



October 11, 2021

The Honorable Mark Takano
Chair
Veterans' Affairs Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Bost
Ranking Member
Veterans' Affairs Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Takano and Ranking Member Bost:

On behalf of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), we write to provide our insights for your hearings later this week on "Domestic Violent Extremist Groups and the Recruitment of Veterans." We appreciate the opportunity to share our expertise as you investigate extremism in the military and to offer several policy recommendations to address this problem. We would ask that this statement be included as part of the official hearing record.

The SPLC is the premier U.S. nonprofit advocacy organization working to serve as a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond. We work in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance human rights of all people. We have deep expertise in monitoring the activities of domestic hate groups and other extremists – including the Ku Klux Klan, the neo-Nazi movement, neo-Confederates, racist skinheads, anti-racist skinheads, antigovernment militias, and others. We currently track more than 1,600 extremist groups operating across the country and are internationally known for exposing the activities of hate groups and other domestic extremists for the past 50 years. We publish investigative reports, share key intelligence, and offer expert analysis to the media and public. SPLC employs a three-pronged strategy: litigation, public education, and policy advocacy. The organization works in the courts to win systemic reforms on behalf of victims of bigotry and discrimination. Through "Learning for Justice" the organization provides free resources to caregivers and educators to help advance human rights and inclusive democracy.

Related, the SPLC Action Fund advocates for the implementation of policies and laws to eliminate the structural racism and inequalities that fuel oppression of people of color, immigrants, young people, women, low-income people, and the LGBTQ+ community. The Action Fund is dedicated to fighting for racial justice alongside impacted communities in pursuit of equity and opportunity for all. We work primarily in the Southeast United States where we have offices in Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Washington, D.C.

People with military experience played an outsized role in the deadly January 6, 2021, insurrection. According to a *CNN* review of court documents, roughly ten percent of those facing charges in connection to the riot have ties to the military, and the majority of those are veterans. Of those with connections to the military, a quarter are associated with extremist groups like the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys.¹ These alarming statistics provide further evidence of what researchers of far-right extremism have long warned: extremist groups

¹ Marshall Cohen, *CNN*, "1 in 10 defendants from US Capitol insurrection have military ties," <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/28/politics/capitol-insurrection-veterans/index.html>, May 28, 2021.

actively recruit members with military experience, and that people with military experience increase the violent capacity of extremist groups.

Background on Extremism in the Military

Lecia Brooks, the Southern Poverty Law Center's Chief of Staff, provided detailed testimony on the problem of extremism in the military for a House Armed Services Committee hearing on March 24, 2021.² As that testimony explained, this is not a new problem. The SPLC first urged officials to take systematic action in 1986, when we urged then-Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger to investigate the participation of servicemembers involved with Glenn Frazier Miller's KKK paramilitary activities.³ Secretary Weinberger did issue a directive instructing servicemembers that they "must reject participation in white supremacy, neo-Nazi and other such groups which espouse or attempt to create overt discrimination." He told military personnel they were barred from "active participation" in these groups. However, as University of Chicago assistant professor Kathleen Belew explains in her book *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, "[T]he directive said nothing about other kinds of actions that undergirded white power activity – such as membership excluding 'organizing or leading,' distributing propaganda, or displaying white power symbols." As a result, "Active-duty personnel continued both passive and active participation in the white power movement."⁴

In 1994, six months before the Oklahoma City bombing by Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh, we wrote to Attorney General Janet Reno to warn of the growing threat of domestic terrorism. In the wake of Oklahoma City and the murder of a Black couple by skinheads serving as active-duty paratroopers with the 82nd Airborne in 1995, the Defense Department tightened regulations on the participation of active-duty servicemembers in extremist activities.

But the increased scrutiny on white supremacist affiliation did not last. Facing recruitment shortages during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military relaxed recruitment standards and largely turned a blind eye toward the extremist beliefs or affiliations of potential recruits. As Matt Kennard wrote in *Irregular Army: How the U.S. Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gang Members, and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror*, the military itself admitted that recruitment had become lax. According to a 2005 report from the Department of Defense's Defense Personnel Security Research Center, military recruiters "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."⁵ Nevertheless, when the SPLC highlighted the

² Testimony of Lecia Brooks Chief of Staff, Southern Poverty Law Center before the Armed Services Committee United States House of Representatives Extremism in the Armed Forces, https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/splc_testimony_house_armed_services_committee_hearings_on_extremism_in_the_armed_forces59.pdf, March 24, 2021.

³ <http://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/images/dynamic/intel/weinberger.pdf>

⁴ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 137.

⁵ Matt Kennard, *Irregular Army: How the US Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gang Members, and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2015), 19, 40, 46

continued presence of white supremacists in the military that same year, then-Undersecretary of Defense David S. C. Chu dismissed our reporting as “inaccurate and misleadingly alarmist.”

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) also downplayed the seriousness of the problem and even ignored the insights of its own analysts. In 2009, a DHS analysis warned that the economic downturn and election of the nation’s first Black president might provide fuel for right-wing extremists and that, amid the war on terror, right-wing extremists might “attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans in order to boost their violent capabilities.”⁶ Despite the report’s accuracy and prescient warnings, then-Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano retracted it under pressure from conservatives who claimed, falsely, that it portrayed *them* as a security threat.⁷ The report did not contain anything that should have been surprising to anyone in federal law enforcement or the DHS. Indeed, according to Kennard, the FBI identified 203 veterans involved in white supremacist incidents between 2001 and 2008, most of whom were associated with groups seeking “the overthrow of the U.S. government.” The SPLC also found that antigovernment groups spiked during the Obama presidency, jumping from 149 in the final year of George W. Bush’s presidency to 512 in the first year of Obama’s and eventually peaking at 1,360 in 2012.

