

**Testimony of Leola Brooks
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before the
Armed Services Committee
United States House of Representatives**

**Extremism in the Armed Forces
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My name is Leola Brooks, I am chief of staff of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on extremism in the U.S. Armed Forces and what we can do to address this challenge.

communities. This fact was dramatically illustrated, once again, by the recent arrests of several veterans for their active involvement in the deadly January 6 insurrectionist siege at the U.S. Capitol.

The vast majority of those who serve in our Armed Forces have no connection to white supremacy or extremism and uphold the best traditions of our nation's democratic ideals. Though the number of extremists associated with the Armed Forces who engage in hate crimes and criminal extremist activity is relatively small, their capabilities and specialized weapons training make them prime targets for extremist propaganda and recruitment.³ Recent investigations have identified dozens of veterans and active duty servicemen and women who are affiliated with white supremacist activity.⁴

This is far from a new problem. In fact, the SPLC has been documenting white supremacist infiltration of the military and urging officials to take substantial and systematic actions since 1986. It is now clear that, despite some adjustments in policies related to recruitment and conduct within the Armed Forces, white supremacist and extremist activity continues to persist in the military.

Assessing the Current Threat of White Supremacist Terror

In recent years, we have witnessed devastating violence carried out by individuals

poll participant noted in their 2020 survey, “I complain that every ethnicity has an observer on the left but have nothing on the right”¹¹

These findings track with the SPLC’s findings regarding research on extremist activity in America throughout the Trump era. In 2019, the SPLC documented the highest number of active hate groups—1,080—since it began its annual tally of hate groups in 1980. Most alarming, the number of white nationalist groups rose by nearly 50% from 2018 to 2019.

While the SPLC’s most recent report shows a decline in 2020 hate groups active in 2020—an 11% decline from 2019—it is important to note that the number of hate groups is nearly one of many metrics for measuring extremist activity in the United States. A decline in hate group numbers, in other words, does not equate to a decline in extremist activity.

During this same period, the SPLC has documented a sharp increase in white supremacist violence. Three major factors have contributed to this increase in society over rapid demographic change in the United States, toxic rhetoric that singles out and targets specific communities based on their immutable characteristics, and the proliferation of hateful propaganda and extremist disinformation on social media and through hate attacks in El Paso, Texas, Poway, California, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, among others. This reminds of the threat posed by white supremacist ideology and those it motivates. One of these attacks was inspired by white supremacist conspiracy theories, particularly the longstanding animosity toward non-white migrants. The alleged perpetrators of these brutal acts were demonstrably influenced by the proliferation of vulgar propaganda by white supremacist ideologues on their

extremist ideologies are not members of any hate group but this fact does not stop them from engaging in real world actions.¹⁴ Extremists have instead turned to internet platforms, such as Telegram, that enable them to chat with other individuals across various extremist

In addition to the attempt to foment violence at a peaceful protest, federal prosecutors learned that the group also considered targeting federal buildings, including a fire station on federal land and a U.S. Forest Service ranger station, and fire bombing a power substation. This case powerfully highlights both the fervent antigovernment nature of the Boogaloo movement as well as its increasingly violent modus operandi.

On June 15, 2020, federal prosecutors charged U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Steven Canillo with murder and the attempted murder of two security guards outside of a federal courthouse in Oakland, California, and the earlier.²¹ Canillo was on active duty at the time and stationed at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, California. He previously received training with a elite Air Force security unit.

Canillo and his accused accomplice, Robert Alvin Justus, Jr., were linked to Boogaloo ideology, according to the criminal complaint.²² Canillo reportedly wrote in a Facebook group chat: “It’s on our coast now, this needs to be nationwide. It’s a great opportunity to target the specialty soup bois. Keep that energy going.” The phrase “soup bois” is thought to be in reference to federal law enforcement agencies whose acronyms may resemble alphabet soup. Justus reportedly replied to Canillo, “let’s boogie.” Canillo is also accused of killing a Santa Cruz County sheriff’s deputy in a shooting when officers tackled down the van thought to be associated in the courthouse attack. He was apprehended after fleeing and being pursued by authorities. In the van, authorities uncovered a vest with a patch featuring a logo of an igloo and Hawaiian style print, which is often attributed to the Boogaloo movement. Canillo is also said to have written “BOOG” and “stop the duppy” on the hood of a car claimed to be stolen by him during the pursuit.

