

APRIL 2021

# “This is War”

Examining Military Experience Among  
the Capitol Hill Siege Participants

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



Combating Terrorism Center  
AT WEST POINT



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**The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either express or implied, of the George Washington University, United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government. The details contained in the court documents are allegations. Defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Findings

- This report explores military experience among those arrested in the January 6 Capitol incident. While the Capitol Hill siege is but one event in a longer history of military populations' involvement in extremism, it offers a useful snapshot through which we can examine the scale and diversity of the issue. We present findings for a number of metrics accordingly, and provide some considerations for military officials, the general public, and policymakers.
- 43 of 357 individuals (12%) charged in federal court for their role in the Capitol Hill siege had some form of military experience. Of these 43 individuals, the vast majority (93%) were veterans and not currently serving in an Active Duty, reservist, or Guard status. Individuals with military experience had, on average, 9 years of service experience. The range of experience was substantial, from 3 years on the low-end to 25 years on the high-end. Over one-quarter were commissioned officers, and 44% deployed at least once. Around one-third joined before 2000, and around 50% left the service over a decade ago.
- 37% of individuals with military experience had affiliations to domestic violent extremist (DVE) organizations like the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys, around four times more likely to be a part of such groups than those without military experience. Some individuals with military experience held leadership positions in these organizations. Many others, however, arrived at the Capitol either in organized clusters or alone.

### Recommendations

- Based on our findings, we recommend that the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs lead a new combined task force to confront and combat extremism in the military community. The task force should have representation from a number of stakeholders including Congressional oversight bodies, military and federal judicial and investigative agencies, and civilian experts who have studied and piloted counter-extremism programming.
- We also recommend that the new task force collect information on criminal and non-criminal extremism-related incidents among active duty service members and veterans in a centralized, internal documentation system. The task force



should leverage its findings and resources to help refine and expand current trainings and briefings related to extremism, and ensure that veterans are reached by these programs as much as possible.

- Finally, we recommend that the task force disseminate its findings through a joint Inspectors General report to Congress and the public.

## INTRODUCTION

*“The defense references Defendant Caldwell’s history of military and government service to support its suggestion that Defendant Caldwell would never attempt to obstruct justice. The government agrees that someone with experience in those positions should know better, but the evidence suggests quite the contrary.”<sup>1</sup>*

The issue of extremism in the military community has posed challenges for a long time.<sup>2</sup> From the role of combat veterans in driving the rise of the militia movement after Vietnam and beyond,<sup>3</sup> the U.S. military has contended with all manner of extremist movements and ideologies.<sup>4</sup> Historically, extremist activities manifested in a number of ways, including attacks and/or hate crimes against fellow service members and civilians, theft of military equipment, security breaches, and broader harm to morale, unit cohesion, personnel retention, recruiting efforts, and mission success.<sup>5</sup> Although the vast majority of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) personnel and veterans uphold our nation’s highest values during and well after their service, the world’s largest employer has struggled at times to confront a problem that affects all corners of American society.<sup>6</sup>

In the past decade, various organizations have raised serious red flags to both the DoD and Congressional oversight bodies regarding this looming threat.<sup>7</sup> More

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<sup>1</sup> *USA v. Thomas Edward Caldwell*, Government’s Opposition to Defendant’s Motion for Reconsideration of Detention, (District of Columbia, 2021). <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Thomas%20Caldwell%20Government%20Release%20Opposition%20Memo.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> We define the military community as current and former military personnel.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph W. Bendersky, *The “Jewish Threat”: Anti-Semitic Politics of the U.S. Army* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this report, we limit our use of the term “extremism” to those extremist groups, movements, and ideologies identified by the Department of Defense as prohibited activities. See: Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Instruction Number 1325.06: Handling Dissident and Protest Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces,” (February 22, 2012). <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132506p.pdf?ver=2019-07-01-101152-143>.

<sup>5</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “Extremism in the U.S. Military: Problems and Solutions,” (March 9, 2021). <https://www.adl.org/blog/extremism-in-the-us-military-problems-and-solutions>.

<sup>6</sup> Niall McCarthy, “The World’s Biggest Employers [Infographic],” *Forbes*, (June 23, 2015). <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2015/06/23/the-worlds-biggest-employers-infographic/?sh=3f69b3d5686b>.

<sup>7</sup> Among others, ADL has led these efforts. See: Mark Pitcavage, *Alarming Incidents of White Supremacy in the Military--How to Stop It?*, Hearing before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Military Personnel, (February 11, 2020). <https://www.adl.org/media/14041/download>.

recent reporting has pointed to growing evidence of white supremacy and racist ideologies in the military these last few years.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the siege on the U.S. Capitol and the surrounding focus on the involvement of individuals with military experience has highlighted the pressing need to take meaningful steps to understand and confront the problem at hand. To be clear, the Capitol Hill siege does not provide an all-encompassing view of modern day extremism in the military. However, an examination of the individuals charged in connection with that event can offer some perspective as to the diversity and scale of the connection between extremism and those with military experience.

In the immediate aftermath of the Capitol Hill siege, one of the most concerning facts being circulated was that the number of individuals with military experience was disproportionately higher compared to their prevalence in the broader U.S. population.<sup>9</sup> Although the presence of individuals with military experience in the siege was by itself startling news, comparisons between those with military experience and those without were lacking. Moreover, there was very little discussion about the lessons that could be drawn from examining what these individuals as a collective can tell us about the broader problem of extremism in and around the military community.

This report seeks to address these gaps using data collected by The Program on Extremism at George Washington University (PoE) on 357 individuals charged in federal court in connection with the January 6 events at the Capitol, including 43 who have some form of military experience. While we believe that our analysis provides some useful insights into the dynamics associated with the involvement of individuals with military experience in the Capitol Hill siege, the overall situation itself remains fluid. New cases are emerging on a daily basis that could alter the data points. Indeed, the Department of Justice announced that it expects 400 to

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<sup>8</sup> Leo Shane III, "One in four troops sees white nationalism in the ranks," *Military Times*, (October 23, 2017). <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/10/23/military-times-poll-one-in-four-troops-sees-white-nationalism-in-the-ranks/>; Leo Shane III, "Signs of white supremacy, extremism up again in poll of active-duty troops," *Military Times*, (February 6, 2020). <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Biesecker, Jake Bleiberg, and James Laporta, "Capitol rioters included highly trained ex-military and cops," *AP News*, (January 15, 2021). <https://apnews.com/article/ex-military-cops-us-capitol-riot-a1cb17201dfddc98291e5badc257>; Tom Dreisbach and Meg Anderson, "Nearly 1 In 5 Defendants In Capitol Riot Cases Served In The Military," *NPR*, (January 21, 2021). <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military>.

500 criminal cases to be filed in total once the investigation is completed.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, we believe that these data can provide important, empirically informed discussion points for military officials, the public, and policymakers as they wrestle with how to address this problem.

### **Definitions**

Definitions are critical to understanding the applicability and limits of our work. We use the term “military arrestees” to refer to the individuals with military experience who have been charged in federal court for their involvement in the Capitol Hill siege. We deemed an individual as having “military experience” if they served in any branch of the military, regardless of whether they served on active duty, in the reserves, or as part of the National Guard. Someone with “military experience” did not have to deploy overseas in order to fit our criteria, although as we will discuss in the report, some military arrestees had been deployed. It is critical to our study to also note that an individual with military experience may or may not still be currently serving in a government-sanctioned arm of the military. As we will see, the vast majority of the military arrestees were not currently serving, but instead were veterans, having left the military at some point prior to the January 6 siege.

This distinction is important. Many current legislative approaches, policy prescriptions, and public discussions dealing with extremism as it relates to the military tend to focus on two aspects of this issue. The first is to view the issue of extremism in the military as a recruitment problem. This often leads to efforts to keep extremists out of the military generally through more stringent recruitment standards, including enhanced background checks and vetting of the social media feeds of recruits. The other aspect commonly considered is how to deal with extremism on the part of those currently serving in the U.S. military. Conceptualizing the issue in this manner sharpens attention on identifying, reporting, and responding to cases of extremist personnel.

Both of these areas are incredibly important and merit our continued focus. In some cases, our analysis of the data on January 6 federal cases reinforces these points. However, one of the key takeaways from our analysis is that there is another part of this problem that is often neglected: veterans. As we will discuss in more detail

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<sup>10</sup> Katie Benner, “Justice Dept. Confronts Increasingly Complex Capitol Riot Inquiry,” *New York Times*, (February 19, 2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/19/us/politics/capitol-riot-investigation.html>.

below, this finding has important implications for how to approach this issue more broadly.

## **Methodology**

We collected data for all known individuals who were charged in relation to the January 6 events at the Capitol. A database of these individuals is publicly-available online and updated regularly by Program on Extremism researchers.<sup>11</sup> PoE's public database includes individuals' names and a number of demographic variables (age, gender, state of residence, etc.), as well as links to available court documents. We included data for individuals charged only in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia (federal jurisdiction).<sup>12</sup> All obtained information is available in open source news reporting or in court documents hosted on PoE's website. It is important to note that the charges brought against all individuals in this report (military and non-military) are still allegations and remain to be proven beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

We supplemented PoE's existing data with a number of variables related to individuals' military experience, including (where known) current status, branches of service, entry and exit dates, length of service, and deployment history. We also documented any affiliations to, and/or leadership roles within, domestic violent extremist (DVE) organizations, as well as involvement in smaller clusters of family, friends, and peer-networks. Some of the data frequencies comparing individuals with military experience and those without presented in this report (e.g. the proportion of all individuals charged who have military experience) are likely to change as the investigation into the Capitol Hill siege progresses and new information is unveiled. As of March 31, 2021, 43 of 357 identified Capitol Hill siege participants (12%) had some known military experience.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Available at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/Capitol-Hill-Cases>.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, individuals charged in the D.C. Superior Court (non-federal, D.C. jurisdiction) are not included in our dataset. In general, available evidence and information for individuals charged in the D.C. Superior Court is much more limited than for those with cases in federal court, including the exact nature of individuals' involvement in the Capitol Hill siege. We know of three individuals reported to have military experience who have open cases in the D.C. Superior Court for their alleged participation in the Capitol Hill siege. We also do not include in our total Ashley Babbitt, who died as a result of a gunshot wound during the siege. See: Jaclyn Peiser and Justin Jouvenal, "Woman fatally shot as pro-Trump mob stormed the Capitol identified as Air Force veteran," *The Washington Post*, (January 7, 2021). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/01/07/ashli-babbitt-dead-capitol-riot/>.

<sup>13</sup> The authors concluded observations on March 31, 2021.

Because the service records of military personnel (both active and former) are subject to privacy restrictions, only a small amount of information is known about the nature of an individual's service. In the case of those charged in connection with the attack on the Capitol, this information has become known through reporting by news organizations, official statements by different branches of the military, public-facing social media accounts, and court documents. There have also been instances of individuals associated with the accused (either family members or attorneys) providing additional details. We have tried to collect as much of this information as we can to provide some additional insight into the backgrounds of those with military experience. While what we present is admittedly and regrettably limited, we do believe that even this incomplete picture helps to provide more context regarding the challenges faced by the military and country as they continue to deal with this issue.

