

TODD C. HELMUS, HANNAH JANE BYRNE, KING MALLORY

Countering Violent Extremism in the U.S. Military

Following the riot on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, reports began to emerge of the seemingly disproportionate role played by current and former members of the U.S. military. Most recent data suggest that 12 percent of those arrested and charged with participation in the riot were current or former members of the U.S. military (Milton and Mines, 2021). In addition, two members of the U.S. Army National Guard contingent charged with protecting the Capitol and the inauguration of President Joseph R. Biden were removed from duty specifically for

KEY FINDINGS

- A plan to counter violent extremism using a terrorism prevention framework might offer the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) a way to address current forms of extremism in the ranks.
- The terrorism prevention framework is derived from a model that highlights how different audiences are drawn into extremist beliefs and groups in three phases.
- Early phase interventions are directed at a vulnerable population, or one that is in the early phases of radicalization; middle phase interventions seek to influence those who are already radicalized and possibly becoming violent; and finally, late phase interventions seek to redirect individuals who are in the midst of planning violent activities or have already done so.
- Specific terrorism prevention initiatives could be considered and adapted by DoD.
- A review of related programs and initiatives suggests that there are early and middle phase initiatives that might be helpful in countering white nationalism and other forms of right-wing extremism (RWE) going forward.
- Early phase initiatives include inoculation warnings, media literacy programs, social media and internet search redirection, Community Awareness Briefings (CABs), and Community Resilience Exercises (CREXs). See Boxes 1–5 for more information.
- Middle phase initiatives include perception assessment of DoD extremism policies, off-ramping interventions, and military law enforcement training. See Boxes 6–8 for more information.
- We did not find any late phase interventions that might be considered by DoD; to date, most programming options generally focus on prison-based mental health care and support services, and the evidence of their effectiveness is limited.

expressing anti-government sentiments (Schmitt and Cooper, 2021). In April of 2021, Seth Jones and colleagues at the Center for Strategic and International Studies presented data showing that the percentage of terrorist attacks and plots perpetrated by active-duty or reserve service members went from zero in 2018 to more than 6 percent in 2020 (Jones et al., 2021). Anecdotes also abound of active-duty service personnel engaged in extremist activities.¹

Furthermore, these events have occurred against a backdrop of rising far-right extremism in the United States. *Far-right extremism* has been defined as

the use or threat of violence by subnational or nonstate entities whose goals may include racial or ethnic supremacy [including white supremacy]; opposition to government authority; anger at women, including from the involuntary celibate (or “incel”) movement; belief in certain conspiracy theories, such as QAnon; and outrage against certain policies, such as abortion. (Jones et al., 2020, p. 2)

Far-right extremism (in this report, referred to as RWE), should be distinguished from other forms of terrorism, such as religious terrorism, which has most recently been Islamic-inspired in the United States, and far-left terrorism, which has emanated from anti-capitalism, black nationalism, environmental or animal rights, pro-socialism, and anti-fascism belief systems (Jones et al., 2020). Data suggest that violence emanating from far-right movements is on a dramatic rise (Jones et al., 2020). For example, five right-wing plots were documented in 2013, but that number grew to 53 in 2017, 44 in 2019, and 72 in 2020 (Jones et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021). Of all such terrorist events in 2020, 66 percent were right-wing

attacks and plots; far-left extremists accounted for 23 percent, and Islamic-inspired attacks accounted for 5 percent (Jones, 2021).

As a result of these events, in February 2021, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J. Austin III, called for a DoD-wide stand-down on extremism, which was intended in part to reinforce values—and more specifically, the oath taken by all service personnel to the U.S. Constitution (Lopez, 2021). In addition, the Pentagon announced tougher screenings of new military recruits, which included the addition of accession screening questions that ask about extremist affiliations. The Pentagon also established a new anti-extremism working group to study the prevalence of extremist behavior in the force and is also seeking to update regulations prohibiting extremist activity. Finally, the services will begin to alert newly retiring or separating service personnel that they might be targeted by extremist groups for recruitment (Losey, 2021b).

These efforts represent important first steps in combating extremist infiltration of the U.S. military and recruitment of current service members, although more efforts will likely be required depending on the results of future research assessing the prevalence of extremist behavior in the force.² Posard, Payne, and Miller’s (2021) RAND Perspective outlines a framework with four broad parts that specify actions the military can take to reduce the risk of extremism in military personnel:

- Recognize and scope the problem.
- Prevent future extremist views and activities.
- Detect and intervene when observing extremism.
- Measure and evaluate extremist trends.

For each of these parts, the authors offer several suggested policies that could help achieve the strategy goals.

In highlighting the need to prevent future extremist views and activities, Posard, Payne, and Miller pay credence to the need to develop counter-violent extremism and counterterrorism programs and policies that seek to undercut extremist efforts to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize followers to violence and that address factors that promote recruitment and radicalization to violence. Indeed, the U.S. focus on

Abbreviations

CAB	Community Awareness Briefing
CREX	Community Resilience Exercise
CVE	countering violent extremism
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
RWE	right-wing extremism
SLATT	State and Local Anti-Terrorism Training

countering Islamic strains of extremism since the September 11, 2001, attacks has yielded a wide variety of initiatives that seek to prevent individuals from radicalizing, turn those radicalizing away from violence, and educate and equip a variety of audiences to identify and respond to the threat of violent extremism.

To support DoD in its efforts to counter extremism among its ranks, our research team sought to explore U.S. countering violent extremism (CVE) programs more deeply and understand how such efforts may or may not apply to the DoD and RWE context. We offer a series of terrorism prevention–based intervention initiatives that DoD can consider adopting for its specific context. We recognize that DoD is a unique institution and that interventions identified in the civilian space will not translate wholesale to the DoD context. Our hope is that this analysis offers DoD planners insights for consideration and provides a way for the public to—at least in part—consider the merits of DoD plans.

