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Perspective

EXPERT INSIGHTS ON A TIMELY POLICY ISSUE

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Reducing the Risk of Extremist Activity in the U.S. Military

In recent years, news headlines have highlighted the involvement of current or former U.S. military personnel in protest violence;[1] supremacist groups;[2] the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol;[3] and other forms of violent extremism spanning different political and ideological spectra.[4] The threat of extremism is not new, but the proliferation of social media has made it easier for radical ideas to spread quickly and for extremist groups to organize, even reaching into the military community (e.g., service members, military spouses, military dependents, civilian employees, and contractors) to expand membership and gain operational capabilities.

The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has long prohibited service members from actively advocating for extremist activities.[5] DoD policy establishes the expectation that commanders detect prohibited activities, investigate them, and take corrective action. It also relies on commanders to help minimize the risk by intervening early, "primarily through counseling" when they observe "signs of future prohibited activities."[6] Thus, commanders have a dual mandate to enforce current policy violations and anticipate future violations by personnel. DoD policy also places great responsibility on commanders to appropriately weigh the

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potentially competing interests of national security; service members' right of expression; and good unit order, discipline, and effectiveness.[7]

In this Perspective, we outline a framework to help commanders reduce the risk of extremism in the military. First, we provide highlights from research on extremism, including a framework for understanding these types of activities. Second, we use this framework to outline four strategies for reducing the risk of extremism in the military. Third, we recommend a community-based approach that leverages existing military programs to better support commanders as they carry out their responsibilities to prevent and mitigate exposure to extremism within the military.

Key Points

- *Extremism* is a term used to characterize a variety of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that often are on the extreme end of the political, religious, or ideological spectrum within society (e.g., white nationalist, anarchist).
- Extremist beliefs, affiliations, and activities are constantly evolving.
- Service members, military families, and civilian employees might actively or passively associate with extremist groups.
- DoD prohibits active involvement in extremist activities, but laws place limits on what activities the military can and cannot restrict or punish.
- Current policy requires commanders to intervene when they observe extremist activities or behaviors that might lead to future extremism.
- We present a framework to assist DoD in reducing the risk of extremism in the military.
- We make five recommendations, each focusing on a community-based approach that leverages existing DoD programs to help commanders and their subordinates prevent, detect, intervene, and measure extremist activities earlier rather than later.

Seeking Identity, Meaning, and Social Bonds, Service Members Might Find Them in Extremist Movements

Recent news headlines raise questions about the extent to which and the reasons why current and former members of the U.S. military would associate with extremist movements. For example, in 2017, U.S. Marine Corps Lance Corporal Vasillios Pistolis was imprisoned over his participation in the violent white supremacist "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.[8] In another case, the government charged U.S. Army Private Ethan Melzer with conspiring to murder his fellow soldiers by allegedly sharing sensitive details about his unit's upcoming deployment with a neo-Nazi and white supremacist group to facilitate an attack.[9] In January 2021, the government arrested ousted ex-soldier and self-proclaimed "hardcore leftist" Daniel Baker, who is accused of making online threats and attempting to organize violence against fascists, white supremacists, conservative protestors, and U.S. military officers.[10]

Individuals labeled as *extremists* (1) identify with beliefs and organizations that are on the far end of political, religious, or ideological spectra within a society and (2) advocate for activities that are outside societal norms and laws. These individuals often draw meaning from the

identity that they apply to themselves and others based on their group affiliations (e.g., race, gender, religion, nationality, political beliefs). Studies have identified a variety of factors that lead people to join extremist movements, such as having a passion for political change, looking for a sense of belonging, and seeking excitement.[11] One former leader of a white nationalist group claims that new members are often seeking to form a sense of identity, community, and purpose[12]—some of the same reasons that people join the military.[13] Research has identified at least four types of experiences that people tend to follow into extremism:

- *life events*: traumatic life events that prompt people to consider extremist views as a framework to understand their trauma
- *propaganda*: consumption of extremist material, including books, music, or online content
- *recruitment*: interactions with members of extremist groups that either reach out to individuals or that individuals seek out after self-radicalizing
- *social bonds*: social interactions with other members of extremist groups, especially if individuals are feeling lonely or isolated.[14]

There is no single factor that sufficiently explains why people become active in extremist causes. Often, a combination of factors leads individuals to become increasingly active in extremist activities. This ratcheting up of involvement might help people construct a new identity that is defined by an extremist ideology. Specifically, research has proposed that extremist identities become problematic when they (1) consume a large part of one's life[15] and (2) are defined by extreme hatred or prejudice toward other groups of people.[16]

Current and former military personnel might come into contact with extremist beliefs or groups on their own initiative, be exposed to those beliefs or groups online or through friends or family, or be approached by extremists seeking to recruit them.