The rest of the report is structured in three sections. First, we examine demographics of the participants who have military experience, including a number of features specific to military service members and veterans. Second, we examine how individuals with military experience populate domestic violent extremist (DVE) organizations like the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, as well as the roles that these individuals have played within such organizations. Finally, we offer some recommendations to policymakers on how to address extremism in the broader military community.

## EXAMINING DEMOGRAPHICS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH MILITARY EXPERIENCE

Of the 357 available cases identified by the Program on Extremism, we found 43 individuals with known military experience (12%).<sup>14</sup> At first glance this is slightly higher than the estimated percentage of U.S. citizens with some military experience (around 7%).<sup>15</sup> Although there is ample reason to be concerned over the presence of individuals with military experience--whatever the percentage is--it is also important to take a step back and consider what this percentage really signals about the involvement of individuals with military experience in the January 6 siege.

As it applies to the Capitol Hill cases, simply comparing the number of individuals with military experience to the proportion of veterans in the broader U.S. population is misleading. There is no reason to think that the arrestee population should be a representative sample of the U.S. population, so any interpretation needs to be cautious. Beyond this fact, the Capitol Hill military arrestees are overwhelmingly male (see the discussion below), yet the percentage of veterans in the U.S. population has a large portion of females overall. So, it may be the case that the better comparison for the proportion of individuals with military experience is not with the overall proportion of veterans in the U.S. population, but the proportion of male veterans. That number for the general population, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, is 14 percent.<sup>16</sup> If we look only at the Capitol Hill federal cases involving men, the percentage with military experience is 13.6 percent. Comparing these two numbers suggests, if anything, that there actually is a very slight underrepresentation of veterans among the January 6 attacks. The bottom line is that, while there are reasons to focus on the presence of individuals with military experience among extremists, researchers, reporters, and policymakers need to recognize the nuance involved.

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<sup>14</sup> Early media reporting in the wake of the siege highlighted that as many as one in five individuals had military experience. See: Dreisbach and Anderson, "Nearly 1 In 5 Defendants In Capitol Riot Cases Served In The Military." The discrepancy may be the result of a number of factors, including that these figures were reported when far fewer cases were available, and some outlets included cases charged at the DC Superior Court, among other reasons. If anything, these fluctuations reveal important lessons for responding in the wake of an attack like January 6, especially when investigations are ongoing.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Census Bureau Releases New Report on Veterans," (June 2, 2020). <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/veterans-report.html>.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, "Veterans' Employment and Training Service, 2020," (2020). <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/womenveterans/womenveterans-relevant-research>.

When it comes to age, military arrestees were 43.2-years-old on average, about 4.7 years older than those without military experience. Even though this difference is accurate as represented in the data, we cannot because of the non-random nature of the data.<sup>17</sup> **(See figure 1)**

We also found that women formed a smaller proportion of the military arrestees compared to those without military experience.<sup>18</sup> In fact, only 1 of the 43 military arrestees was a woman, about 2.3% percent. The fact that a gender disparity exists should not necessarily come as a surprise; women have historically made up only a very small proportion of the armed forces. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of female veterans was 9.2 percent in 2018, up from 6.0 percent in 2000. Although the 2000 figure is closer to what we found here, the 2018 figure suggests that the number of women with military experience in the population is larger than that which we have seen up until this point as it relates to the Capitol Hill siege participants. It is unclear, however, if the reasons for this difference are the result of nuances related to data collection, prosecution, or involvement in the movement that fueled the January 6 incident.

Regardless, two points do seem clear. The first is that women with military experience did participate in the siege,<sup>19</sup> including in leadership roles.<sup>20</sup> This point needs to be taken into account in policies and programs dealing with the problem of extremism as it relates to the military. The participation of women shows that

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<sup>17</sup> A simple t-test examining whether the means of these two groups (military experience and no military experience) are different than each other is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level, with a p-value of 0.0061.

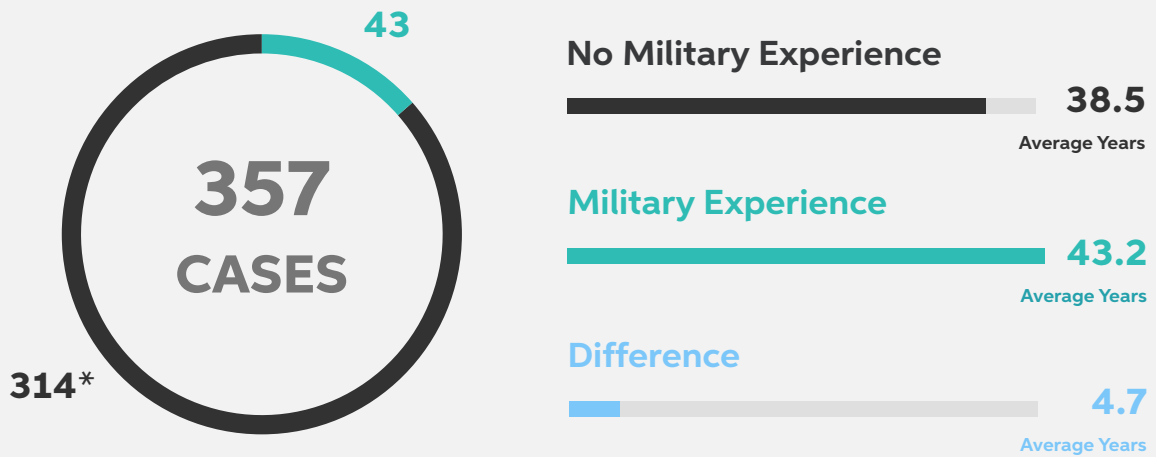
<sup>18</sup> A simple t-test examining whether the means of these two groups (military experience and no military experience) are different than each other is only statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, with a p-value of 0.0103.

<sup>19</sup> As noted in the introduction, this report includes only individuals with military experience with open federal court cases in the District Court for the District of Columbia. Including Ashley Babbitt would of course alter these numbers slightly, and information is still unclear as to allegations of active duty officer Emily Grace Rainey's participation in the siege See: Corey Dickstein, "Fort Bragg captain questioned over attendance at rally before Capitol siege resigned commission last year, officials say," *Stars and Stripes*, (January 11, 2021). <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/fort-bragg-captain-questioned-over-attendance-at-rally-before-capitol-siege-resigned-commission-last-year-officials-say-1.658138>; For more on women's participation in the Capitol Hill siege, see: Devorah Margolin and Chelsea Daymon, "Selfie and Siege: Women's Social Media Footprint and the US Capitol Hill Siege," *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, (March 3, 2021). <https://gnet-research.org/2021/03/03/selfie-and-siege-womens-social-media-footprint-and-the-us-capitol-hill-siege/>.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example: *USA v. Jessica Marie Watkins*, Government's Memorandum in Support of Pre-Trial Detention, (District of Columbia, 2021). <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Jessica%20Marie%20Watkins%20Government%20Memorandum%20in%20Support%20of%20Pretrial%20Detention.pdf>



**FIGURE 1 | Difference in Age by Military Experience**



\*Ages were known for all military arrestees, but ages for 40 of all 314 non-military cases were unknown.

**FIGURE 2 | Representation of Women by Military Experience**



solutions need to account for gender as well. The second point, which will have implications for how such programs are carried out, is that further research needs to be done to better understand the gender dynamics associated with extremism in the military. **(See figure 2)**

### **Branch of Service**

No one branch of the military is immune to extremism in its many forms, a fact largely born out in our findings on the Capitol Hill siege cases. We found evidence of military experience from all branches except the Coast Guard.<sup>21</sup> However, the recent conviction and sentencing in 2020 of Coast Guard officer and would-be domestic terrorist Christopher Paul Hasson shows that the data presented in this report are only one part of a larger picture.<sup>22</sup> Still, our data clearly show that individuals with experience in the Marines (47.8%) and the Army (41.3%) made up the vast majority of military arrestees (89.1% combined).

These numbers are of note, particularly given the relative proportion of each of these branches in the total U.S. military force. For comparison, the figure below includes the average proportion of the active duty component of each branch from 1994 - 2012, drawn from Department of Defense personnel statistics.<sup>23</sup> While not a perfect comparison, these numbers provide at least a reasonable baseline against which to consider the data we collected. What this process shows is that, at least among those charged in relation to the January 6th incident at the Capitol, the Marine Corps were over-represented, the proportion of Army participants was consistent with what we might expect to find in the general population, and the number of individuals with experience in the Air Force and Navy were under-represented.

This finding is curious and emphasizes the need for further research. It may simply be the result of random chance. However, there is also research that suggests that

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<sup>21</sup> The U.S. Space Force, formed in December 2019, is also not represented in our data. However, such an omission almost certainly has more to do with the recency of its formation than any other factor.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Duggan, "Coast Guard Lt/ Christopher Hasson sentenced to 13 years in alleged terror plot," *Washington Post*, (January 31, 2020). [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/coast-guard-lt-christopher-hasson-set-to-be-sentenced-in-alleged-terror-plot/2020/01/31/d01b048a-43ce-11ea-aa6a-083d01b3ed18\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/coast-guard-lt-christopher-hasson-set-to-be-sentenced-in-alleged-terror-plot/2020/01/31/d01b048a-43ce-11ea-aa6a-083d01b3ed18_story.html).

