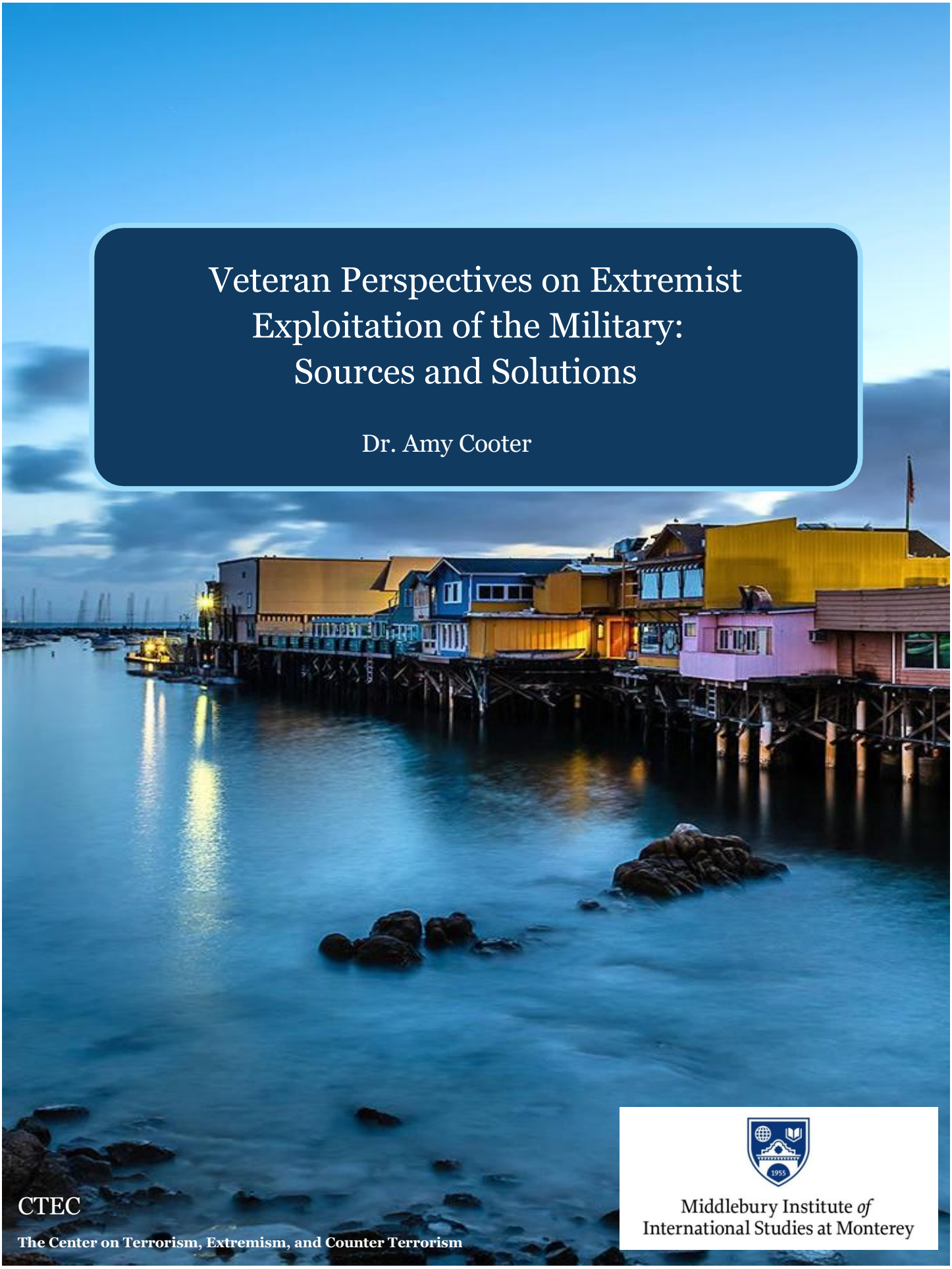
Veteran Perspectives on Extremist Exploitation of the Military: Sources and Solutions

Dr. Amy Cooter



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Dr. Amy Cooter, March 2025

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Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism

CTEC is a research center that applies advanced analytical approaches to deepen academic, tech, and policymakers' understanding of challenging emergent extremism threats. Founded in 2018 and based at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, CTEC researchers mentor the next generation via internship and Fellowship opportunities for students in the Middlebury Institute's Nonproliferation and Terrorism Studies degree program. CTEC is a mixed-methods research center, meaning that our experts and students use analytic tradecraft, data science, and linguistics to closely examine extremist patterns and trends. CTEC is poised to remain at the forefront of terrorist threat mitigation as center experts work with legislators, law enforcement entities, and intelligence agencies to build safeguards against emerging risks associated with anti-government extremist actors.

About the Author

Dr. Amy Cooter is the Director of Research CTEC at the Middlebury Institute and for the Accelerationism Research Consortium. She has studied nostalgic groups in the U.S. for nearly two decades and remains one of only a few researchers who has directly conducted interviews and attended trainings with domestic militia members to understand their motives for and experiences with participation in such groups. She has testified to the U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs' Hearing on the Recruitment of Veterans by Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and submitted written testimony to the January 6th Select Committee regarding the militia movement and its involvement in the Capitol insurrection. She has published in a variety of academic and public outlets about militias, neo-Nazis, and similar groups' structures, motives, and activities and is the author of *Nostalgia, Nationalism, and the US Militia Movement*.