Framework for Reducing the Risk of Extremism in the Military

Figure 1 shows a four-part framework we use to categorize the ways in which the military could combat extremism. We first provide an overview of the framework, and then we examine each element more closely. The first part is to recognize the problem of extremism and define *extrem-*

Abbreviations

ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
CAT	Community Action Team
DAF	U.S. Department of the Air Force
DHS	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
DIBRS	Defense Incident-Based Reporting System
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FRG	Family Readiness Group
MWR	U.S. Army Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation
NIBRS	National Incident-Based Reporting System
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense

FIGURE 1

Framework for Reducing the Risk of Extremism Within the U.S. Military Community

ist activities. The military has already done this through policy, public statements by military leadership, and a one-day "stand down" of activities to discuss extremism in the military.[17] Some experts argue that the scope of extremism should be narrow, with the goal of isolating the most-dangerous members participating in fringe elements of these movements.[18] Others argue that a broader scope can help identify those supporting extremists or provide an early warning about those at risk of becoming extremists. Our proposed framework focuses on addressing these early warning signs of extremism.

Second, the military could better leverage existing violence prevention programs to prevent service members from becoming involved with extremist groups. Some examples of existing prevention resources within the military are chaplains, mental health counselors, the Family Advocacy Program, and Military OneSource.

Third, this framework focuses on detecting extremist activities and designing interventions to respond to them. The military has existing authorities to detect broad patterns of extremism in its ranks; for instance, the military is authorized to coordinate with civilian law enforcement agencies, conduct defense criminal investigative services, and track extremist activities online. Leveraging existing resources designed to support the military community could help commanders detect early signals that might lead to future extremist activities, and then the commanders could intervene. People in existing programs, such as chaplains, counselors, and other sources of support, might become aware of emerging extremist groups, ideologies, rumors, and misinformation being circulated. Although those sources cannot violate their professional and ethical codes or standards for confidentiality, privacy, and the protection of sensitive health information, they could be encouraged and provided with a means to share general information about those trends so commanders could address them across the population at large.

Finally, our framework includes measuring extremist activities and using the results to inform the evaluation of programs designed to prevent, detect, and intervene when commanders become aware of signs of extremist activities. DoD currently tracks bias motivations in the Defense Incident-Based Reporting System (DIBRS), but it might need to reevaluate and revise these reporting codes in DIBRS and consider whether alternative forms of data collection would be useful to measure extremist trends in the future.

Part 1. Recognize and Scope the Problem of Extremism

The first part of our proposed framework is to recognize and define the problem of extremism. Military leadership has publicly recognized this problem, as is evident from the policies against it, recent statements made by U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and various senior civilian and defense leaders, and the 2021 DoD order for commanders to conduct a one-day "stand-down" to discuss extremism with personnel.[19]

Defining the problem of extremism has been a challenge, however, because there is no widely accepted set of criteria for making that determination. In an attempt to draw the line for legal purposes, U.S. courts have tried to balance freedom of expression with the need to protect the public from disruptions and threats.[20] U.S. military courts have focused on the degree to which extremist behaviors were either damaging the reputation or public esteem of the military ("service discrediting") or harming good order and discipline, two concepts that are outlined in the Uniform Code of Military Justice.[21] The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI),[22] however, focus their definitions on how a particular belief system motivates someone to commit acts of violence. There are also definitions of extremism employed by private and nonprofit organizations. The Anti-Defamation League, for example, uses a broad definition of extremism that includes any "religious, social, or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of belief systems more broadly accepted in society."[23]

Historically, the military has struggled to identify and manage personnel whose beliefs might lead to future problems. During World War II, for example, the Army created the 620th Engineer General Services Company as a holding unit for personnel, many of them German-born, whom commanders suspected of being disloyal to the United States.[24] During the Vietnam War, basic military functioning was undermined by racial conflict within the ranks, some of which involved violence—including attacks against officers and enlisted leaders.[25] During the 1980s, following reports of service members involved in Ku Klux Klan activities, then–Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger released a memo broadening the policy against participation in hate groups, stating that active participation in white supremacy groups was "utterly incompatible" with military service, and authorizing commanders to discipline or even discharge those involved in disruptive activities.[26] Although the memo did not forbid joining these groups, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) criticized the policy as overly broad.[27] In 2013, the ACLU also criticized U.S. Army Equal Opportunity training materials that characterized a variety of beliefs as extremism, including some held by evangelical Christian, ultra-Orthodox Jewish, and Ku Klux Klan groups.[28]

It is beyond the scope of this effort to develop a standardized definition of extremism. However, to further illuminate the complexity, we review select definitions from federal law enforcement agencies, DoD, and the military Services.

How Law Enforcement Agencies, the Department of Defense, and the Military Services Define Extremism

This section focuses on definitions of extremism used by selected federal law enforcement agencies, DoD, and each of the military departments as of the date this document was written. These definitions varied in scope. For example, some federal law enforcement agencies narrowly focus on the link between ideological beliefs and unlawful actions. In the U.S. military, however, the focus more broadly includes participation in activities that undermine good order and discipline or are service discrediting.

Federal Law Enforcement

As required by law, the FBI and DHS, in consultation with the Director of National Intelligence, developed definitions for terms related to domestic terrorism.[29] Their definitions for extremism are not identical to one another, but both the DHS and FBI define *domestic violent extremist* as

> an individual based and operating primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States who seeks to further their ideological goals wholly or in part through unlawful acts of force or violence. It is important to remember that the mere advocacy of ideological positions and/or the use of strong rhetoric does not constitute violent extremism, and in some cases direct or specific threats of violence must be present to constitute a violation of federal law.[30]

Department of Defense

DoD policy related to extremism recognizes that "a service member's right of expression should be preserved to the maximum extent possible."[31] Furthermore, it notes that, while balancing the rights of service members, no commander should be indifferent to conduct that undermines unit effectiveness.