<sup>23</sup> Department of Defense, "DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications," [Accessed March 17, 2021]. <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.

each branch has its own distinct organizational culture or “personality.”<sup>24</sup> While these “personalities” are doubtless geared toward important organizational and national outcomes, if further research showed that these trends were not outliers, it would be critical to consider if organizational culture plays any role in an effort to address unintended outcomes. This possibility has been discussed by other analysts and researchers looking at the January 6 siege, who have suggested that it may have more to do with the military occupation specialty (MOS), noting the large number of individuals with experience specifically in the infantry.<sup>25</sup>

We recommend caution before any sweeping conclusions are drawn. These data will need to be adjusted against current personnel numbers for each of the branches. Additionally, there are simply too few data points (46 total<sup>26</sup>) to draw more conclusive takeaways. Our findings should be used with other assessments to help determine the scale of the problem of extremism within each branch. The results may impact resource allocation should policy change come, which we discuss more in our recommendations. For now, we can say only that significantly more individuals with Marines and Army experience were arrested for their actions on January 6th than of any other branch, pending any significant shifts as new cases unfold. **(See figure 3)**

## Status

Where we can perhaps offer more conclusive evidence is on individuals’ status. The data here are unambiguous: veterans made up the vast majority of Capitol Hill siege military arrestees (40 individuals, 93%). Only three individuals are known to have been currently serving in the military at the time of their arrest, none of whom was

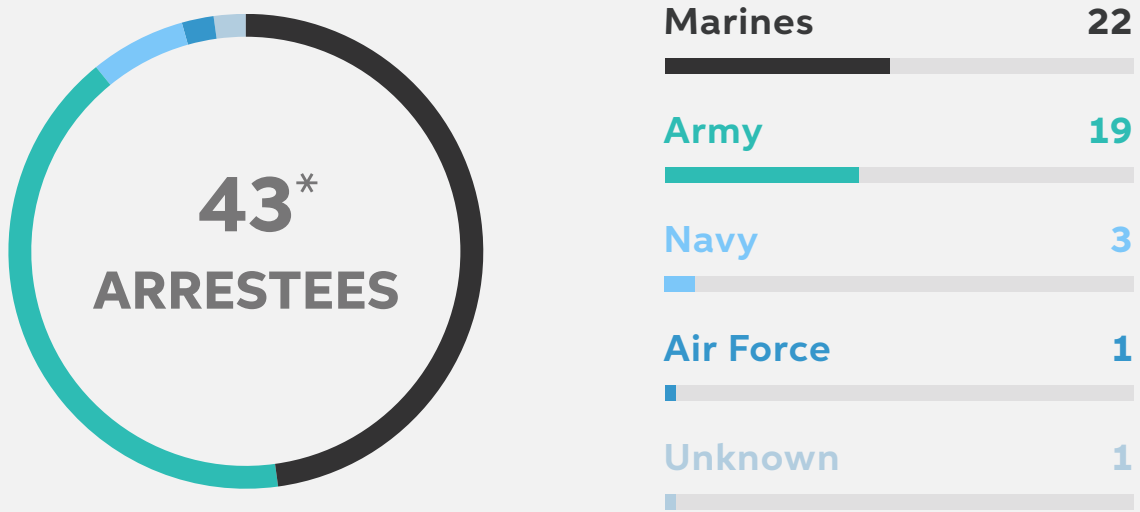
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<sup>24</sup> Carl Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989); S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Kimberly Jackson, Natasha Lander, Colin Roberts, Dan Madden, and Rebeca Orrie, *Movement and Maneuver: Culture and the Competition for Influence Among the U.S. Military Services* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2019).

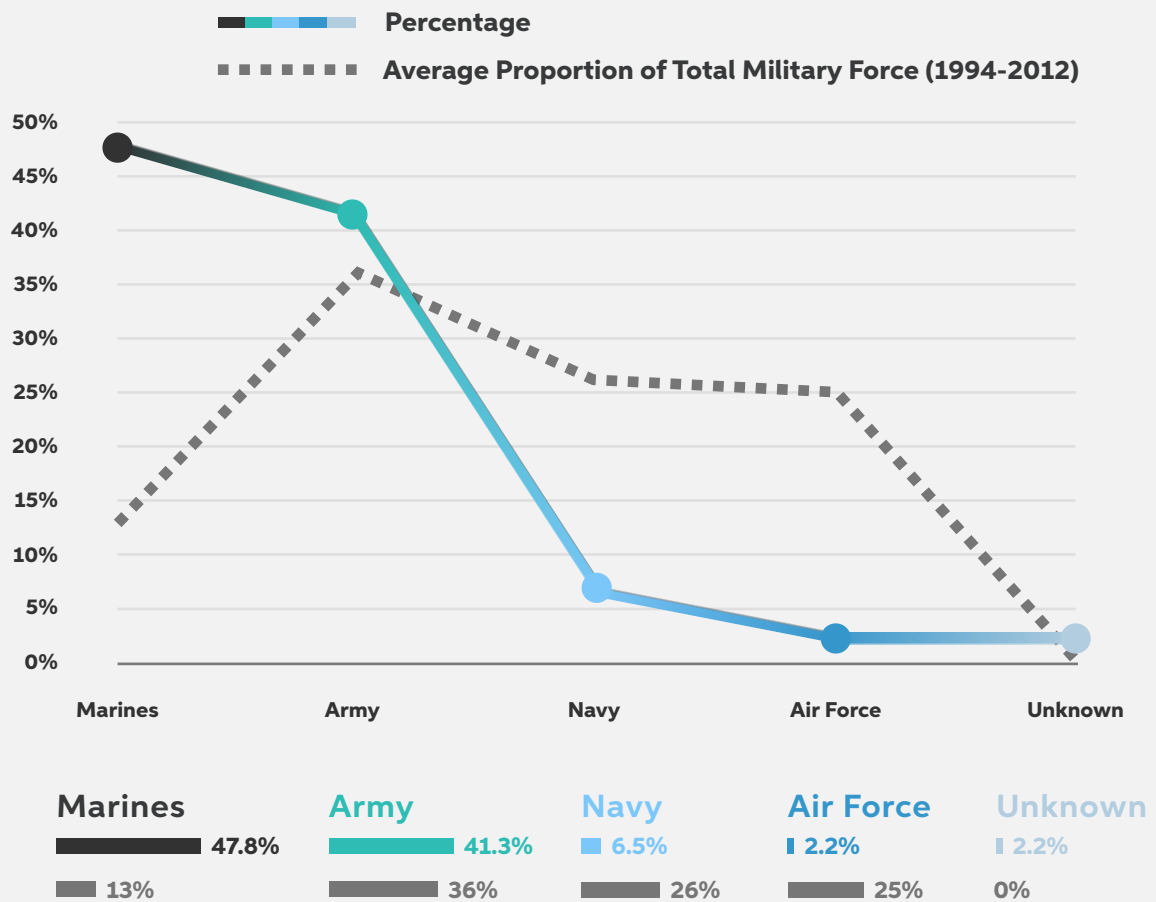
<sup>25</sup> Gina Harkins and Hope Hodge Seck, “Marines, Infantry Most Highly Represented Among Veterans Arrested After Capitol Riot,” *Military.com*, (February 26, 2021). (<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/02/26/marines-infantry-most-highly-represented-among-veterans-arrested-after-capitol-riot.html>).

<sup>26</sup> Three individuals served in two branches, bringing our total observations to 46 for 43 individuals.

**FIGURE 3 | Branch of Service**



\*Three individuals served in two branches, bringing our total observations to 46 for 43 individuals.



active duty.<sup>27</sup> This relatively high percentage of veterans and complete lack of active duty service members raises a potentially perplexing question: if there is a large extremism problem among those currently serving in the military, then why are they not showing up among those arrested at the events of January 6? There are a range of answers to this question and it is incredibly difficult, given the relatively limited information at hand, to adjudicate between them. We touch on some of these answers below.

One potential explanation is that the problem does not exist among active duty personnel, but simply becomes a problem once an individual separates from the military, either due to retirement or discharge. If this were the case, then the suggestion would be that current service members are of little concern. Although the data used in this report only found a small number of linkages to individuals currently serving in the military, at least two convincing sources suggest this sample is likely not entirely representative. The first is a 2019 poll from the *Military Times*, which found that 36 percent of active duty soldiers had encountered some form of white supremacy in the military, a 14 point increase from the year before.<sup>28</sup> The second is an internal Pentagon report which, according to press reports, noted that extremism was an issue within the military.<sup>29</sup> Taken together, these two data points offer a rejoinder to the argument that there is not an extremism problem in the military.

So, how to explain the absence of active duty personnel and the prevalence of veterans? One important consideration would be the logistical hurdles to participation for active duty personnel. Proximity may be a factor. Some active duty personnel are deployed overseas or stationed abroad. Beyond proximity, the ability

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<sup>27</sup> One of these individuals, Jacob Fracker, was serving as a Corporal in the Virginia National Guard at the time of his arrest. Dan Mangan and Amanda Macias, "Virginia National Guard corporal Jacob Fracker and fellow police officer charged in U.S. Capitol riot," *CNBC News*, (January 15, 2021). <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/15/jacob-fracker-thomas-robertson-charged-capitol-riot.html>; Another, Timothy Hale-Cusanelli, was an Army reservist who also worked as a Navy security contractor with a security clearance. See: Marshall Cohen, "Navy probe finds contractor charged in Capitol insurrection was well-known Nazi sympathizer," *CNN Politics*, (March 1, 2021). <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/14/politics/timothy-hale-cusanelli-nazi-sympathizer-capitol-insurrection/index.html>; The third, Mark Sahady, was confirmed by an Army spokesperson to have served in the U.S. Army Reserve since 2004 and currently held the rank of Captain. See: NPR Staff, "The Capitol Siege: The Arrested and Their Stories," *NPR*, (April 2, 2021). <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/09/965472049/the-capitol-siege-the-arrested-and-their-stories>.

<sup>28</sup> Shane III, "Signs of white supremacy, extremism up again in poll of active-duty troops."

<sup>29</sup> John M. Donnelly, "Pentagon report reveals inroads white supremacists have made in military," *Roll Call*, (February 16, 2021). <https://rollcall.com/2021/02/16/pentagon-report-reveals-inroads-white-supremacists-have-made-in-military/>.

to travel is worth noting as well. Veterans, who are no longer subject to the same administrative oversight as active duty personnel, may travel more freely than active duty personnel. Indeed, for many active duty personnel, taking leave requires approval of an immediate supervisor. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, active duty military personnel faced increased travel restrictions except for official government business (such as reporting to a new duty station or deploying abroad).<sup>30</sup> On January 6, 2021, 39 percent of U.S. military bases were under strict travel restrictions, limiting the ability of active duty personnel to travel on leave.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, it is worth considering that there are already policies in place that prohibit military personnel from active participation in extremist organizations. Such policies, which prohibit “activities [that] constitute a breach of law and order” or engaging in demonstrations when “violence is likely to result,” may have been familiar to current military personnel.<sup>32</sup> Although often maligned for not going far enough to prevent extremism in the ranks, such policies may have discouraged desire or ability to participate in the assault on the Capitol. Moreover, active duty personnel are also subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice for other crimes and offenses. Among other things, assaulting police officers, destroying police barriers, and storming the U.S. Capitol would likely have been foreseeable as chargeable offenses by the small number of active duty personnel who might have otherwise been inclined to join in such actions.

In sum, whether for lack of interest, logistical hurdles, or the deterrent effect of current military policies, there are several explanations for the lack of currently serving military personnel among the January 6 cases. As with many things, it may end up being the case that each explanation holds some explanatory power. And, if that is true, there is reason to not take the lack of active duty soldiers among this data as a sign that there is not a problem within the ranks.

An important caveat about this discussion regarding duty status is that these numbers tell us little about when individuals began to form and hold extremist

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<sup>30</sup> Department of Defense, “What Do Travel Restrictions Mean for Service Members,” *Military One Source*, (February 24, 2021). <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/moving-housing/moving/planning-your-move/what-do-travel-restrictions-mean-for-service-members/>.

<sup>31</sup> Department of Defense, “COVID-19 Travel Restrictions Installation Status Update,” (January 4, 2021). <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/06/2002560753/-1/-1/0/COVID-19-TRAVEL-RESTRICTIONS-INSTALLATION-STATUS-UPDATE-JAN-6-2021.PDF>.

