

Congressional Testimony

Violent Domestic Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans

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*Working to stop the defamation of the
Jewish people and to secure
justice and fair treatment to all since 1913*

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Chairman, Mark Takano, Ranking Member, Mike Bost, Members of the Committee, good morning. I am Oren Segal, Vice President of the Center on Extremism at ADL, and it is an honor to appear before you today to address the issue of domestic terrorism and questions about America’s veterans’ potential vulnerability to extremist recruitment.

Since 1913, the mission of ADL (the Anti-Defamation League) has been to “stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.” For decades, one of the most important ways in which ADL has fought against bigotry and antisemitism has been by investigating extremist threats across the ideological spectrum, including white supremacists and other far-right violent extremists, producing research to inform the public of the scope of the threat, and working with law enforcement, educators, the tech industry and elected leaders to promote best practices that can effectively address and counter threats to communities.

As ADL has said time and time again, extremists must be taken at their word. Anyone who has been paying attention to extremist activity across the country, or to the chorus of disinformation and hatred rampant across right-wing media and some corners of social media, will tell you that what happened at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th was in some ways the most predictable outbreak of political violence in American history.

For many of the people who were roused to violence that day, their actions were the product of weeks and months and years of incitement, spread with stunning speed, scope and impact on social media. A portion of these individuals constitute a new breed of extremist, one foundationally animated by devotion to now-former President Trump. They are also living in an ecosphere of disinformation, lies and conspiracy theories, fertilized by Alex Jones, QAnon, groups like the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, the former President and his enablers, among many others.

But the insurrectionists at the Capitol are by no means our nation’s only concern when it comes to domestic extremism. Without a doubt, **right wing extremist violence is currently the greatest threat to everyone in this country.** From Charleston to Charlottesville to Pittsburgh, to Poway and El Paso, we have seen the deadly consequences of white supremacist extremism play out all over this country. We cannot afford to minimize this threat. We need a bipartisan “whole of government approach” – indeed, a “whole of society” approach – to counter it, and the work must start today.

That “whole of society” approach must include America’s military, which we know is not immune to the threat of extremism. Its veterans, in particular, have long been sought out by extremist for recruitment. This is reflected in the long-standing problem of high-ranking former military officers joining extremist causes after retirement.

In America's professional and apolitical military, serving officers are taught to keep their political opinions to themselves. Most—though not all—officers abide by such strictures. However, once they have retired, they are free to go wherever their ideological inclinations lead them—and for some, it is towards extremist causes.

Recently, retired brigadier general Anthony Tata, who served in the Trump Administration, [also promoted anti-Muslim views](#), as well as calling former President Barack Obama a “terrorist leader” and a Muslim. Michael Flynn, another retired general and Trump Administration figure, has [connections](#) to the anti-Muslim group [ACT for America](#) and [became a promoter of the QAnon conspiracy theory](#).

These findings underscore [already-existing concerns](#) about extremists in the military and raise questions about America's veterans' potential vulnerability to extremist recruitment. However, a lack of reliable information means many questions remain unanswered.

In my testimony today, I will Discuss the growing threat of domestic extremism, ways in which right-wing extremist groups are targeting U.S. military veterans for recruitment -- and how these groups use nationalist and individualist rhetoric to attract veterans to their cause.

ADL Trends: By the Numbers

ADL's 2020 Murder & Extremism Report

The good news is that 2020 saw a significant decrease in extremist-related killings — primarily because we were fortunate, for the first time in several years, to avoid mass killing events. However, the relatively low number of murders does not mean that extremists were less active overall. In fact, the opposite is true.

In 2020, domestic extremists killed at least 17 people in the United States in 15 separate incidents. This represents a significant decrease from the 45 extremist-related murders documented in 2019, and the 54 murders of 2018. This is the lowest annual total in ADL statistics since 2004, which saw 14 extremist-related murders. 2020's low numbers were likely impacted by constraints on public gatherings and activities due to COVID restrictions.

It is important, however, to look at these extremism-related murders in context. First, 2020 was consistent with years past in terms of the murderers' right-wing extremist ideologies. Second, this drop in numbers is an apparent outlier when compared to other years, though we would certainly hope for this trend to continue.

As has been the case for most of the past 30 years, the extremist-related murders in 2020 were overwhelmingly tied to right-wing extremists. All but one of the incidents (16 of the 17 murders) were linked to right-wing extremism; more than half had ties to white supremacists.

Similarly, all but one of the 42 extremist-related murders in 2019 (the sixth-deadliest year for domestic extremist-related killings since 1970) were perpetrated by right-wing extremists.¹

Taking a longer view, of the 429 people killed by domestic extremists in the last 10 years, 75% were murdered by right-wing extremists — 77% of whom were white supremacists. This makes white supremacists the deadliest type of extremist movement in the United States over the past 10 years, by far.²

Despite the relatively low number of extremism-related murders in 2020, extremists were not less active overall in 2020. ADL recorded 16 right-wing extremist-related terrorist plots or attacks through November 2020, an increase from the 13 documented in 2019. We also counted more than 5,000 incidents of white supremacist propaganda distribution in the U.S. in 2020, compared to 2,724 in 2019 — nearly a 100% increase.

White supremacist propaganda

Rising numbers of white supremacist propaganda incidents is yet another indicator of America's increasingly active extremist community, and shows that while COVID affected certain elements of extremist activity, it did not seem to affect this sector.

