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The Alt-Right Movement and US National Security

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ABSTRACT: Identifying the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol as an inflection point, this article analyzes the historical relationship between White supremacy and the US military from Reconstruction after the Civil War to the present. The article posits causes for the disproportionate number of current and former members of the military associated with White power groups and proposes steps the Department of Defense can take to combat the problems posed by the association of the US military with these groups.

Introduction

Currently, there is an overrepresentation of military veterans affiliated with far-right groups and the broader White power movement, but the disturbing relationship between White supremacy and the American military dates to before the American Civil War.¹ Most recently, this affinity was underscored by the disproportionate number of servicemembers, who participated in the failed attempt to prevent the certification of the 2020 election on January 6, 2021. This incident renewed concerns about the association between the US military and the White power movement.²

As of July 16, 2021, 563 individuals have been arrested and charged in federal court in the aftermath of the insurrection at the US Capitol. At least 82 (14.6 percent) of those arrested are individuals with military backgrounds predominately affiliated with the Army and the Marine Corps—more than double the percentage of servicemembers in the US population (approximately 6.1 percent).³ While the motivations driving those individuals vary, almost two-thirds of those arrested are affiliated with either Proud Boys, an alt-right gang, or Oath Keepers, a far-right militia. Like many alt-right groups with a White power orientation, these two groups are loosely structured, lack a rigid ideological focus, and are united by things they oppose (for example, immigration, feminism, gun restrictions, and so

1. Carter F. Smith, *Gangs and the Military: Gangsters, Bikers, and Terrorists with Military Training* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); and Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

2. Daniel Milton and Andrew Mines, *"This Is War": Examining Military Experience among the Capitol Hill Siege Participants* (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2021).

3. Michael Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane, "Extremism in the Ranks and After" (research brief, University of Maryland, College Park, MD: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2021), 5; and Milton and Mines, *Examining Military Experience*, 18–20.

forth) rather than any central tenet, and are best described as racist.⁴ Based on US Code, Title 18, Section 2331, Item (5), both groups would be classified as organizations engaging in domestic terrorism.⁵ The FBI and the Department of Homeland Security commonly refer to these groups as domestic violent extremist (DVE) organizations.⁶

This overrepresentation of veterans, however, is supply driven and reflects veterans' greater willingness to join far-right groups than the average civilian. It appears servicemembers are more susceptible to the propaganda and diatribes of far-right groups, and this relationship needs to be addressed. This article examines the disconcerting connection between the US military and the White power movement, traces the historic relationship from past conflicts through the War on Terror, and provides direction on steps the US military can take to combat this dilemma.

Historic Relationship with the Military

White anxiety about the inclusion of former slaves into the social order, including economic competition with White middle and working classes produced not only the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which was founded by six Confederate war veterans, but the Knights of White Camellia, the White League, and other assorted White power DVEs.⁷ It was not until the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and 1868, forcing former Confederate states to rewrite their constitutions, granting voting rights to Black citizens, and installing the US Army as peacekeepers, that White power groups proliferated, offering an outlet for Whites to terrorize Black citizens.⁸ Arguably, the aftermath of the Civil War and the subsequent Reconstruction era could be viewed as an outlier exaggerating the affinity between the White power movement and military veterans.

Yet, surges in membership among veterans enlisting in White power DVE organizations correlate all too well with the ending of wars and

4. Mike Giglio, "A Pro-Trump Militant Group Has Recruited Thousands of Police, Soldiers, and Veterans," *Atlantic*, November 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/11/right-wing-militias-civil-war/616473/>; George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Sam Jackson, *Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis, "Pride & Prejudice: The Violent Evolution of the Proud Boys," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 6 (2021): 26–38; and Shannon E. Reid and Matthew Valasik, *Alt-Right Gangs: A Hazy Shade of White* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

5. Smith, *Gangs and the Military*, 25–27; and "Definitions," US Code, Title 18 – Crimes and Criminal Procedure, Section 2331, Item (5).