The policy also delimits prohibited and preventive activities. First, DoD policy states,

> Military personnel must not actively advocate supremacist, extremist, or criminal gang doctrine, ideology, or causes, including those that advance, encourage, or advocate illegal discrimination based on race, creed, color, sex, religion, ethnicity, or national origin or those that advance, encourage, or advocate the use of force, violence, or criminal activity or otherwise advance efforts to deprive individuals of their civil rights.[32]

Furthermore, the policy instructs personnel to reject active participation in criminal gangs or other organizations that advocate such prohibited views, activities, and illegal discrimination. Some examples of active participation include fundraising, demonstrating or rallying, recruiting, training, and wearing gang colors, clothing, or tattoos. The policy gives commanders authority to use a variety of administrative and disciplinary actions:

> The functions of command include vigilance about the existence of such activities; active use of investigative authority to include a prompt and fair complaint process; and use of administrative powers such as counseling, reprimands, orders, and performance evaluations to deter such activities.[33]

Second, DoD policy requires actions to prevent extremist activities. Specifically, the policy instructs commanders to intervene early (primarily with counseling) when they observe signs of potential future policy violations or actions

Current policy places a significant amount of responsibility on commanders to not only identify current violations of policies that prohibit extremist activities but also anticipate when behaviors might suggest a future policy violation.

that could undermine good order and discipline. For example, the policy states that possessing literature associated with extremist causes, ideology, doctrine, or organizations is not necessarily prohibited, but it signals that further investigations or counseling might be warranted.

Put simply, *current policy places a significant amount of responsibility on commanders to not only identify current violations of policies that prohibit extremist activities but also anticipate when behaviors might suggest a future policy violation*.

Military Departments

Military department policies reiterate key elements of the DoD policy and provide more detail for specific implementation. For example, guidance from the U.S. Department of the Air Force (DAF) prohibits personnel from active advocacy of "supremacist, extremist, or criminal gang doctrine, ideology, or causes."[34] These causes include the advocacy of "illegal discrimination based on race, creed, color, sex, religion, ethnicity, or national origin." Furthermore, prohibited causes include advocacy for "the use of force, violence, or criminal activity" that deprive the civil rights of others. DAF policy also highlights that efforts to counter violent extremism must be balanced, because "commanders must preserve the service member's constitutional right of expression to the maximum extent possible, consistent with good order, discipline, and national security."[35]

The U.S. Department of the Army policy on extremist organizations and activities, Army Regulation 600–20, which was revised in July 2020, is designed to be used in conjunction with DoD Instruction 1325.06. This Army policy prohibits extremist activities. Specifically, the revised policy clearly states that "it is the commander's responsibility to maintain good order and discipline" and notes that "every commander has the inherent authority to take appropriate actions to accomplish this goal."[36] The Army defines extremism by a variety of views that groups are advocating for, including hatred, intolerance, or discrimination based on race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. It also includes the use of violence to deprive people of their individual rights; support for terrorism, sedition, and violence against the United States or

DoD; and unlawful violence to achieve political, religious, discriminatory, and ideological goals.

Furthermore, Army policy prohibits a wide variety of activities if associated with extremist groups; for instance, policy prohibits participating in public demonstrations or rallies, attending meetings on or off duty, fundraising activities, recruiting or training others to join such groups, holding apparent leadership roles, distributing literature on or off military installations, or receiving financial assistance from others associated with extremist groups.

Similarly, the U.S. Department of the Navy's policy prohibits participation in organizations that espouse supremacist causes. It also prohibits participation in organizations that create illegal discrimination based on race, creed, sex, religion, or national origin; advocate the use of force against the United States or subdivisions of the government; or seek to deprive individuals of their civil rights. This policy defines *participation* as conduct that is performed alone or with others (e.g., rallies, fundraising, recruiting, training) and describes the link between prohibited activities and impacts on good order, discipline, or mission accomplishment.[37]

Furthermore, the Navy's military personnel policy outlines a process for administrative or disciplinary actions for personnel who are involved in "any substantiated incident of serious misconduct resulting from participation in supremacist or extremist activities."[38] This policy describes relevant prescribed misconduct that relates to "illegal discrimination based on race, creed, color, sex, religion, or national origin" or "advocating the use of force or violence against any federal, state, or local government[s]."[39] The policy also lists various types of violations (e.g., insubordinate conduct, maltreatment of subordinates, rioting, provoking speech or gesture, assault, disloyal statements), noting this list is not exhaustive. More recently, the U.S. Marine Corps issued an order that consolidates various policies to prohibit a variety of activities, including "hazing, bullying, ostracism, retaliation, wrongful distribution, or broadcasting of intimate images, and certain dissident and protest activities (to include supremacist activity)."[40]

To summarize, the department-level policies share many of the same features, including prohibitions on extremist and supremacist ideology and active advocacy of these beliefs. These policies primarily focus on service members. All policies focus on illegal discrimination or depriving personnel of civil rights and prohibit violence against others or the government. The list of groups mentioned in these policy documents are not exhaustive, and there are a variety of potentially marginalized groups who might become targets. The policies also rely on the judgments of commanders to adjudicate policy violations, but there appears to be less guidance for commanders on how best to identify future violations and preserve service members' right of expression. We conclude that DoD, military department, and Service policies should maintain a standard definition of extremism and provide more guidance for commanders on how best to balance the rights of service members with unit functioning and national security interests. Furthermore, policy should also include guidance on a broader variety of members within the military community who might exhibit extremist behaviors (e.g., military families, military dependents, civilian employees, and contractors).