ADL's [Center on Extremism \(COE\)](#) tracked a near-doubling of white supremacist propaganda efforts in 2020, which included the distribution of racist, antisemitic and anti-LGBTQ fliers, stickers, banners and posters. The 2020 data shows a huge increase of incidents from the previous year, with a total of 5,125 cases reported (averaging more than 14 incidents per day), compared to 2,724 in 2019. This is the highest number of white supremacist propaganda incidents ADL has ever recorded. The number of propaganda incidents on college campuses dropped by more than half, perhaps due to COVID restrictions.

Propaganda gives white supremacists the ability to maximize media and online attention, while limiting the risk of individual exposure, negative media coverage, arrests and public backlash that often accompanies more public events. The barrage of propaganda, which overwhelmingly features veiled white supremacist language with a patriotic slant, is an effort to normalize white supremacists' message and bolster recruitment efforts while targeting minority groups including Jews, Blacks, Muslims, non-white immigrants and the LGBTQ community.

The 2020 propaganda appeared in every state except Hawaii, with the highest levels of activity in Texas, Washington, California, New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, Virginia and Pennsylvania.

Extremist Plots and Anti-Police Violence

¹ ADL, "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2019," *ADL Center on Extremism*, February 2020. (<https://www.adl.org/media/14107/download>)

² ADL, "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2020," *ADL Center on Extremism*, February 2021. (<https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2020>)

Of the 26 extremist terror plots recorded in 2020 and to date in 2021, 21 were connected to right-wing extremists, including white supremacists and anti-government extremists. As of late September 2021, nine of the year's 11 terror attacks or plots were linked to right-wing extremists.

Over the course of 2020, ADL's Center on Extremism [documented](#) 16 incidents in which police and extremists exchanged gunfire, a considerable increase from the 11-year average of nine per year. During these incidents, extremists shot at least ten members of law enforcement. Three of those shootings were fatal.

As has been the case in every previous year of this 12-year study, an overwhelming majority (87.5%) of the 2020 incidents involved right-wing extremists. The 16 incidents included eight anti-government extremists, six white supremacists, one Islamist extremist and one left-wing extremist.

These numbers clearly demonstrate that right-wing extremists, specifically white supremacists and anti-government extremists, continue to pose the greatest threat to law enforcement.

Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories continue to animate right wing extremists. There are seemingly endless conspiracy theories around COVID-19, the vaccines and masking. Meanwhile, the January 6 insurrectionists were energized by lies about a stolen election, stoked by politicians up to and including former President Trump.

One of the most prominent conspiracy theories supporting former President Trump is QAnon, which boasts substantial numbers of adherents who continue to attend "Stop the Steal" events across the country, and who believe the former president will be returned to office at some yet-to-be-determined date.

For years, there have been warning signs that social media platforms such as Twitter were providing a fertile environment for increased radicalization and potential violence from conspiracy groups.³

³ Craig Timberg and Elizabeth Dwoskin, "As QAnon grew, Facebook and Twitter missed years of warning signs about the conspiracy theory's violent nature," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2020. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/10/01/facebook-qanon-conspiracies-trump/>)

Conspiracy theorists played a key role in the attack on the U.S. Capitol, with related accounts on Twitter and other platforms hailing the violence as the first step in a civil war.⁴ As of this writing, about 600 individuals have been arrested in connection with the January 6 insurrection. Researchers at ADL’s Center on Extremism have found that thirty-seven of those people have verifiable links to QAnon, and supporters of the theory were reportedly the first rioters to enter the Capitol.⁵

Veterans and Extremism

The involvement of former high-ranking—and thus high-profile—military figures in far-right causes and conspiracy theories is a serious and ongoing concern. We saw powerful evidence of this on [January 6, 2021](#), when hundreds of fanatic Trump supporters and right-wing extremists intent on interfering with the confirmation of the 2020 presidential election results stormed the U.S. Capitol, where they engaged police in deadly violence and destroyed property until finally evicted hours later.

The events of that day shocked the country, but the riot’s aftermath also surprised many Americans, as the subsequent arrests of rioters included a number of people with connections to the U.S. military. According to [one recent](#) study of 357 Capitol storming arrests, 43 people had ties to the military. Only four of the 43 were currently serving in some capacity; the remaining 39 were all veterans.

With 18 million veterans in the United States, it is inevitable that some of them will be extremists. Anecdotally, one can easily find veterans among the membership of a variety of right-wing extremist groups, from white supremacist neo-Nazis to anti-government militia groups. One can also find people with former military service among far-left groups. For example, [John Fitzgerald Johnson](#), aka Grand Master Jay, the leader of the Not Fucking Around Coalition, a paramilitary group that advocates for black liberation and separatism, served both in the U.S. Army and in the Virginia National Guard from 1989 to 2006. Johnson has also asserted that prior military experience was preferred for members of NFAC. Johnson was [arrested in December 2020](#) for allegedly pointing a firearm at a police officer.

Sometimes leaders of extremist groups will even falsely claim that most or the entirety of their membership consists of people with prior military experience—to make their group seem more “legitimate,” especially to other veterans subject to recruitment.

⁴ Jessica Guynn, “‘Burn down DC’: Violence that erupted at Capitol was incited by pro-Trump mob on social media,” *USA Today*, January 6, 2021. (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2021/01/06/trump-riot-twitter-parler-proud-boys-boogaloos-antifa-qanon/6570794002/>)

⁵ VOA, “Capitol Riot Exposed QAnon’s Dangerous Potential,” March 31, 2021. https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_capitol-riot-exposed-qanons-violent-potential/6203967.html

But the basic answer is that there is insufficient information available to determine if there is a greater or lesser number of extremists among veterans compared to extremists in the general population. This is an area where much more work needs to be done. It is possible that the January 6 Capitol storming crowd may provide a clue, assuming its makeup is relatively representative.