We also review the terrorism prevention framework as it has been applied in the U.S. civilian sector and focus on the initiatives that might be both relevant and adaptable to the military context based on evidence that we present.

Applying Terrorism Prevention Programming to Countering Extremism in the U.S. Military

The United States, like many allied countries, has sought to stanch violent extremism and radicalization that might lead to terrorism. In the search for effective measures to prevent and combat both, the U.S. government has worked directly and indirectly within a framework known as CVE, or more recently, *terrorism prevention*. Terrorism prevention interventions are based on an understanding that the internalization of extremist beliefs happens incrementally, in phases. Thus, designers of terrorism prevention and intervention policies and programs can develop a plan that has multiple ways to address violent extremism that are particular to each stage of a person or group’s internalization of extremist beliefs.

In this report, we first briefly review the tenets of CVE and propose a terrorism prevention implemen-

tation plan that can be considered by U.S. military leaders who are striving to combat RWE in the ranks. We next describe programs that have been applied in the domestic U.S. context. We then offer ideas as to how the measure might be adopted specifically for the U.S. military.

We recognize that some of these ideas are not wholly new to the U.S. military and in fact might have been plied in DoD settings either currently or in the past. However, even in cases where DoD is implementing such recommendations, we believe that this review is still valuable because it highlights the broader evidence for such initiatives, places the initiatives in the context of the radicalization process and in the context of other such initiatives, and offers at least a cursory review of the evidence base for interventions.

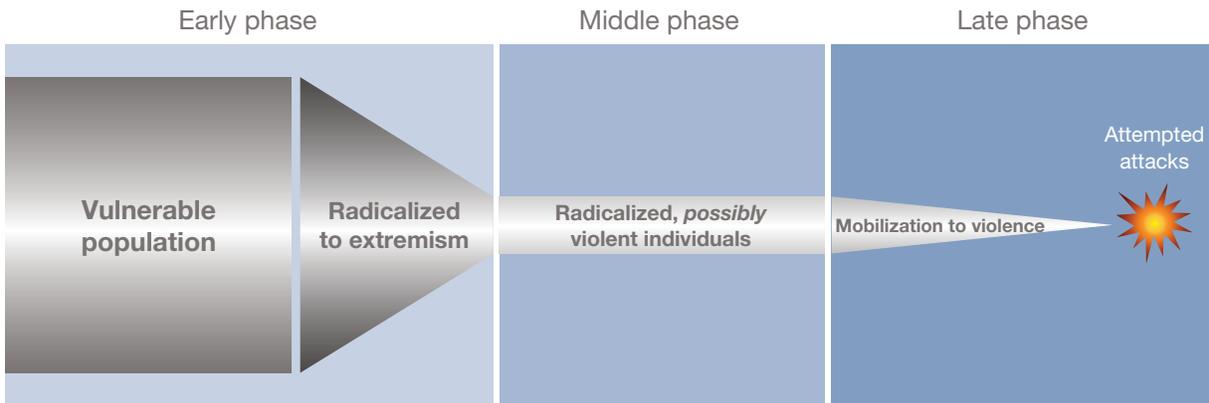
Developing a Terrorism Prevention Model

Terrorism prevention represents a class of initiatives, programs, and interventions that seek to “counter efforts by violent extremists to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize followers to violence and to address specific factors that facilitate violent extremist recruitment and radicalization to violence” (Kerry, 2016, p. 4). Figure 1, which is drawn from Jackson and colleagues’ 2019 report on U.S. terrorism prevention policy, highlights the different audiences that a CVE intervention might target and seek to influence. In the *early phase*, CVE interventions are directed at a *vulnerable population*, or one that is in the early phases of radicalization. In the *middle phase*, interventions seek to influence those who are already radicalized and possibly becoming violent. Finally, a *late phase* intervention seeks to redirect individuals who are in the midst of planning violent activities or have already done so. As one can imagine, the type of CVE intervention would vary considerably depending on the audience it is attempting to reach.

We draw on this model and Jackson and colleagues’ 2019 characterization of different programs to consider interventions that might be appropriate for DoD.

FIGURE 1

The Three Phases of Countering Violent Extremism Interventions



SOURCE: Jackson et al., 2019, p. 40.

Terrorism Prevention: Phased Interventions

Here we describe a phased approach to addressing terrorism prevention in the U.S. military context. This CVE approach allowed us to isolate the effects of the different stages of extremism and collect and review feasible interventions for each. We highlight the interventions that we believe merit serious consideration in Boxes 1–8. In these, we describe individual interventions, present evidence pertaining to their effectiveness, and discuss how they might be adopted by the U.S. military to stanch the proliferation of extremism among the ranks.

Early Phase Interventions

There are at least three critical intervention efforts relevant to early phase terrorism prevention interventions: online messaging, community education and community resilience, and risk reduction (Jackson et al., 2019).

Online messaging programs vary by target audience, objectives, and medium. Some campaigns are broad-based and seek to reach a large population and dissuade those people from turning extremist. The U.S. government, for example, sponsored a social media campaign in Indonesia that disseminated CVE-themed Facebook posts to the country’s young adult population (Bodine-Baron et al., 2020). In contrast, a private firm, Moonshot, takes a more targeted

approach with the Redirect Method. It uses Google ads to place advertisement links in front of individuals searching for extremist content on Google. A user who clicks on the ad link might, for example, see a specially curated video that attempts to cast a negative light on the extremist group of interest (Helmus and Klein, 2018). Other campaigns seek to inform rather than persuade audiences. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, for example, previously sponsored a website called “Don’t Be a Puppet,” which sought to teach youth about violent extremism, extremist groups, recruitment tactics, propaganda methods, etc.³

There are also campaigns that seek to educate or inculcate important skills. A recent RAND Corporation report, for example, argued for the need for media literacy education that can help at-risk audiences better assess the credibility of and think critically about online and other types of information. In theory, such education might help audiences more critically weigh propaganda content or consider the merit of misinformation that drives extremist ideology (Brown et al., 2021). Warning audiences of impending or ongoing radicalization campaigns could be another educational tool. Such warnings can take the place of generic government warnings or more-targeted education efforts. A related strategy is to pair a warning with directions on how to refute the argument or message embedded in the disinformation content (Braddock, 2019). The strategy is referred to as an *inoculation intervention*. Previous

research has demonstrated that audiences who were exposed to the intervention experienced some protection against extremist propaganda.