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Abstract

There has been increasing attention to how military service members and veterans may be recruited or exploited by extremists, yet there is little research on precisely how this may happen or on how such ties may, in turn, influence military cohesion. It is important to emphasize that the vast majority of service members are not extremist, but a growing number of domestic extremists have military connections who may then have an outsized ability to enact harm, including by training others in military techniques. Given the potential for veterans' knowledge and experiences to be exploited by extremist groups, understanding these connections is pressing. This paper shares findings from an in-depth interview study with 42 veterans from all military branches who collectively shed light on how extremism influences various aspects of military life from recruitment to readiness and who offer concrete steps the military could pursue at every stage of service to limit extremists' exploitation of the institution and those who serve.

Table of Contents

1. What is Extremism?

Extremism, for the purposes of this paper, refers to actions that are intended to disrupt typical social or political relationships and that are motivated by some ideological goal. Domestic extremism includes violent acts of terrorism as well as non-violent and non-criminal actions that are nonetheless designed to intimidate groups of people or otherwise influence their behavior in the name of furthering some agenda. One such example would be individuals who legally protest while heavily armed or while wearing iconography associated with explicit racism–actions, in many places, have open carry and First Amendment protections but that are at least in part intended to silence counterprotestors and discourage their future participation in similar oppositional action.

Concerns about extremist connections to the military are not new even though they have garnered renewed and perhaps increased public attention in recent years.[1] As early as 2008, the FBI reported that recruitment into white supremacist organizations from military ranks was a pressing issue, and, shortly after, the Department of Homeland Security expressed similar concerns about how people exiting military service could be susceptible to recruitment to supremacist or anti-government groups.[2] These concerns were not without precedent, as many previous perpetrators of extremism had already been known to have military connections. The quintessential example perhaps remains Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and his co-conspirator Terry Nichols, both of whom had previously served in the U.S. Army and met during basic training.[3] Examples of veteran involvement in extremism unfortunately continue, both of so-called lone-wolf actors, such as Ricky Shiffer, the Navy veteran who threatened Cincinnati FBI agents in August 2022, and of veterans acting in concert with groups of known extremists, as was true on January 6th, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol incursion.[4]

We tend to categorize the above individuals as domestic, or home-grown terrorists, and service member involvement can be found in actions we usually label differently, namely in plots linked to various Salafi Jihadist entities. For example, in 2024, a U.S. Army Private First Class was convicted of lending material support to ISIS efforts to murder soldiers in the Middle East.[5] An Army veteran who killed 14 people by driving into a New Orleans crowd on New Year's Day, 2025, displayed an ISIS flag on his vehicle and is suspected of

[1] Chermak, Freilich, and Suttmoeller 2013; Vergani et al. 2020
[2] FBI 2008; DHS 2009
[3] CNN 2022
[4] Horton et al. 2022
[5] Army Counterintelligence Command Public Affairs Office 2024

being inspired by the group.[6] A project from START that analyzed criminal acts committed by people with military backgrounds found that as many as 10% of them were motivated by similar, Jihadist ideology.[7]

2. Extremism's Intersection with Military Structures

In addition to the relatively obvious ability of extremists to exploit tactical capabilities of military members, extremism also negatively impacts military structures and effectiveness. Seth Jones, director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, for example, reported to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs that government, military, and police personnel and facilities had, combined, become the "most frequent targets" of domestic extremism as of 2020.[8] It is highly unlikely that extremist actors who want to attack the institutions designed to keep our society safe are only targeting these institutions from the outside. Evidence of internal disruption to military or police structures is less clear, but LtCdr. Steven Mack Presley reported as early as 1996 that the presence of racism and other forms of exclusion in the ranks had disrupted morale in Vietnam, and that ongoing extremist elements "[jeopardize] combat readiness by weakening interpersonal bonds, fomenting distrust, eroding unit cohesion, and will ultimately negate a unit's ability to operate to its full potential."[9]

More recently, 36% of active-duty subscribers surveyed by the *Military Times* in 2019 said they had "seen evidence" of white supremacy and racism in the military, a marked increase from the prior year.[10] Thus, despite both society-wide and military-specific efforts to improve racial acceptance in the intervening years since Presley's observation, it is likely that supremacist and other extremist elements continue to have a detrimental effect on military readiness in ways that we have not yet accurately measured. Investigative journalist Matt Kennard, as another example, suggests that non-white parents may not support their children's desire to join the military if extremism is seen as a common problem among the ranks, and speculates that women's participation may be negatively impacted for similar reasons.[11]

[6] Hughes 2025
[7] Jensen, Yates, and Kane 2022
[8] Jones 2021, 8
[9] Presley 1996
[10] Shane 2020
[11] Kennard 2012

Some researchers working to understand how military service intersects with extremism have tried to assess what aspects of military structures could influence extremist thinking. Researcher Stephanos Vlachos, for example, examines survey data from France to demonstrate that direct combat exposure during WWII was correlated with increased support for politicians who were seen as challenging the existing system, suggesting that the trauma of war itself might be sufficient to push some people to reject government legitimacy.[12] Others examine how the perceptions of Vietnam and domestic social change surrounding race, gender, and economy led to a surging extremism among U.S. military veterans who believed this conflict to be a failed effort that undermined the legitimacy of national policy and military strategy alike.[13]