6. FBI, "What We Investigate," <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/terrorism>.

7. Edward Ball, *Life of a Klansman: A Family History in White Supremacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020); David J. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987); Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); and Rory McVeigh and Kevin Estep, *The Politics of Losing: Trump, the Klan, and the Mainstreaming of Resentment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

8. McVeigh and Estep, *Politics of Losing*, 22–24.

conflicts involving the US military, creating a pattern following World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the War on Terror.⁹ In particular, America's defeat in the Vietnam War produced "loss, frustration, and doubt" among servicemembers, similar to the feelings experienced by Confederate veterans.¹⁰ Whereas state power reinforced a White supremacist social order and enabled DVE violence during Reconstruction, the fallout from the Vietnam War was quite different.¹¹ First, after the Vietnam War ended, the fear of communism spreading across the globe remained a foreign policy concern that provided veterans with an outlet to channel their discontentment by participating in counterinsurgency operations as "soldiers of fortune."¹² Such operations were supported by both neoconservatives and the White power movement, creating a complex web of interconnections.¹³

Second, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s drew attention to the legacy of White supremacy in policing and state power and created an environment in which vigilante violence was no longer publicly supported by the state.¹⁴ This disavowal marked a turning point in how the White power movement viewed its relationship to the government. The narrative introduced was a corrupt, bureaucratic, and ineffective federal government that had hamstrung Vietnam veterans from becoming triumphant warriors—by restraining their use of force against the enemy—which the White power movement used to sow distrust of the government in the minds of veterans.¹⁵

The overrepresentation of Vietnam veterans in the White power movement played an instrumental role in transforming the structure, operation, and direction of White power DVE organizations. For instance, noteworthy Vietnam veteran Louis Beam made a major impact on the White power movement. As a former Klansman and prominent neo-Nazi, Beam urged the White power

9. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 20–21; James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 212–30; and Matt Kennard, *How the US Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gang Members, and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror*, (New York: Verso, 2012), 47–49.

10. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 21.

11. Kathleen Belew, "Lynching and Power in the United States: Southern, Western, and National Vigilante Violence," *History Compass* 12, no. 1 (2014): 84–99; and Kathleen Blee and Mehr Latif, "Ku Klux Klan: Vigilantism against Blacks, Immigrants and Other Minorities," in *Vigilantism against Migrants and Minorities*, ed. Tore Bjørgo and Miroslav Mareš (London: Routledge, 2019), 31–42.

12. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 77–100; and Gibson, *Warrior Dreams*, 195–230.

13. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 78.

14. David Cunningham, *Klansville, USA: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 106–7; Blee and Latif, *Ku Klux Klan*, 38–39; and Geoff Ward, "Living Histories of White Supremacist Policing: Towards Transformative Justice," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 15, no. 1 (2018): 167–184.

15. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 22–23; and Gibson, *Warrior Dreams*, 7–10.

movement to utilize the strategy of “leaderless resistance.”¹⁶ Beam contended that large, centralized White power organizations, such as the KKK or Aryan Nations, should be abandoned in favor of small groups to better avoid detection and disruption by law enforcement. Guided by this strategy, Beam established “Aryan Liberty Net” (Liberty.net) in 1984. This clandestine Aryan Nations online bulletin board (a precursor to websites today) allowed users to access recruitment materials, pen pals, password-protected personal ads, and lists of potential targets to sabotage or individuals to assassinate.¹⁷ This capability made Beam and the broader White power movement one of the first adopters of the Internet to communicate digitally and organize globally.

The asymmetric use of digital technologies, evolving from Liberty.net, has allowed White power DVE organizations to maintain communication even if members are not spatially proximate to each other and spread positions and propaganda with minimal resources. The adoption of leaderless resistance as a strategy significantly contributed to the proliferation and persistence of the movement throughout the United States and internationally.¹⁸ The Order, also known as the Silent Brotherhood, is an example of the application of leaderless resistance by White power DVE organizations. This group, composed of military veterans, engaged in paramilitary training and used weapons and tactics from the Vietnam War to participate in an array of serious and violent crimes (for example, counterfeiting, bank/armored car robberies, and murder) in the mid-1980s before being apprehended.¹⁹

As the Vietnam War drifted from American collective memory, the public’s distaste for militarism began to dissolve, and the cycle started again following the Gulf War. In 1990 Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait. The United States responded, along with a broad coalition of support, and drove out Iraqi forces and restored Kuwait’s independence in under six weeks. While this quick and seemingly easy victory ended American’s aversion to foreign military conflicts, it had an unintended consequence among members of the White

16. Louis Beam, “Leaderless Resistance,” originally written 1983, reprinted in *Seditionist* 12 (February 1992); Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 19; and Jeffrey Kaplan, “Leaderless Resistance,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 3 (1997): 80–95.

17. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 120–21; Chip Berlet and Carol Mason, “Swastikas in Cyberspace: How Hate Went Online,” in *Digital Media Strategies of the Far Right in Europe and the United States*, ed. Patricia Anne Simpson and Helga Druxes (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 21–30; Travis Morris, *Dark Ideas: How Neo-Nazi and Violent Jihadi Ideologies Shaped Modern Terrorism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 56.

18. Beam, “Leaderless Resistance,” 12–13; Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 108–13; and George Michael, *Lone Wolf Terror and the Rise of Leaderless Resistance* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012), 55–56.

19. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 115–37; James Coates, *Armed and Dangerous: The Rise of the Survivalist Right* (New York: Noonday Press, 1987), 41–76; Kevin Flynn and Gary Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood: The Chilling Inside Story of America’s Violent, Anti-Government Militia Movement* (New York: Signet, 1990); Mark S. Hamm, *In Bad Company: America’s Terrorist Underground* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002); and Pete Simi, Bryan F. Bubolz, and Ann Hardman, “Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism: An Exploratory Analysis,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (2013): 662–64.

power movement. Instead of the Gulf War being viewed as a heroic triumph able to offset the defeat and frustration of the Vietnam War, the White power movement used the resounding success of the military campaign as evidence that an untrustworthy federal government had betrayed Vietnam veterans and prevented them from wearing the mantles of triumphant warriors.²⁰

In conjunction with the standoff at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and the siege at Waco, Texas, in the early 1990s, the White power movement further fueled the fabrication of a brutish federal government that was intentionally targeting civilian groups (for example, far-right) and oppressing them.²¹ This narrative circulated and gained support from Gulf War servicemembers and veterans who were disaffected with the US military, often as a result of personal difficulties.²² By far, the most noteworthy Gulf War Army veteran who subscribed to these White power talking points is Timothy McVeigh, who perpetrated the deadliest act of domestic terrorism in the United States on April 19, 1995—the Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people and injured 509.²³

Perhaps Beam and McVeigh's experiences and training in the Army assisted them in later endeavors among various White power DVE groups and inspired others. Beam and McVeigh are just two examples of a litany of servicemembers who have brought the war home with them and continue fighting today. In the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, the scrutiny of far-right groups, particularly antigovernment militias, by federal law enforcement agencies peaked and drove affiliates underground and into the recesses of the Internet.²⁴ The White power movement festers and metastasizes in this digital medium until a physical environment becomes hospitable for them to reemerge in public. During the 2000s, the growth of the White power movement remained generally uninterrupted, due to the focus on jihadi violent extremists and the subsequent War on Terror following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.²⁵

20. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 211; and Gibson, *Warrior Dreams*, 195–96, 291–97.

21. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 187–208; Lane Crothers, *Rage on the Right: The American Militia Movement from Ruby Ridge to the Trump Presidency*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 34–58; Betty A. Dobratz, Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile, and Danelle Hallenbeck, “What Happened on Ruby Ridge: Terrorism or Tyranny?” *Symbolic Interaction* 26, no. 2 (2003): 315–42; Mark S. Hamm, *Apocalypse in Oklahoma: Waco and Ruby Ridge Revenged* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1997); and Jackson, *Oath Keepers*, 92–99.

22. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 213.

23. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 209–34; Crothers, *Rage on the Right*, 76–87; Hamm, *Apocalypse in Oklahoma*; Simi, Bubolz, and Hardman, “Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies,” 661–62; Arie Perliger, *American Zealots: Inside Right-Wing Domestic Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 70–71; Smith, *Gangs and the Military*, 51–53; and Stuart A. Wright, *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

24. Crothers, *Rage on the Right*, 91–95; and Daryl Johnson, *Hateland: A Long, Hard Look at America's Extremist Heart* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2019), 57–58.