Finally, campaigns vary with respect to the chosen medium, which can include videos, social media, radio, or even personal engagement. The Center for Strategic Dialogue, for example, developed a model for direct outreach that involves renounced or former extremists reaching out to and attempting to deradicalize online extremists via Facebook direct messaging (Frenett and Dow, 2014).

Community education efforts in the United States have focused on improving threat awareness in the community at large. Some aspects of this are less relevant for an RWE-focused policy, as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has, for example, sought to use such outreach to help build relationships with and address civil rights concerns of the Muslim-American community. That need aside, DHS has used a tool called the Community Awareness Briefing (CAB) to educate local audiences, including religious and civic institutions and parents and youth, about the threat and signs of radicalization, risk factors for extremist ideology, and steps that parents and leaders can take to reduce risk. Another tool is the CREX, which involves local government and community members working together to address unfolding scenarios of possible violent extremist activity. Like a wargame exercise, such efforts help improve trust and coordination between critical actors, and they can help empower local communities to address emergent threats more effectively (Jackson et al., 2019; Schanzer and Eyerman, 2019).

Finally, resilience and risk factor approaches seek to target risk factors associated with extremism. The number of reputed risk factors are many and can include fractured families, substance use, and mental health problems. RAND recently analyzed the radicalization and deradicalization trajectories of 32 U.S.-based extremists and found particularly high rates of past mental health problems in the sample, an observation documented in other related research (Brown et al., 2021). Although we do not know if this link is causal, there is an ongoing debate in extremism-related academic circles as to whether or not treating an extremist's mental health problems can lead to a

reduction in extremist ideology or behavior (Weine et al., 2017).

Department of Defense Application of Early Phase Interventions

How might such strategies apply to DoD? First, it remains unclear whether DoD should use broad-based messaging campaigns to dissuade audiences from extremist radicalization. The evidence showing the success of such efforts is too limited, and some indicators suggest that messaging campaigns can produce effects that are the opposite of what was intended (see, for example, campaigns risking what is called a *boomerang effect*, or the hardening of views inflaming extremist beliefs).⁴

That said, several options might be prudent. First, there might be value in explicitly warning U.S. service personnel that they are the target of extremist recruitment efforts. Such efforts can go even further and use inoculation procedures to help service personnel develop strategies for rebuffing extremist arguments and recruitment activities (see Box 1). Second, media literacy efforts might be relevant. Media literacy interventions, for example, have been shown to improve audience discernment between mainstream and false news content and hence might

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reduce the risk that those who receive the training adopt conspiratorial or extremist views (see Box 2).

Moonshot's approach to using Google advertisements to reach extremist audiences might also provide a unique opportunity to reach audiences at the point of radicalization. Moonshot has used—and to some extent, continues to use—such ads to place counter-radicalization videos in front of audiences. Although the impact of such videos on audience attitudes and behavior is unknown, Moonshot has experimented with alternatives. One such initiative, which intersects with a resilience and risk factor approach, is to advertise a crisis counseling phone

line that audience members can call for free counseling (see Box 3).

Second, drawing on the terrorism prevention program of the CAB and other related initiatives, DoD will need to develop a force-wide training curriculum to educate both broad and at-risk audiences about ongoing extremist threats, radicalization, and mitigation strategies (see Box 4).

Third, it might make sense for DoD authorities to sponsor a type of CREX to help law enforcement authorities, installation leadership, and varied commanders plan and prepare for contingencies associated with radicalized service members (see Box 5).

BOX 1

Using Generalized and Inoculation Warnings to Protect Audiences from Violent Extremism

What is it? Providing generalized warnings is one possible approach to preparing DoD audiences for radicalization risk. Specifically, there might be utility in warning audiences that white supremacy, anti-government, and other extremist groups might target U.S. military personnel with propaganda and other recruitment efforts and that audiences should be highly suspicious of such sources and their intent.

How effective is it? Clayton and colleagues, 2020, for example, demonstrated that providing participants with a general warning that subsequent content might contain false or misleading information increases the likelihood that participants see false headlines as less accurate. This effect, which was deemed “relatively modest” in size, still held true when participants were confronted with attitude-congruent political content. Whether this effect extends to propagandistic content is unclear.

The issuance of a generalized warning could be enhanced by adding what is called an *inoculation* intervention. Applied to countering white nationalist extremism, in an inoculation intervention, the warning is paired with what is described as a “weakened” example of white supremacist propaganda efforts, and audiences are provided directions on how to refute that propaganda. Studies have shown inoculation procedures to effectively induce resistance to conspiracy theories, extremist propaganda, and climate change misinformation (Cook, Lewandowsky, and Ecker, 2017; Braddock, 2019; Banas and Miller, 2013; van der Linden et al., 2017).

How might it be applied in DoD? DoD could study and use such intervention techniques to help protect audiences who are particularly at risk. As noted in the introduction, DoD is developing a process to alert newly retiring or separating service personnel that they might be targeted by extremist groups for recruitment (Losey, 2021b). Adapting this warning to include an inoculation-like opportunity to practice refuting sample propaganda could significantly strengthen the intervention. Beyond separation, DoD could also implement an inoculation-type training to service personnel during specialty training and education programs that take place early in a service person's career.