In April 2021, researchers with George Washington University's Program on Extremism and West Point's Combating Terrorism Center [released a report](#) exploring the military experience of people who were arrested in connection with the Capitol siege. The report, analyzing the backgrounds of 357 identified participants, concluded that 43 (or 12%) had some military experience. Four of the 43 were currently serving in some capacity, and the others are veterans.

These figures largely align with internal ADL Center on Extremism statistics on Capitol stormers facing criminal charges, which find that at least 56 were veterans.

Do extremist groups recruit veterans? The answer to this question is yes, but the answer must be put in perspective. Far right groups are typically small and starved for membership; most are not able to be picky or exclusive about their membership. Most of these groups are eager to attract members from all sectors of society, even though veterans have a particular propaganda and recruitment value. Even the [Oath Keepers](#), an anti-government extremist group that explicitly concentrates on recruiting current or former military, law enforcement and first responders, does not actually limit membership to those categories.

For many movements in the far right, veteran status is appreciated, and right-wing extremist movements that place an emphasis on paramilitary organization and training often do have a particular interest in people with prior military service. Of these, the [militia movement](#) (including the Oath Keepers and [Three Percenters](#)) has the strongest paramilitary focus and thus, presumably, the most interest in veterans.

The Oath Keepers have had some success in recruiting former military personnel; many Oath Keepers speak of past military service. The group has also recruited from among people already involved in the anti-government extremist movement. Membership has never actually required current or former ties with military, police, or first responders. The popularity of Oath Keepers social media accounts illustrates clearly that many more people support the Oath Keepers without ever officially joining (which requires paying dues).

On September 27, 2021, the nonprofit journalist collective Distributed Denial of Secrets (DDoSecrets) uploaded a cache of data allegedly linked to the Oath Keepers. The data includes chat records from the group's private chat room from June 22 to June 26, 2020, and February 5

to September 19, 2021; emails from January 13 to September 19, 2021; and alleged membership information for more than 38,000 individuals including e-mail addresses.

ADL researchers found that 133 people allegedly provided emails with the “.mil” suffix, indicating a military association. It is important to note that this data does not indicate whether these individuals remain active within the Oath Keepers or whether they are still active within the military, only that at some point they signed up for membership using a military e-mail address.

The newer anti-government extremist [Boogaloo movement](#) also places a strong interest in weapons and tactical gear and engages in some paramilitary training. Both the militia movement and the Boogaloo movement include many members with prior military service. The border vigilante wing of the anti-immigrant movement, which often views itself as engaged in a shadow war with Mexican drug cartels, also often has a paramilitary emphasis and border vigilante groups could seek veterans on that basis.

The white supremacist movement also engages in a degree of paramilitary activity. In the 1980s, many white supremacist groups had a paramilitary emphasis, but this interest did not last. White supremacist groups of the 1990s and 2000s engaged in very little paramilitary activity. However, in recent years, paramilitary activity has increased somewhat among white supremacist groups. In the mid-2010s, the [League of the South](#) flirted with paramilitary training and used a person with prior Army service to conduct it. A former Marine [ostensibly taught](#) physical fitness and “hand-to-hand combat” to fellow Patriot Front members in 2018. Similarly, an Army vet [allegedly trained Atomwaffen members](#) on “firearms” and “hand-to-hand combat.” Meanwhile, [white supremacist “fight clubs”](#) inspired by the [Rise Above Movement](#), or R.A.M., are popping up across the U.S.; members emphasize physical readiness to fight the cultural shifts and existential threats to the white race.

How to Counter Extremism Among Veterans

To fully address the issue, we must better understand the issue. To that end, perhaps the most important and immediate need is for more, and more reliable, data. Government agencies like the Department of Veterans Affairs as well as academics and civil society groups may be able to conduct surveys and studies that would help understand the nature and extent of this issue and identify more avenues for addressing it. However, some veterans may be vulnerable in a range of ways, and any such surveys or studies must be conducted with great sensitivity and respect for privacy to ensure they are not inappropriately intrusive.

Veterans’ service organizations have a role to play as well, especially in terms of combating the disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories that extremists use to recruit veterans. They can also be a resource to help veterans who have been exposed to extremism or who know other vets who have.

These veterans' service organizations can also help inoculate their own membership from becoming vulnerable to extremism by speaking out frequently and forcefully against extremism and extremist violence, and by avoiding actions that might be perceived as condoning extremism, such as renting out their meeting halls to extremist groups.

The Proud Boys

The Proud Boys represent an unconventional strain of American right-wing extremism. While the group can be described as [violent](#), [nationalistic](#), [Islamophobic](#), [transphobic and misogynistic](#), its members represent a range of ethnic backgrounds, and its leaders vehemently protest any allegations of racism. Their founder, Gavin McInnes, went so far as to file a [defamation lawsuit](#) against the Southern Poverty Law Center when the SPLC designated the Proud Boys a hate group.

Though Proud Boys present themselves a pseudo-paramilitary group, at least one high-profile member is a military veteran and another used military terminology to describe his "enemy," ie left-wing protesters, during his trial on assault charges, the group does not explicitly recruit veterans into its ranks as some other extremist groups do.