25. Crothers, *Rage on the Right*, 109–18; and Smith, *Gangs and the Military*, 68–73.

The War on Terror and the White Power Movement

While the swift and resounding victory of the Gulf War seemed to shake “Vietnam Syndrome,” it appears the ghosts of Vietnam “buried forever in the sands of the Arabian Peninsula” have become poltergeists, tormenting American servicemembers once again with America’s never-ending War on Terror, now approaching its twentieth year.²⁶ The same “loss, frustration, and doubt” felt by Vietnam and Confederate veterans is being experienced by today’s servicemembers.²⁷ Even more alarming, post-9/11 veterans are more likely to have been deployed, served in combat, experienced emotional trauma, had difficulty transitioning to civilian life, and felt less proud to serve in the military than pre-9/11 veterans.²⁸ A modern-day all-volunteer US military might be expected to be less disillusioned than those who were drafted during the Vietnam War.²⁹

Arguably, the quota requirements for troops needed for the War on Terror lowered the recruitment standards, increased the use of “moral waivers” to dismiss criminal convictions, and decreased the use of discharges for misconduct.³⁰ Shifts in these policies resulted in the military enlisting substandard personnel to meet the quotas, an outcome observed among other federal agencies (for example, the Department of Homeland Security) that succumb to filling positions with warm bodies.³¹

While the mass recruitment of less-than-ideal servicemembers is problematic on its own, the War on Terror is substantially different from America’s prior conflict in Western Asia (for example, the Gulf War). Differences include the structure of warfare, fighting an insurgency, guerilla war tactics, suicide bombers, and pervasive improvised explosive device use, with infantry and special operators being the principal military component as opposed to the use of tanks supported by air and sea campaigns in the Gulf War.³² Additionally, the duration of the

26. George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: US Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 912–16; and Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 65–66.

27. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 21; Kennard, *Irregular Army*, 215–16.

28. Kim Parker et al., *The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2019), 3–5.

29. Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); and Kennard, *Irregular Army*, 5–6.

30. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 27; Kennard, *Irregular Army*, 46–47, 74–76; and Smith, *Gangs and the Military*, 38–39, 201.

31. Melissa del Bosque, “A Group of Agents Rose through the Ranks to Lead the Border Patrol: They’re Leaving It in Crisis,” ProPublica, February 10, 2020, <https://www.propublica.org/article/a-group-of-agents-rose-through-the-ranks-to-lead-the-border-patrol-theyre-leaving-it-in-crisis>; and Bryan Schatz, “New Report Details Dozens of Corrupt Border Patrol Agents—Just as Trump Wants to Hire More,” Mother Jones, April 24, 2018, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/04/new-report-details-dozens-of-corrupt-border-patrol-agents-just-as-trump-wants-to-hire-more/>.

32. Robert M. Cassidy, *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror: Military Culture and Irregular War* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 103; and Christopher Coker, *The Warrior Ethos: Military Culture and the War on Terror* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 24.

War on Terror is approaching two decades while the Gulf War only lasted 43 days. Together, these distinctions have contributed to servicemembers experiencing greater emotional trauma and more challenges transitioning back to civilian life. In addition, the poor quality of care provided to servicemembers has only facilitated disillusionment.³³

Present-day White power DVE organizations harness and pervert these feelings to support their narrative and refine their talking points to connect with a broader, more mainstream audience—a process accelerated by the ubiquity of the Internet and the increased use of social media platforms.³⁴ They cast a much wider net to ensnare potential followers by deploying ironic and caustic memes rapidly across a variety of digital platforms.³⁵ There is a variability in the content that gets distributed, depending on the level of fanaticism. For instance, many alt-right gangs, like Proud Boys or Rise Above Movement (an alt-right mixed-martial arts group), tend to obfuscate their extremism to appeal to more mainstream youth.³⁶

Other more extreme DVE groups do not attempt to mask their adherence to White supremacy. Atomwaffen Division, The Base, and Boogaloo Bois use extreme imagery and catchy slogans in their propaganda materials and explicitly advocate for violence against the government in preparation for an upcoming race/civil war.³⁷ They require members to participate in paramilitary training, similar to long-established far-right militias.³⁸ Even though such activities make these militias illegal in all 50 states, there is no shortage of veterans in their ranks.³⁹ Furthermore, the accelerationist rhetoric used to recruit members—calling for a second civil war or a racial holy war—is translating into real-world violence. Members have been arrested for stockpiling firearms and explosives, plotting terror and infrastructure attacks, kidnapping government officials, and committing murder.⁴⁰

33. Kennard, *Irregular Army*, 200–18; and Parker et al., *American Veteran Experience*.

34. Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández and Johan Farkas, “Racism, Hate Speech, and Social Media: A Systematic Review and Critique,” *Television & New Media* 22, no. 2 (2021): 205–24.