Using Media Literacy to Protect Department of Defense Audiences Against Violent Extremism

What is it? Media literacy programs seek, in part, to help audiences be curious about sources of information, assess their credibility, and think critically about the material presented (Stamos et al., 2019). Policymakers and educators have focused on media literacy as an approach to protect audiences against foreign disinformation or domestic misinformation campaigns. However, misinformation also appears to play a role in radicalization to violent extremism. Rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol, for example, were misled into believing that the U.S. presidential election was stolen from President Donald J. Trump. Likewise, white supremacists follow various racist tropes that help feed their extremist ideology. To the extent that media literacy educational content helps audiences think more critically about the credibility of information and its sources, then it might help protect audiences from content that feeds extremist ideation.

How effective is it? Research increasingly suggests that media literacy interventions have a moderate and positive impact in improving participants' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors related to media (Jeong, Cho, and Hwang, 2012). Such positive effects have been shown for stand-alone educational courses (International Research & Exchanges Board, undated) and social media-based media literacy content (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler, 2020; Helmus et al., 2020). The role of media literacy training in reducing the risk of racist or extremist views is woefully under-studied, and a small number of studies suggest mixed effects (Ramasubramanian, 2007; Ramasubramanian and Oliver, 2007).

How might it be applied in DoD? Given the growth of misinformation and the risk of military audiences' exposure to foreign disinformation efforts, it is likely a worthwhile effort to develop, test, and disseminate media literacy training content to U.S. service personnel. It might be wise to develop and adapt this media literacy content to counter general misinformation risks unique to the DoD mission rather than focus on countering racism directly. In fact, Section 589E of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act stipulates that DoD establish a program to train its personnel on "foreign malign influence campaigns," including those "carried out through social media" (Pub. L. 116-283, 2021). While meeting this requirement of the National Defense Authorization Act, DoD should consider adapting the content of the training curriculum to also address extremist online recruitment practices. We recommend that the developed educational content be rigorously tested to ensure that it is effective and that DoD consider different approaches for dissemination, such as class-based instruction, if feasible, and online courses or even social media content directly targeted via social media-based ads (Helmus et al., 2020).

BOX 3

Using Social Media and Search to Reach and Possibly Influence Those Radicalizing Near U.S. Military Installations

What is it? Numerous research reports on extremism have noted that the internet serves as a central repository for extremist propaganda and that it is the avid consumption of this online propaganda that drives radicalization (Jensen et al., 2018). Given this reality, CVE initiatives have been increasingly directed to the online space, and several noteworthy programs are now able to reach audiences at the point of a Google search. As previously mentioned, Moonshot implements a program called the Redirect Method that uses Google advertisements to place ad links at the top of the search results of people Googling extremist content. Typically, these ad links are connected to video and other curated content that “responds to and counters socially harmful narratives, arguments and beliefs espoused by the content for which they were originally searching” (Moonshot, undated). Moonshot has found that individuals searching for armed groups online were disproportionately more likely than typical audiences to click on ads encouraging “calmness and mindfulness” (Pasternack, 2021). They also found that violent far-right audiences were more likely to click on mental health ads than a comparison group (Moonshot, 2019). Moonshot is currently working with a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization, Life After Hate, experimenting with ways to turn online connections to offline engagement opportunities that can support disengagement and deradicalization efforts. Facebook has also sought a targeted approach with a campaign that presented educational resources and opportunities for off-platform support to individuals making extremist-related searches on Facebook (Moonshot, 2020).

How effective is it? Overall, the evidence documenting the effectiveness of the Redirect Method is limited. Previous RAND research has shown that audiences engage with the ads and the corresponding web content at rates on par with industry standards, but little is known about how the CVE content affects audience attitudes, behavior, or knowledge (Helmus and Klein, 2018). Little is also known about the impact of the crisis counseling or offline connections to deradicalization, although the personalized nature of these interventions at least appears to engender less risk of a boomerang effect than online video content does.

How might it be applied in DoD? The highly targeted nature of the Redirect Method offers a unique opportunity for DoD to address the presence of extremism in the ranks. The ads used in the method can be applied at the county level, thus allowing the program to be implemented only in counties where U.S. military installations are present. The program—especially to the extent that it can connect individuals to crisis hotlines, offer other mental health care, or possibly establish offline connections with a mentor who can support deradicalization—might provide a means to reach out and offer support to extremist military members. The program also has the added benefit of being able to track—at the county level or below—the number of extremist-related searches, which could provide a key measure of extremist activity in the military.^a

^a In addition, given the degree to which social media channels can be used to facilitate radicalization and recruitment (Jensen et al., 2018), it might be wise for DoD to limit access to at-risk platforms on DoD internet and Wi-Fi systems. Such platforms could include 8chan, Telegram, and other platforms frequently used for extremist recruitment.

Educating Department of Defense Audiences on Extremism Threats and Policies Using the Community Awareness Briefing and Other Methods

What is it? Providing audiences critical information about emerging trends in extremism is a key feature of terrorism prevention policies. In U.S. terrorism prevention, this is done in several ways. First, the CAB is a PowerPoint briefing created by the National Counterterrorism Center and the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. Routinely updated to reflect current events, the CAB generally offers information on terrorism threats confronting the United States and local communities, tactics used by extremist organizations to radicalize and recruit new entrants, and factors that motivate youths to join extremist groups, and it identifies steps that communities can take to prevent radicalization of local youth. The briefing has been delivered by representatives of the National Counterterrorism Center and DHS, as well as other trained representatives, such as U.S. attorneys and local law enforcement. In 2015 and 2016, for example, such briefings were delivered in 10 to 20 cities to more than 1,000 attendees each year (Jackson et al., 2019). CABs have addressed particular issues, focusing on different types of extremist groups and different components of radicalization, such as social media-based propaganda. In addition, as previously mentioned, the Federal Bureau of Investigation had sponsored the website “Don’t Be a Puppet,” which aimed to raise young people’s awareness of violent extremist groups and their recruitment strategies.