Part 2: Prevent Future Extremist Views and Activities

The second part of our proposed framework is to design programs to prevent members of the military community from associating with extremist groups or beliefs. Figure 2 outlines some of the features of extremism and proposed corresponding types of interventions. This encompasses activities within narrow definitions of extremism (labeled here as "extremist manifestations") and broader emotions, beliefs, and activities (characterized as "initial states" and "initial manifestations") that might be precursors to those extremist manifestations. The features displayed in Figure 2 are not necessarily linked as a linear process. The goal of these prevention programs should be to counsel individuals when they exhibit initial states or manifestations of extremism—two of the three attributes of extremism that are displayed in Figure 2—and to alert leaders to signs of misinformation, recruitment, and emerging groups that might be posing a threat to the military community.

The initial states of extremism include feelings and emotions, such as frustration and anger, that might not be noticed by others because they might be kept internal and are also common human emotions.[41] In the case of

FIGURE 2

Features of Extremism and Levels of Intervention

Initial states	Initial manifestations	Extremist manifestations
Internal emotions about society, institutions, culture • Anger, frustration, outrage • Dissatisfaction, distancing • Alienation, "otherness" • Revenge, hatred • Grievance, distrust, rejection of authorities and society • Disempowerment, lowered resilience to radicalization	Beliefs and actions more visible to friends, families, colleagues • Lack of participation in political processes • Negative feelings at lack of status, recognition in mainstream society • Acceptance of views that violence is acceptable, justifiable, necessary • Online interactions with extremists • Involvement in sharing extremist material	Activities often shared with like-minded others • Recruitment, radicalization, mobilization of others • Criminality to aid extremist groups • Membership, indoctrination, training in extremist groups • Terrorism, traveling to commit an act of terrorism
Prevention	**Early intervention**	**Aggressive intervention**
Preliminary prevention and detection by military community	Early and intensive intervention by military community	Aggressive intervention using law enforcement

SOURCE: Adapted from Baruch et al., 2018.

NOTE: This figure organizes three broad sets of features. It is not a linear progression of stages, and one might exhibit some or all of these features simultaneously.

extremism, however, the risk is that these intense, hostile feelings can be directed toward the wider society, culture, and authorities. Mentors and service providers, such as counselors and chaplains, can help members manage these feelings in productive ways and find legitimate channels for members to register their grievances.

Initial extremist manifestations are more-clearly visible identifiers of violent extremism—for example, dropping out of political processes and mainstream cultures, accepting extremist group narratives regarding the justification of and need for violence, and interacting with extremist groups and materials.[42] These attributes might be cause for concern for family members, military peers, or commanders, but to preserve the rights of service members, a sophisticated approach to addressing them will be needed, particularly when no policy has been violated.

Finally, extremist activities might be shared with wider groups of individuals who also hold similar beliefs. And, in some cases, these activities may cross into support, or justification, of violence that includes criminal activities.[43] These are the more clear-cut activities for which law enforcement should be contacted.

Existing military programs could augment commanders' efforts, particularly with the initial states and initial manifestations of extremism. These resources include but are not limited to chaplains; mental health counselors; Family Readiness Groups (FRGs); the Military Crisis Line; Military OneSource; the U.S. Army Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) program; and Air Force Community Action Boards. Behavioral and mental health resources and counseling are indispensable for identifying and countering extremism, and a majority of these programs might embrace psychosocial approaches that examine a combination of psychological and environmental factors.

Chaplains are a key line of defense for service members' existential, spiritual, or moral concerns.[44] They can be a point of referral for those in need of behavioral health care services and also provide privileged communication that other service providers would often be required to report.[45] Furthermore, perceived stigma associated with mental health treatment is a complicated barrier to seeking behavioral health interventions,[46] so some service members might be more inclined to seek out the support of military chaplains instead of counselors.

Extremist activities might be shared with wider groups of likeminded individuals and sometimes cross the line by supporting and justifying the use of violence, up to and including committing a criminal offense.