35. Reid and Valasik, *Alt-Right Gangs*, 47–50, 100–3; and Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2019).

36. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 99–105; Reid and Valasik, *Alt-Right Gangs*, 24–29.

37. Reid and Valasik, *Alt-Right Gangs*, 42–44; and Southern Poverty Law Center, *Sounds Like Hate*, produced by Geraldine Moriba and Jamila Paksima, podcast series, <https://soundslikehate.org/>.

38. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 77–134; Gibson, *Warrior Dreams*, 195–230; and Harel Shapira, *Waiting for José: The Minutemen’s Pursuit of America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

39. Crothers, *Rage on the Right*, 128–37; Jackson, *Oath Keepers*; and Perlinger, *American Zealots*, 53–59.

40. Reid and Valasik, *Alt-Right Gangs*, 42–44; Kaleigh Rogers, “Why Militias Are So Hard to Stop,” *FiveThirtyEight*, May 18, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/militias-pose-a-serious-threat-so-why-is-it-so-hard-to-stop-them/>; and Bradley E. Wiggins, “Boogaloo and Civil War 2: Memetic Antagonism in Expressions of Covert Activism,” *New Media & Society* (August 2020), doi:10.1177/1461444820945317.

Current State of the Problem

The level and extent to which support for White power sentiments has infiltrated the US military remains unclear. As routine practice, the service branches deny its persistence. Both the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security have expressed concern for over a decade about the recruitment of active servicemembers by White power DVE groups. Yet, there remains limited knowledge about just how pervasive far-right affiliations are among active-duty personnel.⁴¹ What little is known about the current prevalence of White power sympathies comes from a 2019 poll of *Military Times* readers. The poll revealed 36 percent of troops witnessed “[W]hite supremacist and racist ideologies,” with enlisted and non-White members being more likely to observe these behaviors than officers and White members.⁴² This is a substantial increase from a 2018 poll of *Military Times* readers when only 22 percent reported the presence of White power activities. This trend is moving in a concerning direction.⁴³

The military’s response to DVE affiliations has been inconsistent, partially due to maintaining troop quotas and not raising alarms that would increase congressional scrutiny.⁴⁴ When the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq required more troops, the number of discharges declined and the standards for recruitment were relaxed, meeting quotas with substandard personnel.⁴⁵ The combination of reduced standards and an entrenched “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding the attitudes of servicemembers toward White supremacy and other extremist beliefs have fused in a dangerous and volatile manner.⁴⁶

As details about the January 6 insurrection continue to emerge, it becomes clear alt-right gangs, antigovernment militias, and conspiracy theorists (for example, QAnon) played an outsized role.⁴⁷ The fact that this attempt to usurp America’s democracy involved not just an overrepresentation of servicemembers, who solemnly “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic,” but any at all is disconcerting.⁴⁸ Recent years have shown a greater portion of the public than expected are sympathetic to identity politics and White power propaganda of the alt-right—

41. Johnson, *Hateland*; and Smith, *Gangs and the Military*, 106–9.

42. Leo Shane III, “Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism Up Again in Poll of Active-Duty Troops,” *Military Times*, February 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/>.

43. Shane, “Signs of White Supremacy.”

44. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 27; and Kennard, *Irregular Army*.

45. Kennard, *Irregular Army*, 46–47; and Smith, *Gangs and the Military*, 38–39, 201.

46. Kelly R. Buck et al., *Screening for Potential Terrorists in the Enlisted Military Accessions Process*, Technical Report 05-8 (Monterey, CA: Department of Defense Personnel Security Research Center, 2005).

47. “American Insurrection,” *Frontline*, season 39, episode 15, PBS, aired April 13, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/american-insurrection/>.