In McInnes' own words, the Proud Boys are a "pro-western fraternity," essentially a drinking club dedicated to male bonding, socializing and the celebration all things related to western culture. In reality, the Proud Boys bear many of the hallmarks of a [gang](#), and its members have taken part in multiple acts of brutal [violence and intimidation](#). While the Proud Boys insist that they only act in self-defense, several incidents—including one in which two members of the group were [convicted](#) of attempted gang assault, attempted assault and riot—belie their self-professed peaceful nature. Indeed, many members have criminal records for violent behavior and the organization [actively pursues violence](#) against their perceived enemies.

In the last three years, the Proud Boys have established themselves as a dominant force within the far right. Easily recognizable, thanks to their black and yellow Fred Perry polo shirts and red Make America Great Again baseball caps, members are regulars at far-right demonstrations and Trump rallies. After several years of forging alliances with members of the Republican political establishment, the Proud Boys have carved out a niche for themselves as both a right-wing fight club and a [volunteer security force for the GOP](#). Despite their associations with mainstream politicians, Proud Boys' actions and statements repeatedly land them in the company of white supremacists and right-wing extremists. Jason Kessler, the primary organizer of the deadly 2017 [Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville](#), is a former Proud Boy. Several members attended the violent August 12, 2017, demonstration that ended in the death of counter-protestor Heather Heyer.

During an [October 2018](#) brawl [outside the Metropolitan Republican Club in Manhattan](#), for which two Proud Boys members were convicted and sentenced to substantial prison terms, and

seven others pled guilty, the Proud Boys were joined by the 211 Bootboys, an ultra-nationalist and violent skinhead gang based in New York City. In October 2019, members of the Denver chapter of the Proud Boys marched with members of [Patriot Front](#) and former members of the now-defunct neo-Nazi group [Traditionalist Worker Party](#). These relationships show the Proud Boys to be less a pro-western drinking club and more an extreme, right-wing gang. Ideologically, members subscribe to a scattershot array of libertarian and nationalist tropes, referring to themselves as anti-communist and anti-political correctness, but in favor of free speech and free markets.

Recent Activity and Ongoing Violence

The Proud Boys are a right-wing extremist group with a violent agenda. That has never been more evident than over the course of the summer of 2021, when the Proud Boys and their associates reportedly engaged in violence at eight separate events.

That violence, often against counter-protesters, has included fighting with fists, as is traditional for the Proud Boys, but [paintball guns](#) have also become a popular weapon. Proud Boys have also allegedly attacked journalists in the fray of protests in [Los Angeles, CA](#) and [Portland, OR](#). It is not always clear who initiates the violence, especially as Proud Boys often wear black clothing – rather than their former uniform of black and gold polo shirts – in an effort to blend in with black-bloc antifa adherents and anarchists. This new tactic, announced prior to the January 6 insurrection, has held through the summer of 2021.

The Proud Boys have branded themselves as victims of the “Marxist” left and of so-called “cancel culture.” This has a certain power among those who believe that right-wing viewpoints are sidelined, silenced and in need of protection. Proud Boys also position their rhetoric and actions as patriotism and have shown they are willing to show up and fight, often literally, for their bigoted beliefs.

Those beliefs lead Proud Boys to the following actions: [Members have pulled people from cars](#) and [assaulted them](#) because of their perceived membership in left-wing groups. They stifle freedom of speech at protest efforts with their threats of violence. They have inserted themselves in political events using their known history of violence to intimidate and attempt to quash opposing political viewpoints. They hamper freedom of expression by allegedly attacking journalists reporting on protests and rallies. There was a strategic decision made when the Proud Boys moved from denying any wrongdoings at the Capitol, to instead leveraging their actions there as patriotic, to try and paint the Proud Boys as victims by undermining democratic institutions to gain more followers and political sway.

Violence is almost expected when the Proud Boys come out in numbers to provide “security” for or attend events, including 2021 gatherings in Portland, Oregon, and Olympia, Washington.

Even at rallies where they explicitly disavow violence and claim to want to keep the peace between themselves and counter-protesters, anything they perceive as a threat or provocation is met with force – and they always come prepared to fight. Their role as “security” for right-wing

events has, in their view, given license to violently confront counter-protesters using any level of force they deem fit.

Because they package their views as patriotic, and themselves as beleaguered members of the downtrodden right wing, the Proud Boys are often a gateway group introducing members to hateful ideologies. This makes them especially dangerous. Proud Boys seem to show up at every imaginable event related to right-wing causes, regardless of the issue at hand, positioning themselves as gatekeepers and “security forces.” This ubiquity has provided near-constant media attention and plenty of content to share with followers.

On the one hand, Proud Boys are showing up at [school board meetings](#) to participate in debates that have become mainstream on the right, protesting Critical Race Theory and mask-wearing in schools. They [continue to provide “security” to GOP events](#), and [fight with counter-protesters](#) outside Planned Parenthood buildings. But their agenda is not solely political: their national chairman posted homophobic slurs to his popular Telegram channel on the same day that Proud Boys were allegedly part of a group of violent protesters angry about a spa’s gender-inclusive policy. Hatred, not just politics, is a big motivator for their actions.

While pushing patriotism and solidarity with right-wing causes, perhaps the Proud Boys largest audience exists on Telegram on the channel “The Western Chauvinist” which has more than 50,000 subscribers.

