INTRODUCTION

On January 6, 2021, 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 fought police 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.

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.

**A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

For most of the 20th century, the veteran population of the United States was very large, thanks to two world wars that mobilized millions of men and women into the military, as well as several smaller wars and a peacetime draft that lasted from 1948-1973. In 1980, with a total population of 226 million, the U.S. had 28.5 million veterans. Indeed, veterans constituted such a sizable percentage of the adult male population that their appearance in some numbers among extremist and fringe groups and movements was to be expected.

Today, because of the passing of older veterans and decreased size of the U.S. military, the proportion of Americans who are veterans is smaller. In 2020, with a population of 330 million, the U.S. has about 18 million veterans, according to the Census Bureau (the Veterans Administration estimates 19 million). Still, despite dropping from 12.6% of the population to 5.5%, the current number of 18 million veterans is still a very large population pool, large enough to be representative of broader American society in many respects—including the presence of extremists. Because extremists of various kinds exist in American society, we should expect
to see their presence among American veterans as well. The question then becomes not whether or not there are extremists who have served in the military but rather one of whether there may be a disproportionate presence of extremists within the veteran population.

In addition to the broad issue of extremists in the general veteran population, there historically has also been a second, quite different issue of concern related to extremism and veterans. This is the long-standing issue of high-ranking former military officers joining extremist causes after their 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.

One of the most prominent military figures to do so, as described by historian Joseph W. Bendersky, was the rabidly antisemitic Major General George Van Horn Mosely, whose retirement from the Army in the late 1930s allowed him more openly to promote Jewish Communist conspiracy theories and praise groups like the pro-Hitler German-American Bund.

During the 1950s and 1960s, a number of retired high-ranking military officers became prominent opponents of desegregation, promoters of right-wing conspiracy theories, and leaders in a variety of far right causes. These included U.S. Army Generals Edwin Walker and Edward Almond, Rear Admiral John Crommelin, Jr., and USMC Lieutenant General Pedro del Valle, among others. Some may have gone beyond mere promotion; there is evidence to suggest that Crommelin may have been tied to the 1958 bombing of a synagogue in Atlanta.

Former high-ranking military officers have been involved in extremist causes in more recent years as well. After the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, retired Air Force Brigadier General Benton K. Partin emerged as one of the most influential OKC bombing conspiracy theorists. In the 2000s,
William G. Boykin, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant general, became an outspoken anti-Muslim ideologue, helping to produce the report “Shariah: The Threat to America” for the anti-Muslim Center for Security Policy. Boykin currently is an executive vice-president with the anti-LGBT+ group Family Research Council.

More 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.

One of the more enduring problems involving veterans and extremism, then, is the involvement of former high-ranking—and thus high-profile—military figures in far-right causes and conspiracy theories.

ARE EXTREMISTS DISPROPORTIONATELY REPRESENTED AMONG 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 all of their membership consists of people with prior military experience—to make their group seem more “legitimate.”

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 took part in the Capitol storming. 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 agree with internal ADL Center on Extremism statistics on 411 Capitol stormers facing criminal charges, which find that 45 (or 11%) were veterans.

The PoE/CTC study notes that the 12% veteran participation rate among Capitol stormers was higher than the approximately 7% of Americans with some military experience. However, while the arrested Capitol stormers with military experience were overwhelmingly male, the overall population of veterans includes many women. When gender is taken into account and only male veterans are analyzed, the POE/CTC study concluded that male veterans make up about 14% of the general population but male Capitol stormers with veteran status made up only 13.6% of all male Capitol stormers. The authors suggest that “if anything...there actually is a very slight underrepresentation of veterans among the January 6 attackers.”
These results illustrate that there is no easy answer to the question and much more work needs to be done.