48. “Enlistment Oath,” US Code, Title 10, Section 502, May 5, 1960, <https://www.army.mil/values/oath.html>.

approximately 6 percent of non-Hispanic, White Americans, or about 11 million citizens.⁴⁹ The presence of extremists in the ranks should raise concerns among military leaders about the way military training and practices fail to prevent these associations and may perpetuate them. Furthermore, servicemembers, active duty or discharged, present a potentially greater threat than civilians given their leadership skills, military training, and advanced training in special operations, explosive ordnance disposal, or cyber-operations.⁵⁰

Despite well-documented incidents over the years involving servicemembers engaging in White power-inspired violence and disrupting civilian communities, ongoing efforts by the military to address the public's outcry on White power DVE groups are lackluster. Though lacking the sustained scrutiny of the January 6 insurrection, the 1995 murders of two Black civilians by active-duty paratroopers in Fayetteville, North Carolina; the 2012 mass shooting by an Army veteran at a Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin; and the participation in violence by at least four Marines, two active-duty and two discharged, at the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, were inspired by the White power movement.⁵¹ January 6 produced an inflection point about the growing number of active-duty and discharged servicemembers who are associated with far-right groups. The US military now has an opportunity to address the concerns raised for over a decade by the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, and the FBI.⁵²

Combating the White Power Movement

As the understanding of the connections between the White power movement and the military continues to grow, the US military needs to take serious steps to prevent, intervene, and potentially suppress the far-right activities of both active-duty and retired servicemembers. The ubiquity of the Internet and other digital communication (for example, online forums, image boards, and social media platforms) has allowed individuals interested in or affiliated with the White power

49. George Hawley, "The Demography of the Alt-Right," Institute for Family Studies, August 9, 2018, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-demography-of-the-alt-right>.

50. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 52–53; Kennard, *Irregular Army*, 39; Simi, Bubolz, and Hardman, "Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies," 654–71; and Smith, *Gangs and the Military*, 187–96.

51. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 135–55; William Branigin and Dana Priest, "3 White Soldiers Held in Slaying of Black Couple," *Washington Post*, December 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/>; Kennard, *Irregular Army*, 45; Arno Michaelis and Pardeep Singh Kaleka, *The Gift of Our Wounds: A Sikh and a Former White Supremacist Find Forgiveness after Hate* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018); Michael A. Peters and Tina Besley, "White Supremacism: The Tragedy of Charlottesville," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 14 (2017): 1309–12; and Paul Szoldra "These Are the Faces of Extremism in the Military: It Only Takes One to Wreak Havoc in the Ranks," *Task & Purpose*, April 23, 2021, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/us-military-extremism/>.

52. Johnson, *Hateland*, 32–34; and "Gangs in the Military: How Much Do We Know?" *Stars and Stripes*, February 8, 2007, <https://www.stripes.com/news/gangs-in-the-military-how-much-do-we-know-1.60141>.

movement to connect.⁵³ Despite military personnel being governed by the Uniform Code of Military Justice and its narrower application of the First Amendment—limiting the free speech protections of servicemembers and veterans—it would be a hefty challenge for the US government to monitor all the digital communications of active-duty servicemembers, let alone veterans.⁵⁴ While the ethics and legality of such an undertaking are problematic, such monitoring is also likely to experience blowback, a succession of false positives, and further serve the White power movement’s distorted narrative that a corrupt and disloyal federal government is restricting the freedom of individuals.⁵⁵

Instead, a starting point would be to consider the shifts in a servicemember’s life course—from recruitment to basic training to deployment to reintegration to end of active-duty service. These different transitions may have a multitude of impacts on an individual’s behavior. For example, research shows that entering military service can be a turning point that inhibits criminal activity.⁵⁶ What is less clear is how the act of leaving military service, particularly if it is involuntary, might impact future behavior when the institutional social structure and networks are removed.⁵⁷ As seen in other research areas, such as traditional street gangs or White power DVEs organizations, risk factors can shift over time and life circumstances.⁵⁸ This finding includes a key dynamic. Once an individual joins either of these groups, their behavior is more delinquent than individuals who are just surrounded by delinquent peers.⁵⁹

Intervention and prevention programs should target these turning points and provide appropriate transition services, including initial social

53. Kennard, *Irregular Army*, 34–36; and Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 138–60.

54. Danley K. Cornyn, “The Military, Freedom of Speech, and the Internet: Preserving Operational Security and Servicemembers’ Right of Free Speech,” *Texas Law Review* 87, no. 2 (2008): 463–86; Walter M. Hudson, “Racial Extremism in the Army,” *Military Law Review* 159 (March 1999): 1–86; and “Uniform Code of Military Justice,” US Code, Title 10, Chapter 47.