But the issue did not receive substantial attention until the January 6 insurrection underscored the prominent role that people with military experience play in the far right. In the aftermath of the deadly attack on the Capitol, we were very pleased that Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin issued his February 5 Memorandum mandating a “Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks,” and that he recognized the action as “just the first initiative of what I believe must be a concerted effort to better educate ourselves and our people about the scope of this problem and to develop sustainable ways to eliminate the corrosive effects that extremist ideology and conduct have on the workforce.”⁸ Responding to a consensus Stand-Down finding that troops and commanders wanted better training and guidance on these issues, Secretary Austin issued another Memorandum on April 9 which, among other things, established the Countering Extremism Working Group (CEWG) to lead further study of these issues and implement the immediate assigned tasks.⁹ In addition, in March, Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough announced that his agency would investigate radicalization of veterans by hate groups.¹⁰ To date, no information about the progress of that investigation has been made public.

6 “Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment,” Extremism and Radicalization Branch, Homeland Environment Threat Analysis Division of the Department of Homeland Security, April 7, 2009, https://web.archive.org/web/20110927124641/http://rogerhedgecock.com/resources/HSA_RightwingExtremism_Report_april2009.pdf.

7 Eric Marropodi, *CNN*, “Napolitano Apologizes to Veterans over ‘Extremist’ Flap,” <https://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/24/napolitano.am.legion/>, April 24, 2009.

8 Secretary of Defense, “Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks,” <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Feb/05/2002577485/-1/-1/0/STAND-DOWN-TO-ADDRESS-EXTREMISM-IN-THE-RANKS.PDF>, February 5, 2021.

9 Secretary of Defense, “Immediate Actions to Counter Extremism in the Department and the Establishment of the Countering Extremism Working Group,” <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Apr/09/2002617921/-1/-1/1/MEMORANDUM-IMMEDIATE-ACTIONS-TO-COUNTER-EXTREMISM-IN-THE-DEPARTMENT-AND-THE-ESTABLISHMENT-OF-THE-COUNTERING-EXTREMISM-WORKING-GROUP.PDF>, April 9, 2021.

10 Leo Shane III, *Military Times*, “New congressional investigation to examine the link between veterans and extremist groups,” <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/03/04/new-congressional-investigation-to-examine-the-link-between-veterans-and-extremist-groups/>, March 4, 2021.

We are eagerly awaiting both the CEWG report and the report from the Department of Veterans Affairs, which will contain policy recommendations to address and prevent extremism in recruitment, during active-duty service, and the transition to civilian status. We hope and expect these reports will also proactively identify potential vulnerability to extremist recruitment and promote ways to inoculate veterans from disinformation and propaganda promoted by violent extremist organizations.

The Proud Boys: Seeking Veterans and Posing a Continuing Threat

This statement will focus specifically on the Proud Boys, an ultranationalist hate group with a long history of violence, and will detail their history, ideology, and methods of political organizing. We have chosen to focus specifically on this group because they have proven particularly attractive to veterans, who are highly valued by the Proud Boys because of their operational and tactical training. One study of people arrested for their involvement in the January 6 insurrection found that those with military experience were more likely to be affiliated with a domestic violent extremist organization than those without. Of those arrested who had military experience and were affiliated with an extremist organization, over half were associated with the Proud Boys.¹¹ While the Proud Boys are a particular threat, it is essential to point out that they are only one component of a much broader far-right movement that is antidemocratic, authoritarian, ethnonationalist, and willing to engage in violence to further their political objectives. The fact that veterans were disproportionately represented among those arrested for their role in the deadly January 6 insurrection is partly a legacy of the military's long-running failure to adequately monitor for extremist links, address the presence of extremists in its ranks, and inoculate veterans against adopting extremist ideologies.¹²

The Proud Boys played a pivotal role in the insurrection.¹³ On December 29, 2020, the group's chairman, Enrique Tarrio, posted on social media that the Proud Boys planned to "turn out in record numbers on Jan 6th."¹⁴ Between the 2020 presidential election and 2021 insurrection, Proud Boys encouraged others to attend "stop the steal" rallies protesting the results of the presidential election, raised funds for equipment and travel to Washington, D.C., and coordinated communication between members who planned to be on the ground for the "Save America" rally that immediately preceded the Capitol siege. According to U.S. investigators, over 60 Proud Boys participated in a group called "Boots on the Ground" on an encrypted messaging app. Proud Boy leaders created the chat on January 5, 2021, to facilitate communication between members who had gathered in Washington, D.C.¹⁵ *The New York*

¹¹ Daniel Milton and Andrew Mines, "This is War": Examining Military Experience Among the Capitol Hill Siege Participants," <https://ctc.usma.edu/this-is-war-examining-military-experience-among-the-capitol-hill-siege-participants>, April 12, 2021.

¹² Tom Dreisbach and Meg Anderson, *NPR*, "Nearly 1 in 5 Defendants in Capitol Riot Cases Served in the Military," <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military>, January 21, 2021.

¹³ In 2017, the SPLC named the Proud Boys a hate group, which we define as an organization or collection of individuals that – based on its statements or principles, the statements of its leaders, or its activities – has beliefs or practices that attack or malign and entire group of people. The groups that appear on our annual census of hate groups vilify others because of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other immutable characteristics.

¹⁴ Pete Williams, *NBC News*, "Proud Boys leader sentenced to more than 5 months for burning Black Lives Matter banner," <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/proud-boys-leader-sentenced-more-5-months-burning-black-lives-n1277466>, August 23, 2021.

¹⁵ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/case-multi-defendant/file/1377586/download>

Times reported that a contingent of about 100 Proud Boys descended on the Capitol after then-President Donald Trump's speech on the National Mall.¹⁶

To date, at least 37 of those arrested in relation to the insurrection have ties to the Proud Boys, and at least nine of them are veterans.¹⁷ Those include Joseph Biggs and Dominic Pezzola, who prosecutors allege were among the first to enter the Capitol during the siege.¹⁸ The Proud Boys' participation in the insurrection was the culmination of years of on-the-ground organizing that frequently descended into violence. Gavin McInnes, an incendiary rightwing media figure who co-founded VICE media, created the men's-only group in 2016. To join the Proud Boys, a man needs to proclaim, "I am a proud Western chauvinist and I refuse to apologize for creating the modern world." Violence is at the core of the Proud Boys political project. They believe leftists and antifascists – or, more broadly, anyone who supports multiculturalism and inclusive democracy – should be punished with violence, and they use the ever-present implicit threat of violence as an instrument to silence their political foes. Since their founding, dozens of Proud Boys have faced criminal charges, including assault, weapons charges, and destruction of property.¹⁹ That includes Tarrio, the group's chairman, who is currently serving a five-month prison sentence for destroying a Black Lives Matter banner that belonged to a historically Black church and bringing a high-capacity magazine into Washington, D.C.²⁰

