

*Report on*

# **DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS and the RECRUITMENT OF VETERANS**



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*Published by the Majority Staff of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs*



THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON  
**VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

MARK TAKANO, CHAIRMAN

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On October 13, 2021, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs conducted an investigative hearing into domestic violent extremist (DVE) groups and the recruitment of veterans.<sup>1</sup> The hearing had three objectives:

1. To **define the nature and scope of threats** posed by DVE groups that seek to recruit and radicalize veterans;
2. To **understand why these groups target veterans** in their recruitment efforts; and,
3. To **examine some of the risk factors** that may lead a veteran down the path to extremism.

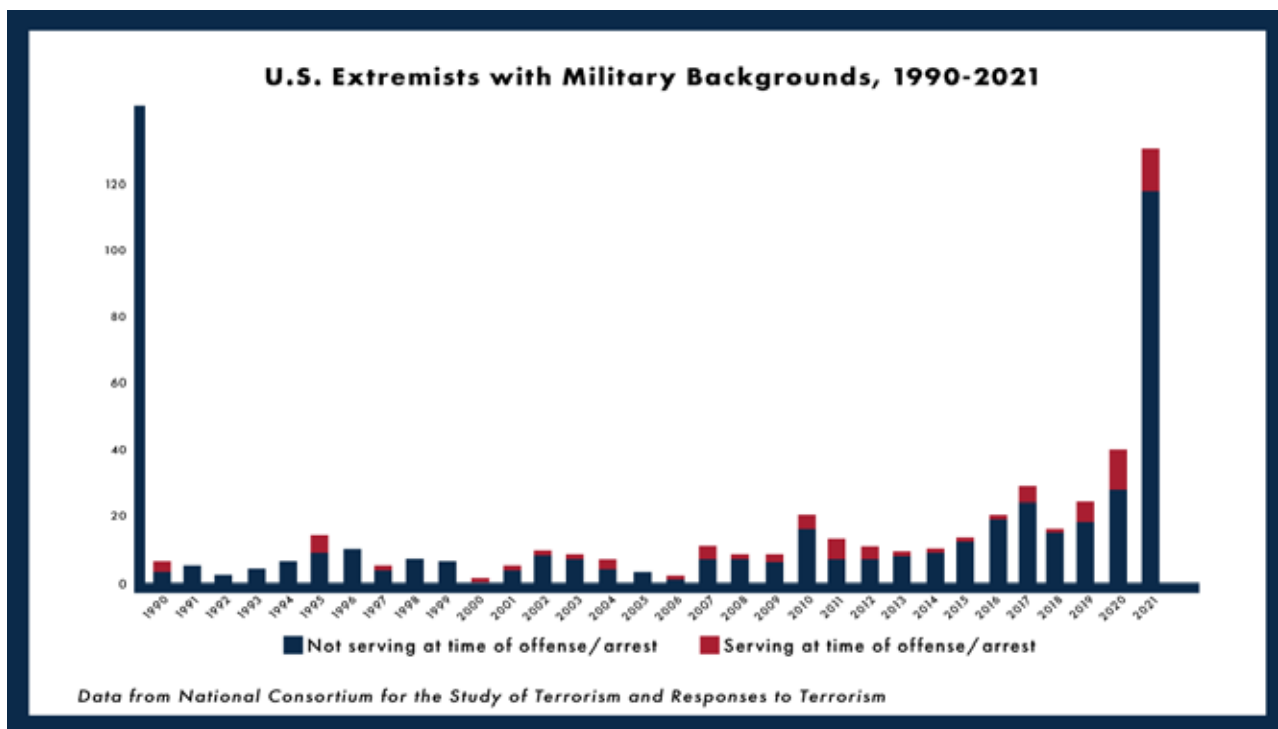
This report summarizes key findings as presented by expert witnesses from the hearing. Additionally, the Committee plans to further examine contributory factors that facilitate the recruitment of veterans and to identify resources and opportunities to assist veterans before and after radicalization.