<sup>32</sup> Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Instruction Number 1325.06.”

beliefs and/or interpersonal connections to like-minded affiliates or groups. There are a number of additional factors that we need to consider to ground the findings on the status of military arrestees. At the broadest level, however, what our findings do suggest is that solutions to tackle extremism in the broader military community should not be limited to current DoD personnel only. If anything, new resources and approaches to combat extremism in the military community should emphasize working with veterans at least as much as with non-veterans. **(See figure 4)**

### ***Length of Service and Rank***

Next, we examined individuals' lengths of service. As noted above, we coded this information based on a variety of different sources, some of which provide only vague time windows for an individual's time in the military. For example, one news story might only provide bookending years (2005 – 2009), whereas others may provide months as well. For consistency across all of our observations, we only utilized a beginning and ending year in our calculation, which may result in a slightly elevated time estimate. We were able to find beginning and ending years of service for 30 individuals and placed them into three categories. **(See figure 5)**

Although the sample size is small, it reveals a couple of key trends. The first is that the majority of the participants with military experience in the Capitol attack had four or more years of service. Although this may seem to indicate that those with more military experience may have been more likely to participate in the siege, it is important to remember that the relevant comparison is with the larger population of individuals with military service. If, among those with military service in the U.S. population, most have served four years or more, then the prevalence of such a high proportion of individuals within the ranks of the participants is less surprising. Unfortunately, the authors could not find a breakdown of average length of service for veterans.

Such data were, however, available for the active duty force. According to the Department of Defense, in 2017, the percentage of active duty soldiers (enlisted and officers) with less than 3 years of service was 42.6 percent, 4-10 years of service was

30.9 percent, and more than 11 years was 26.5 percent.<sup>33</sup> Assuming that these percentages, which have generally been consistent for the past 20-30 years, also reflect the amount of military experience among veterans in the general population, the numbers above are quite unexpected. Arrestees with less military service appear to be underrepresented in our data, while those with more military experience tend to be overrepresented. Given the nature of our data, we cannot explain why this is the case, but it is certainly a question that merits further research.

The second trend worth discussing is that longer military service does not appear to be an inoculation against participation in extremist movements. Among the participants are individuals like Larry Rendall Brock, who between his active duty and reserve service in the Air Force, served in the military for 25 years.<sup>34</sup> Brock's relatively high rank (Lieutenant Colonel), also does not appear to have prevented participation in the Capitol Hill siege. Although length of service is not a perfect proxy for rank, when we divided each of the individuals into groups based on whether their rank was at the level of junior enlisted, non-commissioned officer (NCO), or officer, we found a similar dynamic. As can be seen in the chart below, there is a fair amount of diversity when it comes to the rank held by individuals who served in the military. **(See figure 6)**

Before moving on, it is important to observe that a number of these individuals held some form of leadership role, either as a NCO or as an officer, during their service in the military. If they held extreme views during their service (which cannot be confirmed by the data currently available in the public sphere), it would put them in a position to influence and mentor others. Even if they did not engage in extremist activities during their military service, the fact that they have such leadership experience would make them invaluable assets to an extremist organization or

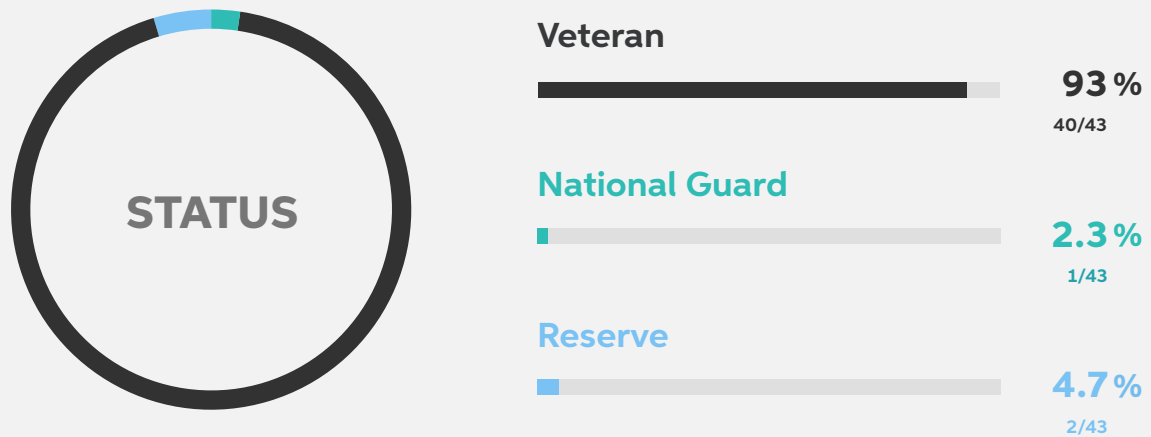
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<sup>33</sup> Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, *Population Representation in the Military Services. Appendix D: Historical Tables*, <https://www.cna.org/research/pop-rep>. These numbers reflect the combination of enlisted personnel and officers. The numbers for enlisted personnel in 2017 were as follows: percentage with 3 years or less of service (46.80), percentage with 4-10 years of service (30.53), percentage with 11 or more years of service (22.67). The numbers for officers in 2017 were as follows: percentage with less than 3 years of service (21.58), percentage with 4-10 years of service (32.47), percentage with 11 years or more of service (45.95). These numbers have only been consistent since 2014. Prior to this point, the breakdown was more similar to what was presented in the main text for enlisted individuals.

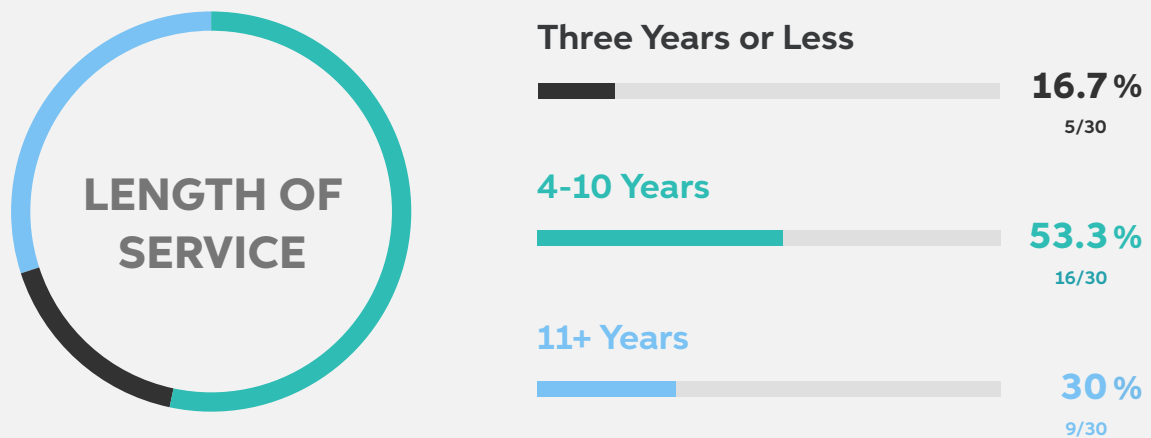
<sup>34</sup> Associated Press, "Air Force vet photographed in Capitol riot arrested in Texas," *Military Times*, (January 10, 2021). <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2021/01/11/air-force-vet-photographed-in-capitol-riot-arrested-in-texas/>.



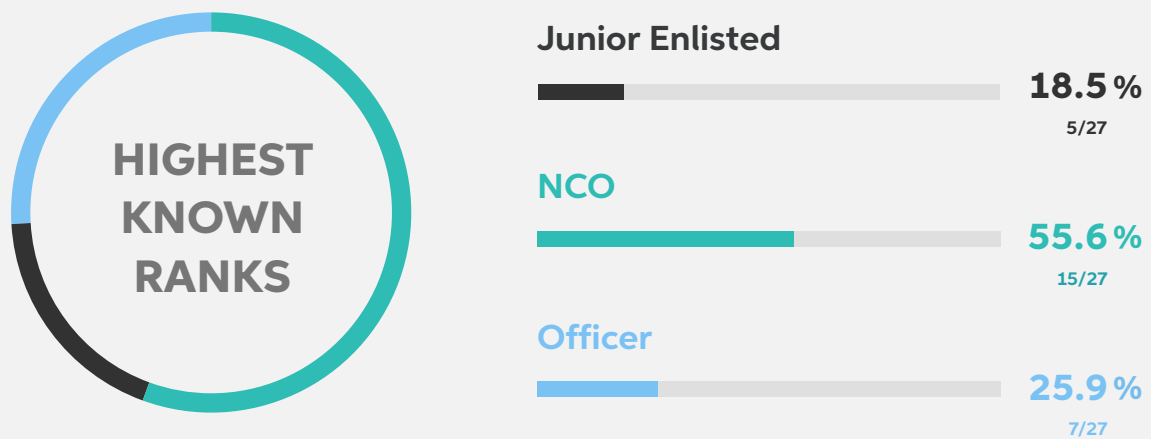
**FIGURE 4 | Status of Arrestees with Military Experience**



**FIGURE 5 | Length of Service Among Military Arrestees**



**FIGURE 6 | Highest Known Ranks of Military Arrestees**



group of any sort. In sum, while the chart on rank reinforces the above point that experience or, in this case, rank is not an immunity from participation in extremist actions, it serves as a reminder that counter-extremism efforts cannot be limited to certain types of personnel and that this challenge is not simply faced by new recruits.

### ***Entry and Exit Years***

While length of service and rank are important indicators of the depth of connection each of these individuals may have had with the military, there is another temporal trend worth examining: when did individuals join and leave the military? We were able to collect information on the years that 30 individuals joined and left military service and then grouped those results by decade.<sup>35</sup> **(See figure 7)**

This information shows that the challenge of extremism in the military, at least as illustrated through this examination of arrested participants in the Capitol attack, is not a problem of a bygone era. Although certain extremist movements may have been able to initially develop and take hold in no small measure due to the role of a small number of veterans from the Vietnam conflict, the appeal of extremism goes far beyond any particular era or conflict.<sup>36</sup> Of those with military experience arrested in connection with the Capitol attack, 70 percent of them joined the military after 2000. And what is more, around one-half of those arrested left the military less than one decade ago.

As discussed briefly above, the conclusion here should not necessarily be that these individuals were extremists when they were in the military and/or that they participated in extremist activities. Because we do not have detailed information on when each of these individuals acquired their extremist views, we cannot make a definitive statement on that point. However, there is some anecdotal evidence that this was the case for some individuals. Jere Brower, an Army specialist who served for 5 years, appears to have participated in the distribution of racist literature on behalf of the Aryan Nations during his military service.<sup>37</sup> More information is needed

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<sup>35</sup> Note: the total number of observations for exit decade is 27 because three individuals are still serving in reservist or National Guard capacities.

<sup>36</sup> For a more in-depth discussion about the connection between the Vietnam era and the rise of the White Supremacist movement, see: Belew, *Bring the War Home*.