Proud Boys' Ideology

With at least forty-three chapters across the country, the Proud Boys are part of a broad authoritarian threat posed by a highly mobilized far-right movement within the United States. But, in comparison to most extremist groups, they have been uniquely able to sustain and grow their membership even in the face of public and legal pressure. That is in part because the Proud Boys, unlike many far-right groups, have generally – and strategically – claimed that they reject overt white nationalism. They welcome men of all racial and ethnic backgrounds (their chairman is Afro-Cuban), so long as they were assigned male at birth and hold that "the West is the best." By opening membership to men of color, the Proud Boy are able to not only draw on a larger pool of recruits but use those members as a shield against accusations of racism.²¹

Despite the inclusion of non-white men in the group, the Proud Boys are working to build a society that is exclusionary and hierarchical. They tend to speak euphemistically about race, claiming they want to maintain the integrity of Western *culture*, which they claim is threatened

¹⁶ Alan Feuer and Frances Robles, "Proud Boys Under Growing Scrutiny in Capitol Riot Investigation," <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/us/proud-boys-capitol-riot.html>, January 26, 2021.

¹⁷ Spencer S. Hsu, *Washington Post*, "Current, former police officers charged in new Proud Boys indictment in Capitol riot," https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/legal-issues/proud-boys-police-indictment-florida/2021/07/16/1fdbe642-e5a4-11eb-8aa5-5662858b696e_story.html; https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/This-is-War_Final.pdf, July 16, 2021.

¹⁸ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/case-multi-defendant/file/1377586/download>

¹⁹ In addition to the Proud Boys who face charges related to the insurrection, other members of the group who have been charged with criminal acts include Alan Swinney, Donovan Flippo, Tusitala "Tiny" Toese, and ten Proud Boys who participated in an attack on antifascist activists in New York City in 2018.

²⁰ Paul Duggan, *Washington Post*, "Proud Boys leader Henry 'Enrique' Tarrio sentenced to five months in jail," https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/legal-issues/tarrio-proud-boy-jail-sentence/2021/08/23/df06b84a-041b-11ec-a266-7c7fe02fa374_story.html, August 23, 2021.

²¹ Daniel Martinez Hosang and Joseph E. Lowndes provide an in-depth examine of the inclusion of people of color in the far right in *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2019.

by Islam, immigrants, and those who value multiculturalism. This “Western chauvinism” is the foundation of the Proud Boys’ ideology. “We are not a ‘melting pot,’” one Proud Boys Telegram channel posted to its more than 45,000 subscribers in early 2021. “Western nations have been widely recognized as multicultural societies. This is a lie told by those who wish to destroy us,” the post continued, “Europeans are the architects of Western culture and we will honor our forefathers by rejecting the degradation of our culture in the name of tolerance.” While not explicitly equating Western culture with whiteness, the implication is clear.

For the Proud Boys, Western culture is European and Christian, and they view most people who do not fit into those categories as an existential threat. McInnes, who was the leader of the group until late 2018, said plainly in 2017, “I’m not a fan of Islam. I think it’s fair to call me Islamophobic.” Recently, in response to calls to resettle Afghan immigrants in the United States after the American troop withdrawal, a Proud Boys chapter in Texas posted on their Telegram channel that they did not want “the same unspeakable horrors that have been committed across Europe by forced immigration to happen in America,” and suggested that Afghans come from a “rape culture.”²²

Proud Boys revere Patrick Buchanan’s *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* and, at times, read excerpts from the book when they gather for meetings. Buchanan argues that declining white birth rates and immigration from predominantly non-white countries will lead to the collapse of Western civilization.²³ This notion underpins the white nationalist “great replacement” conspiracy theory, which alleges that white people across the Western world are being systematically and deliberately “replaced” by non-white immigrants. The myth has inspired multiple white supremacist terror attacks, including the 2018 attack at a Pittsburgh synagogue and 2019 attack at an El Paso Walmart. Proud Boys have openly cited the theory. “IT IS the Great Replacement...” the Ohio chapter posted on their Telegram channel about the country’s immigration policy under President Biden.²⁴ The Proud Boys’ adoption of this conspiracy is part of a larger trend; rightwing figures like Fox News host Tucker Carlson have also repeated and helped to normalize the great replacement myth within mainstream spaces.²⁵

To the Proud Boys, preserving Western culture means maintaining “traditional” gender roles, where men retain power over both public and private affairs. The group claims women are inferior to men and ill-suited for work outside the home, and that women having the right to vote has been destructive to society. Proud Boys propaganda suggests that violence is a way of responding to women who do not submit to the absolute power of men. In one post on an official Proud Boys social media channel, an image of a woman transforms into a punching bag when she refuses to obey her partner’s commands.²⁶ Nick Ochs, who is facing charges related to his participation in the insurrection, once posted a photo with the text “Is it always illegal to kill a woman?” on his Telegram channel. In response, he wrote “Legal hint: no.”²⁷

The group uses similarly dehumanizing language and imagery to describe transgender people and those who do not adhere to binary conceptions of gender. Proud Boys consistently refer

²² Southeast Texas Proud Boys Telegram channel, September 7, 2021.

²³ “Proud Boys,” SPLC Extremist File, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>.

²⁴ Ohio Proud Boys Telegram channel, September 23, 2021.

²⁵ Sebastian Murdock, *HuffPost*, “Tucker Carlson Continues to Promote White Supremacist ‘Great Replacement’ Conspiracy,” https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tucker-carlson-continues-to-promote-white-supremacist-great-replacement-conspiracy_n_614cca1ce4b03dd7280888e0, September 23, 2021.

²⁶ Proud Boys Telegram channel, June 14, 2021.