Other plots by white supremacists active in the military have luckily been thwarted, including the one hatched by Lt. Christopher Paul Hassan, a 49-year-old serving in the Coast Guard.²³ Hassan, who had also spent time in the Maine Cops and the Army National Guard, pleaded guilty to federal gun and drug charges—including unlawful possession of unregistered silencers, unlawful possession of firearms silencers unidentified by a serial number, possession of a firearm by an addict, and unlawful use of a controlled substance, and possession of a controlled substance—in October 2019.²⁴ He was sentenced to more than 13 years in prison in February 2020.²⁵ Hassan identified as a white nationalist and advocated for “focused violence” against journalists, Democratic politicians, professors, U.S. Supreme Court justices, and “leftists” in

²¹ Katie Shepherd, “An officer was gunned down. The killer was a ‘boogaloo boy’ using nearby peaceful protests as cover, feds say,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2020.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/17/boogaloo-steven-canillo/>.

²² Criminal complaint U.S. v. Steven Canillo, June 15, 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1235706/download>

²³ Dave Phillips, “Coast Guard Officer Plotted to Kill Journalists, Prosecutors Say,” *New York Times*, Feb. 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/us/christopher-hasson-coast-guard.html>

²⁴ Christine Huser, “Coast Guard Officer Called a ‘Domestic Terrorist’ Pleads Guilty to Gun and Drug Charges,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/03/us/christopher-hasson-coast-guard-white-supremacist.html>

²⁵ Michael Levenson, “Former Coast Guard Officer Accused of Plotting Terrorism is Sentenced to 13 Years,” *New York Times*, Jan. 13, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/31/us/christopher-hasson-coast-guard-terrorist.html>

order to establish a white ethnostate. He had been engaged with white supremacist ideologies before he joined the military in the 1980s.

Radicalization in Military Largely Ignored, Despite Alarms

There is no single radicalization narrative. An individual's pathway toward extremism is invariably complicated and can involve the combined factors of their life circumstances, outside influences, personal relationships, individual psychology, and the larger political climate. However, researchers have recognized that major changes in a person's identity, as well as changes in how they believe they are perceived by society, can contribute to far-right radicalization. Sini and Bubolz showed, for example, that individuals with a military background who become far-right extremists often get there through two different pathways. In the first, a person makes an involuntary exit from the military because they are unable to advance into specialized units or are discharged—honorable or dishonorable—for other reasons. While they want to remain in the military and advance their careers there, the institution has rejected them. As a result, they lose a defining part of their identity and seek validation elsewhere, especially in settings that allow them to recoup their identity as a warrior or soldier. A far-right extremist group may feel like a welcoming and familiar place because of its congruities with the military, the appreciation for veteran's specialized skills, the sense of camaraderie, and the value placed on traditional notions of masculinity.

In the second pathway identified by Sini and Bubolz, a person returning from the military finds that they don't receive the recognition or appreciation they feel they deserve for their service, leaving them with a sense of anger that could end up directed at an out-group or the government they once served.²⁶ Indeed, feeling betrayed by the government is an unfortunately common feeling among veterans of the nation's recent wars. In a 2019 poll, 69% of veterans said the war in Iraq was not worth fighting and 58% said the same of the war in Afghanistan.²⁷ Many veterans also feel that the country abandoned them after their service. Sixty percent of veterans said in a 2014 poll that they thought the Department of Veterans Affairs was doing an "only fair" or "poor" job addressing the problems they faced.²⁸ It's no coincidence that a veteran who feels betrayed by their government might join an movement that sees the federal government as their enemy, as the white power movement does.

These are, of course, not the only connections between military service and right-wing extremism. Others develop extremist beliefs before they enter service, doing so in some cases to receive specialized training. Others become radicalized while serving, possibly by coming into contact with another servicemember who holds extremist beliefs. If those holding the extremist beliefs are a superior in rank, or the commanding officer of your unit, the potential for radicalization without external oversight is much greater; we have heard too many stories. The military justice system is simply not set up to deal with a national security problem—such as the

²⁶Sini and Bubolz, "Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far-Right Terrorism in the United States," *Journal of Terrorism Studies*, 2019.

are posed by white supremacists—within its ranks. There is a need to examine how the particular command structure of the military, which differs from civilian life, can contribute to a

standards and largely turned a blind eye toward the extremist beliefs or affiliations of potential recruits. As Matt Kennard wrote in

, the military itself admitted that recruitment had become lax. According to a 2005 report from the DoD's Defense Personnel Security Research Center, military recruits "were not aware of having received training on recognizing and responding to possible terrorists who try to enlist." The report concluded "Effectively, the military has a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy pertaining to extremism. If individuals can perform satisfactorily, without making their extremist opinions overt... they are likely to be able to complete their contracts." A report the next year from the National Gang Intelligence Center also raised the problem of extremists serving in the Armed Forces, noting that "various white supremacist groups have been documented on military installations both domestically and internationally."³³ Nevertheless, when the SPLC highlighted the continued presence of white supremacists in the military that same year, then Undersecretary of Defense David S. C. Chudson dismissed our reporting as "inaccurate and misleadingly alarmist."