This channel frequently posts white supremacist, antisemitic, and other heinous content and has gained more than 4,000 subscribers since May 2021. The channel currently has more than 51,000 subscribers and is notable because of its staunchly white supremacist content. The content shared on this channel is virtually indistinguishable from that of neo-Nazi channels on Telegram. The Western Chauvinist channel is run by “3rd and 4th degree Proud Boys in good standing” so while it is not the official mouthpiece of the group, its subscribership, which exceeds the official Proud Boys channel, and authority coming from high-ranking members is certainly evidence that the views this channel purports are accepted by some members of the group. This channel belies the group’s “patriotic” branding and can bring subscribers further into the folds of extremist thought cloaked perhaps by the group’s more public patriotic rhetoric and branding.

The year 2020 was also significant year for the Proud Boys. They solidified their status as the most visible, and most active right-wing extremist group in the country. As the nation grappled with the pandemic, members of the Proud Boys became a [regular sight](#) at anti-lockdown protests, using the demonstrations not only to raise their profile, but as recruitment opportunities. The group is not unique in this sense – [Boogaloo bois](#) and [militia members](#) were also frequent participants at these rallies. Another key factor in the Proud Boys 2020 activity was [their embrace of the #Saveourchildren campaign](#), alongside [QAnon](#) adherents. The new links with QAnon allowed Proud Boys access to untapped segments of the pro-Trump extremist movement.

Events held in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd allowed the Proud Boys to brand themselves as “law and order” counterpoint to Black Lives Matter protesters, although the Proud Boys themselves generally precipitated the most egregious acts of [violence and](#)

[intimidation](#) against protesters. This dynamic produced some of the most brutal clashes between Proud Boys and their adversaries, particularly in Portland, Oregon which saw over 100 days of continuous unrest. There were violent and armed [clashes on August 22](#), and a [MAGA convoy on August 29](#) led to the death of Aaron “Jay” Danielson, [a member of right-wing group Patriot Prayer, a frequent ally of the Proud Boys](#). On September 26, 2020, close to 500 Proud Boys [gathered in a park in Portland](#), demanding justice for Danielson. Apart from a few incidents, that event was largely peaceful.

Proud Boys’ profile was given an additional boost when President Trump, in his [September 29, 2020, debate](#) against Joe Biden, instructed the Proud Boys to “[stand back, and stand by.](#)” Emboldened by the attention from the President, the Proud Boys rallied for Trump twice in Washington, D.C. following his election loss. The first rally took place on [November 14](#), and the second on [December 12](#), which ended with four members of the [Proud Boys suffering stab wounds](#) from a brawl.

During that same rally, Proud Boys members allegedly set fire to a BLM banner they stole from Asbury United Methodist Church, a historically Black church. Proud Boys leader, Enrique Tarrío, took responsibility for the incident and was later charged with and convicted of destruction of property. He was arrested, carrying two extended gun magazines, on the eve of the January 6, 2021, rally that led to the storming of the U.S. Capitol. As a condition of his release, [a judge barred Tarrío from attending the January 6 protest](#).

Proud Boys have the dubious distinction of being the best represented extremist group among those arrested in relation to the insurrection, and some of the most serious charges have been levelled against group members. Center on Extremism researchers have found that forty-five of the roughly 600 individuals arrested to date in connection with January 6, 2021, siege on the U.S. Capitol are members or associates of the Proud Boys. This includes a number of influential, high-ranking members.

Three Percenters

Three Percenters (also known as 3%ers, III%ers and Threepers) are anti-government extremists who are part of the militia movement. Three Percenters have a track record of criminal activity ranging from weapons violations to terrorist plots and attacks. They believe that, just as a small revolutionary vanguard overthrew the tyrannical British rule in America, a dedicated group of modern patriots could rid the United States of today’s alleged tyranny. The term itself is a reference to a false belief that the number of Americans who fought against the British during the Revolutionary War amounted to only three percent of the population at the time (Historians say that percentage was far higher).⁶

⁶ John A. Tures, “More Americans Fought in the American Revolution Than We Thought,” *Observer*, July 3, 2017. <https://observer.com/2017/07/soldiers-militia-american-revolution/>

Though the media often refer to Three Percenters as a movement or a group, they are neither. Rather, they constitute a major part of the broader anti-government militia movement, whose ideology they share. Some Three Percenters form militia groups, while others form non-paramilitary groups or create online networks; even more are active as individual or unaffiliated Three Percenters.

Oath Keepers

The Oath Keepers are a large but loosely organized collection of right-wing anti-government extremists who are part of the [militia movement](#), which believes that the federal government has been coopted by a shadowy conspiracy that is trying to strip American citizens of their rights.

Though the Oath Keepers will accept anyone as members, what differentiates them from other anti-government extremist groups is their explicit focus on recruiting current and former military, law enforcement and first responder personnel.

While there is a formal national leadership, on the local level many Oath Keepers are essentially self-organized, and form official, semi-official or informal groupings of Oath Keepers.

The Oath Keepers were particularly active in 2020, participating in various anti-lockdown protests, providing vigilante-style “security” for local communities and businesses during the Black Lives Matter protests that spread in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, and warning about a potential takeover by the “Marxist left” during the 2020 election.

Of the 598 individuals arrested (to date) in connection with the Capitol insurrection, at least 38 had ties to anti-government extremist movements such as the militia movement (including Oath Keepers and Three Percenters) and the sovereign citizen movement.

These three right wing extremist groups often appear at events together, but they have different goals. The Proud Boys’ primary adversaries are those they consider part of “the left,” while the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, similarly active right-wing extremist groups, are far more focused on responding to what they believe is ongoing dramatic overreach by a tyrannical federal government.