How effective is it? Interviews with government experts and community leaders suggest that the CAB has been well received. Local community demand for the CABs outstrips the ability of the U.S. government to deliver them (Schanzer and Eyerman, 2019). It has been noted that the CAB and the CREX “generate opportunities for interaction and engagement” among varied government and community leaders (Jackson et al., 2019, p. 149). The effectiveness or reach of the “Don’t Be a Puppet” site is unclear, although it did receive criticism for its stereotypical treatment of Muslims as extremists (Camera, 2016).

How might it be applied in DoD? DoD will need to develop a force-wide training curriculum to educate personnel on the threat that extremist groups pose to U.S. military personnel, information on specific extremist groups and recruitment tactics, information on DoD policies with respect to extremism, and expectations for U.S. military personnel with respect to those policies. The DoD-wide stand-down on extremism sought in part to address this critical requirement. The need for more in-depth training was also addressed in a 1996 report by the Secretary of the Army’s Task Force on Extremist Activities, which recommended that the Army “Develop a state of the art, interactive, discussion-based set of training support packages for use at each level of professional military education” (U.S. Department of the Army, Secretary of the Army’s Task Force on Extremist Activities, 1996, p. 28). In 2000, the U.S. Department of the Army issued Pamphlet 600–15, which offered an outline for the contents of a proposed “Extremism Lesson Plan” that could be implemented in one-hour small-group settings (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2000, p. 7).^a

Although we do not know the extent to which DoD has already developed such training initiatives, it seems clear that they are necessary. In addition to developing such efforts for professional military education, options include a CAB-like briefing that can be delivered in person to special audiences, such as those in a high-risk unit or installation, or to establish trust with a skeptical audience. There might also be value in disseminating training content via online courses or other online means, such as social media or social media-based ads. Finally, it is critical that this education reach and influence the U.S. military’s commissioned and noncommissioned officer corps, whose enlistment in the counter-extremist fight will be crucial to DoD’s success.

^a The pamphlet explains that the objectives for such training include explaining restrictions on participation in extremist organizations, describing the definitions of terms related to extremism, explaining the prohibitions with regard to extremism, and explaining the training responsibilities of the commander with regard to extremist organizations and activities (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2000, p. 7).

Adopting the Community Resilience Exercise for Department of Defense Needs

What is it? The CREX is a tabletop half-day exercise hosted by federal officials for local community leaders and law enforcement officials. It presents scenarios about individuals who show signs of violent radicalization and fosters discussions among participants about who should do what in such circumstances. The goal is to improve understanding and communication between the community and law enforcement and highlight necessary steps that different parties should take when someone in the community shows signs of radicalization.

How effective is it? Overall, interviews with participants of CREX events suggest that the event is well received. Government officials report that the events improve understanding between different players. They also reportedly help community members realize their role and responsibility in a space that is considered “pre-crime” (Schanzer and Eyerman, 2019, p. 20). Government officials also note that after-action evaluation of community members was “usually off the charts positive”; law enforcement evaluations were more “mixed” (Schanzer and Eyerman, 2019, p. 21).

How might it be applied in DoD? Depending on the overall extremism threat to DoD, it is conceivable that DoD might develop a CREX-type initiative to help parties in at-risk installations or units better understand how to address that local radicalization threat. Bringing together law enforcement, installation commanders, unit commanders, and noncommissioned officers could open channels of communication that would be needed in the event that threat indicators suggest a need for a more robust response.

Middle Phase Interventions

During the *middle phase*, terrorism prevention interventions are used to influence those who are already radicalized and possibly violent. The key interventions during this phase address referral promotion, law enforcement training, and intervention programming.

Given that individuals in this stage are well into the process of extremist radicalization and tending toward violence, it is critical that they be identified and interdicted before they can commit violent acts. *Referral promotion* refers to the process by which community members identify such individuals and the risk they pose and then make a referral to either law enforcement or some other established remediation program. At its face, the process is simple: Disseminate a phone number for people to call. But successful implementation of a referral policy must address a variety of issues and questions. In particular, the community needs to know what behaviors merit reporting, and it must know where and how to make such a report. Motivations must also be addressed, as those reporting might consider the consequences of making a report. In the United States, some community members were reluctant to refer identified youth, given concerns that such a

call would ultimately lead to the youth’s arrest and incarceration (Jackson et al., 2019). U.S. authorities have used the CAB as a means to address such critical questions.

Law enforcement officers, especially those who might encounter violent extremists in their job or be called upon to investigate such extremists, also require training. To address this training gap, the United States has funded the State and Local Anti-Terrorism Training Program, or SLATT, which offers training to state and local law enforcement personnel (Davis et al., 2016). The U.S. Secret Service’s National Threat Assessment Center has also offered its own version of a Law Enforcement Awareness Brief (Jackson et al., 2019).

Finally, once a referral is made, a key question concerns what to do with the individual who is being referred. In the U.S. fight against Islamic extremism, the answer to this question often involved a criminal investigation with a goal of prosecuting the suspect on terrorism-related charges. At times, the Federal Bureau of Investigation would even use undercover agents to facilitate a suspect’s participation in a seemingly real terror plot, which would enable the investigating agents to arrest the suspect and refer the person to prosecution more quickly. However,

the approach heightened suspicions among members of the Muslim community, who were reluctant to submit their loved ones to aggressive police tactics (Warikoo, 2016). Hence, demand grew for some alternative intervention that could help identified individuals deradicalize and avoid the fate of criminal investigation and prosecution. Various private organizations, such as Life After Hate and Beyond Barriers, which are founded and created by former extremists, have sought to address this need by creating deradicalizing interventions. Parents for Peace also supports intervention work and offers a 24-hour crisis line (Parents for Peace, undated). There is also a federal program called Shared Responsibilities Committees, which promotes voluntary collaboration of law enforcement, mental health, and religious leaders, who work together to help identified individuals. Various challenges exist with such programming, but the programs might be helpful to individuals who earnestly want such assistance.