Both the aforementioned 2009 DHS report and other research efforts have focused on 9/11 and the War on Terror as similarly pivotal points that likely increased extremist connections inside the U.S. military. Researchers Hall, Hassell & Fitch suggest that military recruitment standards were loosened during this time to ensure a large, deployable force, making it easier for extremists to join and acquire skills they could then use against other Americans.[14] The DOD's 2005 Defense Personnel Security Research Center report goes so far as to say that the military had a "'don't ask, don't tell' policy pertaining to extremism" during this time as it prioritized recruitment volume over possible extremist elements.[15] Hall et al. note that extremist groups themselves were aware of these laxening standards and encouraged their members to join the military–a tactic the authors argue paid off for extremist groups.[16] They find that there were twice the number of successful or planned, violent, rightwing attacks with military connections in the 15 years after 9/11 as compared to the 15 years before that date. The study also finds evidence that attacks in the latter period were both more violent and more fatal compared to the earlier time frame. The increased success of these attacks may not only be from the presence of more military members in extremist groups, but also because those with military experience have been shown to disproportionately rise to leadership roles in extremist groups, positioning them to teach others about their skill sets in a way that could be used for more effective violence.[17]

[12] Vlachos 2016
[13] Gibson 1994; Belew 2018
[14] Hall, Hassell, and Fitch 2021
[15] Buck et al. 2005, 12
[16] Hall, Hassell, and Fitch 2021
[17] Smith et al. 2011

3. A Growing Problem

Extremist groups' exploiting veterans by pushing them into leadership positions helps contextualize data from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database. Researchers with the National Consortium on the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism have noted that these data confirm most extremists do not have military backgrounds, but when extremist groups are able to take advantage of veterans and their knowledge, not all group members need to have first-hand military experience for that experience to be appropriated for violent aims.[18] Experts who testified to the House Committee on Veterans Affairs in October 2021 regarding veteran recruitment to extremism have also noted that veterans' presence in these groups can potentially increase the size of the group by giving them credibility that attracts more would-be members to their ranks.[19]

More recent years are not available in the dataset used in the Hall et al. study but given continuing increases in domestic extremist activity in society as a whole, it may be the case that military connections have continued to grow in extremist groups during the intervening time.[20] Increasing connections would be consistent with two other recent findings. First, data from the Center for Strategic & International Studies say veterans are responsible for 10% of all domestic terror attacks and plots since 2015, a startling figure.[21] Second, current data indicates that 13% of the January 6th Capitol insurrection defendants have military experience, while only 5.4% of the U.S. population are veterans.[22] The disproportionate share of military connections among these defendants is concerning and highlights the importance and timeliness of understanding how and why military members can become affiliated with or exploited by extremist groups and actions.

America is facing similar cultural disruptions as previous eras, such as Vietnam and 9/11, that are considered pivotal to extremist infiltrations of the military and to veterans' exposure to extremist narratives. Against the backdrop of current political polarization, similar cultural conditions have once again generated verdant opportunities for extremist actors to exploit veterans' grievances through the promotion of warped narratives and conspiracy theories. Domestic extremism poses continuing threats of physical violence, growing disruptions to our democratic institutions, and has risen to a level of concern sufficient for The

[18] Copland 2021; Jensen, Yates, and Kane 2022; Pape and Ruby, 2023
[19] House Committee on Veterans' Affairs 2021
[20] O'Harrow, Tran, and Hawkins 2021
[21] Jones et al. 2021
[22] GW Program on Extremism 2022

White House to issue its first national security directive to address it.[23] In October 2022, The Majority Staff of the U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs also formally recommended more support for research into extremism in the veteran community following their two-part series of hearings on the topic, noting,

> "Acknowledging the unfortunate reality that violent extremism is a small but growing threat among the U.S. veteran population does not impugn all veterans. Rather, ignoring the threat of veteran-involved violent extremism does a disservice to those who continue to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic, following their military service."[24]

Studies like those conducted by Hall et al., while insightful regarding how military practices may contribute to the growth of extremism in its ranks, suffer from a flawed assumption that there is a relatively constant base-rate of extremism in broader society while suggesting that shifts in military culture act as a valve for permitting or restricting entry of extremism into military ranks.[25] This model largely ignores evidence that extremism has been increasing in society at large in recent years.[26] Systematic investigations of military connections to extremism must additionally account for social/political and individual factors that can contribute to an extremist pathway and that are largely independent of military recruitment, strategies, or practices.

4. The Influence of Individual Traits

Studies that have focused on individual characteristics have identified a variety of factors that may be associated with extremist outcomes. Researchers Haugstvedt & Koehler reviewed a relatively small number of cases from the PIRUS dataset to identify a broad set of factors that may differentiate rightwing extremists with military experience from rightwing extremists without that experience.[27] These included factors like experiences with trauma, injury to social standing, romantic difficulties, mental illness, and anger. Databases like this can suffer from a variety of data integrity issues for example, people with military experience may simply be more likely to have mental illness assessments than their non-military comparison points yet serve as good starting points for pinpointing risk factors

[23] The White House 2021
[24] House Committee on Veterans' Affairs 2022
[25] Hall, Hassell, and Fitch 2021
[26] O'Harrow, Tran, and Hawkins 2021
[27] Haugstvedt and Koehler 2021

that can then guide efforts to identify service members who are potentially susceptible to extremist recruitment.

Other studies investigating the role of individual characteristics focus on traits believed to be associated with masculinity like risk-taking and status-seeking. Both traits are exhibited much more strongly in men than in women for social reasons and likely biological reasons as well.[28] Psychologist Sophia Moskalenko suggests that a risk and status-seeking framework helps explain military connections to extremism, since a common, stereotypical archetype of service members is that of brave, physically strong men willing to take risks for their country or their unit, men who rise in the ranks when rewarded for doing so.[29] Moskalenko then asserts that "most" Army recruits join "in pursuit of selfish interests," such that the Army must actively destroy their self-esteem and sense of identity before rebuilding the recruit on a foundation of self-sacrifice.[30] The important implication is that men who are most strongly motivated to take risks and aim for high social status are likely to find both military and extremist opportunities appealing, and that these men might find the process of assimilation to military culture particularly damaging in a way that pushes them into extremist affiliations or outlets as the attempt to rebuild their identity.