“Anytime you defeat communism, it’s a victory for America” said Jerry Richman, one of the men found not guilty.⁴⁰

The focus on fighting a war on American soil, the shared anti-communist focus, and the perception of the state itself as the primary enemy of white men created a great sense of unity within the white power movement and pushed it toward more violent ends. Many veterans came into positions of leadership. Frazier Glenn Miller served for 20 years in the U.S. Army, including two tours of duty in Vietnam and 13 years as a Green Beret. Afterward, he founded the Cadena Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and, with the help of active duty soldiers, began to amass illegal weapons and conduct military training. Miller, who also founded the White Patriot Party, had ties to The Order, a white supremacist terrorist organization whose members carried out a murder and assassinated Denver radio host Alan Berg. During a trial for criminal contempt in 1986, a witness testified that he had procured weapons and explosives for Miller, including 13 armor-piercing anti-tank rockets, from military personnel. Miller later served three years in prison for his involvement in a plot to kill SPLC founder Morris Dees. Heard other Klansmen were flushed out of an hideout in Missouri, where the FBI found C-4 explosives, hand grenades, automatic weapons and ammunition. In November 2015, Miller was sentenced to death on murder charges after he killed William Cooper, 69; Reet Underwood, 14; and Terri LaMarr, 53, during an April 13, 2014, attack on Jewish facilities in Overland Park, Kansas.

Another well-known white supremacist, Louis Beam, who popularized the “leaderless resistance” model of white supremacist terrorism that is experiencing a revival, served as a helicopter gunner in the Army during the Vietnam War. Shortly after his return, he joined the United Klans of America and went on to become one of the most influential leaders in the white power movement during the 1980s and 1990s.⁴¹ He maintained a close relationship with Richard Butler, the head of the Aryan Nations, who was himself an Army veteran.⁴² Michael Tubbs, the leader of the Florida chapter of the neo-Confederate group League of the South, is a former Green Beret with expertise in demolitions. In 1980, Tubbs was arrested on charges related to a huge cache of weapons and explosives he had amassed, including 45 pounds of C-4 explosive, an anti-aircraft machine gun, and 25 pounds of TNT.⁴³ Authorities believed the arsenal was stolen from the military. A letter found by authorities suggested that Tubbs was planning to use the arsenal to outfit his group, Knights of the New Order, which was dedicated to “fostering the welfare of the white Aryan Race.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Shaun Assael and Peter Keating, “The Massacre That Spurred the Alt-Right,” Nov. 3, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/11/03/greensboro-massacre-white-nationalism-klan-29853/>

⁴¹ “Louis Beam,” Extremist Files, Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremistfiles/individual/louis-beam>

⁴² “Richard Butler,” Extremist Files, Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremistfiles/individual/richard-butler>

⁴³ Heidi Beirich, “League of the South to Protest ‘Southern Demographic Displacement,’” Aug. 21, 2013, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2013/08/21/league-south-protest-%E2%80%99Csouthern-demographic-displacement-%E2%80%9D>

⁴⁴ “Michael Ralph Tubbs,” Extremist Files, Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremistfiles/individual/michael-ralph-tubbs>

Veterans and servicemen bring social capital, legitimacy, specialized training and an increased capacity for violence⁴⁵ to white power groups, which makes them highly sought after recruits⁴⁶ In one effort to appeal to veterans, William Luther Pierce, who founded the violent neo-Nazi group National Alliance in 1970, bought the subscribers list for

already had a tattoo of a white supremacist slogan and openly expressed his violently racist views and his desire for “ahmndard for white people,” according to a man who served with Page.⁵⁰ Two years after his discharge, in 2000, Page attended a music festival held annually by one of this country’s oldest and most violent racist skinhead crews. From there, Page plunged headlong into the white power music scene and 11 years later earned his full membership “patch” in that same crew, the Hammer in Nation. About a year later, on August 5, 2012, Page entered the Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. The sounds of worshipers preparing the day’s communal meal on that Sunday were shattered by the crack of gunfire, as Page began a shooting spree that left six people dead: Sita Singh, 41; Rajit Singh, 49; Palash Singh, 39; Paranjit Kaur, 41; Suresh Singh, 84; and Satwant Singh Kaleka, 65. Baba Punjab Singh was shot in the face, which caused brain trauma that led to permanent paralysis.⁵¹ Singh survived for nearly eight years before succumbing to complications related to his injuries on March 2, 2020. He was 72.