Department of Defense Application of Middle Phase Interventions

If DoD crafts a zero-tolerance policy for extremist group affiliation in the military, then it will need to

draft a commensurate mechanism to disseminate that policy and educate installation and unit commanders on how to report violations. It will also have to consider how audiences perceive of DoD's planned adjudication policies for such infractions. If audiences consider such plans as overly strict or unfair, then they might think twice before making a report, or they might avoid making a report in all but the most-obvious cases (see Boxes 4 and 6).⁵

Here the plan for adjudication of referred individuals is critical. Ultimately, DoD will need to craft policies that govern the consequences for service members who are shown to have joined an extremist organization. One result might be discharge from service. DoD might want to consider other alternatives that offer some sort of intervention designed to help individuals walk away from extremism. To this end, DoD might consider drawing on previously established interventions and make such services available if and when needed (see Box 7).

DoD might also need to develop and disseminate enhanced training on extremism to the service's criminal investigative agencies (see Box 8).

BOX 6

Assessing Rank-and-File Perceptions of Department of Defense Extremism Policies

What is it? Box 4 highlights the need for DoD to vigorously communicate its policies and educate audiences on the risks of extremism and extremist recruitment efforts. Such messaging would include expectations for reporting service personnel who violate DoD extremism policies. Beyond this, it will be critical for DoD to monitor how service personnel perceive its extremism policies. Service personnel and commanders will ultimately be the first ones to see extremism in the ranks, and they will be confronted with a decision of whether or not to report such suspicions to their chain of command. These individuals will likely consider several factors in making this report, including the degree to which they are confident that the individual in question violated DoD policy and the degree to which they think that the investigation process and outcome will be fair. The more heavy-handed and unfair they consider the investigation process and outcome, the less likely they might be to report suspicions. Consequently, DoD will need to develop its policies with this in mind and monitor rank-and-file views about the policy.^a

^a One past example of such an assessment is the 1995 Secretary of the Army's Task Force on Extremist Activities. More than 1,000 interviews with Army personnel were conducted, and it was observed that many junior officers and noncommissioned officers were confused about the definition of *extremism*. Some were afraid to take "preemptive action" against extremism for fear that doing so would go against other contemporaneous Army policies (such as the Single Soldier Initiative) that sought to give soldiers more leeway for free-time activities (U.S. Department of the Army, Secretary of the Army's Task Force on Extremist Activities, 1996, p. 11). The assessment also found that small-unit leaders often fail to receive appropriate information on how to make corrective actions or how to educate soldiers on extremist threats.

Using Interventions to Off-Ramp Military Extremists

What is it? Off-ramp interventions are those that seek to help radicalized individuals disengage from extremist organizations and desist from extremist activities. The interventions also seek to possibly deradicalize these individuals' ideology. Life After Hate, for example, is an organization created by a former white supremacist and has the mission to help "people leave the violent far-right to connect with humanity and lead compassionate lives" (Life After Hate, undated). It draws on a cadre of *formers*, individuals who were part of but have left the white supremacy movement, who offer support and education to those seeking to leave far-right groups. Another organization, Parents for Peace, seeks to empower families, friends, and communities to prevent radicalization and extremist violence. The organization offers intervention and rehabilitation services and a support network for families and friends of those involved in extremism. It also offers a 24-hour hotline that affected individuals and family members can call to receive help.

How effective is it? The evidence supporting such interventions is largely anecdotal, and there is little in the way of prospective evidence on the effectiveness of third-party disengagement strategies. However, many people who join extremist organizations leave them and desist from extremist activities. A recent RAND report on extremism in the United States documented the radicalization and deradicalization trajectories of extremists and found that many who left extremism did so because of support they received from a friend, life partner, or religious authority (Brown et al., 2021).

How might it be applied to DoD? In cases where the military authorities become formally aware that a service member is engaged in extremist activities, then it likely makes sense to make off-ramp services available to that service member if the person is interested in receiving them. In cases where the military seeks to discharge a service member for extremist-related ties, then an off-ramp service would be advantageous because the discharge process might risk inflaming the individual's state of radicalization further, and it could push the service member to a more violent state (Helmus, Brown, and Ramchand, 2021a). In theory, individuals identified as having extremist ties could be given access to an off-ramp counselor who could help motivate the individual to participate in treatment or initiate that treatment if the individual was so inclined. Military medical authorities, with support from mental health practitioners, chaplain services, law enforcement authorities, and the chain of command could potentially develop the intervention treatment. It might make even more sense to engage civil society organizations that have relevant experience in such matters and offer credibility, given the former extremist status of counselors.^a

The military might also wish to make intervention support services available directly to family members and friends of extremist service members (see Helmus, Brown, and Ramchand, 2021b). The support offered by Parents for Peace might be particularly valuable because family members can contact the available crisis support line and receive direct emotional support, as well as support for any attempt at engagement and intervention. Service members looking to disengage from extremist ties might also benefit from being able to directly seek support. Family and service members should be able to anonymously engage these services. DoD would have to promote the availability of these services to family members and the broader force.

^a However, DoD would need to ensure that any formal or contractual relationship with civil society organizations does not ultimately harm said organization's reputation or breed suspicion if a service member or the person's family member contacts the organization directly for support.

Providing Military Law Enforcement Training

What is it? There is a recognition in the civilian sector that it is important that law enforcement authorities have some requisite training in violent extremism and terrorism if they are to respond to acts of extremist violence and identify and respond to individuals who are at risk of extremist-related violence (Jackson et al., 2019). The SLATT Program, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance, provides terrorism-related on-site training to state and local law enforcement. It specifically offers training in such topics as emergency preparedness and readiness, prevention and response, detection and interdiction, and train the trainer (State and Local Anti-Terrorism Training Program, undated). Various other entities also offer training, including the U.S. Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center and the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center.