²⁷ Nick Ochs Telegram channel, June 16, 2018.

to transgender people using slurs and paint them as mentally ill and a threat to children – both dangerous myths perpetuated by anti-LGBTQ extremists. An online post from a Wisconsin Proud Boys chapter shows a person labelled “transgender” standing at a crossroads: the road to their left takes them down a path to “committing suicide,” while the one on their right leads to “raping kids.”²⁸ A particularly repugnant post from a Texas chapter shows a drawn image of a person wearing the colors of the transgender pride flag hanging from a noose.²⁹

The Proud Boys’ History of Violence

The Proud Boys contend that the country is facing a multitude of internal threats, posed by individuals and groups whose politics are contrary to their own. They identify antifascists, Black Lives Matter activists, leftists, Democrats, and others not just as political opponents, but enemies in a battle over the future of Western civilization. To the Proud Boys, members of these groups are not *true* Americans, and they need to be eradicated – by force, if necessary – to preserve the integrity of the country. “The Americans are coming out and we’re sick and tired of this shit,” Proud Boy Tusitala “Tiny” Toese told reporters at a Portland rally this past August, drawing a distinction between the Proud Boys who qualified as American and antifascist counter-protesters who, to him, do not. “If we have to die to defend ourself, our families, and our fucking freedom in America, we’re gonna do it.”³⁰

As Toese’s comments underscored, the Proud Boys believe that violence is the most effective way to deal with their perceived political enemies. McInnes made that message clear early in the group’s history. “Fighting solves everything,” he declared the year Trump won the presidency, “we need more violence from the Trump people – Trump supporters: Choke a motherfucker.”³¹ The group fetishizes Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean dictator who was responsible for the deaths and torture of thousands of political foes, including many who his death squads dropped from helicopters. At rallies, Proud Boys have worn shirts that read “Pinochet did nothing wrong” and “Make communists afraid of rotary aircraft again.”³² In October 2020, Joe Biggs, who is charged with conspiracy in relation to the insurrection and is also a veteran, posted a photo on his Telegram channel of himself and Proud Boys chairman Enrique Tarrio holding a sign that reads “The only good communist is a dead communist.”³³ The Proud Boys also revere Kyle Rittenhouse, a young man charged with murdering two activists at a Black Lives Matter event, as a “hero.”³⁴

Since their founding, the Proud Boys have planned or participated in hundreds of demonstrations around the country, many of which have descended into riots. Proud Boys often planned for violence beforehand, coming to rallies brandishing weapons and decked out in protective gear.³⁵ Violence has always been celebrated in the group – they often release

²⁸ Wisconsin Proud Boys Telegram channel, September 20, 2021.

²⁹ Southeast Texas Proud Boys Telegram channel, September 14, 2021.

³⁰ Cassie Miller, SPLC Hatchwatch, “Proud Boys are Still Violent, Despite Legal Woes,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/08/25/proud-boys-are-still-violent-despite-legal-woes>, August 25, 2021.

³¹ Adam Leith Gollner, *Vanity Fair*, “The Secret History of Gavin McInnes,” <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/06/the-secret-history-of-gavin-mcinnnes>, June 29, 2021.

³² Cassie Miller, SPLC Hatewatch, “Why are Proud Boys so Violent? Ask Gavin McInnes,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/18/why-are-proud-boys-so-violent-ask-gavin-mcinnnes>, October 18, 2018.

³³ Joseph Biggs Telegram channel, October 2020.

³⁴ Cassie Miller, SPLC Hatewatch, “This is the Moment the Proud Boys Have Been Waiting For,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/09/25/moment-proud-boys-have-been-waiting>, September 25, 2020.

³⁵ Andy Campbell, *HuffPost*, “Leaked Proud Boys Chats Show Members Plotting Violence At Rallies,”

“sizzle reels” of their most violent clashes as a way of recruiting new members and riling up existing ones for the next demonstration.

The Proud Boys came to prominence during one of the most active periods of far-right mobilization in decades, spurred by the white nationalist “alt-right” that united in support of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign. The deadly 2017 Charlottesville Unite the Right rally changed the alt-right’s political calculations: the rally created immense public backlash, and the movement’s leaders became hampered by lawsuits that are still playing out today. While Jason Kessler, a former Proud Boy, planned the rally, McInnes denounced it beforehand, largely shielding his group from criticism.³⁶

In the aftermath of Unite the Right, as many openly white nationalist far-right groups pulled away from public demonstrations, the Proud Boys became the preeminent on-the-ground organizers within the movement. They planned events across the country but focused predominantly on the Pacific Northwest – an area that has historically harbored both strong antifascist and far-right movements. Each followed a familiar formula. The group would announce they were holding a rally for “freedom” or other broad political concept, and then plan and promote the event on social media, where they perpetuated the narrative that they were standing up against a violent leftist menace. By preemptively taking a defensive posture, the Proud Boys could justify violence on their part.³⁷ If violence did occur, it provided fodder for revenge and, therefore, another rally.

The Proud Boys relied on this form of organization for years, often with little interference from law enforcement.³⁸ One exception came in 2018, when ten members of the group faced charges for attacking a group of antifascist activists after McInnes gave a speech in New York City.³⁹ That temporarily halted mobilization from the group, but months later they were back on the streets. They again hosted waves of events in Portland where, on multiple occasions, including this year, the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) announced they would not be deploying officers. Before an August 2020 rally, PPB encouraged people to “self-monitor for criminal activity.”⁴⁰ The lack of substantial government response to the Proud Boys emboldened the group, giving them the impression police were giving tacit approval to their actions. It also allowed them to create widespread organizational networks and strategies to prepare and carry out large demonstrations – all of which helped to pave the way for the group’s role in the Capitol insurrection.

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/proud-boys-chat-logs-premeditate-rally-violence-in-leaked-chats_n_5ce1e231e4b00e035b928683, May 22, 2019.

³⁶ Cassie Miller and Howard Graves, SPLC Hatewatch, “When the ‘Alt-Right’ Hit the Streets: Far Right Political Rallies in the Trump Era,” <https://www.splcenter.org/20200810/when-alt-right-hit-streets-far-right-political-rallies-trump-era>, August 10, 2020.