Page had received specialized training as a psychological operations, or “psyops,” specialist—a skill set that could have made him a prized asset to any number of the white power movement’s leaders. Many of these leaders spoke candidly about the value U.S. military training added to their racist organizations. Tom Metzger, an Army veteran who founded the neo-Nazi group White Aryan Resistance (WAR), told Matt Keenan that he estimated about “10 percent of the army and Marines... are racist extremists of some variety.” Of his followers, Metzger said, “I would encourage them to join the military, if they have a goal that they can’t hit. They go into bring some training back to the US and make the federal government aware of our existence.” Neo-Nazi Billy Roper revealed that within his group, White Revolution, there were about a dozen members who served in the military. “Some of them have tattoos” of racist symbols, he said, “because anyone can walk in and get in the military now.” Two military members of his group were reprimanded for having swastika tattoos, he said. But when they had them altered and made into Sonnenrads—a widely used symbol among neo-Nazis—both were allowed to reenter the military.⁵²

Some Violent White Supremacists Use the Military as a Training Ground

Over the last several years, the SPLC, researchers, and journalists have identified dozens of former and active-duty military personnel among the membership of some of the country’s most dangerous and violent white supremacist groups. Those groups include the Atomwaffen Division, a now-defunct terrorist neo-Nazi group⁵³ whose members have allegedly been responsible for five murders since mid-2017. One of the people killed was a gay, Jewish college student named Blaze Bernstein who was stabbed more than 20 times.

⁵⁰Rick Rensel, “Shooter’s Ch... dBevEJ M% eed iE ulthraq Mr m Ê iNle—btid ei

Brandon Russell, who landed Atomwaffen in 2015 from an online forum called Iron March, served in the Florida Army National Guard. After his roommate Devon Arthus allegedly killed the pair's two other roommates—who were also members of Atomwaffen—police found a stash of explosive materials and homemade fuses. Inside a cooler labeled with Russell's name, they found hexamethylene triperoxide diamine, or HMTD, a homemade explosive used in past terror attacks, including the London bombing in 2005. A framed photo of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh was found in Russell's bedroom. Police released Russell after questioning, but only hours later he was arrested by Florida sheriff's deputies who found an AR-style assault rifle and more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition in his car. He also possessed flyers that read "Don't prepare for exams, prepare for a war."⁵⁴

According to Arthus, Russell joined the National Guard in order to receive the kind of skills he would need to prepare for that potential race war: "He joined specifically for the knowledge and the training and he wants to use that training against the government," Arthus

Others joined the military after being involved in the group. David Cole Takington, who went by the username "The Yark" on Iron Mach, recruited or attempted to recruit at least 12 members of the forum to Atomwaffen. Among some of the members Takington brought into the group were John Cameron Denton, known online as "Vincent Synder" and "Rape." Denton would go on to become a co-leader of the group, while Takington would go on to join the Navy as an aviator's mate's apprentice with Strike Fighter Squadron VFA-41. Following a Gizmodo investigation, Takington is no longer a member of the squadron on the U.S. Navy.⁵⁸

Atomwaffen Division was one of a growing number of groups that embraced violence as a tool that would ultimately help them fight a race war. They were one of many groups that believed society should be pushed to collapse, providing them the opportunity to build a new white, non-Jewish ethnostate. These groups organized themselves into networks of clandestine cells, each charged with committing targeted acts of violence they believe will sow societal discord and ultimately attract new white people to their ranks.

also expand and more clearly define protections for whistleblowers⁷⁵ chain of command oversight responsibilities, and reporting and transparency requirements

- 3 Congress should update the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) to define and address extremist activity. The House of Representatives had included a provision to create a new UCMJ article on violent extremism in its version of the FY 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The Senate did not agree, and it was removed in conference⁷⁶**

An amending the UCMJ was one of the recommendations included in a recent report by the Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion⁷⁷ An accompanying Memorandum to Pentagon leaders and commanders in the field included assignments, a specific plan of action, and milestones required to amend and update the UCMJ⁷⁸

- 4 The Department of Defense should tighten recruitment and screening processes for**

beliefs. All service branch recruits should receive uniform training on how to detect extremist activity among recruits and newly inducted servicemembers, including training on identifying symbols and tattoos associated with hate groups and extremists that should raise red flags about a particular recruit. Consistent with privacy protections, steps must be taken to ensure procedures are in place for documenting disciplinary actions and sharing that information as a servicemember moves from one duty station to another.

- 5 The Department of Defense should immediately rename the 10 U.S. Army bases named for Confederate leaders.⁷⁹ Despite a veto threat from former President Donald Trump.⁸⁰**

Thank you for holding this hearing. We deeply appreciate the Committee's attention to the issue of extremism in the Armed Forces and look forward to working with you as you continue to focus on this important issue.