Although unspecified by the Moskalenko study, logically, there are two routes through which this funneling toward extremism might happen. First, men who are unable to reach the high standards required in the military might be dissatisfied by the experience: feeling disconnected, unrewarded, or perhaps even receiving a dishonorable discharge; they thus feel forced to seek out other routes to masculine success. Second, men with successful military careers may nonetheless face uncertainty following their separation from service, causing them to seek out a surrogate arrangement upon retirement.

Sociologist Amy Cooter observed veterans who were actively seeking out domestic militia groups for both the above reasons while conducting fieldwork with militias in Michigan in 2008-2011.[31] One man, for example, wanted to use his skills against the government after coming to believe he had been mistreated, even experimented upon, during his service. Another talked, in contrast, about needing to find a community where his experiences could be understood and respected, where he could find a sense of camaraderie that he had previously possessed while enlisted. One important observation from Cooter's study is that both types of men continued to regard themselves as patriots who were dedicated to serving their countrymen through their actions. This undercuts Moskalenko's assertions that purely selfish interests are at the

[28] Connell 1995; Verdonk, Seesing, and de Rijk 2010; Moskalenko and McCauley 2020
[29] Moskalenko 2021
[30] Moskalenko 2021, 182
[31] Cooter 2024

root of many service members' disillusionment process, and demonstrates why efforts to understand extremism in the military must consider service members' understanding of patriotism and related concepts that may be motivating factors for seeking out extremism.[32]

5. Solutions Suggested by the Literature

Some researchers have proposed concrete actions that the military could undertake to limit extremism in its ranks, yet the impact of these proposals is currently unknown. The Rand Corporation, for example, has suggested additional action at the recruitment stage to buffer against extremist elements joining the military. Alongside higher screening standards, they suggest that basic training should include lessons on media literacy to help combat misinformation as well as so-called inoculation messaging, which teaches incoming service members about their risk of being targeted for extremist recruitment and provides strategies to resist those efforts.[33] Some researchers have demonstrated that peer networks prevent isolation and are "instrumental in both prevention and intervention efforts [for extremism]."[34] Peers should thus also be a crucial source of information about how extremist exploitation can influence service members in the first place.

Other suggestions for limiting extremists in the military have included developing definitions of extremism and rules regarding extremist group affiliations that are consistent across all military branches, developing a clearer reporting structure with increased resources for investigating reports of extremism among service members, and encouraging chaplains or others in the military network to know and report signs of extremism.[35] To ensure accurate identification and reporting of possible extremism, however, military leaders must know what kinds of behavior or messaging to watch for—a knowledge base that was considered generally lacking in the DOD's Defense Personnel Security Research Center report about screening for potential terrorists in the military.[36] The U.S. military has attempted to respond directly to concerns of extremism elements through several efforts in recent years, including implementing stronger prohibitions against tattoos that may indicate affiliation or at least ideological

[32] While most extremists are men, frameworks that focus exclusively on male biology or traits that are assumed to be comparatively absent in women additionally risk missing how women can be radicalized. Some women do join extremist organizations and commit violence and others are ideologically supportive of such efforts even without personal engagement Blee 1992. Understanding how women fit into extremism is crucial for fully tracking it and, hopefully, mitigating its impact.
[33] Helmus, Byrne, and Mallory 2021
[34] House Committee on Veterans' Affairs 2022
[35] Posard, Payne, and Miller 2021
[36] Buck et al. 2005

resonance with extremism and rehardening recruitment standards, but effectiveness of these strategies is currently unknown.[37]

6. Methods

This study helps address gaps we still have in understanding what forms extremism currently takes within the military by centering the voices of veterans who are not always consulted in existing research on these questions. Their insider view allows a more robust exploration of the mechanisms by which this exploitation happens while attending to both military processes and individual traits that might further explain which service members are vulnerable to this exploitation. Interviewing veterans further facilitates a more thorough understanding of the true impacts extremism has on the military and its members while yielding actionable and experience-based insights into how to address extremism's influence.

Forty-two interviewees participated in open-ended interviews on Zoom that explored their exposures to extremism in the military and their ideas about what more the military, the government, or society more broadly could do to limit extremist exploitation of service members and veterans. Interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling from the PI's broader network, and while interviewees represent all branches of the service, including Space Force, they over represent women, the medical field, and liberal politics relative to the U.S. military as a whole. The goal of this study is not to provide generalizable estimates of extremist exposure across branches, but rather to deeply explore how extremism is evidenced in the day-to-day lives of service members and to understand and mitigate its impact on the military.

The fact that the majority of interviewees (all except three) believed they were never likely to be a successful target of extremist recruitment is a strength in the context of this study. We know extremists are not the majority of our military. Much of the existing work examines extremists with military experience retrospectively, only after they have already committed some act of extremist violence. Other work similarly examines only veterans who express extremist support, while other researchers interview individuals who are formers—people who previously affiliated with extremist groups but did not necessarily commit extremist action. These studies are valuable because they allow us to closely examine the highest risk cases, the actors who have committed harms or who were highly likely to do so before disaffiliating from

[37] DOD 2021b; 2021a; Fowler 2021

their respective groups. What studies like that cannot address, however, is how the average service member is impacted by these outliers. The interviewees in this study help us do just that.

All forty-two interviewees were very eager to help, and most had a tendency to describe themselves as somewhat different from the average service member, elaborating that they, for various reasons, believed themselves to be more attuned to problems of extremism than the typical soldier. Whether or not this is true is difficult to say, but it did indicate a collective dedication to identifying and addressing extremism within the interview sample. A few interviewees engage with questions of extremism in their careers or previously did so in their military roles, which means their insights were especially considered.