<sup>1</sup> House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

# BACKGROUND

Since the 1990s, there has been a steady increase in domestic violent extremist activity in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Over the same period, the Department of Defense has raised concerns about the infiltration of white supremacists and other domestic violent extremists into the military and, subsequently, the spread of such extremist views into the veteran population.<sup>3</sup> From Oklahoma City to the Atlanta Olympic Park bombing, from Frazier Glenn Miller to Nidal Hassan, hundreds of individuals who have carried out DVE crimes in the U.S. over the past three decades have had military backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> While the overwhelming majority of the nation's roughly 19 million veterans remain law-abiding citizens following their military service, the number of veterans committing DVE crimes has risen sharply in recent years – from fewer than 20 in 2016 to nearly 120 in 2021.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 15% of those facing charges related to the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol have military backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> This far exceeds veterans' share of the overall U.S. population.<sup>7</sup>



Although the rise in domestic violent extremist activity has been evident across the ideological spectrum, according to Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)

2 Center for Strategic & International Studies, *The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States* (June 2020) ([https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612\\_Jones\\_DomesticTerrorism\\_v6.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612_Jones_DomesticTerrorism_v6.pdf)).

3 Department of Defense, *Report on Countering Extremist Activity Within the Department of Defense* (December 2021).

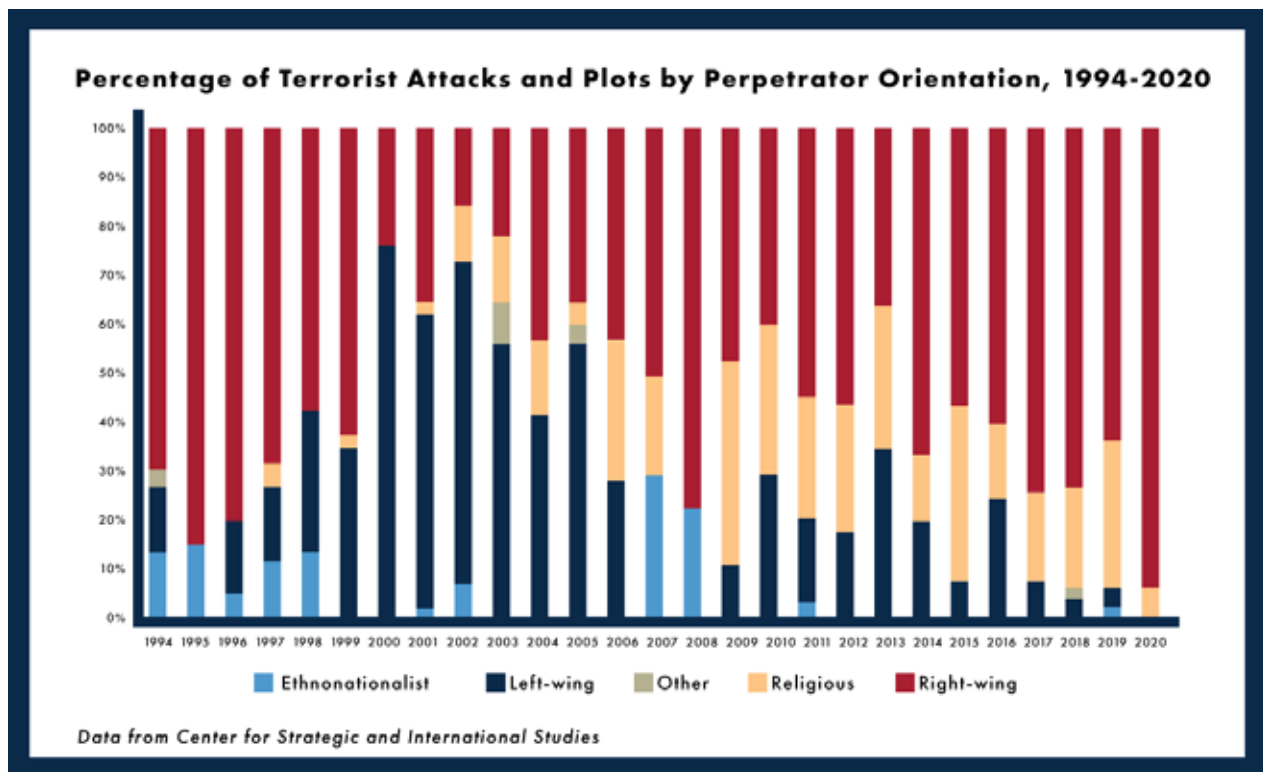
4 National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, *Radicalization in the Ranks: An Assessment of the Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military* (Jan. 17, 2022) ([www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Final%20Report%20for%20SAF%20CDM.pdf](http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Final%20Report%20for%20SAF%20CDM.pdf)).