³⁷ Cassie Miller, SPLC Hatewatch, “Accusation in a Mirror: How the Radical Right Blames Rising Political Violence on the Left,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/06/11/accusations-mirror-how-radical-right-blames-rising-political-violence-left>, June 11, 2019.

³⁸ For an history of the Proud Boys’ relationship with law enforcement, see David D. Kirkpatrick and Alan Feuer, *New York Times*, “Police Shrugged Off the Proud Boys, Until They Attacked the Capitol,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/14/us/proud-boys-law-enforcement.html>, August 23, 2021.

³⁹ Janelle Griffith, NBC, “Two Members of Proud Boys Convicted in New York City Brawl with Antifa,” <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/two-members-proud-boys-convicted-new-york-city-brawl-antifa-n1044021>, August 19, 2019.

⁴⁰ Cassie Miller, SPLC Hatchwatch, “Proud Boys are Still Violent, Despite Legal Woes,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/08/25/proud-boys-are-still-violent-despite-legal-woes>, August 25, 2021.

The Proud Boys were also mobilized by of the wave of demonstrations motivated by COVID-19 public health measures and the Black Lives Matter movement that took place in 2020. The Proud Boys attended some of the earliest protests against state-imposed stay-at-home orders and, after George Floyd's murder sparked a mass mobilization in the name of racial justice, the group counterprotested those demonstrations.⁴¹ The wave of protests also brought new men into the Proud Boys' fold. For example, Las Vegas Proud Boy Matt Anthony, who is working with other Proud Boys and their allies to take over the Clark County Republican Party by packing it with new members, said on a podcast that his first foray into politics was through the "Fight for Nevada" movement that opposed COVID-19 public health measures.⁴² He had never even heard of the Proud Boys until May 2020 when he saw that they were attending "reopen" rallies in Nevada. They began working together and, eventually, he joined the group.⁴³

Proud Boys in the Aftermath of the Insurrection

Since early 2020, when the country sunk into overlapping political and health crises, the Proud Boys' rhetoric has taken on a more revolutionary tone. President Trump was one of the few elected officials the Proud Boys believed represented their interests and, since he left office, the limited trust they had in the state has eroded precipitously. The government, they believe, is tyrannical, and seeks to censor, disarm, and jail – or worse – right-leaning Americans. They often cite the same conspiracies that animate the antigovernment militia movement and, like those groups, encourage members to take up arms and prepare to go to war against the state. "Arm yourself, take off the masks, hug your family, remove your kids from public schools, prepare to defend yourselves," the official Proud Boys Telegram channel posted in March 2021, "Because no one is coming to save you." The group has also repeatedly referenced the "boogaloo" – a term commonly used in far-right communities to describe an imagined impending civil war, which they welcome because it would create an opening to eradicate groups they see as political enemies.⁴⁴

With their participation in the January 6 insurrection, the Proud Boys demonstrated that they are willing to take dramatic, violent action to disrupt the democratic process and impose their political will. Even with dozens of their members facing criminal charges, they have not backed down from their insurrectionary actions. Instead, they have continued to mobilize and

⁴¹ Cassie Miller, SPLC Hatewatch, "Anti-Lockdown Rallies are Providing an Opening for Proud Boys and Other Far-Right Extremists," <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/04/27/anti-lockdown-rallies-are-providing-opening-proud-boys-and-other-far-right-extremists>, April 27, 2020. Tim, Craig, Washington Post, "Proud Boys and Black Lives Matter activists clashed in a Florida suburb. Only one side was charged," https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/florida-protest-bill-unequal-treatment/2021/02/01/415d1b02-6240-11eb-9061-07abcc1f9229_story.html, February 4, 2021.

⁴² Tess Owen, *Vice*, "Nevada's GOP Has a Proud Boy Problem," <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4avxqm/nevadas-gop-has-a-proud-boy-problem>, May 24, 2021.

⁴³ The Johnny Bru Show, Interview with Matt Anthony, May 16, 2021.

⁴⁴ Cassie Miller, SPLC Hatewatch, "The 'Boogaloo' Started as a Racist Meme," <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/06/05/boogaloo-started-racist-meme>, June 5, 2020. During the mass political mobilization in 2020, "Boogaloo boys" appeared at protests and congregated on social media. People associated with the movement argued that the country was headed toward a civil war, or what they called the "boogaloo." The right-wing movement mobilized partially as a response to increasingly militarized policing, which lent credence to their conspiratorial beliefs that they were at war with the state. More than a dozen men associated with the movement have been charged with crimes since May 2020, including conspiracy to cause destruction at a Black Lives Matter protest and the murder of a police officer. For an examination of how militarized policing inflames right-wing movements, including the Boogaloo boys, see Miller, SPLC Hatewatch, "One Way to Counter the Far Right? Demilitarize the Police," <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/08/17/one-way-counter-far-right-demilitarize-police>, August 17, 2020.

undertaken an effort to write their own “narrative” of the events at the capitol on January 6. After the insurrection, the group quickly began casting those who participated as martyrs and “political prisoners,” unfairly persecuted not for their actions but their political beliefs. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” read text superimposed over an image of an FBI poster seeking information on insurrectionists that the Long Island Proud Boys chapter posted to their Telegram in February.⁴⁵ The Proud Boys started a campaign called “Free the Boys” along with a Telegram channel that directs people to funding campaigns for individual Proud Boys facing criminal charges. The channel currently has roughly 1,700 subscribers, and the campaigns promoted on the page have raised from \$1,250 to \$103,893.