Rather than deciding to seek counseling on their own, service members might be encouraged or required to do so by their commander or other relevant personnel. One study examined how active-duty military personnel choose between options for help with emotional or mental health concerns and reported that soldiers generally seek out *civilian* mental health professionals for family and substance abuse problems, whereas *military* mental health professionals are primarily consulted for stress management, depression, anxiety, combat or operational stress, or anger management.[47]

Established in 2012, DoD's Military Family Readiness System comprises a diverse set of policies, programs, services, resources, and practices to support and promote family well-being. Commanders are supposed to work within this system when addressing many of the service member attitudes and behaviors that fall within the initial states and initial manifestations of extremism. Service member and family well-being fosters family readiness, which in turn enhances service members' readiness.[48] DoD's Military Family Readiness System includes such resources as FRGs (and their equivalents in the Services), the Military Crisis Line, and Military OneSource. As official command-sponsored and command-resourced organizations, FRGs offer assistance, mutual support, and a network of communications between family members, the chain of command, and community resource providers.[49] The Military Crisis Line is a free, confidential resource for service members. Military OneSource offers support for nonmedical counseling (e.g., marriage counseling, stress management) and referrals to other types of resources. Military mental health professionals address such issues as suicidal and homicidal thoughts; experiences of sexual assault, child abuse, or domestic violence; alcohol and substance abuse; and serious mental health conditions that require medical treatment. MWR and its partners offer education and counseling services for such issues as suicide prevention and survivor outreach.[50]

Air Force Community Action Boards and Community Action Teams (CATs) are another viable resource for coordinating strategies to identify and address patterns related to signs of initial states or initial manifestations of extremism. These are entities at the installation, major command, and headquarters level composed of representatives from diverse organizations (e.g., leadership, law enforcement, service providers) who coordinate periodically to identify and monitor the needs of the various populations within the military community (i.e., service members, their families, Air Force employees) and develop strategies to address them. For example, Air Force Instruction 90-5001 encourages commanders to consult with CAT members, Community Support Coordinators, and Violence Prevention Integrators to enhance well-being and resilience within their units.[51]

Part 3: Detect and Intervene When Observing Extremism

The third part of our proposed framework is to detect early trends of extremist activity at the installation level and then intervene at these installations, accordingly.[52] Coordination between military and civilian law enforcement and collection of open-source intelligence are two strategies for detecting these trends.

First, civilian and military law enforcement agencies have useful information they could share on which groups

pose the greatest threats for service members online and in the areas surrounding particular installations, as well as whether they observe indicators of extremist affiliations, such as symbols or slogans.[53] Military leaders, educators, and service providers could draw upon these resources for education, training, and informational awareness activities. For example, installation-level Air Force CATs (or equivalents in other Services) could develop a toolkit to provide access to videos, reports, bulletins, or other materials that could inform unit or community programming. The toolkit could offer ideas on organizations to contact for guest speakers who could educate and warn members about particular extremist groups and their beliefs, activities, and recruitment tactics. This information could help provide counter-messaging or inoculation against narratives and propaganda by extremist groups.

There are various criminal investigative services across DoD that might encounter evidence of extremist activities during investigations, either directly or indirectly. These include the Defense Criminal Investigation Services,[54] Air Force Office of Special Investigations,[55] U.S. Army Criminal Investigations Command,[56] and Naval Criminal Investigation Service.[57] Although they need to preserve the integrity of their investigations, there might be patterns or broader trends they could then share with military leaders and service providers to aid in detection, stop the spread of harmful information, and engage in other countermeasures. The Office of Law Enforcement Policy and Support within the Defense Human Resources Activity could also help coordinate the detection of extremist activities and sharing of information across DoD.

Second, the internet has made it easier for extremist groups to interact with a broader variety of potential members. New machine learning techniques can aid in searching for online trends of extremist involvement.[58] For example, models can be trained to detect extremist communities on such social media platforms as Twitter and to infer the degree to which users who appear to have current or past associations with the military are engaging with these extremist groups. From these online discussions, insights could be drawn to inform headquarters-prepared materials targeting misinformation, recruitment language, and so on for broader use by the military community. However, there are risks associated with the use of artificial intelligence and machine-learning tools, including privacy concerns, false positive or negative results, and algorithmic bias that require continuous recalibration by a human-in-the-loop.[59]

Detection and intervention are not solely the domain of law enforcement or data analysts. Service providers might have information about potential risks for extremist activity, although they might not always recognize it as such. Chaplains, psychologists, social workers, Military and Family Life counselors, psychiatrists, and health care providers might be providing support for individuals exhibiting the initial states or initial manifestations of extremism. These support service providers must preserve their professional and ethical obligations regarding confidentiality and act in ways that promote rather than undermine help-seeking behaviors and treatment. We do not imply that these professionals should report every individual who feels frustrated with the government, feels alienated from others, or is withdrawing from political processes, for example, but in the course of their work they might become aware of information that could be impor-

tant for detecting and intervening to counter extremism. Such information might include

- extremist materials appearing on the installation (e.g., left in the chapel or hospital waiting rooms)
- emerging extremist groups, movements, or causes
- rumors or misinformation being spread that could stoke the flames of social conflicts (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation)
- justifications of extremist activities that resonate with members
- poor reputation of military channels for filing complaints or appeals, or service members' lack of awareness of these channels.

Sharing this type of information—not tied to any particular individuals—could inform efforts to keep abreast of ever-evolving groups and social movements, to actively dispel myths and misinformation or dismantle justifications that could increase the risk of adopting extremist views, and to improve the awareness and functioning of complaint channels to encourage people to work within them.

It is important that providers (1) understand the types of aggregate information that they could share with commanders that would be helpful and (2) have a safe way to share this information.