5 *Id.*

6 *Id.*

7 *The Changing Face of America's Veteran Population*, Pew Research Center (Apr. 5, 2021) ([www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/05/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/#:~:text=There%20are%20around%2019%20million,the%20total%20U.S.%20adult%20population](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/05/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/#:~:text=There%20are%20around%2019%20million,the%20total%20U.S.%20adult%20population)).

analysis, “right-wing attacks and plots account for the majority of all terrorist incidents in the United States since 1994, and the total number of right-wing attacks and plots has grown significantly during the past six years.”<sup>8</sup> CSIS attributed 67% of terrorist plots and attacks in the United States in 2020 to Far Right actors, including anti-government and white supremacist groups.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Anti-Defamation League data indicates that 75% of extremist-related murders in the United States in the past 10 years have been carried out by right-wing extremists.<sup>10</sup> By comparison, left-wing extremists were responsible for roughly one-quarter of domestic terrorist plots or attacks since 1994.<sup>11</sup> There is scant evidence to suggest that left-wing DVE groups prioritize veteran recruitment, as is the case among Far Right extremists. Domestic terrorism and law enforcement experts have estimated that in 2020 there were between 15,000 and 20,000 individuals with military backgrounds associated with roughly 300 right-wing militias, making up at least 25% of these groups’ membership rolls.<sup>12</sup> By comparison, veteran involvement with left-wing violent extremism has been extremely limited, and veterans with far-left extremist ideologies tend to act outside defined organizational structures.<sup>13</sup>



8 Center for Strategic & International Studies, *The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States* (June 2020) ([https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612\\_Jones\\_DomesticTerrorism\\_v6.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612_Jones_DomesticTerrorism_v6.pdf)).

9 Center for Strategic & International Studies, *The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States* (Oct. 22, 2020) ([www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states](http://www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states)).

10 Anti-Defamation League, *ADL Finds Domestic Extremist Murders in 2020 Overwhelmingly Linked to Far-Right Extremists* (Feb. 3, 2021) ([www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-finds-domestic-extremist-murders-in-2020-overwhelmingly-linked-to-far-right](http://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-finds-domestic-extremist-murders-in-2020-overwhelmingly-linked-to-far-right)).

11 Center for Strategic & International Studies, *The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States* (June 2020) ([https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612\\_Jones\\_DomesticTerrorism\\_v6.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200612_Jones_DomesticTerrorism_v6.pdf)).

12 *Veterans Fortify the Ranks of Militias Aligned With Trump’s Views*, *New York Times* (Sept. 11, 2020) ([www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/us/politics/veterans-trump-protests-militias.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/us/politics/veterans-trump-protests-militias.html)).

13 *Id.*

Given the present partisan divide in American society, it is imperative that the propensity for violence be used as the objective metric to define domestic violent extremism. As Chairman Takano explained at the outset of the hearing on October 13, 2021:

*Violent extremism exists on both ends of the political spectrum. We are specifically using the propensity for violence as our definition, because it is not our intention to label any political views, parties, or opinions as inherently extremist but, rather, to recognize that any viewpoint, when expressed through violence, crosses a dangerous line into extremism. Violent conduct is outside the scope of constitutionally protected speech and beyond the limits of law. Violence should be rejected by all of us, irrespective of party or politics. And like the vast majority of issues that come before this Committee, it should be a bipartisan concern.*<sup>14</sup>

Ranking Member Bost echoed this sentiment during the hearing, noting, “Violence cannot be tolerated. It is undemocratic and anti-American. And we have seen political violence from across the political spectrum over the last several years.”<sup>15</sup>

Focusing on data reflecting the increasing number of violent acts perpetrated by DVE groups, as well as additional empirical evidence of veteran recruitment into these groups, brings the troubling issue of domestic violent extremism squarely into the purview of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. The Committee’s investigation is primarily oriented toward understanding the underlying issue of veteran recruitment by domestic violent extremist groups and developing proactive approaches to help identify, extract, and rehabilitate veterans who are caught in the spiral of recruitment and radicalization by such groups. The Veterans’ Affairs Committee’s investigation will remain squarely within the jurisdiction of the Committee by focusing on the threat posed to veterans and by exploring how to leverage resources and opportunities to aid veterans who are being targeted by these groups.