7. Findings

The interviews unsurprisingly reveal interviewees' complex and multifaceted understandings of extremism's connection to the U.S. military. The study and interview prompts define extremism as a broad construct, one that reflects attempts to push service members toward ideas or toward groups that do things like promote violence, distrust in the government, or encourage racism or other kinds of exclusion. However, only three interviewees mention extremism that was not right-wing extremism. Two of these three said they thought it would be interesting to explore Islamic extremism's influence on the military but offered no personal insights into this kind of extremism, while one interviewee discussed how an understanding of extremism as something foreign or, specifically, Islamic, has limited the military's focus on other kinds of extremism. He says:

> "...we were sitting in one of those [mandatory] classes one time, and a guy was asking what did you join the Marine Corps for?' They're always fucking yelling at you, and he wanted answers like, 'I wanted to be part of a team. I wanted to, you know, do this, I wanted to serve my country.' A [this guy] from Michigan stands up and he goes, 'I want to destroy Islamic extremism from the face of the earth,' and got like a big fucking cheer. And whoever was teaching it was kind of like, 'Alright, well, we gotta be careful with that, but like I like your moxie, son.'"

Only four interviewees report witnessing anything resembling direct recruitment attempts from extremist actors. This low level of recruitment is not surprising;

extremists make up a small minority of service members and, as other researchers have confirmed, extremists who want to recruit among the ranks bide their time, testing individuals' susceptibility or proclivity to extremist messaging before revealing themselves to avoid possible detection by superiors, formal investigation, and punishment for their activities.[38]

Three of the observed recruitment efforts were from the Oath Keepers, and two of these attempts happened at Veteran Administration facilities, rather than on base. One interviewee describes her experience by saying:

"There were different organizations including insurance salesmen when you walk the halls of VA, and you'd find Oath Keepers there. Like they would just be there as part of the scenery. [...] It was almost like they were trying to dress proper in business suits. They didn't look all shaggy or whatever. They were trying to look professional. They were trying to give an air of professionalism. [...] They had sign-in rosters where they wanted your email, your address, your phone number."

The fourth over recruitment effort was reportedly from a white supremacist organization that unsuccessfully attempted to recruit one interviewee into racist thinking through wilderness activities. He shares:

> "I was pretty lonely when I first moved out there. I didn't have any friends or anything, so I ended up kind of joining up with this neo paganism revival group that—my family is Germanic and Nordic in origin, and, not that I bought a lot of stock into it, but I was like, 'Well, it'd be cool just to hang out with these people see kind of what they're about.' And they did a lot of hiking in the woods, and camping, and, you know, did a lot of feasts and stuff out there, so it was cool. I was into that. I'm a big outdoors person. But probably about 6-7 months into that, I realize, especially the people who are leading it, were straight up Nazis. I mean, this was a pipeline to recruit people. No one ever overtly approached me with it, but I felt like they were watching to see, like, okay, which people can they target? So I very quickly distanced myself from that group"

Despite the varied experiences and nuanced perspectives across the interviewees, two clear but competing threads nonetheless emerge about the believed origins of extremism in service members, and interviewees collectively suggest concrete solutions at every stage of military service that could bolster the military's resiliency against extremist exploitation. The first explanation of extremism's

[38] Amarasingam, St-Amant, and Jones 2024

origin focuses on biographical factors while the other attributes causality to the military environment itself.

7.1. Individual Biography

Some interviewees note that they believe individual life factors that pre-existed military involvement are the core explainers for extremism within the military. These individuals identify some combination of socio-economic disadvantage, rural upbringing, and an innate, personality-based susceptibility to racist or other exclusionary narratives.

Putting aside for the present analysis that these assertions when applied across the board are rooted in stereotypical and problematic portrayals of underprivileged and rural people, these interviewees' perspectives may nonetheless yield insights into anecdotal cases they have observed. These interviewees believe that impoverishment or the comparative homogeneity of a rural hometown are more strongly associated with feelings of marginalization or animus toward non-white people and women, feelings that might be brought to a head in the military environment. Participants in some other studies have reported that seeing people of color and women in leadership positions and working alongside unit members from a variety of demographic backgrounds helped them challenge preconceptions and prejudices, but some interviewees in this study say they witnessed the opposite. They say they personally witnessed racist and misogynist hostilities fester when some individuals had to report or be accountable to others they believed were inherently inferior. One interviewee, for example, recounts a story of a unit member who was made to remove a Confederate flag from the barracks, complained that his sergeant made him remove it, later separated from the service for reasons unknown to the interviewee, and then made national news for a violent, racist attack.

Some of these interviewees note that hateful individuals were still largely able to put their personal animus to the side during missions, especially combat, and follow the rank structure. Even so, this baseline approach to perceived outgroup members makes these individuals susceptible to extremist messaging that exploits and amplifies these feelings, especially messages that blame social problems on specific racial groups or even, from an anti-government perspective, shadowy elites. Once a mission concludes, it is likely, according to the interviewees, that hostile feelings resurface and can be particularly dangerous if unaddressed when someone separates from the service.

Individuals who, for whatever reason, are influenced by conspiracism or feelings of isolation are largely at even greater risk, interviewees say. Conspiracism generally amplifies perceived in- and out-group boundaries and the search for something, or someone, concrete to blame for apparent personal or social problems. Numerous interviewees discuss how social media is a catalyst for some people they have seen drawn into extremist and conspiratorial thinking. They believe a sense of isolation even and perhaps especially in an environment that functions based on a formalized camaraderie may also facilitate some individuals' search for another social group where they feel accepted and supported. Some interviewees specifically reference the concept of "joiners"—people who feel they must belong to some kind of group to be comfortable, who perhaps are less interested in a given group's ideology and more interested in the sense of belonging the group creates. These interviewees say that joiners, regardless of other biographical characteristics, seem to be most prone to problematic associations.