Part 4. Measure Extremist Trends and Evaluate Interventions

The last part of our proposed four-part framework involves the measurement of extremist trends and subsequent evaluation of the early interventions previously described. DoD already collects some data on extremism using the DIBRS, which records law enforcement activities and statistics within the military and reports criminal data to the FBI as required by the Uniform Federal Crime Reporting Act of 1988.[60]

One data element in DIBRS is "bias motivation." *Bias* is defined as "a performed negative opinion or attitude toward a group of persons" (e.g., racial, religious, ethnic or national origin, sexual orientation, or disability groups).[61] Table 1 displays some of these codes in DIBRS.

There are several potential areas of improvement for data collection related to extremism in the military. First, the codes used in DIBRS might not always align with those used in the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS).[62] For example, NIBRS has a code for "Anti-Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander" while DIBRS has a separate code just for "Anti-Pacific Islander." DIBRS has separate bias motivation codes for seven religions, while NIBRS has 14 codes for religious bias. Furthermore, NIBRS has a code for "Anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (mixed group)" while DIBRS has no code for transgender bias.

Second, there might be biases in how incidents are reported to DIBRS. For example, incidents in the FBI's NIBRS are not necessarily representative of all incidents among the U.S. population,[63] and some have reported a nonresponse rate in reporting by law enforcement agencies to the FBI.[64] The same might hold true for DIBRS. Furthermore, some have raised concerns in the past about the reliability of data from the DIBRS.[65] Thus, there might be a need to continuously review what is reported to DIBRS (i.e., consistent use of correct motivation bias codes), the frequency of reporting (i.e., consistent reporting by the Services over time), and the sharing of data with the FBI to ensure that broad trends related to

TABLE 1

Bias Motivation Codes in the Defense Incident-Based Reporting System

Race and Ethnicity	Religion	Sexual Orientation	Mental and Physical Disabilities	Unknown Bias
• AW = Anti-White • AH = Anti-Black • AD = Anti-Arab • AM = Anti-Hispanic • AC = Anti-American Indian • AB = Anti-Alaskan • AE = Anti-Asian • AT = Anti-Pacific Islander • AR = Anti-Multi-Racial Group • AZ = Anti-Other Ethnicity	• AO = Anti-Jewish • AI = Anti-Catholic • AN = Anti-Islamic (Moslem) • AU = Anti-Protestant • AS =Anti-Multi-Religious Group • AA = Anti-Agnostic • AY = Anti-Other Religions	• AQ = Anti-Male Homosexual • AK = Anti-Female Homosexual • AL = Anti-Heterosexual • AG = Anti-Bisexual	• BA = Anti-Mental Disability • BB = Anti-Physical Disability	• AX = Unknown Bias

SOURCE: DoD, 2020, p. 26.
NOTE: Table 1 does not display the code "NB = None (no bias)."

extremism are captured between civilian and military law enforcement organizations.

Third, there could be alternative ways to collect data on trends related to extremism and how they might relate to intervention activities. For example, the Army's iSALUTE program is an online reporting tool for members of the Army community to report suspected extremist activities.[66] As military leaders release new tools, there will be a need to continuously evaluate these data sources and subsequent interventions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This Perspective outlines a framework for reducing the risk of extremism in the U.S. military. It provides a brief review of relevant background information about extremism and presents a four-part framework for mitigating such activities. The first part is recognizing and defining the problem of extremism, which the military has already done. The second part is preventing future extremist activities from occurring across the ranks, and the framework outlines ways for the military to accomplish this. The third part involves using strategies to detect what might be precursors of extremism and helping commanders intervene accordingly. The fourth part describes ways for the military to measure extremist trends and evaluate interventions using an evidence-based approach.

Conclusions

We have identified four conclusions using this framework.

First, current DoD policies clearly prohibit extremism in the military and place significant responsibilities on commanders to implement this policy. Specifically, policy requires commanders to take corrective action when they observe active forms of extremist activities. It also requires commanders to intervene when they observe behaviors that *might* lead to a future violation of policies that prohibit extremism. This is a tremendous responsibility, particularly given that commanders are not subject-matter experts in extremism and that, even for experts, this would be difficult, because many of the precursors to extremism are common (e.g., frustration with society, institutions, and culture) and do not lead to extremism.

Second, there is no widely accepted definition of extremism that delineates where to draw the line between *extremism* and beliefs and behaviors that are simply *outside the norm*. That presents challenges for commanders in trying to balance the rights of service members with detection of current extremist policy violations or problematic behaviors that have a high probability of leading to extremist activity in the future.

Third, policy largely focuses on extremist activities by service members. The problem of extremism emerges from and affects the broader military community, meaning not only service members but also their families and civilian employees.

Fourth, DoD has several existing support programs that could be better leveraged to support commanders in implementing DoD's ban on extremist activities while protecting the rights and needs of those they serve. Such programs could also help a broader variety of members of the military community (e.g., military spouses, dependents, civilian employees, contractors) to detect and intervene earlier rather than later when they observe extremist activities that affect the military.

Recommendations

We offer five recommendations that inform a strategy to support commanders in mitigating extremism within the military.

