



# International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism

## HOW CAN WE PREVENT AND COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE MILITARY?

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# VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE MILITARY IN THE SPOTLIGHT

- George Washington University's Program on Extremism found that, at the Capitol Hill Riot on January 6<sup>th</sup>:
  - 12% of people charged with federal crimes were veterans or active-duty military
  - 25% of those with military experience (93% of whom were veterans) were commissioned officers
  - 44% of those with military experience had been deployed at least once
  - 37% of those with military experience were associated with violent extremist groups, making them 4 times more likely to be part of such a group than rioters without military experience
- Secretary of Defense Austin ordered a series of stand down days to address violent extremism in the military
- The problem continues:
  - On November 10, 2021, Texas National Guard member Franklin Barrett Sechriest was arrested for setting a fire at an Austin synagogue, causing \$25,000 in damage
  - Police found swastikas and stickers with antisemitic sentiments in Sechriest's car



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# VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE MILITARY IS NOT NEW

- Timothy McVeigh, who carried out the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, was a former soldier and Bronze Star recipient
- A Black couple was murdered at Fort Bragg in 1995 by members of a white supremacist group which included active-duty soldiers
- Army doctor Nidal Hassan carried out the Fort Hood shooting in 2009, inspired by the sermons of Anwar al-Awlaki
- The problem is not limited to the United States
  - Canada and Germany have also faced cases of military and police personnel becoming involved in far-right violent extremist groups



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# GUIDELINES AND PROTOCOLS FOR DEALING WITH VIOLENT EXTREMISM ARE MURKY

- Definitions of extremism have at times included Evangelical Christianity and Orthodox Judaism in addition to white supremacism
- Although active participation in violent extremist groups is prohibited, active-duty military members are permitted to be members of such groups and are not prevented from receiving mail from those groups or attending meetings while off duty and out of uniform
- The War on Terror has been implicated as a source of dehumanization of Arabs and Muslims that is easily extended to other minority groups
- Military members report being uncertain as to the protocols for reporting violent extremism in the ranks, as well as the possible repercussions both for the accused *and* the accusers



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# THE STUDY

- In-depth psychological interviews with 50 current and former members of far-right, white supremacist, and hate group members
- Interviews coded on 252 variables related to vulnerabilities, influences, motivations for joining, roles and experiences in the group, and sources of disillusionment with the group
- Full descriptive information about the sample can be found [here](#)
- Three individuals served in the U.S. military, but 32 provided information about military members and law enforcement participation in their groups when probed
- Short article: [The challenge of extremism in the military is not going away without a new perspective](#) Full research report [here](#).

