-right extremist groups’ manipulation of the values that attract many individuals to enlist in the armed forces in the first place. Far-right

extremist rhetoric is laden with appeals to brotherhood, heroism, defense of one's people, and a chance to be a part of a meaningful cause. Extremist groups exploit military and security service members with emotional calls related to defense of the nation or people, courageous heroism, and protection of an oath or the constitution—often arguing that they are called upon to defend the country against liberals, traitors, or tyrannical leaders. In this way, extremist groups aim to convert a sense of betrayal or anger at the government for mainstream society into mobilization to violent action that is framed as heroic defense of the “real” or “true” nation.

Active-duty service members and veterans are also targeted because of their tactical skills, communications training, security clearances, and access to munitions, weapons and facilities, which could be useful to the group in violent action and terrorist plots. It is also important to note that merely dismissing enlisted members or officers from the military if active ties are discovered does not solve the problem- it only moves the problem to the veteran's community. Among veterans, for example, one high-risk condition for radicalization and extremist engagement is involuntary separation from the military—whether honorable or dishonorable discharge, as we have seen in several prominent cases of white supremacist extremist actors who experienced involuntary exit from the military.¹⁵

Taken together, all of this means that active-duty service members and veterans are at risk for manipulation from extremist groups, who have adopted sophisticated visual marketing techniques-- through memes, videos, merchandising, and integration into subcultures like the mixed martial arts-- in ways that promote violence and falsely link it to heroic defense of the nation or one's people. In other words, valor itself has been commodified in ways that seek to exploit the experiences and emotions of veterans, some of whom have been manipulated by extremist groups and movements into believing that violent, antidemocratic, and antigovernment

actions-- including lethal threats against elected officials and law enforcement, kidnapping plots, and even murder-- reflect their engagement as courageous revolutionary actors.

This elaboration is not meant to excuse, but rather to explain how acts that should be abhorrent to current and former military service members can be eagerly embraced by a small minority of them. We need to understand what is happening with veterans' engagement in extremist movements as resulting in part from the exploitation of our veterans and active duty troops by extremists. It is our duty—as experts, as legislatures, and as educators—to provide resources and training to reduce this manipulation and make veterans less vulnerable to recruitment into movements that are actively working to undermine and dismantle the very institutions they have sworn an oath to protect and defend.

STRATEGIES TO COUNTER VETERAN RECRUITMENT

We need three kinds of investments to prevent veteran radicalization and recruitment into extremist movements. First, given the susceptibility of veterans to far-right recruitment, the government should devote more resources to supporting their reintegration after service through counseling, treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological needs, treatment of physical health needs, employment support, educational attainment, and needs to address social isolation, homelessness, or other contributory causes of vulnerability. Second, veteran support organizations and local law enforcement agencies should receive staff training to better recognize warning signs of extremist radicalization and know how to gain access to further resources and help. While the primary concern of this hearing and of our efforts to prevent radicalization to violent extremism among our veterans should be the prevention of violence, preventative work requires attending to important precursors to violence as well. This includes

the production, dissemination, and spread of hate speech, disinformation, and propaganda which create fertile ground for or can directly incite extremist violence. Vulnerability to disinformation and propaganda—which exists across the ideological spectrum—is an epidemic that undermines democracy and the health and stability of the nation. We need serious investments in strategies to help people recognize conspiracy theories, propaganda, disinformation and persuasive extremist techniques like scapegoating or fearmongering.