DoD efforts to combat extremism should engage the wider military community, not focus solely on service members. Given the diversity of the U.S. military community, any policies or programs designed to prevent or detect extremism should consider *all* members of the military community—in partnership with relevant civilian community members—as potential partners in the fight against extremism. In 2019, there were more than 1.3 million members on active duty, but also more than 1 million members of the Ready Reserve, more than 200,000 members of the Standby or Retired Reserve, almost 900,000 DoD civilian employees, more than 965,000 military spouses, and more than 1.6 million children of members.[67] Additionally, military installations and deployed environments can include contractors, personnel from other agencies, and members of other nations' militaries. Any member of these groups might adopt and promote extremist beliefs and act upon them, including becoming active or passive members of extremist groups promoting racial supremacy, religious extremism, or specific social or political issues. Commanders and supervisors face major challenges detecting early signs of extremism across the various members in the broader military community, many of whom commanders will rarely if ever directly meet. Anti-extremism efforts focused just on active-duty personnel will miss key sources of information and opportu-

nities for influence. Such military activities and resources as stand-downs, town halls, information campaigns, and channels to share tips with leaders should also engage the broader community, including active and reserve component personnel, spouses and partners, children, civilian employees, and contractors.

Efforts to address extremism should take a community-based approach that leverages existing military programs. Responding to early signs of extremism is preferable to waiting until initial extremist states manifest in ways that directly affect military readiness or preparedness. Service providers from the various support agencies already do help individuals find more-acceptable ways to manage emotions, such as frustration and anger directed toward authority figures or certain segments of society. Community service providers could also think about broader ways to counter the influence and impact of extremist groups. For example, they could

- provide general guidance on how to break cycles of outrage and hate and to manage personal relationships with any friends or relatives who hold extremist views or are involved in violent extremist groups
- organize activities to dispel stereotypes and myths promulgated by hate groups and to illuminate the harm of hate speech, targeted threats, and other extremist activities
- organize real-time live or virtual question-and-answer sessions with reformed extremists to understand the impacts of extremism and how people disengage from these groups.

Service providers could also alert leaders to signs of misinformation, recruitment, and emerging groups that might be posing a threat to the military community.

A community-based approach would also emphasize the need to support unit and broader installation-wide morale, welfare, and recreational activities to strengthen the military identity, community, and sense of belonging. These may counterbalance extremist recruitment strategies, which seek to build rapport, camaraderie, and loyalty at the small-group level as a bridge to introducing extreme beliefs and actions. A stronger sense of unit cohesion and community well-being can make personnel and their families more resistant to these strategies within the military community.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) should continue to coordinate information-sharing between civilian and military law enforcement agencies. Extremist groups are volatile by nature. Such groups might form, evolve, splinter, or disintegrate relatively quickly, only to reemerge later in new forms. The tracking of these trends will require cooperation among federal law enforcement agencies (e.g., FBI), state and local law enforcement agencies, military law enforcement organizations (e.g., Army Criminal Investigation Command), and domestic intelligence and security agencies (e.g., DHS and the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency).

OSD and the military departments should employ machine-learning technologies to help detect broad, emerging trends of extremism that might affect members of the military community. The internet and social media have reduced the costs of creating, sustaining, and growing extremist organizations—not only in the United States but also around the world. Many of these online data are publicly available, and recent advances in machine-learning methods would allow trained professionals within OSD and the military departments to spot early patterns of extrem-

ist activities that might target members of the military community.[68] Such tools are useful for identifying broad trends at the installation level, using de-identified data. We distinguish this approach from law enforcement analyses of individual-level identifiable data for investigation purposes. The use of these machine-learning tools does carry risks, including privacy concerns, false positive or negative results, and algorithmic bias. Thus, we recommend continuous recalibration of these tools that involves a human-in-the-loop.

OSD should continually measure existing extremist trends and evaluate programs designed to prevent, detect, and intervene when members of the military community express extremist views. There is a paucity of data on trends surrounding the prevalence of extremist activities in the military. For example, extremism might occur at the nexus of civil-military relations, whereby civilian extremist groups attempt to recruit members of the military community; but civilian and military law enforcement agencies might not always share information about possible extremism. The bias motivation codes used in DIBRS and the process for collecting and reporting bias-motivated incidents should align with the FBI's NIBRS. This integration would ensure that trends in extremism are shared between civilian and military law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, as the Services and OSD develop new tools for collecting data on extremism, opportunities will arise to identify best practices for measuring extremist activities over time.

Cautionary Points on Implementation

This section discusses four cautionary points on the issue of scope creep when implementing policies designed to reduce the risk of extremism in the U.S. military. First, policy should avoid loosely applying the label of *extremist* to *all* people who exhibit initial states of extremism. Not all people who express anger, frustration, outrage, or feelings of alienation are or will become extremists. Second, we are not suggesting that the military should assign the mission of combating extremism to any of its existing community support services. These services are a set of tools out of many (e.g., law enforcement entities, counterintelligence efforts, mental health services) and should be part of a comprehensive strategy to combat extremism.