## HEARING OVERVIEW

The Committee’s October 13, 2021, hearing, entitled “Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans,” featured eight expert witnesses on two separate panels.<sup>16</sup>

The first panel included the veteran voices of Lt. Col. Joe Plenzler (Ret.) and Jeremy Butler, representing Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, as well as extremism experts Dr. Seth Jones of the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) and Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss of American University. The witnesses uniformly noted

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<sup>14</sup> House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

# Witnesses

## Panel 1

### MR. JOE PLENZLER

Retired Lieutenant Colonel  
U.S. Marine Corps

### MR. JEREMY BUTLER

Chief Executive Officer  
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

### DR. SETH JONES

Senior Vice President, Director of the  
Transnational Threats Project  
Center for Strategic and International Studies

### DR. CYNTHIA MILLER-IDRISS

Director of the Polarization and Extremism  
Research & Innovation Lab  
American University

## Panel 2

### DR. SAM JACKSON

Assistant Professor in the College of Emergency  
Preparedness, Homeland Security, and  
Cybersecurity  
State University of New York at Albany

### DR. AMY COOTER

Senior Lecturer in Sociology  
Vanderbilt University

### MR. OREN SEGAL

Vice President of the Center on Extremism  
Anti-Defamation League

### DR. HEIDI BEIRICH

Co-Founder and Chief Strategy Officer  
Global Project Against Hate and Extremism

a concerning rise in incidents of domestic violent extremism over recent years, and each acknowledged that veterans represent a fertile source of recruitment for the groups engaging in such conduct. Both Mr. Plenzler and Mr. Butler called upon Members of Congress to acknowledge in a nonpartisan manner the serious and growing threat posed by veterans joining extremist groups, while Mr. Plenzler further stated that the veteran community itself must take responsibility to police its own members. Dr. Jones presented data showing that 2020 marked a peak in incidents of domestic terror and that, while the percentage of extremist activity perpetrated by active-duty or reserve personnel has steadily increased, the share involving veterans remains even higher – accounting for a full 10% of all domestic terrorist attacks and plots since 2015, according to CSIS data.<sup>17</sup> “Despite the reality that the number of veterans committing these plots and attacks are small, the percentage is growing, which is of concern,” Dr. Jones stated in testimony before the Committee.

Dr. Miller-Idriss echoed similar observations on the rising trends in both extremist activity and in veteran/military member participation in such violent conduct. She noted:

*The goals of the extreme far right lead to non-democratic ends. Far right groups undermine democracy globally, through extreme actions that include disinformation campaigns, election interference, attacks on freedom of the press, violating the constitutional protections of minority rights, or using violence and terrorism to achieve political goals.<sup>18</sup>*

<sup>17</sup> House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Dr. Seth Jones, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, Hearing on Domestic Violent

In dialogue with Committee Members during questioning, the witnesses underscored their deep concern about the threat posed by veteran recruitment into domestic violent extremist groups and delineated those concerns from a simple statistical set of measures of the number of veterans harboring extremist views, engaging with these groups, or conducting violent acts. Given the nature of potential harm even a small number of veterans acting within an extremist group could perpetrate, several of the witnesses urged the Committee to take the issue seriously and continue to investigate it.

The hearing's second panel built on these macro-level observations and delved into the specific histories, ideologies, and cultures of prominent extremist groups, including the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, Three Percenters, and the broader militia movement. The witnesses – Dr. Sam Jackson of the State University of New York at Albany, Dr. Amy Cooter of Vanderbilt University, Oren Segal of the Anti-Defamation League, and Dr. Heidi Beirich of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism – each offered insights into what individual DVE groups believe and, more importantly, why they prioritize the recruitment of veterans. The experts noted that the presence of veterans give these extremist groups credibility and help attract more members, often including those who have not served in uniform themselves but, rather, seek the vicarious experience of military service through training and fraternizing with veterans.