<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Steinhauer, "In the Battle for the Capitol, Veterans Fought on Opposite Sides," *New York Times*, (February 8, 2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/08/us/politics/capitol-riot-trump-veterans-cops.html>.

to aid our understanding of when individuals developed extremist views in relation to their period of service.<sup>38</sup> We also know relatively little about why individuals left the military and the nature of their separation (including different types of discharge). This is made all the more difficult by the fact that the Navy is the only branch of service that requires documenting supremacist or extremist activities as a reason for dishonorable discharge.<sup>39</sup> Additional research into these factors will be critical to develop more effective policy solutions.

## **Deployment**

One of the areas we wanted to examine in this report was whether there seemed to be a prevalence of overseas experience among the individuals with military experience identified in our report. To code this data, we relied on the definition used by previous research on the subject, which refers to the individual being physically located in a combat zone or being put in a location in direct support of combat operations.<sup>40</sup> Our interest in examining this particular aspect of the data is relatively straightforward. We wanted to see if deployment experience varied among the individuals with military experience who were arrested for participating in the January 6 siege.

On this point, the data reveal quite a bit of diversity. 19 military arrestees (44%) had some known deployment history, almost all of whom served in either Iraq, Afghanistan, or both.<sup>41</sup> This is not necessarily surprising, as the U.S. military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past two decades has seen a large number of service personnel deployed overseas in support of combat operations.

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<sup>38</sup> One study in 2012 examined the effects of two different pathways--involuntary role exits and social stress after separation--among individuals with military experience who became far-right extremists. Such studies provide important exploratory analyses to guide our understanding of the factors that may influence current and/or former military service members' radicalization into extremist activity. See: Pete Simi, Bryan F. Bubolz, and Ann Hardman, "Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism: An Exploratory Analysis," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (July 2013): 654-671. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.802976>.

<sup>39</sup> Department of Defense, *Report to Armed Services Committees on Screening Individuals Who Seek to Enlist in The Armed Forces*, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, (June 2020). <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Mar/02/2002592042/-1/-1/0/REPORT-TO-ARMED-SERVICES-COMMITTEES-ON-SCREENING-INDIVIDUALS-WHO-SEEK-TO-ENLIST-IN-THE-ARMED-FORCES.PDF>.

<sup>40</sup> Jennie W. Wenger, Caoliann O'Connell, Linda Cottrell, *Examination of Recent Deployment Experience Across the Services and Components* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018). [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1928.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1928.html). See in particular footnote 6.

<sup>41</sup> Seven individuals deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving a total of 26 observations for deployment country.

However, what is interesting is that the proportion of individuals with at least one deployment among the military arrestees is substantially lower than what was found in a survey of military personnel in 2015, which found that approximately 61% of all soldiers had at least one previous deployment.<sup>42</sup> This may be due to the fact that deployment experiences are underreported in open-source media articles, or it may be due to the fact that the rate of deployments is declining as U.S. troop commitments abroad are scaled back. However, this latter reason seems unlikely, especially given that these individuals all appear to have served during a time period when deployments were not uncommon.<sup>43</sup> **(See figure 8)**

Beyond simply noting that some arrestees have deployed and others have not, we found some evidence that the nature of the deployments these individuals experienced differed markedly as well. As one would imagine among any population of military veterans with deployment experience, some of those within our data served with great distinction and were wounded in combat. For example, Joshua Lollar, an Army veteran from Texas, deployed to Iraq, was wounded in combat, and received a Purple heart.<sup>44</sup> Another example is Christopher Kuehne, a Marine captain with deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq and numerous commendations and medals, including a Combat Action Ribbon, three Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medals, and the Purple Heart for injuries sustained in combat.<sup>45</sup> In short, there are a variety of experiences even among this small number of arrestees with military experience.

One question that may arise from the diversity of experiences among arrestees with military experience is whether their experiences, particularly in combat, factor into their current situation. There is no way to know from the data at hand if the individuals in our dataset who deployed abroad were impacted in any relevant manner by that experience. There is certainly no reason to believe that those

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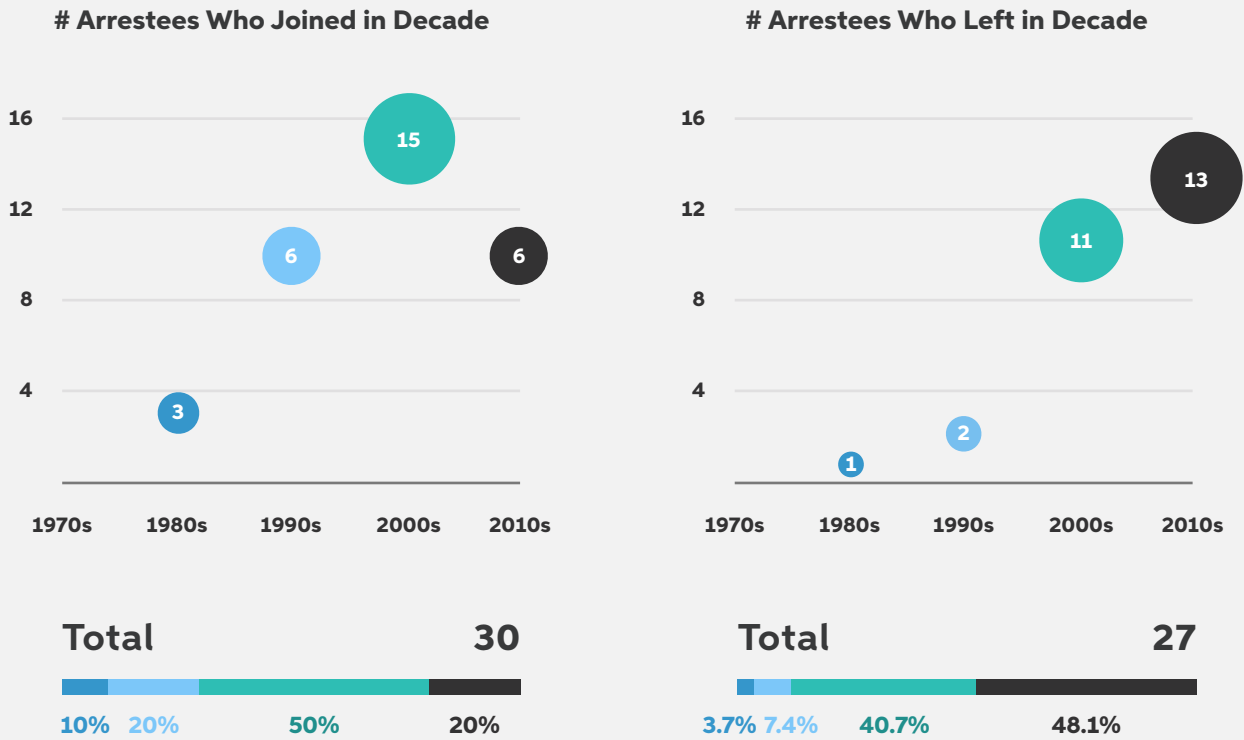
<sup>42</sup> Sarah O. Meadows, Charles C. Engel, Rebecca L. Collins, Robin L. Beckman, Matthew Cefalu, Jennifer Hawes-Dawson, Molly Waymouth, Amii M. Kress, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, Rajeev Ramchand, and Kayla M. Williams, *2015 Health Related Behaviors Survey: Deployment Experiences and Health Among U.S. Active-Duty Service Members* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018). [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9955z1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9955z1.html).

<sup>43</sup> This finding is not driven either by the 9 individuals in our dataset who joined in the 1980s and 1990s. Among those individuals, 5 of them had at least one deployment, or about 56%.

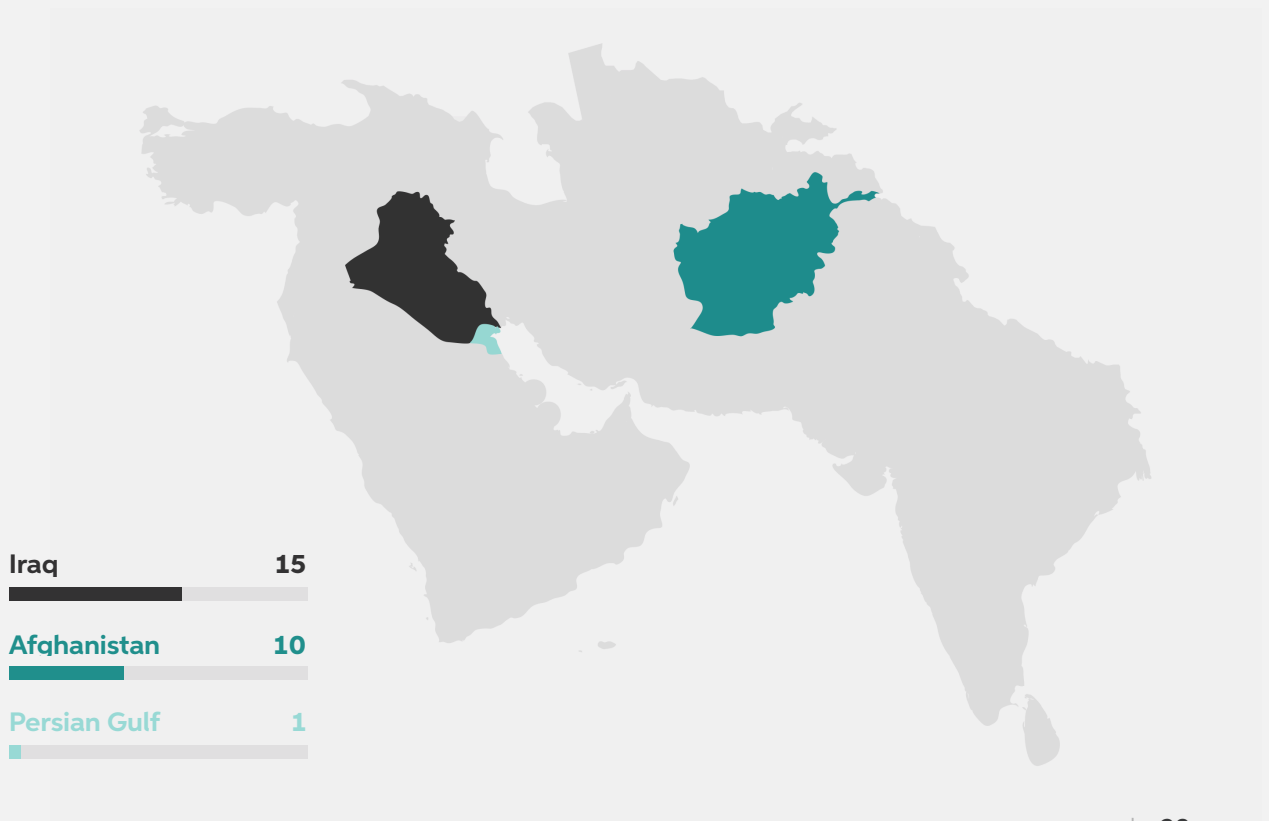
<sup>44</sup> Paul P. Murphy, Katelyn Polantz, Marshall Cohen, Evan Perez, and Christina Carrega, "At least 150 people have been charged by Justice Department in Capitol riot," *CNN*, (January 26, 2021). <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/26/politics/capitol-riot-arrests-150/index.html>.