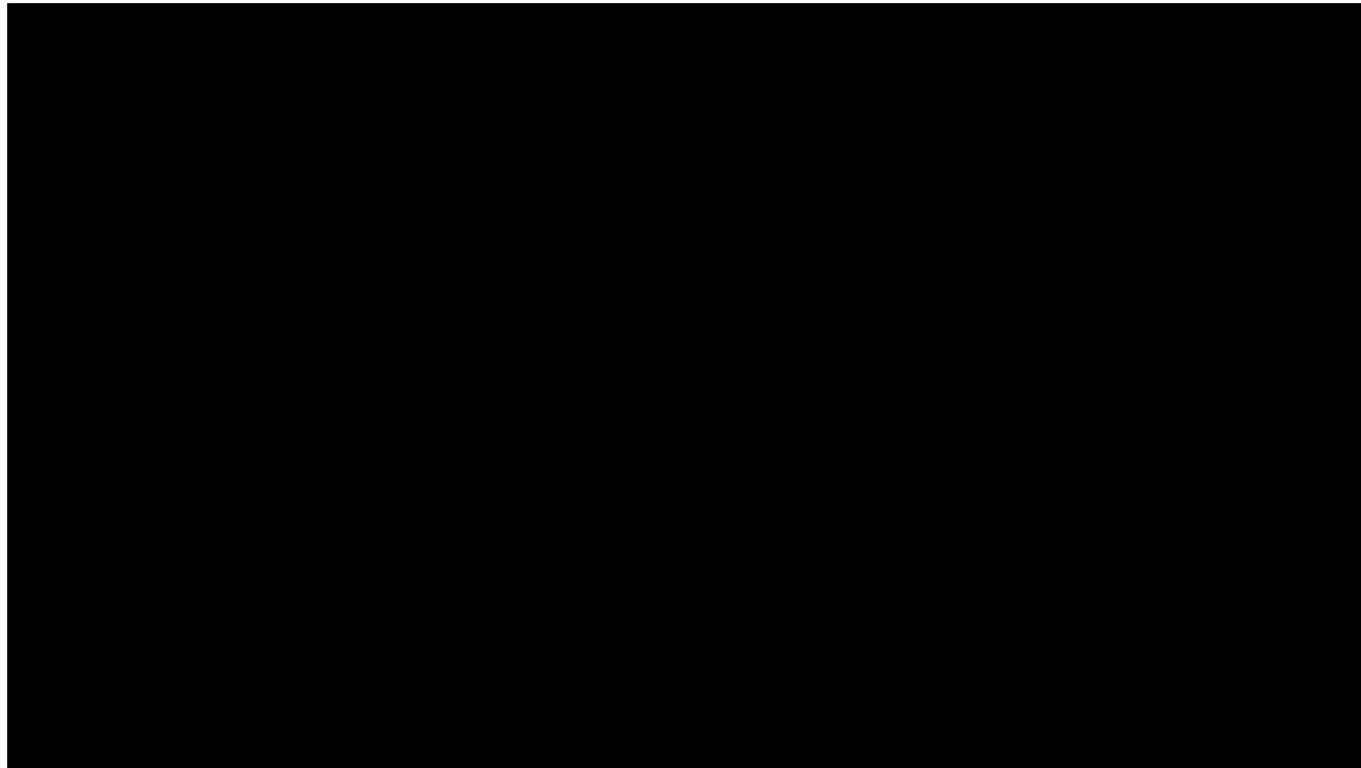
# WHY DO VIOLENT EXTREMISTS RECRUIT MILITARY MEMBERS?

- Weapons training and access and other operational skills
- Sense of discipline and structure
- Air of legitimacy
- Façade of patriotism



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# COUNTER NARRATIVE: “LET’S HAVE A RACIAL WAR”



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# WHY ARE MILITARY MEMBERS SUSCEPTIBLE TO VIOLENT EXTREMIST RECRUITMENT?

- Need for belonging, community, and camaraderie
- Aggrievement toward the government for lack of support
- Attraction to a “noble cause”
- Coping strategies for PTSD:
  - Discipline & structure
  - Attachments & bonding
  - Continued combat mentality
  - Drinking culture



# COUNTER NARRATIVE: “BLACK PEOPLE ARE NOT OUR FRIENDS”



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# AN OPPOSITE CHALLENGE: VIOLENT EXTREMISTS JOINING THE MILITARY

- It is in violent extremist groups' best interest for their members to join the military:
  - Receive training
  - Obtain access to weapons, intelligence, and hard targets for attacks
  - Recruit new members
- Some violent extremists may openly espouse their ideologies in order to radicalize and recruit others
- Others may hide their beliefs
  - The military must be able to intervene when servicemembers become radicalized *and* how to effectively screen out violent extremists who try to enlist



# COUNTER NARRATIVE: “A SOLDIER FOR MY RACE”



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# WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMIST RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT IN THE MILITARY?

- There is a lack of clarity and specificity regarding military policies surrounding extremism
- Dishonorable discharge:
  - Pros:
    - Immediately removes a radicalized person
    - Sends a message of zero tolerance
  - Cons:
    - Creates a sense of grievance against the military and U.S. government
    - Nullifies one's identity and sense of belonging as a member of the military
    - Puts the wider community at risk



# WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMIST RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT IN THE MILITARY?

- Treatment:
  - Pros:
    - Psychological and social factors that result in radicalization can be addressed in a similar manner as PTSD and substance abuse disorder
    - It is possible to rehabilitate a radicalized person, especially who has not yet committed any violent actions
  - Cons:
    - May reinforce to victims and perpetrators of violent extremism that such ideologies and actions are at least somewhat tolerated by the military
    - Could be interpreted as the military being sympathetic to violent extremists
- Middle ground:
  - Once identified, violent extremists who have not already committed a crime are required to undergo an intensive treatment program
  - Those who refuse treatment or are noncooperative are dishonorably discharged





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THANK YOU!