Moreover, the witnesses described how veterans offer DVE groups leadership and organizational skills, tactical and strategic acumen, logistical and operational expertise, weapons training, and even occasional access to restricted materials. These attributes are invaluable to extremist groups that intend to engage in violent conduct. The witnesses also discussed the role of disinformation and social media and how the online space is increasingly used, not only for recruitment by extremist groups, but also to reinforce the seminal conspiracy theories and cultural grievances that bind group members together.

Throughout the hearing, witnesses and Members also discussed various strategies and recommendations to help mitigate the increasing engagement of veterans in the domestic violent extremist movement. The role that Veterans Service Organizations could play in educating their members about the threat of recruitment by domestic violent extremist groups and in identifying, supporting, and referring members that become entangled with such groups was offered as a community-based recommendation for combatting veteran radicalization. The connection with other priorities the Committee supports, including veteran healthcare, employment, housing, and education, was also discussed.

# DEFINING THE PROBLEM: “WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM?”

Understanding the taxonomy of DVE groups, and specifically why they value and prioritize veteran recruitment, is an essential preliminary step toward developing solutions to address the problem. The federal government defines “domestic terrorism” in the USA Patriot Act.<sup>19</sup> However, the United States does not have a domestic terrorism statute that prohibits affiliation or membership in any enumerated domestic terrorist groups, unlike the strict prohibitions on supporting, funding, or joining enumerated foreign terrorist groups. Moreover, veterans and all U.S. citizens enjoy certain constitutional protections of their rights to speak freely, to peaceably assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.<sup>20</sup>

**THE PATRIOT ACT** defines domestic terrorism as follows:

“(5) the term ‘domestic terrorism’ means activities that— “(A) involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State; “(B) appear to be intended— “(i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; “(ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or “(iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and “(C) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.”

Therefore, any definition of domestic violent extremism must carefully balance constitutional protections against unlawful or harmful conduct. Federal law enforcement agencies have adopted a definition of domestic terrorism based on violence or unlawful acts of force. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Homeland

Security (DHS) define a Domestic Violent Extremist (DVE) as:

*“An individual based and operating primarily within the United States or its territories without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power who seeks to further political or social goals wholly or in part through unlawful acts of force or violence. The mere advocacy of political or social positions, political activism, use of strong rhetoric, or generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics may not constitute extremism, and may be constitutionally protected.”<sup>21</sup>*

Similarly, for purposes of this investigation, the Committee defines a domestic violent extremist group as one that demonstrates the propensity for violence or actual use

19 Pub. L. No. 107-56 (2001).

20 U.S. Const. amend. I.

21 Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Homeland Security, Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism (May 2021).



of violence in furtherance of political, ideological, or social goals. Importantly, the Committee’s definition does not consider political opinion or partisan affiliation but, rather, is solely concerned with the propensity for violence. The anti-government domestic violent extremist groups identified in this report – specifically, the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, and Three Percenters – all have advocated for, planned, and engaged in acts of violence in recent years, and all have prioritized the recruitment of veterans (as well as active duty servicemembers and law enforcement).<sup>22</sup>

## **DVE GROUPS TARGET VETERANS FOR THEIR COMBAT EXPERIENCE, WEAPONS TRAINING, AND LEADERSHIP/OPERATIONAL SKILLS**

Multiple data sources show that veteran engagement with DVE groups has risen sharply in recent years and that parallel trends in veteran engagement and violent activity are a significant cause for concern.<sup>23</sup> Mr. Plenzler described the problem during the Committee’s October 13, 2021, hearing:

*For decades, violent extremist groups have sought to infiltrate our military to gain tactical training and access to weapons and explosives. ... They specifically target the isolated, the impoverished veterans who are frustrated and confused, those who are struggling to adapt to the civilian world. They provide them with a tribe, a simplistic view of the world and its problems, actionable solutions, and a sense of purpose. And then they feed these vulnerable individuals a concoction of lies, an unrelenting narrative of political and social grievance. And they have been successful. Security experts are increasingly concerned about the rise in participation of law enforcement members, active duty and reserve servicemembers, and veterans within the ranks of these violent extremist groups. Veterans have been connected in 10 percent of all domestic terrorist attacks since 2015. This is shocking since veterans only comprise less than 6 percent of the population.*<sup>24</sup>

Veterans are prized recruits for domestic violent extremist groups because of their presumed combat experience, weapons training, and leadership/operational skills.