Finally, the armed forces and veterans' communities should invest in preemptive evidenced-based inoculation approaches that intervene before individuals are exposed to dangerous ideas, enabling those individuals to be more resistant to radicalization efforts and disinformation. Inoculation approaches—as elaborated in the work of my American University colleague Dr. Kurt Braddock and tested in multiple lab studies in PERIL—work by teaching people how they are at risk of being manipulated by others who are trying to persuade them-- in this case, from extremist and terrorist groups. Attitudinal inoculation creates resistance to persuasion and has proven effectiveness across violent extremism ideologies in creating psychological reactance to extremist messages, reducing perceptions of extremist group credibility, and reducing intention to support the extremist group. Together with other preemptive strategies like Moonshot's Redirect Method, which uses targeted advertising to redirect people searching for harmful content online with alternative messages, attitudinal inoculation is a strategy that can be implemented at scale and works by engaging with everyone, not just specific targeted or at-risk groups.¹⁶

Every U.S. service member who exits the military should be inoculated against the persuasive tactics and manipulative strategies of extremist groups. This includes individuals who are dismissed from active-duty military engagement because of extremist ties—who simply

become problems for the veterans' community. But it includes everyone else in the military, too. Inoculation approaches work across ideologies and do not target specific communities or label some people as more at risk than others. Rather, such approaches work to provide blanket training for everyone, because every individual needs to be equipped with the tools to recognize disinformation, resist propaganda, and defend democracy from extremist threats and the manipulative efforts an extremist fringe will try to use against them. Evidence shows that even for violent extremism, inoculation helps individuals resist attempts to radicalize them.¹⁷ There is already a built-in structure to support inoculation training during the separation and transition period, when active-duty service members are preparing to return to civilian life. The Soldier for Life Transition Assistance Program, or TAP, should include specific inoculation support to equip veterans with the skills to recognize potential outreach and propaganda from extremist groups who wish to exploit them.

CONCLUSION

The threat posed by the rise in far-right extremist violence is specifically aimed at our democracy itself – and should thus be of paramount concern to all citizens, and especially this Body. Extremist ideas and groups cannot be left to operate unchecked within the very organizations charged with protecting the population, including its most vulnerable citizens. For the future of multicultural democracy, extremism in the military and veterans' community must be treated like the threat to national security that it is.

ENDNOTES

¹ I gratefully acknowledge Sarah Bartholomew, Meili Criezis, Pasha Dashtgard, Brian Hughes, Sarah Thorne, Jennifer West, and Kesa White from the PERIL team.

² This section is adapted from my recent article: Miller-Idriss, Cynthia. “From 9/11 to 1/6: The War on Terror Supercharged the Far Right.” *Foreign Affairs* September/October 2021. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/war-on-terror-911-jan6>

³ See the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021.” March 1, 2021. Available at: <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/UnclassSummaryofDVEAssessment-17MAR21.pdf>; and see the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “Homeland Threat Assessment,” October 2020. Available at: https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2020_10_06_homeland-threat-assessment.pdf

⁴ For coverage of the Canadian addition of the Proud Boys to its list of terrorist entities, see Jacobs, Emma. “Proud Boys Named ‘Terrorist Entity’ in Canada.” May 2, 2021. *NPR*. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/02/992846086/proud-boys-named-terrorist-entity-in-canada>. On incels, see for example, Hoffman, B., Ware, J., & Shapiro, E. (2020). Assessing the threat of incel violence. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(7), 565-587; Jaki, S., De Smedt, T., Gwózdź, M., Panchal, R., Rossa, A., & De Pauw, G. (2019). Online hatred of women in the Incels. me forum: Linguistic analysis and automatic detection. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 7(2), 240-268; Ribeiro, M. H., Blackburn, J., Bradlyn, B., De Cristofaro, E., Stringhini, G., Long, S., ... & Zannettou, S. (2020). The evolution of the manosphere across the Web. arXiv preprint arXiv:2001.07600.

⁵ See my elaboration of these points in Miller-Idriss, Cynthia. “From 9/11 to 1/6: The War on Terror Supercharged the Far Right.” *Foreign Affairs* September/October 2021. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/war-on-terror-911-jan6>. For the data on global trends in terrorism, see the Global Terrorism Index 2020 at <https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf>

⁶ See Hughes, Brian and Cynthia Miller-Idriss. “Uniting for Total Collapse: The January 6 Boost to Accelerationism.” *CTC Sentinel*. April/May 2021. Volume 14, Issue 4. Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/uniting-for-total-collapse-the-january-6-boost-to-accelerationism/>

⁷ Study findings and methodology are elaborated in Malet, D., Dashtgard, P., Daymon, C., & Miller-Idriss, C. (2021). “Maintaining a healthy democracy.” [Manuscript under review]. Polarization and Extremism Research Innovation Lab, American University.