The Proud Boys have also used the legal action against insurrectionists to further stir up antigovernment sentiment, drawing on the stories of veterans like Joseph Biggs who are facing criminal charges. The country, they suggest, has betrayed its veterans by hitting them with trumped-up charges, which are aimed at punishing them solely for their political beliefs. A funding page for Biggs, who reportedly led roughly 100 Proud Boys on January 6 and was among the first to enter the Capitol, touts his military service and his outspoken support for veterans facing mental health issues. The message acknowledges that Biggs entered the Capitol but says he did not engage in destruction of property or violence (he faces charges of conspiracy, obstructing an official proceeding, knowingly entering a restricted building without lawful authority, and engaging in disorderly and disruptive conduct).⁴⁶ He is being criminalized, it says, “due to his outspoken support of the Pro-America Movement... The same country he sacrificed for has now made him one of the focal points of its case against the people.”⁴⁷

Rather than turning away from the public sphere in the aftermath of the insurrection, Proud Boys are getting involved in local political activism and some are themselves running for office. Tarrío told *NPR* earlier this year that his goal for 2021 was to “Start getting more involved in local politics, running our guys for office from local seats, whether it’s a simple GOP seat or a city council seat.”⁴⁸ In Kansas a former member of the group is running for Topeka City Council,⁴⁹ while Proud Boy Chicago chapter president and Capitol riot participant Edgar “Remy Del Toro” Gonzalez is running for Illinois Senate.⁵⁰ In New York, a large contingent of Proud Boys rallied outside an August fundraiser for the state Republican party and, months earlier in Florida, the Boca Raton Regional Republican Club invited Tarrío to speak at a dinner.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Long Island Proud Boys Telegram channel, February 5, 2021

⁴⁶ Doha Madani and Pete Williams, *NBC News*, “Proud Boys Organizer Joe Biggs Charged in Capitol Riot,” <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/proud-boys-organizer-joe-biggs-charged-capitol-riot-n1254999>, January 20, 2021.

⁴⁷ Joseph Biggs funding page, <https://www.ourfreedomfunding.com/campaign/54/joe-biggs-needs-your-help-and-support>.

⁴⁸ Tim Mak, *NPR*, “Some Proud Boys <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/28/1010328631/some-proud-boys-are-moving-to-local-politics-as-scrutiny-of-far-right-group-ramp>,” January 21, 2021.

⁴⁹ Blaise Mesa Topeka *Capital Journal*, “Joel Campbell used to be a Proud Boy member. Now, he’s running for Topeka City Council,” <https://www.cjonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/local/2021/03/12/former-proud-boy-joel-campbell-running-topeka-city-council-capitol-riots/4632855001/>, March 12, 2021.

⁵⁰ Tony Schuba, Chicago *Sun-Times*, “Proud Boy who was present for Capitol riot planning run for Illinois Senate,” <https://chicago.suntimes.com/politics/2021/3/25/22349435/proud-boys-remy-del-toro-edgar-gonzalez-capitol-riot-joseph-biggs-enrique-torro-antonio-munuz>, March 25, 2021.

⁵¹ Dan Murphy, *Yonkers Times*, “The Proud Boys Came to my Hometown. Westchester Dems Call Out Republicans,” <http://yonkerstimes.com/the-proud-boys-came-to-my-hometown-westchester-dems-call-our-republicans/>, August 19, 2021.

Despite their stated political ambitions, the number of Proud Boys running for political office so far remains small. Instead of working through the electoral system, they are focused on organizing around local political flashpoints, including mask mandates, the display of Confederate monuments, abortion rights, inclusive education in schools, and vaccine policies. That mobilization has been widespread. According to data gathered by Princeton's Bridging Divides Initiative and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project and shared with the SPLC, the Proud Boys were present at roughly 100 demonstrations from the day after the insurrection until mid-September.

Participation in local political battles creates a space for the Proud Boys to recruit new members, make alliances between disparate parts of the far right, heighten political tensions, normalize their presence within the Republican Party, and create combustible situations that could lead to violence. All the Proud Boys activities, from disrupting school board meetings to attending anti-masking protests, are aimed at promoting the idea that the country is under attack by perceived authoritarian forces, and that policies like mask mandates are the first step on the road to tyranny. In this framing, anyone who is in any way connected to policies the Proud Boys oppose – from teachers to healthcare workers and elected officials – can be seen as a pressing existential threat. That is especially concerning in our current political atmosphere, where political violence appears to be on the rise. According to Capitol police, the number of threats made against Members of Congress in 2020 were nine-and-a-half times as high as those recorded in 2016, and threats this year are on track to double the number made in 2020.⁵² Threats against election workers have become so pervasive that the Department of Justice created a task force to combat them.⁵³

The Proud Boys have undoubtedly faced setbacks since the insurrection. In addition to the members currently imprisoned and others facing charges in relation to the Capitol siege, Reuters reported in late January that Tarrio was once a "prolific" law enforcement informant. This tarnished his image in the minds of many of his followers and, in response, chapters around the country – including ones in Indiana, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Las Vegas – broke away from national leadership.⁵⁴ But the Proud Boys have always allowed state and regional chapters to operate with relative autonomy, and the splintering of some chapters away from national leadership has had little effect on the organization's level of activity. The combination of well-established networks, generated over years of organizing around the country, and an amenable political environment mean the Proud Boys are quite resilient, and have been able to withstand external legal pressure and infighting.

The Proud Boys and Veterans

While there is no singular radicalization pathway, research from sociologist Pete Simi and criminologist Bryan Bubolz shows that individuals with a military background who come to far-right extremism generally get there through one of two paths. In the first, they are discharged from the military involuntarily – either through dishonorable discharge, an injury, or other event – and left with feelings of rejection. Having lost a defining part of their identity, they look for

⁵² Sarah D. Wire, Los Angeles *Times*, "Threats against members of Congress are skyrocketing. It's changing the job," <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-09-20/threats-members-of-congress>. August 20, 2021.

⁵³ Department of Justice, *Justice Blogs*, "Justice Department Launches Task Force to Combat Threats Against Election Workers," <https://www.justice.gov/opa/blog/justice-department-launches-task-force-combat-threats-against-election-workers-0>, June 29, 2021.