55. Ken Klippenstein, “Pentagon Plans to Monitor Social Media of Military Personnel for Extremist Content,” *Intercept*, May 17, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/05/17/military-pentagon-extremism-social-media/>.

56. Leana Allen Bouffard, “Examining the Relationship between Military Service and Criminal Behavior during the Vietnam Era: A Research Note,” *Criminology* 41, no. 2 (2003): 491–51; Glen H. Elder Jr., “War Mobilization and the Life Course: A Cohort of World War II Veterans,” *Sociological Forum* 2, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 449–72; John H. Laub and Robert J. Sampson, *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); and John Paul Wright, David E. Carter, and Francis T. Cullen, “A Life-Course Analysis of Military Service in Vietnam,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 42, no. 1 (2005): 55–83.

57. Lauren Van Staden et al., “Transition Back into Civilian Life: A Study of Personnel Leaving the UK Armed Forces via ‘Military Prison,’” *Military Medicine* 172, no. 9 (2007): 925–30; and Kevin M. Wilson-Smith and Philip J. Corr, *Military Identity and the Transition into Civilian Life: “Lifers,” Medically Discharged and Reservist Soldiers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

58. Beidi Dong, Chris L. Gibson, and Marvin D. Krohn, “Gang Membership in a Developmental and Life-Course Perspective,” in *The Handbook of Gangs*, ed. Scott H. Decker and David C. Pyrooz (Oxford, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2015): 78–97; and Pete Simi, Karyn Sporer, and Bryan F. Bubolz, “Narratives of Childhood Adversity and Adolescent Misconduct as Precursors to Violent Extremism: A Life-Course Criminological Approach,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 53, no. 4 (2016): 536–63.

59. Maxime Bérubé et al., “Converging Patterns in Pathways in and out of Violent Extremism,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 6 (2019): 73–89; and Chris Melde and Finn-Aage Esbensen, “Gang Membership as a Turning Point in the Life Course,” *Criminology* 49, no. 2 (2011): 513–52.

media literacy and critical-thinking courses as part of basic training and a survey and assessment at each turning point in a service career. As an added benefit, these assessments would also help servicemembers take stock of other mental health issues while giving military leaders a screening tool for identifying personnel susceptible to White power DVE groups or even those working on behalf of the organizations. Following active-duty service, the US Department of Veterans Affairs could establish moderated in-person and online social support groups as an alternative forum to challenge the disinformation propagated by White power DVE organizations. While all veterans would likely benefit from increased social support, a more-tailored approach focused on veterans who are assessed as being vulnerable to extremism, far-right or otherwise, could be required to participate in the prosocial support groups or one-on-one therapy or risk losing benefits.

Research has also shown that in paramilitary organizations (for example, police departments) where the chain of command oversees disciplinary action, the consequences of misconduct are frequently light and often thought to be one-off incidents without any systemic influence on the unit or department.⁶⁰ Recent studies have noted that misconduct by law enforcement officers spreads through a police department's social networks.⁶¹ This contagion model of misconduct could be applied to understanding how White power beliefs and behavior spread through institutions, such as the military.

The assumption that an individual's behavior is separate from the larger unit has led to a dearth of research regarding deviance among those in positions of power and the influence of these individuals on the larger group.⁶² For example, the arrest of an active-duty Marine at the January 6 insurrection underscores that the rules in place are not sufficient to restrain individual behavior.⁶³ Furthermore, that Marine's larger social network may have influenced this behavior (including those who may have been present but not arrested) and should be investigated instead of treating him as a single bad apple.