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. They may like the idea of recruiting veterans, and even talk about it, but the truth is most will accept anybody. 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 may be appreciated but is not necessarily particularly sought after. However, 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 militiamovement (including the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters) has the strongest paramilitary focus and thus, presumably, the most interest in veterans. 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.” Videos of several white supremacist “training” events did not seem to show much beyond target practice and were certainly primitive compared to a lot of paramilitary training within the militia movement, to say nothing of actual military training.

The idea of extremists recruiting veterans for military skills also must be put in perspective. First, on the demand side, it should be noted that relatively few white supremacist groups are paramilitary or weapons-oriented in nature. Even in the much more paramilitary-oriented militia movement, there are many groups and individuals who do not engage in paramilitary training, while the track record for militia violence is even less than that for white supremacists. And when white supremacists or anti-government extremists engage in violence, it virtually never resembles any sort of military or paramilitary tactical action, nor does it typically require military skills beyond the ability to use firearms. None of the perpetrators of the deadliest mass casualty attacks by right-wing extremists in recent years—Dylann Roof, Robert Bowers, Patrick Crusius—had any military background nor utilized military skills in their deadly attacks on soft targets.

Moreover, just because someone was in the military does not mean they have transferrable military skills useful for a white supremacist or militia group. Modern military forces in general have a significant “tooth-to-tail” ratio, meaning that it takes a large number of noncombat military personnel (the “tail”), ranging from truck drivers to meteorologists, to support the frontline combat soldiers (“the tooth”). Even frontline combat positions do not necessarily provide skills transferrable to an extremist group.

Norm Olson, the founder of the Michigan Militia and later leader of other militia groups in Michigan and Alaska, was a former Air Force master sergeant. His
military background was probably of far less relevance to the Michigan Militia than was his later career as owner of a gun shop. Many other extremists with prior military service had military backgrounds that were equally unhelpful to their later activities in extremist groups.

Though some individual former military personnel may bring practical or useful skills to the extremist groups they join, in most cases they do not. What they offer, instead, is a sort of status. Extremist groups often boast that their ranks contain many veterans—even when they don’t. Just as extremists appreciate knowledge about firearms—to the point where they may engage in endless online discussions to demonstrate who knows more—they often also appreciate people who can effortlessly use military lingo. The mere fact of former military personnel being part of an extremist group can confer status.

DOES MILITARY SERVICE MAKE PEOPLE MORE VULNERABLE TO EXTREMISM?

Over the years, there has been a lot of speculation about whether veterans generally might be more vulnerable than nonveterans to being recruited by extremists, or whether specific circumstances might arise that might make them so. In 2009, for example, a highly-publicized DHS memo speculated that “disgruntled military veterans” returning from Iraq or Afghanistan might be radicalized by right-wing extremist groups. However, an FBI memo from around the same time noted that, though “some veterans” of Iraq and Afghanistan had joined extremist groups, “they have not done so in numbers sufficient to [stem the then-current decline in white supremacist activity] nor has their participation resulted in a demonstrably more violent extremist movement.”

The odds are there is nothing about having served in the military that would make one meaningfully more likely to be recruited by an extremist group. However, although it would seem unlikely, the basic answer is unknown. This is an area where more data and analysis would definitely be useful. It is also not known if
extremists with prior military service are more (or less) likely to engage in violent or criminal activities than extremists without such prior service.

It is important, in considering this issue, to avoid *post hoc ergo propter hoc* assumptions. Just because someone served in the military, then later became involved in an extremist group, does not mean that the former had anything to do with the latter. Indeed, people often become extremists years or even decades after their military service, making it quite unlikely that their military service played any significant role in prepping them for radicalization. It is also the case that some extremists with prior military service had extremist views before they entered the military.

**WHAT CAN BE DONE TO COMBAT EXTREMISM AMONG VETERANS?**

Perhaps the most important need is for more, and more reliable, data. Both government agencies like the Veterans Administration 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, many veterans are physically and emotionally vulnerable, and any such surveys or studies must be conducted with great sensitivity and respect for privacy to ensure they are not inappropriately intrusive.

Veterans’ 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’ 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.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **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. The agency 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’ 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.