Third, the military should avoid using its community support services as an extension of law enforcement. Chaplains, mental health counselors, and FRGs should support personnel and their families versus collecting evidence on individuals for future law enforcement actions.[69] These services can help provide information about misinformation, patterns, and external groups but must not undermine their

Community support services are a set of tools out of many that should be part of a comprehensive strategy to combat extremism.

own efforts, ethics, or professional standards. Finally, "early interventions" refer to leveraging existing support services to prevent people from ever taking up active involvement in extremism that requires disciplinary actions. Preventive work can be achieved through helping individuals manage difficult feelings and life experiences and guiding them to more-productive channels for expressing their grievances and bringing about change.

Closing Thoughts

The vast majority of military personnel and their families are not extremists. But even a small number of people engaged in extremist activities could damage the U.S. military's reputation, its force, its members, and the larger community. Extremist activities can also be harmful to the individuals who are radicalized and their friends and family. DoD has existing programs that support personnel and their families, promote diversity and inclusion, and prevent violence. A community-based approach that leverages these existing programs could help the military to prevent service members and their families from associating with extremist groups and to respond sooner—and more effectively—when they do.

Notes

1 Thompson, Winston, and Hanrahan, 2018.

2 Wilkinson, 2020.

3 Dreisbach and Anderson, 2021.

4 Shammas and De Vynck, 2021.

5 DoD Directive 1325.6, 1996; DoD Instruction 1325.06, 2012.

6 DoD Instruction 1325.06, 2012, p. 10.

7 DoD Instruction 1325.06, 2012.

8 Thompson and Winston, 2018.

9 U.S. Department of Justice, 2020.

10 Shammas and De Vynck, 2021; *United States v. Baker*, 2021.

11 Helmus, 2009.

12 Picciolini, 2020.

13 Helmus et al., 2018.

14 Brown et al., 2021.

15 Burke, 1980.

16 Fromm, 1973.

17 Austin, 2021.

18 Jenkins, 2021.

19 Garamone, 2021.

20 Williford, 2019.

21 DoD, 2019b; *United States v. Wilcox*, 2008.

22 DHS and FBI, 2020.

23 Anti-Defamation League, undated.

24 Ricks, 2011.

25 Cortwright, 1990.

26 Gross, 1986.

27 United Press International, 1986.

[28] Murphy, Rottman, and Sher, 2013; Sher and Rottman, 2013.

[29] DHS and FBI, 2020.

[30] DHS and FBI, 2020, p. 2.

[31] DoD Instruction 1325.06, 2012, p. 1.

[32] DoD Instruction 1325.06, 2012, p. 9.

[33] DoD Instruction 1325.06, 2012, p. 9.

[34] DAF Instruction 51-508, 2018, p. 14.

[35] DAF Instruction 51-508, 2018, p. 14.

[36] U.S. Department of the Army Regulation 600–20, 2020, p. 30.

[37] U.S. Department of the Navy, 1997.

[38] U.S. Department of the Navy, 2008, p. 1.

[39] U.S. Department of the Navy, 2008, p. 1.

[40] U.S. Marine Corps, undated; U.S. Marine Corps, 2021.

[41] Baruch et al., 2018.

[42] Baruch et al., 2018.

[43] Baruch et al., 2018.

[44] Kim et al., 2016.

[45] See Rule 503 in DoD, 2019b.

[46] Kazman et al., 2020.

[47] Morgan et al., 2016.

[48] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019.

[49] U.S. Army, undated.

[50] MWR, undated.

[51] DAF Instruction 90-5001, 2019.

[52] For a similar approach that collected data on individual members of the U.S. Air Force community using surveys but aggregated them to the installation level, see Sims et al., 2019.

[53] National Gang Intelligence Center, 2015.

[54] DoD, 2010.

[55] Grabosky, 2020; Losey, 2020.

[56] Ethridge, 2020.

[57] McMahon, 2020.

[58] Marcellino et al., 2020.

[59] Brown et al., 2020.

[60] DoD Instruction 7730.47, 2020.

[61] DoD Instruction 7730.47, 2020.

[62] U.S. Department of Justice, 2021.

[63] Addington, 2008.

[64] McCormack, Pattavina, and Tracy, 2017.

[65] DoD, 2014; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2010.

[66] U.S. Army, 2021.

[67] DoD, 2019a.

[68] Marcellino et al., 2020; Marcellino et al., 2021.

[69] For a discussion of how some heavy-handed responses to extremism may fail, see Brown et al., 2021.

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About This Perspective

In recent years, news headlines have highlighted the involvement of current or former U.S. military personnel in protest violence; supremacist groups; the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol; and other forms of violent extremism spanning different political and ideological spectra. The threat of extremism is not new, but the proliferation of social media has made it easier for radical ideas to spread quickly and for extremist groups to organize, even reaching into the military community (e.g., service members, military spouses, military dependents, civilian employees, and contractors) to expand membership and gain operational capabilities.

This Perspective outlines a framework to help commanders reduce the risk of extremism in the military. First, we provide highlights from research on extremism, including a framework for understanding these types of activities. Second, we use this framework to outline four strategies for reducing the risk of extremism in the military. Third, we recommend a community-based approach that leverages existing military programs to better support commanders as they carry out their responsibilities to prevent and mitigate exposure to extremism by members of the military community.

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