⁵⁴ Aram Roston, *Reuters*, "Exclusive: Proud Boys leader was 'prolific' informer for law enforcement," <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-proudboys-leader-exclusive/exclusive-proud-boys-leader-was-prolific-informer-for-law-enforcement-idUSKBN29W1PE>, January 27, 2021.

other spaces that allow them to reclaim their masculinity and identity as a warrior or soldier. A far-right group might appeal to these veterans because of its congruities with the military, as well as its camaraderie and appreciation for a veteran's specialized skills. In the second path, a person leaving military service feels they have not received adequate recognition or appreciation for their service, and they begin to harbor feelings of resentment toward the government they once served.⁵⁵ Feelings of abandonment are unfortunately common among veterans. According to 2019 polling by Pew, less than half of veterans say the VA is doing an excellent or good job in meeting their needs, and post-9/11 veterans are more likely than their predecessors to say the government has provided them with less help than it should.⁵⁶

Veterans may be attracted to a far-right extremist group because of the camaraderie, its validation of their masculinity, its appreciation for their military experience, or because of antigovernment animus they developed after leaving the military. But many also see their participation in the far right as an extension of their military service. The Proud Boys, as well as other ultranationalist groups, see themselves as the defenders of the United States and Western civilization more broadly. Military service is fundamentally about protecting the security of the country, and their participation in the far right is framed as an extension of that mission. The enemy they are protecting against is not a foreign power, but one that is internal: leftists, communists, Democrats, Black Lives Matter activists, or any group that is perceived as standing in the way of their authoritarian political agenda.

Proud Boys and others who participated in the insurrection have used this frame to explain their actions on January 6. A crowdfunding page for Marine veteran Charles Donohue, which the Proud Boys have promoted, drew a parallel between Donohue's service and his actions at the Capitol. "He is a Marine Veteran who chose to stand up for this great country and it's [sic] Constitution, and what it stands for on January 6th," the page reads.⁵⁷ The funding page for William Chrestman – a Proud Boy who asked protesters outside the Capitol on January 6 "Do you want your house back? Take it!" – reads similarly.⁵⁸ "Billy is a [sic] Army Veteran. He is a true Patriot, who loves our country. He comes from a long line of men who served in the military, including his father and both grandfathers," the page says, "He was at the Capital [sic] on January 6th, alongside thousands of patriots, trying to make a difference."⁵⁹ Veterans who were at the Capitol of January 6 believe their actions constituted an act of patriotism, even though the government was the object of their attack.

There are historical precedents for this moment. In her book *Bring the War Home*, University of Chicago historian Kathleen Belew argues that the white power movement that carried out countless acts of racist violence from the 1970s through the 1990s was, in part, a product of the war in Vietnam. Not only did the war help to create a highly militarized culture in the United States, but it also led some veterans to believe they needed to continue to fight the war when they returned home. The communist menace – which promoted racial integration and racial

⁵⁵ Pete Simi and Bryan Bubolz, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, "Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism: An Exploratory Analysis," https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260780820_Military_Experience_Identity_Discrepancies_and_Far_Right_Terrorism_An_Exploratory_Analysis, August 2013.

⁵⁶ Ruth Igielnik, Pew Research Center, "Key Findings about America's Military Veterans," <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/07/key-findings-about-americas-military-veterans/>, November 7, 2019.

⁵⁷ Charles Donohue funding page, <https://givesendgo.com/G287S>; Tess Owens, *Vice*, "All the Terrible Things Proud Boys Have Done Since Storming the Capitol," <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pkb377/all-the-terrible-things-proud-boys-have-done-since-storming-the-capitol>, June 23, 2021.

⁵⁸ <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/William%20Chrestman%20Criminal%20Complaint.pdf>

⁵⁹ William Chrestman funding page, <https://givesendgo.com/G26QJ>.

equality – they believed, was not just in Vietnam but had infected our own culture and needed to be eradicated. In this way, Vietnam veterans framed their participation in a violently racist far-right movement, and even the movement’s declaration of war against the federal government, as congruent with their military service.⁶⁰

Conclusion

In recent years, we have witnessed devastating violence carried out by individuals radicalized by white supremacist propaganda. This propaganda, found primarily online, is intended to recruit young people into an extremist worldview that portrays white people as being systematically replaced by nonwhite migrants – and people of color more broadly – and that demands urgent, radical, and violent action to “reset” America. This antidemocratic movement – composed of different groups with various extreme and hateful ideologies – puts a premium on the type of training afforded by the Armed Forces. It is thus no surprise that extremist groups and individuals encourage their followers to join a branch of the military and that they target existing servicemembers and veterans for recruitment. Veterans and servicemembers bring social capital, legitimacy, specialized training, and an increased capacity for violence⁶¹ to white power groups, which makes them highly sought-after recruits.⁶²

Moreover, the military’s unique command structure makes the need for leadership in rejecting extremism and bigotry essential. Instructors, officers, and upper-class students at service academies have virtually absolute command authority over their students and subordinates, creating a potential for undue pressure on an individual to conform – or not to complain or report bigotry, extremist activity, or race-based intimidation – in order to not jeopardize his or her military career. We have been told by veterans that, if those holding the extremist beliefs are superior in rank, or the commanding officer of your unit, the potential for radicalization without external oversight is much greater. Commanding officers have the authority – and the responsibility – to address problems within their ranks before they escalate and, where necessary, to discipline or separate those who participate in extremist activity.

Policy Recommendations

When SPLC testified before the House Armed Services Committee last March, we promoted a wide variety of policy recommendations to address this problem.⁶³ Our focus today is on

⁶⁰ Belew, *Bring the War Home*.

⁶¹ “Having members with military backgrounds may increase a group’s propensity towards violence in several ways. First, former members of the military may have particular technical and leadership skills that can be used by the group to commit violence. ... This skill set includes extensive training in the use of weapons, explosives, and combat strategies. Second, military veterans turned activist may have specific grievances directed at the government. Thus, we hypothesize that groups that have members with previous military training will be more likely to be involved in violence.” See Steven M. Chermak, Joshua D. Freilich and Michael Suttmoeller, “The Organizational Dynamics of Far-Right Hate Groups in the United States: Comparing Violent to Non-Violent Organizations,” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Dec. 2011. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/944_OPSR_TEVUS_Comparing-Violent-Nonviolent-Far-Right-Hate-Groups_Dec2011-508.pdf.