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22 See, e.g., Center for Strategic & International Studies, Examining Extremism: The Oath Keepers (June 17, 2021) ([www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-oath-keepers](http://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-oath-keepers)); Anti-Defamation League, Three Percenters ([www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/three-percenters](http://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/three-percenters)); Southern Poverty Law Center, Proud Boys ([www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys](http://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys)).

23 See, e.g., Center for Strategic & International Studies, The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States (April 12, 2021) ([www.csis.org/analysis/military-police-and-rise-terrorism-united-states](http://www.csis.org/analysis/military-police-and-rise-terrorism-united-states)); National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Radicalization in the Ranks: An Assessment of the Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military (Jan. 17, 2022) ([www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Final%20Report%20for%20SAF%20CDM.pdf](http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Final%20Report%20for%20SAF%20CDM.pdf)).

24 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

As Dr. Miller-Idriss explained in her testimony:

*Active duty servicemembers and veterans are targeted [for recruitment] because of their tactical skills, communications training, security clearances, and access to munitions, weapons, and facilities, which could be useful to groups in violent action or terrorist plots.<sup>25</sup>*

Dr. Beirich expanded on this point:

*Military training is seen as vital to achieving these groups' goals whether that be a race war or battle with the federal government. The reasons are obvious. The training soldiers have in tactics, weapons, bomb making, leadership, all of which may increase the possibility of a successful attack.<sup>26</sup>*

## **VETERAN INVOLVEMENT GIVES DVE GROUPS AN AIR OF CREDIBILITY, AIDS IN FURTHER RECRUITMENT, AND HAS A FORCE-MULTIPLIER EFFECT**

Having veterans in their ranks adds credibility, authenticity, and prestige to DVE groups, particularly groups that engage in paramilitary activity. Beyond the experience, training, and operational skills that veterans, especially combat veterans, possess, individuals with a military background also represent the highest examples of patriotism, valor, and service, which in turn imbues DVE groups that recruit veterans with an air of credibility and respectability. A federal judge recently referred to these attributes as the “weaponization of military training.”<sup>27</sup> As Dr. Beirich explained, veterans “convey a legitimacy on hate and extremist organizations and can make additional recruitment easier. The military is rightly one of the most trusted institutions in our society, and extremist organizations aim to leverage that trust for their own ends.”<sup>28</sup>

For DVE groups in particular, veteran representation in their ranks offers a means to broaden their appeal and expedite growth while also ostensibly enhancing the group’s internal capabilities to organize and execute violent activities. Dr. Cooter discussed the dual appeal of veterans to DVE groups in the context of the militia movement:

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25 *Id.*

26 *Id.*

27 Ex-Army Ranger weaponized military training to aid Capitol rioters, judge says, CNN (July 21, 2021) ([www.cnn.com/2021/07/21/politics/robert-morss-army-ranger-capitol-riot/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2021/07/21/politics/robert-morss-army-ranger-capitol-riot/index.html)).

28 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

*Militia groups for many veterans can make symbolic appeals to other potential members, presenting themselves as patriotic organizations filled with people who have already demonstrated an unquestionable commitment to their country through their military service. From a practical perspective, militia members without their own military experiences want to learn skills from former servicemembers.<sup>29</sup>*

The skills and expertise veterans offer can have significant force-multiplier effects for a DVE group in that even a small number of experienced veterans can enhance the operational capabilities of the rest of the group members (especially those members who lack prior military service or training). In effect this means that the empirical data on numbers of veterans recruited by or engaged with DVE groups actually understates the danger posed by their relatively small numbers. According to Dr. Beirich, “The danger of leaving this unaddressed cannot be overstated because veterans make extremist groups and attacks more effective, unfortunately. ... The radicalized veterans are a few in number. But their skills help attacks succeed.”<sup>30</sup>

Mr. Butler further underscored the detrimental effect that any incidence of veteran involvement in extremist acts has on broader public perceptions:

*A presence at any level degrades confidence in government, lends credibility to any extremist organization that claims members of the military and veteran community, and paints an inaccurately negative picture of the greater veteran community when we already have a large and widening civil and military divide where most Americans do not know or understand the veteran experience.<sup>31</sup>*

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29 *Id.*

30 *Id.*

31 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

# APPEALS TO PATRIOTISM, SOCIAL ISOLATION, A SEARCH FOR COMMUNITY, DIFFICULTIES ADJUSTING TO CIVILIAN LIFE, AND ONLINE DISINFORMATION ARE AMONG THE FACTORS THAT PUSH SOME VETERANS TOWARD DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Having established why DVE groups value and prioritize veterans as recruits, it is important to also consider why veterans might be drawn to these groups, their ideologies, or their culture. Veterans are rarely, if ever, coerced into joining these groups, but sophisticated recruiters are able to identify and leverage certain vulnerabilities in individual veterans to draw them in. There are also some broader observations about why some veterans may find DVE groups attractive that are important to understand.

Patriotic language, memes, and explicit appeals to cultural concepts of valor or brotherhood are recurring themes in overtures made to veterans, particularly online or on social media. As Mr. Segal stated in testimony before the Committee:

*We are seeing how extremists use the language of patriotism to further their reach, wrapping their agendas in the Stars and Stripes. And this language finds voice on a variety of social media and online platforms, providing a fertile environment for the hate conspiracies and disinformation to proliferate in so-called patriot groups and other spaces that animate real world activity.<sup>32</sup>*

Drawing in veterans through simplistic, but overt, appeals to patriotism, heroism, or related cultural themes facilitates subsequent exposure to disinformation intended to trigger emotional responses that deepen the level of engagement. According to Dr. Miller-Idriss:

*They are recruited, in part, through extremist groups' manipulation of the values that attract many individuals to enlist in the first place, related to defense of the nation or people, brotherhood, courageous heroism, and protection of the oath of the Constitution. In this way, extremist groups and movements seek to convert a sense of betrayal or anger of the government or mainstream society into mobilization to violent action that is framed as heroic defense of the real or true nation. In this sense, valor itself becomes commodified by extremist groups in ways that seek to exploit the experiences and emotions of veterans.<sup>33</sup>*

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<sup>32</sup> House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

Similarly, this same manipulation of cherished values to elicit an emotional response explains how a small contingent of veterans can be persuaded to engage in conduct that the overwhelming majority of veterans would find abhorrent and antithetical to the values that initially compel them to serve in uniform.<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, some veterans prove to be more vulnerable to recruitment by DVE groups based on their adjustment to civilian life after their service. Those whose service was involuntarily terminated display particular susceptibility to recruitment and hostility toward the government.<sup>35</sup> Others who struggle with basic aspects of civilian life, including employment, shelter, or healthcare, are also more prone to successful recruitment. There are also those disillusioned, angry, or lost veterans who don't need recruitment but are themselves seeking to fill a void in their lives and find a comfortable fit with DVE groups. Dr. Cooter elaborated on this point in testimony before the Committee:

*These veterans have a preexisting desire to share their military skills. These men – and all whom I have personally encountered are men – so that they are searching for a way to continue to serve their country after leaving the service. Part of what they are doing is also searching for a community that would appreciate, if not quite replicate, their service and expertise. Some veterans who are searching for a place to belong are driven by anger at the federal government, which they believe has betrayed them in some way. Those who are motivated by such anger also want to find a militia unit that is on the extreme end of the spectrum, one that at least claims to be ready for violent action[.] ... Veterans' attraction to extremist groups has an important, shared similarity with those other issues. They need to feel supported and included in a society where many civilians struggle to understand the veteran experience.<sup>36</sup>*

The impact of social isolation, in which veterans find themselves missing the routines and comfort of being in a cohesive, ordered, and highly regulated environment, often compounds other struggles, including depression/mental health challenges, physical issues, addiction, or difficulties rebuilding a social network. A veteran's inability to access adequate education, employment, housing, or healthcare may also be contributory factors. According to Mr. Plenzler:

*A recent RAND study on domestic radicalization based on interviews with extremists showed financial instability, poor mental health, and societal factors like victimization, stigmatization, and marginalization to be primary drivers towards radicalization[.] ... Veterans in the process of military to*

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34 *Id.*

35 Pete Simi and Bryan F. Bubolz, Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism: An Exploratory Analysis, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (Aug. 2013).