We know extremists are talented at identifying individuals who are vulnerable in this way and capitalizing on that vulnerability to increase their own ranks. One interviewee expresses her awareness of this relationship and describes herself in contrast to how she believes joiners have to define themselves within the context of some group belonging:

> "In my mind, I'm like, 'I did my service, like, I did it.' Whatever service I owed to my country, I'm good now, so like whatever volunteering was required of me, I think I'm set. I still do certain volunteer activities. I still donate blood regularly and things like that. But I'm probably less likely to actually be a joiner again to actually join in on various [group-based] volunteer activities or like service activities."

7.2. Military Environment

The other dominant explanation interviewees have for extremism within the military attributed extremist outcomes to the military itself. Reinforcing some existing work as well as the experiences of the graduate student research assistant who worked some on this project, several interviewees emphasize how the military functions on defining and enforcing in- and out-group boundaries.[39] They argue that at least some degree of prejudice is essential for maintaining unit cohesion and operational effectiveness in regions of conflict, regions that have

[39] Diego Olivieri 2025; Villamil, Turnbull-Dugarte, and Rama 2024

been dominated by engagements in Muslim countries in recent decades. They likewise suggest that dehumanization through xenophobic rhetoric and Islamophobic stereotypes is necessary to enable soldiers to justify killing and other hostile actions in which they directly participate in war zones. In this context, prejudice, if not outright extremism, becomes thought of as a tactical advantage.

While two interviewees argue that such exclusionary, racist frameworks are present in the military only because the military is a microcosm of larger society, a majority of interviewees note that exclusionary thinking was actively reinforced by some military leaders, especially, but not exclusively, for those deployed in combat zones. One even reports that their unit leader regularly stoked Islamophobia even while they were on a peacekeeping mission when enhancing hostilities toward Muslim citizens was not only directly against the mission but also increased real risks of retributive violence toward members of that unit.

Interviewees not that the inculcated us-versus-them framework permeated military culture to the extent that, in their own unit, the adoption of extreme views (or at least rhetoric) served as a form of social currency, a requirement for inclusion within certain military cliques both on and off base. One observes that this dynamic was not necessarily about genuine or deeply held political convictions, but rather about a desire for belonging, where "if you didn't have those views you kind of weren't part of the club."

7.3. Amplifying Variables

Nineteen interviewees specifically identify Donald Trump as a particularly politicizing force within the military who normalized political discussions and even interpersonal aggressiveness that these interviewees said had not been there before his first campaign. One interviewee remarks:

> "I never really felt like the military was specifically politicized in the way it was beginning in about 2015. So what I started seeing is not just the political allegiance, you know, picking one candidate over the other. But you start seeing III%er T-shirts. You start seeing Proud Boys' symbology, iconography, and stuff that—before 2014-15—people were very reticent about. [...] There was kind of a sea change, I think, when Trump came into office. [...] Once he turned some of those military engagements into political engagements. It seemed to

> open the doors a little bit, and people felt very comfortable on being more open with their personal political views, even while in uniform."

There are several interviewees among this Trump-identifying subset whose period of service started before then extended through the 2016 Presidential campaign cycle. They report observing a marked increase in visible extremist affiliations, such as tattoos and symbols associated with groups like the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and III%ers, even though such displays violated military policies. One interviewee notes the presence of Trump patches on Air Force uniforms, a clear violation of usual policy. Another reports a significant escalation in such overt displays after the military was used as a visual backdrop for political events following that election, suggesting that there was a correlation between political events and the emboldening of extremist elements within the military. He says:

> "There were a couple of times where Trump, once he got elected, would show up at military bases or different places around the world, and he would politicize that event. And even though we had military there in the background, it was a political event. And so you start seeing a crossing of the streams of, 'I'm out here seeing the troops,' and 'I'm making political speeches,' and really overtly mixing those two, which most Presidents before him had taken a pretty serious line on. 'I'm gonna visit the troops. It's a morale visit. I'm going to boost their morale, but I'm not gonna mix it with political speech.'"

Even more intensely, while several interviewees report that they felt pressures to silence any challenges they might feel toward conservative viewpoints being endorsed among the ranks, two interviewees report that they had been directly instructed by a superior to vote for Donald Trump during the 2016 Presidential election

Fourteen interviewees say that Fox News is treated as though it is official military news on many bases, contributing to a hostile environment, an echo chamber, and a suppression of contradictory political views. Three separate interviewees express similar ideas, saying:

> "...if it's a government owned TV like if it's in the cafeteria or in headquarters it only plays Fox News"

> "I won't dwell on it, but it always kind of disgusted me that every installation you go to, whether you're in a barbershop or in an exchange or a food court. It's always Fox News on."

> "… get Fox news off the bases because when you go to the chow hall, when you go to the barracks everybody's seeing Fox News. That is not news, that is propaganda. So these guys are all watching the white replacement theory, you know that's Fox News."

Some interviewees who complain about Fox News's presence also note that they saw the network being played at Veterans Administration facilities and believe it served as a breeding ground for extremist ideas and even distorted perceptions of reality among separated service members, too. All of them comment on how they believed Fox News is a major catalyst for exclusionary or otherwise problematic behavior they observed during their time in the military.