<sup>45</sup> "Former Marine, cop and metal worker. KC Proud Boys appear in court on riot charges," *Kansas City Star*, (February 12, 2021). <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article249214515.html>.

**FIGURE 7 | Entry and Exit Points for Arrestees with Military Experience by Decade**



**FIGURE 8 | Country of Deployment**



experiences contributed to their participation in the Capitol Hill siege or in extremists organizations more generally. The evidence available to us here does not support such a conclusion. This point cannot be overemphasized.

However, two anecdotal examples from our data suggest that the issue of the impact of deployment and military experience cannot be fully divorced from discussions about the involvement of individuals with military experience in extremism. The first is for Mark Leffingwell, a veteran who served a tour of duty in Iraq with the Washington National Guard and was honorably discharged in 2009.<sup>46</sup> In a court appearance, his lawyer noted that Leffingwell had suffered a traumatic brain injury from an IED while deployed.<sup>47</sup> Whether this point was offered in mitigation, contextualization, or explanation is not clear, but it does suggest it may be an issue of discussion in the case moving forward. The second is for Joshua James, a veteran of the Iraq war who was awarded the Purple Heart for his actions in combat.<sup>48</sup> At a hearing, the Federal judge overseeing the hearing kept James in custody due to concerns regarding public safety, citing concerns about James' mental health, including PTSD.<sup>49</sup> The reporting of this hearing does not indicate the origins of these challenges, but they seem to have weighed heavily in the judge's decision.

Beyond these select examples, there is a significant and convincing body of well-documented research that has identified a range of mental, social, and physical impacts of deployment, combat, and injury.<sup>50</sup> In addition, on average, service

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<sup>46</sup> Mike Carter and Lewis Kamb, "Ex-Washington National Guardsman indicted in U.S. Capitol attacks," *Wenatchee World*, (January 13, 2021). [https://www.wenatcheeworld.com/news/ex-washington-national-guardsman-indicted-in-u-s-capitol-attack/article\\_2c0338d0-55a8-11eb-8583-67dfa8f545b5.html](https://www.wenatcheeworld.com/news/ex-washington-national-guardsman-indicted-in-u-s-capitol-attack/article_2c0338d0-55a8-11eb-8583-67dfa8f545b5.html)

<sup>47</sup> Sarah N. Lynch and Makini Brice, "Man who sat at Pelosi aide's desk faces charges; FBI probes officer's death," *Reuters*, (January 8, 2021). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-police-investigation/man-who-sat-at-pelosi-aides-desk-faces-charges-fbi-probes-officers-death-idUSKBN29D294>.

<sup>48</sup> Audrey Ash and Marshall Cohen, "Alleged Oath Keeper charged in Capitol riot chauffeured Roger Stone, FBI agent says," *CNN*, (March 11, 2021). <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/11/politics/roger-stone/index.html>

<sup>49</sup> "Federal judge orders Alabama man to remain in custody for Capitol riot charges," *CBS42*, (March 11, 2021). <https://www.cbs42.com/alabama-news/federal-judge-orders-alabama-man-to-remain-in-custody-for-capitol-riot-charges/>

<sup>50</sup> Stéphanie Vincent Lyk-Jensen, Cecilie Dohmann Weatherall, Peter Winning Jepsen, "The effect of military deployment on mental health," *Economics & Human Biology* 23 (December 2016): 193-208; Sarah O. Meadows, Terri Tanielian, and Benjamin Karney, (eds.), *How Military Families Respond Before, During and After Deployment: Findings from the RAND Deployment Life Study*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016). [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9906.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9906.html).

members who separate from service post-deployment experience significantly elevated psychological symptoms.<sup>51</sup> This previous literature shows that the challenges of deployment are not in any way unique to any of the individuals in our dataset. But, taken together with the anecdotal examples provided above, it is a reminder that future policy efforts and research may need to engage with the complex and difficult questions of combat related factors and stresses as it applies to this particular topic.

An important parenthetical to the conversation about deployment, specifically the potential mental health challenges that may arise, is that mental health considerations are not unique to soldiers who have deployed overseas. Anecdotal evidence among the January 6 cases demonstrate this as well. Michael Foy, a veteran of the Marine Corps who never deployed overseas, is alleged to have struck a law enforcement officer during the Capitol Hill attack with a hockey stick. Both his attorney as well as prosecutors have raised the issue of PTSD and substance abuse in his case.<sup>52</sup> Thus, although the impact of deployment and exposure to combat may be one avenue through which the issue of mental health and extremism may arise, it is certainly not the only path. Being aware of the complexity of these issues is something lacking from our current discussion of this difficult problem.

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<sup>51</sup> Meadows et al., *How Military Families Respond*.

<sup>52</sup> Beth LeBlanc, "Wixom man charged in Jan. 6 hockey stick attack denied bond ahead of D.C. court proceeding," *The Detroit News*, (January 25, 2021). <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2021/01/25/prosecutor-wixom-mans-actions-d-c-chaotic-graphic-and-brutal/6699376002/>; See also: *USA v. Joseph Randall Biggs*, Defendant Biggs' Opposition to Motion to Revoke Pretrial Release, (District of Columbia, 2021). <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Joseph%20Biggs%20Opposition%20to%20Motion%20to%20Revoke%20Pretrial%20Release.pdf>.

## AFFILIATIONS WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMIST (DVE) ORGANIZATIONS

Historically, individuals with military experience are highly sought-after by various domestic violent extremist (DVE) organizations.<sup>53</sup> Some, like the Oath Keepers, prize military experience well above other qualifying characteristics. These organizations specifically target individuals with military experience for recruitment because of the significant value-add to their causes.<sup>54</sup> As much as they provide various operational enhancements (technical weapons expertise, combat training, knowledge of operating procedures, etc.), members with military experience also influence the culture and social norms of DVE organizations and the broader movements they comprise.<sup>55</sup> They also offer another commodity: political legitimacy.<sup>56</sup> The military is one of the most trusted institutions in the country.<sup>57</sup> When individuals with military experience, whether currently serving or veterans, participate in an organization, it allows the organization to claim a certain amount of legitimacy. While details on the Capitol Hill siege are still unfolding, available evidence already shows the ‘force-multiplying’ effects of individuals with military experience both planning for and participating in the Capitol Hill siege.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For a review of terminology, see: Department of Homeland Security and Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Domestic Terrorism: Definitions, Terminology, and Methodology,” (November 2020). <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-definitions-terminology-methodology.pdf>. We limit our threshold to individuals with concrete ties to DVE organizations, which does not include individuals with nebulous ties to conspiracy theory movements like QAnon or individuals who espoused racially or ethnically motivated ideologies in available sources but lacked organizational ties. For more on individuals who adhere to QAnon conspiracy theories, see: Michael Jensen and Sheehan Kane, “QAnon Offenders in the United States,” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, (2021). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/qanon-offenders-united-states>.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example: Belew, *Bring the War Home*; Sam Jackson, *Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Department of Defense, *Report to Armed Services Committees on Screening Individuals Who Seek to Enlist in The Armed Forces*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Michael Robinson and Kori Schake, “The Military’s Extremism Problem Is Our Problem,” *New York Times*, (March 2, 2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/02/opinion/veterans-capitol-attack.html>; Department of Defense, *Report to Armed Services Committees on Screening Individuals Who Seek to Enlist in The Armed Forces*.

<sup>57</sup> Mosheh Gains, “Public trust in military and police falls, but numbers for Congress and media are worse, says survey,” *NBC News*, (March 10, 2021). <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/public-trust-military-police-falls-numbers-congress-media-are-worse-n1260388>.

<sup>58</sup> Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Denise Lu, Eleanor Lutz, and Alex Leeds Matthews, “A Small Group of Militants’ Outsize Role in the Capitol Attack,” *New York Times*, (February 21, 2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/02/21/us/capitol-riot-attack-militants.html>.



### **Known DVE Organizational Affiliations**

Military arrestees with DVE organizational affiliations were among the most organized Capitol Hill siege participants. They took part in broader conspiracies that, as alleged by federal prosecutors, included advance planning to breach the Capitol.<sup>59</sup> The Proud Boys and Oath Keepers allegedly played a particularly salient role in strategizing ahead of time and coalescing other rally-goers around their efforts to storm the Capitol building.<sup>60</sup> 46 of all 357 known participants currently facing federal charges (12.9%) had known DVE organizational affiliations, most of whom were members of either the Proud Boys (28) or the Oath Keepers (13). The proportion of military arrestees who had some DVE organizational affiliation (37.2%) was disproportionately higher compared to those without military experience (9.6%). They included nine members of the Proud Boys, six members of the Oath Keepers, and one member of the Three Percenters.<sup>61</sup> 27 (62.8%) military arrestees had no known DVE organizational affiliations. Some were members of loosely-organized clusters that planned their travel to the Capitol together (13, 30.2%); others appear to have shown up alone (14, 32.6%).<sup>62</sup> **(See figures 8 and 9)**

These numbers may change as more information is unveiled in legal proceedings, but generally they reveal a few things. First, there is a great deal of variation in observed engagement among individuals with military experience in organized extremist activities. This suggests that approaches to combat extremism in military populations — at whatever point in their service--need to consider the contours of individual engagement in extremist activities as much as group-level dynamics.<sup>63</sup> That case is made clear by the involvement in the siege of individuals like Timothy Hale-Cusanelli, a 30-year-old Sergeant in the Army Reserves and avowed white

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<sup>59</sup> *USA v. Jessica Marie Watkins*, Government's Memorandum in Support of Pre-Trial Detention.