36 House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

*civilian transition are particularly vulnerable to extremist recruitment as they, for the first time, navigate myriad decisions ranging from where to live, choosing their future occupation, securing work, determining fair compensation, addressing service-connected disabilities, and finding a second life built on continued service and profound meaning.*<sup>37</sup>

Seeking camaraderie, acceptance, or a welcoming environment where their prior service is understood and respected is another prevalent reason veterans join DVE groups of their own accord. They may respond to an invitation for a weekend firearms course or a survivalist outing, for instance, and find kindred spirits or a degree of understanding that they have been craving since their separation from the Armed Forces. Mr. Butler described this search for community in his written testimony:

*One of the most stressful times for a veteran is their transition out of the military. Almost 80% of IAVA members cited having at least “some challenges” during their transition. The top three challenges veterans cited were loss of identity/purpose, relating to non-veteran civilians/reintegrating with community, and readjusting to their social life. It is clear that while veterans transition, they often miss the camaraderie that military service brings them. Unfortunately, it can also be a time when extremist groups could target them for recruitment and seek to fill a void that the veteran feels they are missing.*<sup>38</sup>

Lastly, according to multiple witnesses at the Committee’s October 13, 2021, hearing, online disinformation and the effects of social media also have a compounding effect on veteran recruitment by DVE groups. These messages spread and reinforce erroneous information and cultural grievances and often serve as a glue that binds group members together. According to Dr. Cooter:

*Even members who say they reject conspiracy theories have had a tendency in recent years to follow them and share them on social media pages, saying they want other people to be able to evaluate them for themselves or that they want to “research” and be aware of the theories “just in case” they end up having an element of truth. This means that even members who consider themselves as disengaged from conspiracy theories may become susceptible to them through habituated online exposure.*<sup>39</sup>

Mr. Segal further noted that online sources are not only places where disinformation is spread, but can also contribute to the likelihood that a domestic violent extremist

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37 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Lieutenant Colonel Joe Plenzler (Ret.), Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021); RAND Corporation, What Do Former Extremists and Their Families Say About Radicalization and Deradicalization in America? (2021) ([www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RBA1071-1.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1071-1.html)).

38 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Mr. Jeremy Butler, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).

39 House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Testimony Submitted for the Record of Dr. Amy Cooter, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021)

plot is effectuated:

*We know that the plots of tomorrow, the threats of tomorrow are being hatched online today. And so the role of social media and online platforms are not only animating the narratives and grievances that motivate extremists, but that we know are linked to actions on the ground is critical. It is the lifeblood of these movements.*<sup>40</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Committee's work thus far has shed light on the nature of the domestic violent extremist threat, why DVE groups often target veterans in their recruitment efforts, and how some veterans are drawn to extremist ideologies. Key findings include:

- 1.** DVE groups target veterans for their combat experience, weapons training, and leadership/operational skills;
- 2.** Veteran involvement gives DVE groups an air of credibility, aids in further recruitment, and has a force-multiplier effort; and,
- 3.** Appeals to patriotism, social isolation, a search for community, difficulties adjusting to civilian life, and online disinformation are among the factors that push some veterans toward domestic violent extremism.

Both domestic violent extremism and veteran engagement with DVE groups have risen steadily in recent years. There is often a mutual attraction between disaffected veterans seeking camaraderie, acceptance, and an outlet for social frustrations and DVE groups seeking credibility, expertise with weapons or tactical skills, and the ability to enhance their operational capabilities in perpetrating violence. Taken together, this is deeply troubling and dangerous. Groups like the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, Three Percenters, and other anti-government militias pose a real and growing threat to veterans, their families, and our democracy. Veterans have lost their jobs, families, liberty, and even their lives through engagement with these groups.

It is clear that more action is needed to identify and assist veterans who engage with these nefarious DVE groups. As such, the Committee plans further exploration into the psychology of extremism, the veteran radicalization process, and intervention strategies that may be effective in providing "off-ramps" from extremism.

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<sup>40</sup> House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Hearing on Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans, 117th Cong. (Oct. 13, 2021).