Dangers of Extremism in Military and Law Enforcement

Extremists within the ranks of military and law enforcement can have a dangerous and outsized impact. By associating with extremist movements or publicly expressing support for these ideologies, members of law enforcement and the military are behaving in a way that directly contradicts their oaths to serve and protect our communities and country, and undermines community safety. Some of these extremist beliefs, notably white supremacist ideologies, place vulnerable populations, including Black people and other people of color, as well as immigrant populations, at greater risk of harm.

Beyond this erosion of trust, the presence of extremists among law enforcement officers and members of the military also poses tactical challenges. For one, police officers and military members are often privy to sensitive – and in rare cases classified – information that extremists could use to advance their agenda or even to disrupt an investigation.

Extremists do not exist in a vacuum. If a white supremacist is serving within an agency, that person’s decisions and views will inevitably affect their coworkers, eroding trust between officers and compromising safety for all.

One of the most prominent recent examples of extremists infiltrating law enforcement is the emergence of the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA), run by Richard Mack. The CSPOA is an anti-government extremist group whose primary purpose is to recruit sheriffs into the anti-government “patriot” movement. This group was the subject of a major ADL report in 2021.⁷

Mack, CSPOA’s leader, is a former Arizona sheriff who gained celebrity on the right in the 1990s after suing to overturn a prominent gun control measure, the Brady Law, especially after the Supreme Court ruled largely in his favor.

The central tenet of CSPOA, borrowed from the anti-government extremist sovereign citizen movement, is that the county sheriff is the ultimate authority in the county, able to halt enforcement of any federal or state law or measure they deem unconstitutional.

Mack primarily marketed this (false) claim as a way to oppose gun control measures, but in 2020-21, he has also used it to exploit anger and frustration over federal and state measures to combat Covid-19.

Mack crisscrosses the country for speaking engagements where he promotes himself, CSPOA and his county sheriff thesis. Increasingly, he seeks out law enforcement audiences, billing his extremist events as “trainings.” In an especially disturbing development, in 2021, Mack was able to win official state approval for his “trainings” in Montana and Texas, which allows attendees to receive continuing education credit for attending Mack’s events.

Current Trends: A Growing Threat of Domestic Terrorism

At ADL, we were deeply shocked but not surprised by the January 6 attack — it is the unfortunate and predictable result of years of escalating hate and extremism in our country. After years of manifestos and mass killings, these attacks should no longer come as a surprise to anyone.

While it is hard to say with certainty what lies ahead, we know that white supremacists and some other extremists, including Islamophobes, anti-immigrant extremists and antisemites, are driven by conspiracy theories as well as manufactured fears around demographic change, which

⁷ ADL, “The Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association: How Extremists are Successfully Infiltrating Law Enforcement,” October 2021: <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/the-constitutional-sheriffs-and-peace-officers-association-csboa-and-richard-mack#key-points>

some extremists fear will only accelerate as the Biden Administration enacts more humane policies towards immigrants and refugees who are people of color. Extremists equate those policies to “white genocide.”

We’ve seen an increasingly vocal sector of the right-wing ecosystem espousing support for The Great Replacement – a racist conspiracy theory whose adherents rail against the “replacement” of white people by non-white immigrants.⁸ Initially focused on Muslim immigration to Europe and the theory that Muslims and other non-white populations had a much higher birth rate than whites, the “great replacement” philosophy was quickly **adopted and promoted** by the **white supremacist movement**, as it fit into their conspiracy theory about the impending destruction of the white race, also known as “white genocide.” It is also a strong echo of the white supremacist rallying cry, **“the 14 words:”** “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”

This has been precisely the response from white supremacists and other right-wing extremists following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent efforts to assist Afghan refugees.⁹

We are concerned about right wing extremist activity around the conspiracy theories about election “fraud” and COVID-19 vaccines. In recent months, Proud Boys have shown up at school board meetings to protest mask mandates designed to keep children safe. We are seeing a growing number of right-wing extremists join the mainstream political fray, many with designs on the 2022 midterms.

Militia and other antigovernment groups may also be very active in the next few years. The militia movement has historically derived much of its energy and vitality from its rage towards the federal government. However, the movement’s support of President Trump over the past few years dulled that anger. A Biden Administration will allow militias to return to their foundational grievances — the belief that a tyrannical government in league with a globalist conspiracy is coming to enslave them by first taking their guns and then the remainder of their rights.

Finally, antisemitism will likely continue to be a central part of the conspiratorial views that fuel right-wing violence.

In short, we worry that the coming years may be a particularly active era for right-wing extremism.

Lawmakers, law enforcement and the public need to recognize the grave and dangerous threat posed by right-wing extremism. We cannot begin to defeat this deadly form of hatred if we fail to recognize it.

⁸ ADL, “The Great Replacement: An Explainer,” July 2021: <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/the-great-replacement-an-explainer>

⁹ ADL, “Right-Wing Extremists Decry Aid, Fret About Demographic Replacement,” September 2021: <https://www.adl.org/blog/afghan-refugees-right-wing-extremists-decry-aid-fret-about-demographic-replacement>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

ADL strongly recommends urgent action to prevent and counter domestic violent extremism, including the targeting of our nation's service members and veterans. Some measures we recommend the Committee consider include:

- **Gather knowledge and data about extremism among veterans.** To effectively address and mitigate the spread of extremism among veterans, the government and stakeholders need, first and foremost, to learn more about the prevalence of violent extremist veterans. Veterans Affairs should work with civil society groups that advocate for and represent veterans' interests to explore methods of assessment that are not inappropriately intrusive. The VA should also consult with these veterans' rights groups about issues that come to their attention regarding white supremacist or violent extremist activity in which veterans are involved.
- **The Veterans Affairs Transition Assistance Program should build awareness of the signs of extremism recruitment and radicalization and to create frameworks for community and personal resilience.** The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) assists servicemembers as they separate by creating a curriculum designed to "provide service members with the resources, tools, services and skill-building training needed to meet Career Readiness Standards." This includes financial planning and career transition advice. TAP does not currently include any resources directly related to radicalization and recruitment to extremism, but it could and should offer individuals information about recognizing the potential dangers of involvement in extremist movements, as well prompts to share concerns about materials and outreach targeting servicemembers. The VA Benefits & Services Guide provides an overview of a broad range of VA counselling services, with a focus on primary-level trauma such as sexual assault, PTSD, and addiction. Including content related to isolation and social alienation could address conditions that can enhance vulnerability to violent extremism and provide additional insight into whether there are other forms of counseling or personal assistance that may be effective in preventing and disrupting recruitment of veterans to extremist causes.
- **Fund a study of the health and welfare-related services provided to veterans to explore how those services can proactively identify signs of radicalization.** There are some frameworks to help understand circumstances that may make radicalization more likely, including factors such as a lack of self-identity and a sense of isolation and alienation. The National Counterterrorism Center and, similarly, the British Army have developed frameworks to help understand how these factors can manifest; further review of these frameworks can illuminate existing best practices and gaps for understanding indicators of radicalization and how to prevent them.

A VA study should consider how existing institutional frameworks could be improved for the VA's use to better integrate public health resources available during and after separation, and whether the VA or a third party is best situated to assess risk factors associated with violent extremism. Secondly, the study can establish which indicators are relevant to the challenge of veteran radicalization.

Finally, the VA could assess what is in its power to address directly and/or to address via grant or contract funding, and what would be outside the scope or abilities of the VA. As the part of the VA which focuses on “developing and piloting care” and “facilitate[ing] root cause analysis engagement,” the VA Innovation Center (VIC) may be the appropriate entity to carry out this study, though the VA should have some discretion for the most efficient mechanism to complete the study.

- **Enlist organizations that serve veterans.** Veterans’ service organizations also have a role to play in combating the disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories that extremists use to recruit veterans. They can also be a resource to help veterans who have been exposed to extremism or who know other vets who have. These veterans’ organizations should help inoculate their own membership from becoming vulnerable to extremism by speaking out frequently and forcefully against extremism and extremist violence, and by avoiding actions that might be perceived as condoning extremism, such as renting out their meeting halls to extremist groups.

More broadly than just this Committee’s work, we urge Congress to take more steps to prevent and counter domestic terrorism. The framework ADL has created – the PROTECT plan — is a comprehensive, seven-part plan to mitigate the threat posed by domestic extremism and domestic terrorism while protecting civil rights and civil liberties. Together, these seven steps can have an immediate and deeply significant impact in preventing and countering domestic terrorism – more so than any one action, policy, or law – and can do so while protecting vulnerable people and communities against the risk of government overreach. Our suggestions are that you:

- P** Prioritize Preventing and Countering Domestic Terrorism
- R** Resource According to the Threat
- O** Oppose Extremists in Government Service
- T** Take Public Health and Other Domestic Terrorism Prevention Measures
- E** End the Complicity of Social Media in Facilitating Extremism
- C** Create an Independent Clearinghouse for Online Extremist Content
- T** Target Foreign White Supremacist Terrorist Groups for Sanctions

Prioritize Preventing and Countering Domestic Terrorism

First, we urge Congress to adopt a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to preventing and countering domestic terrorism.

- The Biden-Harris Administration released the first-ever National Strategy to Counter Domestic Terrorism. The strategy is laudable, and a step in the right direction. However, many critical details were left unanswered. Congress must press for further details into how the plan will be implemented, as well as the civil rights and civil liberties implications.
- The Select Committee investigating the events of January 6th must be allowed to operate in good faith, absent politicization of its important work. The American public needs a

careful review of the brazen and lethal attack on the very seat of our democracy. We urge Congress to search for answers, publicly release information whenever possible, and issue bipartisan recommendations to ensure that no attack like that on January 6th can take place again.

- As Congress considers appropriations bills, resources to prevent and counter domestic terrorism are critical to mitigating the threat. ADL urges Committee Members to consider significant appropriations in the Commerce, Justice, and Science; Homeland Security; Defense; State and Foreign Operations; Interior; and Labor, Health, and Human Services appropriations processes.

Resource According to the Threat

We must ensure that the authorities and resources the government uses to address violent threats are proportionate to the risk of lethality of those threats. In other words, allocation of resources must never be politicized, but rather transparently based on objective security concerns.

- Congress should immediately pass the Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act (DTPA) to enhance the federal government's efforts to prevent domestic terrorism by formally authorizing offices to address domestic terrorism and requiring law enforcement agencies to regularly report on domestic terrorist threats. Congress must ensure that those offices have the resources they need and can deploy those resources in a manner proportionate to existing threats.
- Congress must exercise careful oversight to ensure that no resources are expended on counterterrorism resources based on protected political speech. Investigations and other efforts to mitigate the threat should be data-driven and proportionate to the violent threat posed by violent extremist movements.

Oppose Extremists in Government Service

It is essential that we recognize the potential for harm from when extremists gain positions of power, including in government, law enforcement, and the military.