60. Kimberly D. Hassell and Carol Archbold, "Widening the Scope on Complaints of Police Misconduct," *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 33, no. 3 (2010); and Kim Michelle Lersch and Tom Mieczkowski, "An Examination of the Convergence and Divergence of Internal and External Allegations of Misconduct Filed against Police Officers," *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 23, no. 1 (2000).

61. Marie Ouellet et al., "Network Exposure and Excessive Use of Force: Investigating the Social Transmission of Police Misconduct," *Criminology & Public Policy* 18, no. 3 (August 2019): 675-704; and Linda Zhao and Andrew V. Papachristos, "Network Position and Police Who Shoot," *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 687, no. 1 (2020): 89-112.

62. Matts Hammarstrom and Birger Heldt, "The Diffusion of Military Intervention: Testing a Network Position Approach," *International Interactions* 28, no. 4 (2002): 355-77; and Peter V. Marsden and Noah E. Friedkin, "Network Studies of Social Influence," *Sociological Methods & Research* 22, no. 1 (1993): 127-51.

63. Corey Dickstein, "Marine Major Charged with Assaulting Officers during Jan. 6 Siege of US Capitol," *Stars and Stripes*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/marine-major-charged-with-assaulting-officers-during-jan-6-siege-of-us-capitol-1.673373>.

In order to address this issue, the military should ensure support for or activity with White power DVE groups will be identified as a criminal matter to be handled by Criminal Investigation Divisions and not treated as a discipline and order issue.⁶⁴ By reclassifying such activity as criminal rather than disciplinary, the Army could prevent casual engagement with White power viewpoints that might grow into serious criminal tendencies after separating from the military. A criminal investigation would also help the Army to identify larger networks and mediums of influence and how White power DVE organizations disseminate messages throughout their ranks, enabling the US military a greater opportunity to educate and protect current and former servicemembers. In addition to providing support services that would help nullify the abandonment narrative, the military's criminalizing support for White power DVE organizations could help frame these extremists as villains who—like foreign agents—seek to undermine and corrupt American democracy.⁶⁵

The final, and perhaps most at-risk transitional phase for servicemembers is when they exit the military. Disillusionment, trauma, lack of opportunities, and removal of the rules and safeguards in place can put veterans in a vulnerable situation for recruitment by White power DVEs and make them much more susceptible to the pull of these groups, who provide a new enemy to hate and move against.

Again, using the insurrection at the US Capitol as an example, at least 82 individuals with military backgrounds participated in the vitriolic violence and rioting.⁶⁶ As we consider this transition, we can regard active-duty military service as a period of strong labels, control systems, and associations. These labels and associations are thrown into doubt during the preparation for and separation from the military. To prevent these issues, the US military can conduct a series of exit interviews to monitor the mental and social health of veterans and reach out with additional resources as needed.

Additionally, the military should provide more career counseling and support groups with former servicemembers to engage veterans in prosocial support groups that meet synchronously online or in person. As the January 6 insurrection reveals, without the US military creating and propagating a counternarrative among its personnel that frames White power DVEs as terrorists and enemies of the state, these extremist groups will continue to thrive and recruit active-duty, retired, and separated servicemembers.

64. Kennard, *Irregular Army*, 44–46; and Smith, *Gangs and the Military*, 124–31.

65. John E. Finn, *Fracturing the Founding: How the Alt-Right Corrupts the Constitution*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

66. Jensen, Yates, and Kane, "Extremism in the Ranks," 5; Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "D.C. Officer Daniel Hodges Called Capitol Rioters 'Terrorists.' Here's Why That Matters," MSNBC, July 28, 2021, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/d-c-officer-daniel-hodges-called-capitol-rioters-terrorists-here-n1275231>; and Milton and Mines, *Examining Military Experience*, 18–20.

At the end of the day, all servicemembers come home. It is imperative military leaders proactively address the issues surrounding the adoption of far-right narratives or association with White power DVE organizations—and not brush them aside or ignore them. To reduce the allure of far-right extremism, the military should develop appropriate health-care systems for both active-duty and retired servicemembers, particularly addressing PTSD, and establish wraparound services to ease the transition to civilian life, including financial assistance programs for economic hardships. Instead of protecting the nation from a domestic enemy, the military's inaction is contributing to the White power movement's growth and capacity for violence, making American communities less safe.

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