⁸ See for example Simi, P., Bubolz, B. F., & Hardman, A. (2013). Military experience, identity discrepancies, and far right terrorism: An exploratory analysis. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 36(8), 654–671. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2013.802976>

⁹ For an overview of the Oklahoma City bombing, see “Twenty-five years later, Oklahoma City Bombing Inspires a New Generation of Extremists.” April 19, 2020. Anti-Defamation League. Available at: [Twenty-five Years Later, Oklahoma City Bombing Inspires a New Generation of Extremists | Anti-Defamation League \(adl.org\)](https://www.adl.org/press-releases/2020-04-19-twenty-five-years-later-oklahoma-city-bombing-inspires-a-new-generation-of-extremists)

¹⁰ See Dazio, Stefanie. “Air Force sergeant charged in killing of federal officer at California courthouse.” June 16, 2020. *Air Force Times*. Available at: [Air Force sergeant charged in killing of federal officer at California courthouse \(airforcetimes.com\)](https://www.airforcetimes.com/story/air-force-sergeant-charged-in-killing-of-federal-officer-at-california-courthouse/2020/06/16/air-force-sergeant-charged-in-killing-of-federal-officer-at-california-courthouse/)

¹¹ See the tracking information at the George Washington University Program on Extremism, at <https://extremism.gwu.edu/Capitol-Hill-Cases>.

¹² Hearing entitled “Alarming Incidents of White Supremacy in the Military- How to Stop It?,” held February 11, 2020 before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Military Personnel. Available at: [Subcommittee on Military Personnel Hearing: “Alarming Incidents of White Supremacy in the Military—How to Stop It?” - Hearings - House Armed Services Committee - Democrats](#). Also see “A New Transnational Agenda to Combat Rising White Supremacist Violence and Terrorism,” Global Project against Hate and Extremism, October 30, 2020. Available at: [A New Transnational Agenda to Combat Rising White Supremacist Violence and Terrorism \(globalextrémism.org\)](#)

¹³ See the letter’s contents at: [Rep. Cisneros co-leads bipartisan letter urging DoD to review active duty policy on white supremacist activity - Orange County Breeze \(oc-breeze.com\)](#)

¹⁴ See Buckley, Chris, Myrieme Churchill and Jacob Ware, “Fighting demons, healing hatred, restoring hope: How to defeat extremism in the U.S. military.” November 28, 2020. Available at: <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2020/11/28/fighting-demons-healing-hatred-restoring-hope-how-to-defeat-extremism-in-the-us-military/>; also see Koehler, Daniel. 2020. “Violent extremism, mental health and substance abuse among adolescents: towards a trauma psychological perspective on violent radicalization and deradicalization.” *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 31:3, 455-473. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2020.1758752>

¹⁵ See the analysis in Simi et al 2013.

¹⁶ Braddock, Kurt. 2019. “Vaccinating against hate: Using attitudinal inoculation to confer resistance to persuasion by extremist propaganda.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1693370>; for more on Moonshot’s Redirect Method, see <https://moonshotteam.com/redirect-method/>.

¹⁷ See Braddock 2019; also see Lewandowsky, Stephan and Muhsin Yesilada. 2021. “Inoculating against the spread of Islamophobic and radical-Islamist disinformation.” *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*. 6: 57 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-021-00323-z>. These points are elaborated on in Braddock, Kurt, Brian Hughes and Cynthia Miller-Idriss. “The post-9/11 fight against extremism must take on propagandists’ tricks, not just ideology.” *Market Watch*. September 11, 2021. Available at: [Opinion: The post-9/11 fight against extremism must take on propagandists’ tricks, not just ideology - MarketWatch](#)