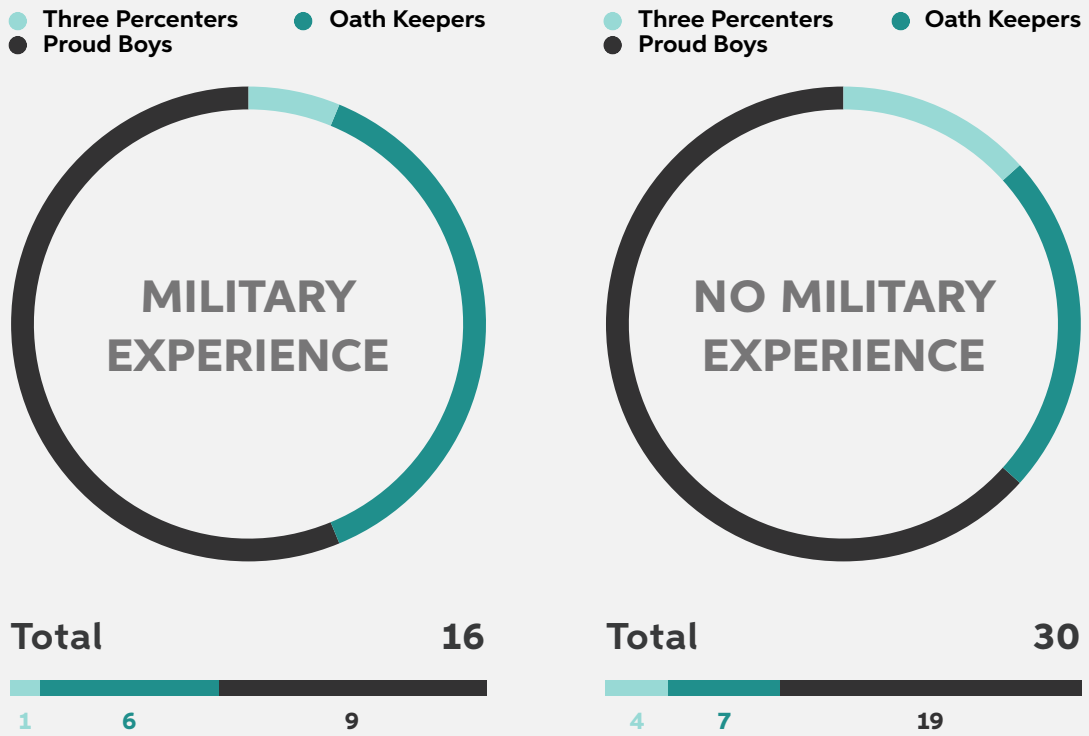
<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*; *USA v. Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zachary Rehl, and Charles Donohoe*, First Superseding Indictment, (District of Columbia, 2021). <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Nordean%20Biggs%20Rehl%20Donohoe%20First%20Superseding%20Indictment.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> For more background on the Oath Keepers, see: Jackson, *Oath Keepers*. On the Proud Boys, see: Anti-Defamation League, "Proud Boys," (January 6, 2020). <https://www.adl.org/proudboys>. On the Three Percenters, see: Alejandro J. Beutel and Daryl Johnson, *The Three Percenters: A Look Inside an Anti-Government Militia*, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, (February 2021). <https://3y4moi335jqc3hdi6ss66vpc-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/20210225-Three-Percenter-PR-NISAP.pdf>.

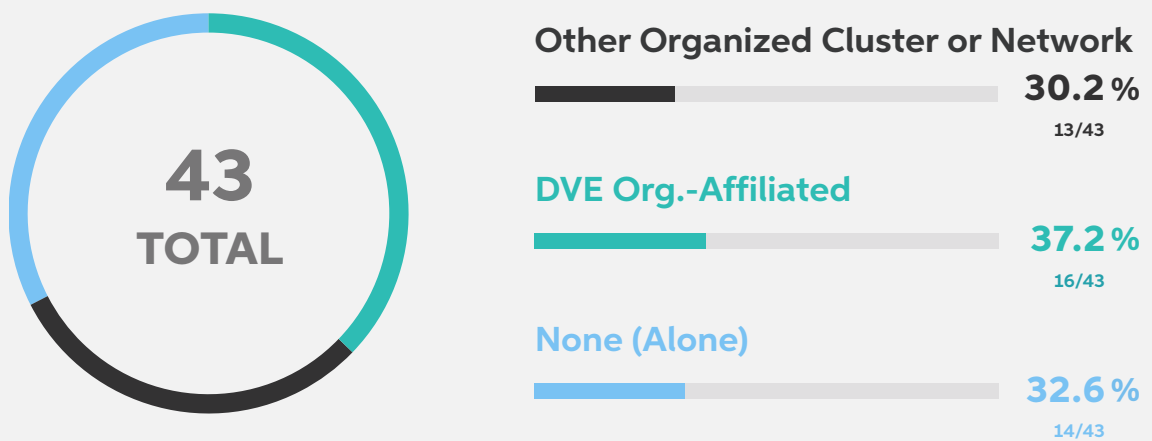
<sup>62</sup> For a typology of Capitol Hill siege participants, see: Program on Extremism, "*This is Our House!*": A Preliminary Assessment of the Capitol Hill Siege Participants, (March 2021). <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/This-Is-Our-House.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> Simi et al., "Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism."

**FIGURE 9 | Affiliations with DVE Organizations**



**FIGURE 10 | Level of Organizational Involvement of Military Arrestees**



supremacist and Nazi sympathizer.<sup>64</sup> Despite a lack of known affiliation to any domestic extremist group or network, the evidence of Hale-Cusanelli's racially-motivated extremist ideology presented in available court documents so far is substantial:



*Another HBC contractor stated that no one wanted to report Defendant because he was “crazy” and people were afraid he would find out who reported him. That contractor reported that Defendant “100% had a problem with Jewish people” and that Defendant stated “they are ruining everything and did not belong here.” That contractor stated that Defendant spoke of his dislike of Jews every day.”<sup>65</sup>*

Second, the relatively high rate of participation in DVE organizations by individuals with military experience may be the result of an individual need and desire for connection to others and participation in other organizations dedicated to what the individual deems as important causes. The military as an organization provides common purpose and close social interaction with others, often under very challenging circumstances.<sup>66</sup> Individuals accustomed to that social dynamic may continue to need such connections upon separation from the military, which can come in a

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<sup>64</sup> *USA v. Timothy Louis Hale-Cusanelli*, United States' Opposition to Defendant's Motion for Conditional Release, (District of Columbia, 2021). <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Timothy%20Hale-Cusanelli%20Govt%20Opposition%20to%20Motion%20for%20Conditional%20Release.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Anthony King, “The Word of Command: Communication and Cohesion in the Military,” *Armed Forces & Society* 32, no. 4 (2006): 493-512; Timothy Coon, “Social Capital and the Returning Military Veteran,” in Alva G. Greenberg, Timothy P. Gullotta, and Martin Bloom (eds.) *Social Capital and Community Well-Being* (Springer, 2016).

variety of formats.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, we know from scholarly research that extremist organizations are often characterized by close social ties, interactions, and high levels of trust.<sup>68</sup> It stands to reason that, if an individual that previously enjoyed the camaraderie found in the military becomes attracted to an extremist ideology for whatever reason, doing so in a group format as opposed to alone would not be surprising.

Third, the engagement of individuals with military experience in DVE organizations presents unique challenges for disengagement and reintegration efforts. These may include group-specific entry processes that involve community-building with the group and bridge-burning with the ‘normal community’, as well as various push and pull factors that can facilitate or hinder individuals leaving groups.<sup>69</sup> As a result, considerations for individuals with military experience and extremist group/organizational involvement may differ from individuals without similar ties. Bucketing these individuals based on their engagement with such groups (or lack thereof) may offer some value to disengagement and reintegration efforts, but risks and needs will of course need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

### ***The Leadership Roles of Individuals with Military Experience***

Within the sub-group of military arrestees with DVE organizational affiliations, one finding stands out in particular: several held leadership roles within these organizations. Their precise roles and functions varied, and more evidence is still forthcoming. Nonetheless, we can still draw some preliminary distinctions. Some individuals, like Joseph Randall Biggs of the Proud Boys, allegedly served as key organizers.<sup>70</sup> Others, like Jessica Watkins and Thomas Caldwell, are alleged to have held “commanding officer” positions over other members in their respective groups,

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<sup>67</sup> Anne Demers, “When Veterans Return: The Role of Community in Reintegration,” *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 16, no. 2 (2011): 160-179; Katherine Albertson, Jamie Irving, and David Best, “A Social Capital Approach to Assisting Veterans Through Recovery and Desistance Transitions in Civilian Life,” *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* 54, no. 4 (September 2015): 384-396.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Vertigans, *The Sociology of Terrorism: People, places and processes* (New York: Routledge, 2011); John F. Morrison, “Trust in me: Allegiance choices in a post-split terrorist movement,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 28 (2016): 47-56; Thomas J. Holt, Joshua D. Freilich, Steven M. Chermak, Colleen Mills, and Jason Silva, “Loners, Colleagues, or Peers? Assessing the Social Organization of Radicalization,” *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 44 (2019): 83-105.

<sup>69</sup> Tore Bjorgo, “Processes of disengagement from violent groups of the extreme right,” in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and collective disengagement*, ed. Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan (New York: Routledge, 2009), 30-48.

<sup>70</sup> *USA v. Joseph Biggs*, United States’ Motion to Revoke Pretrial Release, (District of Columbia, 2021). <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Joseph%20Biggs%20Govt%20Motion%20to%20Revoke%20Pretrial%20Release.pdf>.

and were purportedly responsible for developing and coordinating various components both ahead of January 6th and during the siege. For the Oath Keepers, this included discussions over developing “quick reactionary forces” of reserve members who were allegedly meant to ferry heavy weapons across the Potomac River and to members inside the Capitol once it had been breached.<sup>71</sup>

Our findings support previous research that highlights the disproportionate number of military veterans in DVE organizations who hold leadership roles.<sup>72</sup> It is worth restating that the figures quoted in this report may come down slightly as more individuals are arrested and charged. However, the problem remains clear: individuals with military experience not only joined DVE organizations and marched on the Capitol, but also allegedly led efforts to disrupt and deny the democratic process. The claims of defendant Thomas “Commander Tom” Caldwell of the Oath Keepers show that DVE group leaders and members with military experience may have been prepared to do much more: “If we’d had guns I guarantee we would have killed 100 politicians. They ran off and were spirited away through their underground tunnels like the rats they were.”<sup>73</sup>

It is perhaps less surprising that this category of arrestees held higher leadership representation in a group like the Oath Keepers, which as discussed above prizes military experience. But their outsized role in a group like the Proud Boys, which is arguably less selective in its membership, should be cause for concern. The Proud Boys is a relatively young organization with transnational appeal,<sup>74</sup> and the potential impact of start-up human capital in the form of leaders with military experience (as well as general members) cannot be understated.

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<sup>71</sup> Investigations into how developed these forces ultimately were are ongoing. See: *USA v. Thomas Edward Caldwell*, Motion and Memorandum in Support of Reconsideration of Detention, (District of Columbia, 2021). [https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Caldwell\\_Motion%20to%20Reconsider%20Detention.pdf](https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Caldwell_Motion%20to%20Reconsider%20Detention.pdf). See also: *USA v. Thomas Edward Caldwell*, Government’s Opposition to Defendant’s Motion for Reconsideration of Detention, (District of Columbia, 2021). [https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Caldwell\\_Government%20Opposition%20to%20Defendant%20Motion%20to%20Reconsider%20Detention.pdf](https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Caldwell_Government%20Opposition%20to%20Defendant%20Motion%20to%20Reconsider%20Detention.pdf).