8. Solutions

As with opinions about the root causes of extremism in the military, proposed solutions were complex and sometimes contradictory. Three interviewees say they believe there is "nothing" that could truly be done to prevent or mitigate extremist influence. The others echo some of what the literature already suggests but offer a closer and more compelling view as to why these solutions may be effective. They also clearly indicate that simple or single solutions will not work, that solutions must be pursued in concert and that there must be a desired and sustained investment on the part of the military and broader society for interventions to be effective

8.1. At Recruitment

Most interviewees who believe solutions can be found to extremist exploitation of military members say they believe that the military should do more to exclude certain individuals from joining in the first place, even as they acknowledge this may be an unlikely goal in an era when recruitment numbers are low and perceptions of global threats are high. This is true both for interviewees who attributed extremism to biographical factors that predated military service and those who believe extremism is largely rooted within military culture. The latter group navigates what at first might seem like a contradiction in their attribution of extremism's cause by observing that they believe any context where people are encouraged to think in exclusionary ways could be more impactful on some people than others.

Beyond stricter standards for acceptance, many interviewees call for a generally more rigorous vetting process. Some insist that, for an accurate assessment, the military should truly evaluate the social media activity of prospective candidates, despite also acknowledging the intense reticence for such examination on First Amendment grounds. They nonetheless say that they believe analyzing online activity for indicators of extremist affiliations, hate speech, or the endorsement of conspiracy theories could effectively factor into an overall assessment of a given candidate's potential for extremist susceptibility and that higher-risk individuals who may otherwise be good candidates could receive focused support services to bolster their resilience to extremist exploitation. One interviewee described this almost the way someone might explore a new friend's social media:

> "Start with small topic stuff. Just general stuff. 'Hey, do you like sports?' And then get into politics to see where this person—where their I guess loyalties lie, where they're influenced with other things."

He did not think of this as an antagonistic process but rather more of an interview step to provide more information about supporting each recruit while acknowledging the high degree of likely-human resources to perform this process at scale.

A smaller number of interviewees focus more heavily on the role of recruiters, individuals who should be the military's first line of defense against infiltration. Some discuss how they believe recruiters are insufficiently trained to recognize evolving symbols of extremism and wish there were a more reliable database for consultation. Others largely believe recruiters have the tools they need for excluding possibly problematic candidates but lack the incentives to do so. They believe that recruiters face pressures to enroll as many candidates as possible and believe that some actively instruct some candidates about how to lie or omit certain parts of their histories in order to pass screening. These interviewees thought of recruiters as having a primary responsibility to protect the integrity of the military, rather than simply meet recruitment quotas.

8.2. During Service

Suggestions interviewees make for deterring extremist exploitation during service include clear guidance, robust reporting mechanisms, and comprehensive education. Some interviewees believed this element would be best served by regularly providing updated lists of unacceptable affiliations.

They note that there has been hesitancy to fully pursue this option once again out of First Amendment considerations, but that it is nonetheless a necessary step in establishing a military free from extremist influence.

Others articulate a need to establish anonymous, centralized reporting structures for extremist activity or rhetoric, structures that mirror existing systems for other sensitive issues like sexual assault or substance abuse. This would encourage individuals to report problems without fear of reprisal, ensuring that crucial information reaches the appropriate authorities for investigation and action. Several said something like this interviewee, who discussed needing a reporting structure outside the chain of command.

> "This is where it's important that people are allowed to go outside their command and be able to report anonymously. To have to report to their squad leader or their platoon commander or company commander just isn't good enough. They need to be able to go outside to whatever the internal affairs is of the military and report to them what they've seen. Who was involved in it. And allow them to remain anonymous as best they can."

One interviewee in particular talked about this issue not as an ideal or hypothetical, but as something she had actually experienced. She felt at a loss during her service without a clear, external place to report hearing repeated racism because the person she needed to report was her direct supervisor. Under the policy she was expected to follow, she would have been required to report her supervisor to her supervisor, which would clearly have caused enormous personal and professional problems. Intervening action resulting from improved reporting, interviewees including this one say, would not necessarily be punitive in nature depending on the offense, but instead could provide relevant support services when appropriate.

Almost all interviewees advocate for some version of a more robust and regular educational component regarding extremist ideologies and recruitment tactics for all service members. This education, they say, should go beyond superficial briefings and instead delve into the specific strategies used by extremist groups to target and exploit service members. Ongoing education should include real-world examples and case studies, highlighting the potential consequences of extremist involvement and how this involvement is fundamentally un-American. The idea is that the military can empower individuals to recognize and resist extremist influences can foster a culture of vigilance and awareness.

Some interviewees note that part of this education should include positive lessons about diversity and inclusion—a goal that has become increasingly

unlikely in recent months, but one they say is essential for addressing some of the prejudice and ingroup-outgroup thinking that undergirds extremism. Other researchers argue that inclusion of women and racial minorities in military life can both reduce extremism and improve recruitment and retention. However, inclusion must be legitimate and not superficial, meaning it must be clearly endorsed by military leadership. One interviewee who remarks on the value of diversity recalls having limited seminars about inclusion being largely blown off or even openly mocked by their leadership in a way that would directly undermine this goal. She was frustrated and noted that this dismissive and exclusionary behavior made it less likely that high-quality personnel would stay in the military long-term, negatively impacting future leadership and readiness potentials alike.