- To the extent permitted by law and consistent with Constitutional protections, take steps to ensure that individuals engaged in violent extremist activity or associated with violent extremist movements, including violent white supremacist and unlawful militia movements, are deemed unsuitable for employment at the federal, state, and local levels — including law enforcement. Appropriate steps must be taken to address any current employees, who, upon review, match these criteria.
- To the extent permitted by law and consistent with Constitutional protections, take steps to ensure that individuals engaged in violent extremist activity or associated with violent extremist movements, including violent white supremacist and unlawful militia movements, are not given security clearances or other sensitive law enforcement credentials. Appropriate steps must be taken to address any current employees, who, upon review, match these criteria.

Take Domestic Terrorism Prevention Measures

We must not wait until after someone has become an extremist or a terrorist attack has happened to act. Effective and promising prevention measures exist, which should be scaled.

- Congress can provide funding to civil society and academic programs that have expertise in addressing recruitment to extremist causes and radicalization, whether online or offline. By providing funding for prevention activities, including education, counseling, and off-ramping at-risk individuals, Congress can help empower public health and civil society actors to prevent and intervene in the radicalization process and undermine extremist narratives, particularly those that spread rapidly on the internet.
 - These initiatives must be accompanied by an assurance of careful oversight and safeguards. They must also meaningfully engage communities who have been targeted by domestic terrorism and who have been targeted when prior terrorism authorities have been misused. They must be responsive to community concerns, publicly demonstrate careful oversight, and ensure that they do not stigmatize communities.
 - While Congress has funded a small grant program for prevention measures domestically, the program is too small to have an impact at scale and, in some cases, DHS' implementation of the program has lost the confidence of communities. Now that the Administration has launched the Center for Prevention Programming and Partnerships, Congress should significantly scale its grant program; ADL has recommended a \$150 million annual grant level.

End the Complicity of Social Media in Facilitating Extremism

Congress must prioritize countering online extremism and ensuring that perpetrators who engage in unlawful activity online can be held accountable with regard both to criminal charges and civil liability, and do so without implicating First Amendment concerns.

- Congress can work with independent extremism experts to protect vulnerable targets from becoming either victims of abuse or radicalized perpetrators of violence. Legislation like the National Commission on Online Platforms and Homeland Security Act, for example, would establish a commission to investigate how online content implicates certain national security threats, such as targeted violence.
- We also need to provide better recourse for victims and targets of online hate and harassment. In the 115th Congress, Representative Katherine Clark (D-MA) introduced and led H.R. 3067, the Online Safety Modernization Act, which, among other things, would have provided federal protections against doxing and swatting. It is time to pass laws that cover these types of harms. It is crucial that legislation provide private rights of action.
- We also need to train law enforcement to investigate cybercrimes and require better reporting of these crimes. Only then can we fully understand the extent of the problem.
- Finally, Congress must amend Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act to make tech companies legally accountable for their role in enabling stalking, facilitating violence, committing civil rights violations, and inciting domestic terrorism. We do not support the elimination of Section 230 altogether for the simple reason that doing so will

have the unintended consequence of allowing more hate online where that hate is heinous and harmful, but does not on its own rise to the level of being unlawful. We are also well aware that too blunt a legislative instrument in this area could silence and harm the very communities and speech we seek to protect. We therefore urge lawmakers to seriously consider Section 230 reform proposals that prioritize equity and justice for users and bar immunity when platforms put profit over people. This could include enacting measures such as the Protecting Americans from Dangerous Algorithms Act, which would prevent the use of algorithms to amplify discriminatory content, or aid and abet terrorism. We will separately be providing more details on ADL's views on reform.

Create an Independent Clearinghouse for Online Extremist Content

Congress should work with the Biden-Harris Administration to create a publicly funded, independent nonprofit center to track online extremist threat information in real-time and make referrals to social media companies and law enforcement agencies when appropriate.

- This approach is needed because those empowered with law enforcement and intelligence capabilities must not be tasked with new investigative and other powers that implicate civil liberties – for example, through broad internet surveillance. Scouring online sources through an independent organization will act as a buffer, but will not prevent the nonprofit center from assisting law enforcement in cases where criminal behavior is suspected. This wall of separation, modeled in part on the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), will help streamline national security tips and resources while preserving civil liberties. For Congress to appropriate \$500,000 toward a feasibility study for the Center would make an excellent first step.

Target Foreign White Supremacist Terrorist Groups

Congress must recognize that white supremacist extremism is a major global threat of our era and mobilize with that mindset.

- To date, no white supremacist organization operating overseas has been designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Only one has been designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. Congress should review how these designation decisions are made, if any additional racially or ethnically motivated extremist groups outside the United States, particularly white supremacist groups, have reached the threshold for either designation, and whether doing so would help advance U.S. national interests.
- The Biden-Harris Administration must mobilize a multilateral effort to address the threat of white supremacy globally. Multilateral best practices institutions, such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund, and the International Institute for Justice and Rule of Law may be helpful mechanisms through which to channel some efforts. Moreover, the Global Engagement Center should be charged with undermining the propaganda of violent extremist groups – not just designated terrorist organizations, but overseas white supremacist violent extremists as well.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this august body and for calling a hearing on this urgent topic. ADL data clearly and decisively illustrates that the impact of hate is rising across the United States, and that domestic extremism and terrorism will continue to pose a grave threat. It is long past time to acknowledge that these threats overwhelmingly come from right-wing extremists, especially white supremacists, and allocate our resources to address the threat accordingly. We must also address these threats holistically rather than piecemeal. This is precisely what ADL's **PROTECT** plan does, applying a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to the fight against hate and extremism. On behalf of ADL, we look forward to working with you as you continue to devote your attention to this critical issue.