How effective is it? Such trainings have received positive evaluations. Interviews by Jackson and colleagues, 2019, revealed that the trainings have been positively reviewed and that there remained an unmet demand for such training efforts. Davis and colleagues, 2016, assessed SLATT and found that the trainings were positively reviewed by participants and that a majority of surveyed participants said that the training changed the way they would approach terror threats and investigations.

How might it be applied to DoD? If DoD seeks to root out participation in extremist organizations from the ranks, then a heavy responsibility will fall on the service branch law enforcement organizations to investigate possible cases of extremist membership. Assuming that such an effort will be a new focus for these agencies, they will likely require some training to reorient them to this particular problem set. Personnel in the agencies will need to develop knowledge about specific extremist groups and organizations, their recruitment strategies, signs and indications of service member participation, investigative tactics, and critical incident response tactics.

Late Phase Interventions

The focus of late phase terrorism prevention interventions is on recidivism reduction. Once an individual is arrested and charged with criminal or terrorism-related offenses, then terrorism prevention efforts seek to reduce the likelihood that the individual will return to extremism upon release from prison or parole. Programming options are limited in this regard and generally focus on prison-based mental health care and support services. As Jackson et al., 2019, notes though, the evidence of the effectiveness of such programming is limited, and it is constrained by a lack of assessment tools.

Department of Defense Application of Late Phase Interventions

It remains unclear to what extent the U.S. military will need to incarcerate individuals on extremism-related charges. It is not known whether the military would seek to prosecute and imprison individuals for

membership in an extremist organization, although such incarceration would most certainly occur if an individual committed an act of extremist violence, as has happened in previous instances. If extremism incarceration rates did rise to some relevant level, then it might be feasible for DoD to use a CAB of sorts to educate prison staff or offer prison- and parole-based counseling and support services.

Conclusions

This report provides a general framework for terrorism prevention practices and programs as implemented in the United States and identifies how some of these programs could be applied to the U.S. military context. Such programs as generalized or inoculation warnings, media literacy education, Google ads, education programming, CREXs, monitoring of military personnel attitudes toward DoD extremism policies, off-ramping interventions, and military law enforcement training are examples of programs that

Different programs and interventions are suitable for different audiences, and an individual's position on the "pathway" to extremism represents one critical variable to consider.

DoD should consider implementing as it weighs its approach to the rising extremist threat.

Beyond specific programs, however, DoD should recognize a key lesson imparted in the three phases of interventions (Figure 1). Different programs and interventions are suitable for different audiences, and an individual's position on the "pathway" to extremism is one critical variable to consider. Separate programs should be geared toward audiences at different stages in the radicalization process: those who are vulnerable but not yet radicalized, those who are beginning to radicalize, those who are radicalized and moving toward violence, and those who are mobilizing or have already mobilized toward violence. And although DoD might or might not wish to implement our suggested menu of interventions, or in cases for which it is already implementing these interventions, there is value in showing how the adopted interventions fit along the radicalization pathway and how they work and complement one another.

It should also be noted that there are several challenges in trying to directly apply the aforementioned programs to address extremism in the DoD context. First, many of these programs have been designed to counter Islamic strains of extremism and might not suitably address RWE, which often takes

the form of white supremacy and anti-government violence. Second, not all terrorism prevention programs are equal in effectiveness, and emerging evidence suggests that some types of initiatives can risk inflaming extremist viewpoints. Of course, one strength of the DoD context is that it has its own governing laws and regulations and rank and command structure; thus, in theory, programs can be implemented with the weight of command and institutional orders.

Terrorism prevention is not the only applicable model to addressing extremism in the military. One of the most-obvious alternative approaches is to incorporate insider threat programs. Insider threat programs are "designed to deter, detect, and mitigate actions by insiders who represent a threat to national security" (Center for Development of Security Excellence, undated). Such programs are often focused on protecting unauthorized disclosure of classified information by insiders, although the monitoring and detection practices can be extended to address extremism. Efforts that can detail such programs and guide how DoD can better identify right-wing extremists at the point of accession or monitor for extremism-related behaviors as part of the security clearance process would be of great value. A major focus, for example, has been how the Department can review social media and other open-source data to determine fitness for duty of new recruits (Losey, 2021a). Another potential area of study relates to efforts to eradicate extremism from the ranks of U.S. police departments. Police departments across the United States are currently working to identify and remove violent extremists from the police payrolls and prevent the radicalization of police officers. Lessons learned from such efforts might inform DoD policies and programs (and lessons from DoD might likewise inform screening and prevention in law enforcement).⁶

One critical challenge in offering recommendations from the terrorism prevention space is that, although significant advancements have been made in developing terrorism prevention interventions and understanding the potential effects of such interventions, *relatively little is known about the military context of extremism*. Without an adequate understanding of the prevalence of right-wing extremist affiliations in the military, it is difficult to identify

the level of effort that DoD planners should invest in terrorism prevention. For example, higher prevalence rates and higher threat risk would likely merit more funds and programmatic investment. In addition, a fuller understanding of the dynamics and manifestation of extremism will be critical to forming specific programmatic responses. Actionable and specific policy recommendations can come from, for example, an understanding of tolerance among rank-and-file troops for extremist views and affiliations, identifying the factors that weigh on those who consider reporting or acting on observed extremist activities, and assessing the impact of extremist views and activities on unit cohesion. Future research should seek to address these critical questions.

With this in mind, we conclude this report by offering the following recommendations for research that DoD can undertake in expanding actionable knowledge of extremism and informing policy:

- **Continue with the intention of assessing the overall prevalence of extremism in the military.** DoD currently intends to go ahead with such an assessment, which will be helpful to designing targeted responses for specific services. In addition, it will be useful to know how prevalence varies in different career fields and installations. Knowing the number of years of service of individual members might also provide insight.
- **Seek to understand how extremism manifests itself in the military.** Do those with extremist views openly or surreptitiously

(using coded language) talk about their extremist views? Do they attempt to recruit new members? What effect does it have on unit cohesion and other in-unit dynamics?