Finally, three interviewees discuss how unstructured time can inadvertently facilitate extremist ideologies. Military life includes periods of unstructured time, especially during deployments or between assignments. This idle time, coupled with the ready availability of social media contributes to echo chambers, exploration of conspiracism, and self-selection of narrow news sources. These interviewees suggest that more regulations about social media usage and education about media awareness could help present this problem in addition to providing more engaging downtime activities

8.3. During and After Separation

Individuals transitioning out of the military and back to civilian life are at a critical juncture for mitigating extremist exploitation of departing service members. To address the profound challenges of transitioning to civilian life, interviewees almost uniformly believe that the military must significantly enhance its support systems. Many veterans, including nearly half of the interviewees in this study cite a "lack of mission" once they leave the service. This, coupled with inadequate job and housing assistance, creates a void for some veterans that is easily filled by extremist groups offering a false sense of purpose and community. One interviewee postulated this effect may be heightened for individuals who felt the allure of secrecy and having access to special knowledge while in the military and that, when losing that, extremist and conspiratorial narratives may invoke the same kind of feeling.

Extending the timeframe for post-separation support, including job search assistance and housing resources, would provide a more robust safety net against this kind of exploitation. Several interviewees note that they themselves were not quite ready to receive support at the time they left the service. They

were too ready to transition out to absorb meaningful information from what were often boring sessions, and did not always know where to go (or believe they had the option to go anywhere) if concerns or questions arose later.

Improved mental health services were also frequently cited by participants. One advocated for the inclusion of better measures of extremist exposure or temptation on some standard measures about overall mental health. Two others talked at length about how many people may see obvious connections to combat or acute, traumatic experiences in the service as necessitating mental health support, even basic training can induce trauma and the need for assistance. Working to further reduce the stigma around mental health awareness and care—especially for men—would also be required for these services to be effective.

Several interviewees talk about the need for greater deprogramming. Some who believe the military relies on exclusionary xenophobia and other perspectives delve into the need to unpack and discourage these perspectives in a civilian context. They are not sure how successful such efforts would be but believe the military does not currently make any effort toward this end. Two with similar viewpoints shared enhanced concerns about individuals they knew who were very overt with their Islamophobia and other prejudice who joined the police force after leaving the military, worrying that these discriminatory stances would threaten civilian equality and general experiences with police in these cases.

One interviewee talks at length about the heightened vulnerability of dishonorably discharged members. Dishonorable discharges typically preclude those individuals from receiving most benefits of military service, but this interviewee's compelling argument is that it is precisely these dishonorably discharged individuals who seem most likely to develop shame and anger that extremists attempt to exploit for violent purposes. He acknowledges that it may be difficult to convince politicians and others to support such an approach, but believes services given to these individuals are well worth the investment given the alternative cost of extremist radicalization and violence.

Finally, some interviewees again referenced ongoing education. They believe that the military must strengthen educational efforts regarding extremist exploitation during the separation phase. Transition programs like Soldier for Life should be significantly improved, they say, incorporating robust modules on recognizing and resisting extremist recruitment tactics. These programs should emphasize the importance of critical thinking, media literacy, and building healthy support networks in addition to maintaining a positive sense of military or veteran identity.

8.4. Other Prevention Avenues

Some interviewees offer suggestions for combating extremist exploitation of military members that fall somewhat outside the above categories yet are compelling and worth mentioning. Several argue that a comprehensive strategy must extend beyond the active-duty branches and acknowledge the unique vulnerabilities of the National Guard, which has received only limited attention in existing research. Given Guard members' deep ties to local communities, and, as one interviewee observed, their greater racial homogeneity relative to the military at large, they may face heightened risk factors for echo chambers and radicalization. He had participated in Guard units that were intentionally racially segregated during the mid-1990s, worked to integrate them or more well-rounded capabilities despite being labeled a "troublemaker" by superiors. He believes that particular dynamic is better today, overall, but still works with Guard units he says have limited internal diversity because of their geographic location and finds it harder to foster inclusion and cohesion within them as a result.

Similarly, one interviewee discusses how the military must recognize the significant role of civilian contractors in its operations and establish clear monitoring, reporting, and behavioral guidelines for these individuals. This interviewee's experience included civilian contractors who were largely immune to some of the expectations service members were required to follow yet interacted daily with those same service members in ways that easily facilitated problematic and potentially radicalizing ideas.

Finally, one interviewee offers an interesting perspective on social media, suggesting we think of it, or more precisely, the cognitive impacts it creates, as a national security issue. This interviewee was not referring to more typical areas of focus like foreign injection of disinformation but rather about how social media's ability to facilitate echo chambers, conspiratorial and extremist narratives, and general incivility may negatively influence social stability. It is unclear what exactly this framing of social media may translate to in terms of public policy or military strategy but is, at the very least, an interesting consideration as social media companies become increasingly associated with political parties.

9. Conclusion

This study affirms the complex nature of extremist exploitation of the military. Interviewees offer two different sources for extremism in the military, with

some focusing on individual factors and others analyzing the military environment itself. Those who believe the military itself is most culpable for extremism's influence also talked about how external factors, namely Donald Trump and Fox News, amplified negative aspects of military culture and created a situation where extremist views could foment. All interviews were completed before Trump's second inauguration, and the specific worries interviewees expressed about his administration's influence on extremism in the military are likely to be amplified over the next four years.

Interviewees are more unified in their belief that solutions to extremism in the military are complex, difficult, and require change at every stage of the military trajectory. Despite these challenges, interviewees offered concrete solutions at every stage of military service. At recruitment, they advocate for stricter vetting, including social media analysis, and enhanced recruiter training and accountability. During service, they emphasize clear guidelines, anonymous reporting structures, and robust education on extremist ideologies. During separation, they stress improved transition programs, extended support services, and comprehensive mental health care. Underscoring this point, almost all interviewees had an obvious desire to talk about their experiences and expertise, with some evoking a visceral emotionality, yet another clear indication we do not do enough to reintegrate service members into society or to recognize and appreciate their experiences. However, the success of these solutions hinges not only on their implementation but also on the sustained political will to prioritize them. and convert them into concrete policy changes and resource allocation.

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