⁶² “Extremist leaders seek to recruit members with military experience in order to exploit their discipline, knowledge of firearms, explosives, and tactical skills and access to weapons and intelligence.” FBI Intelligence Assessment, “White Supremacist Recruitment of Military Personnel since 9/11” (unclassified), July 7, 2008, <https://documents.law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/White%20Supremacist%20Recruitment%20of%20Military%20Personnel%20Since%209-11-ocr.pdf>

⁶³ Testimony of Lecia Brooks, Chief of Staff, Southern Poverty Law Center before the Armed Services Committee United States House of Representatives, “Extremism in the Armed Forces,” March 24, 2021.

priority recommendations for this Committee and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

1. This hearing and the Committee's commitment to continue its investigation of the issue over the next months is significant and welcome. This is an evolving problem that will require this Committee's ongoing involvement and oversight – especially on the implementation of the CEWG report and the findings and recommendations of the Department of Veterans Affairs investigation.

And it is impossible to overstate the importance of military leaders speaking out against hate and extremism – from the Commander in Chief, to the Secretary of Defense, to the squad leader.⁶⁴ Words matter. Military leaders must exercise leadership and use their command positions to condemn hate and extremism. Failure to do so emboldens extremists.⁶⁵

2. We urge the Pentagon to institute annual service branch voluntary, confidential climate surveys to enable military personnel to anonymously report their exposure to white supremacy and extremist views during their service. A report based on the surveys, focused on the erosion of unit cohesion and the impact exposure to white supremacy and extremism has on good order, discipline, morale, and readiness, should be made available to the public annually, like the Department of Defense's Annual Report on Sexual Harassment and Violence at the Military Service Academies.⁶⁶

3. Secretary Austin's April 9 Memorandum contains a call for each service branch to:

“add provisions to their Service member transition checklists for individuals separating or retiring from the military that include training on potential targeting of Service members by extremist groups and work with the other Federal Departments and Agencies to create a mechanism by which Veterans have the opportunity to report any potential contact with an extremist group should they choose to do so.”

https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/splc_testimony_house_armed_services_committee_hearings_on_extremism_in_the_armed_forces59.pdf

⁶⁴ “Stand-down to Address Extremism in Ranks,” Memorandum for Senior Pentagon Leadership, Defense Agency and DOD Field Activity Directors, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, Feb. 5, 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Feb/05/2002577485/-1/-1/0/STAND-DOWN-TO-ADDRESS-EXTREMISM-IN-THE-RANKS.PDF>; SPLC wrote to Secretary Austin, offering support for his initiative and a number of policy recommendations.

https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/splc_letter_to_sec_of_defense_lloyd_austin_2.10.21-final.pdf, February 10, 2021.

⁶⁵ An outstanding example of this type of leadership occurred after racial slurs were scrawled outside black students' doors at the U.S. Air Force Academy's (USAFA) preparatory school. USAFA Superintendent Lt. Gen. Jay Silveria called all 4,000 cadets together with faculty and USAFA staff and delivered an unmistakable message: “If you can't treat someone with dignity and respect, then you need to get out. If you can't treat someone from another gender, whether that's a man or a woman, with dignity and respect, then you need to get out. If you demean someone in any way, then you need to get out. And if you can't treat someone from another race, or different color skin, with dignity and respect, then you need to get out.” Though investigation later revealed that the slur was a hoax perpetrated by one of the targets, Gen. Silveria demonstrated model leadership in seizing the teachable moment to condemn hate and promote respect. See Bill Chappell, “‘You Should be Outraged,’ Air Force Academy Head Tells Cadets About Racism on Campus,” NPR, Sept. 29, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/twotwo-way/2017/09/29/554458065/you-should-be-outraged-air-force-academy-head-tells-cadets-about-racism-on-campus>. September 29, 2017.

⁶⁶ Department of Defense press release, “DOD Releases Annual Report on Sexual Harassment and Violence at the Military Service Academies,” <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2069838/dod-releases-annual-report-on-sexual-harassment-and-violence-at-the-military-se/>, January 30, 2020

This is a welcome initiative, but there is also a need for the Pentagon, the Department of Veterans Affairs, veterans' groups, and other stakeholders to work together to design pre-retirement training to help veterans understand that they may be targeted for recruitment by extremism groups. In addition, we recommend training designed to help inoculate veterans against adopting extremist ideologies, and, importantly, the ongoing availability of counseling and other mental health and social welfare services.

4. There is a significant shortage of research focused on a holistic, whole-of-government examination of extremism in the military.⁶⁷ The Department of Defense should partner with vetted academic researchers with strong track records on radicalization and extremism to provide access to enlisted servicemembers, so they may research this dangerous phenomena and produce reports offering empirical guidance and lessons learned.⁶⁸ These reports, along with the expanded, anonymous climate surveys and incident data collected and made public on both hate crimes (under the Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990⁶⁹) and violations of existing policies related to white supremacy or other forms of extremism, should be helpful to inform the creation of evidence-informed trainings intended to inoculate against radicalization at entry, throughout one's military career, and as veterans reenter into civilian life.

Thank you for holding this hearing and for committing to additional hearings on this important issue. We deeply appreciate the committee's attention to, and ongoing investigation of, efforts of violent extremist to recruit active-duty personnel and veterans. We look forward to working with you as you continue your focus on this important issue. If you have questions about this statement or need additional information, please contact Michael Lieberman, SPLC Senior Policy Counsel, at Michael.Lieberman@splcenter.org.

Sincerely,



Cassie Miller, PhD
Senior Research Analyst, Intelligence Project

⁶⁷ "At a strategic level, the military is fighting this battle blind. Only two studies have been commissioned to look at this problem specifically—one in the active-duty Army and one in the Air National Guard—and both are more than two decades old. Like sexual harassment, extremism among the troops may not be reported; its pervasiveness may not be evident until one goes looking." See Heather Williams, "How to Root Out Extremism in the US Military," *Defense One*, Feb. 1, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/02/how-root-out-extremism-us-military/171744/>.

⁶⁸ Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Daniel Koehler, "A Plan to Beat Back the Far Right: Violent Extremism in America Demands a Social Response," *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 3, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-03/plan-beat-back-far-right>.

⁶⁹ Hate Crime Statistics Act, 28 USC § 534 (1990).