- **Seek to understand the in-unit dynamics related to extremism.** Critical questions include, *To what extent are such views and related behaviors tolerated among rank-and-file troops? What considerations weigh on those who are considering reporting on an identified extremist?*
- **Conduct a stream of research that can inform the creation of terrorism prevention interventions and assess their impact.** Any existing intervention, such as a media literacy program, will have to be developed in such a way that it speaks to the U.S. military audience. Initial tests and more-substantive impact evaluations should suggest that such interventions are effective (see Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler, 2020, for an example of how such testing can be conducted) and do not spark a boomerang effect that would actually heighten or worsen extremist reactions (Helmus et al., 2017). It might also be fruitful to examine the success of past terrorism prevention interventions, such as any educational efforts previously developed as a result of the 1996 Secretary of the Army's Task Force on Extremist Activities (U.S. Department of the Army, Secretary of the Army's Task Force on Extremist Activities, 1996, p. 28).

Notes

¹ For example, in 2012, a member of the Missouri National Guard was arrested for providing weapons and command to a neo-Nazi paramilitary training camp in Florida, a ten-member Marine Corps sniper team posed in front of a Nazi flag in Afghanistan, and two soldiers murdered a veteran and his girlfriend to cover up their plans to assassinate President Barack Obama (Jones, 2019). In 2019, U.S. Coast Guard LT Christopher Hasson, who had spent five years in the U.S. Marine Corps and two years in the U.S. Army National Guard, was discovered to be a neo-Nazi who was stockpiling weapons in preparation for an attack on politicians in Washington, D.C. (McCausland, 2019).

² Overall, recent survey data identifying the prevalence of extremism in the force are limited. Following the murder of an African American couple in Fayetteville, North Carolina, by neo-Nazi-affiliated members of the 82nd Airborne Division, the Department of the Army released a 1996 study on extremist activities (U.S. Department of the Army, Secretary of the Army's Task Force on Extremist Activities, 1996). The report presented results of more than 7,000 interviews with soldiers and Army civilians, and 0.5 percent attested to being an active participant in an extremist group. Results of a separate and written survey of more than 17,000 soldiers and Army civilians suggested that 7 percent of respondents "reported they knew another soldier whom they believed to be a member of an extremist organization" (U.S. Department of the Army, Secretary of the Army's Task Force on Extremist Activities, 1996, p. i).

More-recent data suggest this problem might have worsened. *Military Times* surveyed its active-duty readership on exposure to extremism and racism in the force (Shane, 2020). The findings are not published in a peer-reviewed journal or report, but the publication says that 36 percent of the 1,630 surveyed individuals reported "evidence of white supremacist and racist ideologies in the military," a figure that the author notes is up from 22 percent in a previous year's survey (Shane, 2019). It was noted, for example, that participants reported

witnessing incidents including racist language and discriminatory attitudes from peers, but also more specific examples like swastikas being drawn on servicemembers' cars, tattoos affiliated with white supremacist groups, stickers supporting the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi-style salutes between individuals. (Shane, 2020)

³ This website, while serving as an example of an educational campaign, received significant criticism for stereotyping Muslims as extremists (Camera, 2016).

⁴ Evidence supporting CVE-focused persuasion campaigns is limited. RAND recently evaluated two such campaigns and documented mixed effects for a radio campaign in Nigeria and a relatively unsuccessful social media campaign in Indonesia (Bodine-Baron et al., 2020; Marrone et al., 2020). Aspects of both campaigns showed what is often called a boomerang effect, in which a media campaign that seeks to positively change hard-worn attitudes actually produces an opposite effect. Given the limited evidence for effectiveness and the limited knowledge about the prevalence of extremism in the ranks, it is difficult to recommend a DoD-sponsored messaging campaign that seeks to reduce appeal for RWE ideology.

⁵ Even with personnel for which reporting would be deemed mandatory, such as chain of command or those holding security clearances, decisions on whether to report extremist behavior in the ranks might be highly personal and complex.

⁶ We did investigate the potential utility of one police department program to determine whether it was suitable to the U.S. military context. Specifically, the vast majority of police departments across the country implement a form of implicit bias training that seeks to help officers recognize unconscious prejudices and stereotypes and provide tools to counter such automatic patterns of thinking and acting (Worden et al., 2020; Green and Hagiwara, 2020). Implicit bias is not violent extremism. However, it might constitute a lesser form of racism; hence, efforts that can successfully address implicit bias might reduce the risk that someone will subsequently form more-extremist attitudes. Unfortunately, the only major randomized control trial conducted on the training's effectiveness found that, although the training can change officer attitudes and knowledge, it did not change enforcement behavior (Worden et al., 2020).

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About This Report

Only days after the U.S. Capitol riots on January 6, 2021, a chilling discovery was made: Participants included current and former U.S. military members. In early February, the Secretary of Defense implemented a Department of Defense (DoD)-wide stand-down on extremism, instituting various policies designed to limit right-wing extremism in the ranks. These efforts represent important first steps in combating the infiltration of violent extremism in the U.S. military.

To support DoD in its efforts for the longer term, RAND Corporation researchers sought to understand how extremism in the U.S. military has been addressed in the past and how it could be addressed in the near future. To do this, the team conducted a review of the history of extremism in the U.S. military and then reviewed terrorism prevention policies as practiced in the United States, identifying policies that might have utility for DoD. The authors also recommend that DoD work to find out more about the dynamics and manifestation of extremism in the U.S. military before investing in, designing, and conducting large anti-extremist efforts.

Because relatively little is known about extremism in the U.S. military context to date, the current investigation does not lead to recommendations of a single program or policy to institute in the near term. Rather, the report offers DoD several directions to continue investigating before attempting to institute a particular program or action plan and related policy.

RAND National Security Research Division

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