<sup>72</sup> Brent L. Smith, Andrew J. Bringuel II, Steven M. Chermak, Kelly R. Damphousse, and Joshua D. Freilich, “Right-Wing Extremism and Military Service,” in *Terrorism Research and Analysis Project (TRAP): A Collection of Research Ideas, Thoughts, and Perspective, V. 1*, ed. Andrew J. Bringuel II, Jenelle C. Janowicz, Abelardo C. Valida, and Edna F. Reid (Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011), 341-364.

<sup>73</sup> *USA v. Caldwell*, Government’s Opposition to Defendant’s Motion for Reconsideration of Detention.

<sup>74</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “Proud Boys,” [Accessed March 19, 2021]. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>.

## TAKING STEPS TO COMBAT EXTREMISM IN THE MILITARY COMMUNITY

Amidst growing public scrutiny, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin III issued a military-wide stand down to address extremism in the ranks.<sup>75</sup> Although the stand down was certainly a step in the right direction and is an important signal of his desire to take the issue of extremism in the military seriously, it will take more time, effort, and ingenuity to develop both a deeper understanding and a coherent strategy towards combating extremism in the military community. As more information has emerged on the role of those with military experience at the Capitol Hill siege, there has been some preliminary advocacy for solutions that address regulations, training, and reporting.<sup>76</sup> The potential value of such solutions is unambiguous, but most of these recommendations are limited to what the DoD can do about extremism among active-duty service members. If anything, our brief examination of the data on the Capitol Hill cases suggests that such a narrow focus, though a critical part of any solution, cannot be viewed as the whole solution. As a result, we recommend a broader and more assertive approach.

### ***Combined Task Force to Combat Extremism in the Military Community***

In the weeks following January 6th, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, the Senate Armed Services Committee, the Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary, and the Secretary of Defense all began their own investigations and/or inquiries into the role of individuals with military experience in the siege.<sup>77</sup> More recently, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks announced she was establishing a new Deputy's Workforce Council to tackle a range of challenges that included extremism

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<sup>75</sup> Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, "Memorandum for Senior Pentagon Leadership Defense Agency and DOD Field Activity Directors: Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks," Department of Defense, (February 5, 2021). <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Feb/05/2002577485/-1/-1/0/STAND-DOWN-TO-ADDRESS-EXTREMISM-IN-THE-RANKS.PDF>.

<sup>76</sup> Anti-Defamation League, "Extremism in the U.S. Military: Problems and Solutions," (March 9, 2021). <https://www.adl.org/blog/extremism-in-the-us-military-problems-and-solutions>; Doyle Hodges, "Bureaucratizing to Fight Extremism in the Military," *War on the Rocks*, (February 10, 2021). <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/bureaucratizing-to-fight-extremism-in-the-military/>; Heather Williams, "How to Root Out Extremism in the U.S. Military," *Defense One*, (February 1, 2021). <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/02/how-root-out-extremism-us-military/171744/>.

<sup>77</sup> Leo Shane III, "New congressional investigation to examine the link between veterans and extremist groups," *Military Times*, (March 4, 2021). <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/03/04/new-congressional-investigation-to-examine-the-link-between-veterans-and-extremist-groups/>; Meghann Myers and Leo Shane III, "The military knows it has a problem with domestic extremists, white supremacists," *Military Times*, (January 14, 2021). <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2021/01/14/the-military-knows-it-has-a-problem-with-domestic-extremists-white-supremacists/>.

alongside diversity, sexual assault, and other problems.<sup>78</sup> However, between its active-duty service members, contractors, reserves, and veterans, the U.S. military is a massive community, and each of the problems it faces (extremism being only one) is complex. This is not a problem that can be solved in-house and by one body, and the complexity of the problem at hand demands a coordinated approach.

We recommend a **combined task force to combat extremism in the military community** be stood up, one with joint VA and DoD leadership. This task force should have additional representation from Congress, the military investigative agencies, the Joint Service Committee (JSC) on Military Justice, and the Department of Justice. Its first goal should be to review current approaches, best practices, and gaps in identifying and responding to extremism related to the military. The task force should seek out expertise from a number of civil society sectors to bring in a diversity of perspective, and to serve as bridges to help educate the public on these issues, as well as the important role civil society needs to play.<sup>79</sup> It could also aim to examine how to better manage disparate and decentralized screening, rules, and disciplinary systems across the various branches.<sup>80</sup> Creating such a task force would help bring coherence to efforts to combat extremism in the military and encourage buy-in across the military community and outside it.

### ***Centralized, Internal Documentation System for Extremism-Related Incidents***

It has become clear that there is not a coordinated mechanism for tracking and analyzing the prevalence of extremism in the military. The new task force might consider recommending a centralized, internal documentation system for extremism-related incidents. Unfortunately, one does not yet exist. Such a system would benefit from uniform reporting requirements across the service branches and from agencies outside the DoD. It would also benefit from gathering data on more than just criminal probes compiled by the military criminal investigation organizations (MCIOs) and the FBI into active duty service members and veterans.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Bryan Bender, "Hicks to establish 'workforce council,'" *POLITICO*, (March 11, 2021). <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/morning-defense/2021/03/11/exclusive-hicks-to-establish-workforce-council-793931>.

<sup>79</sup> Robinson and Schake, "The Military's Extremism Problem Is Our Problem."

<sup>80</sup> This may take the form of uniform regulations. See: Anti-Defamation League, "Extremism in the U.S. Military."

<sup>81</sup> Tom Bowman, "Defense Official: Scores of Current and Former Military Probed in Extremism Cases," *NPR*, (January 15, 2021). <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/15/957503046/defense-official-scores-of-current-and-former-military-probed-in-extremism-cases>.

This includes cases that fail to raise larger flags because they fall below the criminal threshold,<sup>82</sup> or ones that are ultimately resolved before justice agencies are involved. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the threat, the new system might also track cases of individuals who are screened out of service selection for extremism-related issues,<sup>83</sup> as well as dishonorably discharged for extremist-related activities.<sup>84</sup>

Beyond tracking the level of severity of extremism-related cases, the new documentation system might gather information on a number of additional themes. The first could be level of activity, from the organizational to the individual-level and other levels in between. Another could be information pertaining to which movements, ideologies, and/or groups (if applicable) the case falls under, similar to how the FBI categorizes various international and domestic threats.<sup>85</sup> Tracking information along these lines will help with efforts to both size and understand the fractured landscape of domestic extremist movements as they relate to the military community.<sup>86</sup> It will also promote coordination and cooperation among the relevant agencies. Ethical guidelines regarding anonymity and privacy should be prioritized.

### ***Refine and Expand Trainings and Briefings***

In the U.S. military, there are an abundance of briefings and training covering everything from maintenance of weapons systems to physical fitness to personal finances. When it comes to the issue of extremism, however, there is still more to be done. To that end, the task force should consider refining and expanding current trainings and briefings to be more comprehensive and include insights from non-military providers. These trainings should emphasize identifying and responding to

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<sup>82</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, “Memorandum of Understanding between the Departments of Justice and Defense Relating to the Investigation and Prosecution of Certain Crimes,” (August 1984). <https://www.justice.gov/archives/jm/criminal-resource-manual-938-department-defense-memorandum-understanding>.

<sup>83</sup> The FBI and the Department of Defense already have a close working relationship that leverages both organizations’ resources to screen such individuals. Including cases like these will provide a better understanding of the broader threat. See: Department of Defense, *Report to Armed Services Committees on Screening Individuals Who Seek to Enlist in The Armed Forces*.

<sup>84</sup> As mentioned above, the Navy is the only branch that currently requires reporting supremacist or extremist-related activities as a reason for dishonorable discharge. *Ibid*.

<sup>85</sup> Department of Homeland Security and Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Domestic Terrorism: Definitions, Terminology, and Methodology.” See also: FBI, “What We Investigate: Terrorism,” [Accessed March 19, 2021]. <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/terrorism>.

<sup>86</sup> Seamus Hughes and Devorah Margolin, “The Fractured Terrorism Threat to America,” *Lawfare*, (November 10, 2020). <https://www.lawfareblog.com/fractured-terrorism-threat-america>.



active and passive participation in extremist networks, organizations, and ideologies.<sup>87</sup> Other initiatives should aim to build resilience to extremism,<sup>88</sup> and assemble collaborative teams of commanding officers, recruiters, trainers, military psychologists, academics, researchers, and others inside and outside the military with a range of experiences and expertise. New trainings and resilience-building programs will help the military confront a new era of dynamic challenges posed by extremist movements and ideologies.

It is not enough that such materials are created and placed on a shared drive, where they are only accessed on an annual basis when compliance numbers appear low. Certainly an enterprise-wide training on extremism would be helpful. We argue that beyond that, however, three critical points in the “life cycle” of every soldier ought to be reexamined: recruitment, permanent change of station (PCS), and separation. Each of these points reflects a critical moment in which norms and culture are being learned and taught, whether for the entire enterprise or a single unit. Officers and NCOs, responsible for the care of soldiers, as well as officials tasked with preparing soldiers for life after the military, need to be given the proper tools and support to help warn soldiers of the dangers of extremist organizations, while also helping to guide concerned soldiers to the appropriate resources and venues for reporting and responding to instances of extremism. To be clear, if our data is any indicator, these initiatives need to reach not just active duty personnel, but veterans as well. This would suggest incorporating organizations such as the VA into this process. Figuring out how to build resilience and encourage ownership of this problem by the larger military community will be a critical factor to long-term success.

### ***Joint Offices of Inspector General Report***

To ensure public transparency, the task force should publish a report styled on other OIG reports issued by the VA, DoD, and DOJ. That report should include unclassified data from the documentation system recommended above, especially with regards to both the number and types of cases (criminal vs. non-criminal) and the other themes discussed previously. It should also include data and evidence for measures of progress related to implementation efforts in the DoD and VA.

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<sup>87</sup> Missy Ryan, Paul Sonne, and Razzan Nakhlawi, “Seeking to combat extremists in ranks, the military struggles to answer a basic question: How many are there?” *Washington Post*, (February 9, 2021). [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/military-extremist-threat-lloyd-austin-/2021/02/09/198794c8-66f9-11eb-bf81-c618c88ed605\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/military-extremist-threat-lloyd-austin-/2021/02/09/198794c8-66f9-11eb-bf81-c618c88ed605_story.html).

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, the work of the Polarization and Extremism Research Innovation Lab (PERIL) at American University. Available at: <https://www.american.edu/centers/university-excellence/peril.cfm>.

## CONCLUSION

In a video message sent to all employees of the Department of Defense on February 19, 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin noted that the problem of extremism is “not new to our country, and sadly, not new to our military.”<sup>89</sup> Unfortunately, our examination of the individuals involved in the January 6 attack on Capitol Hill has shown that not only is this statement true, it encompasses more than just those who wear the uniform currently or those who fit into a specific preconceived notion of an extremist. Young and old, men and women, enlisted and officer, deployed and not deployed, the profiles of those with military experience arrested for involvement in January 6th points to a nuanced and multi-faceted problem.

Of course, it is also important to remember that, even though the number of individuals with military experience among the January 6 perpetrators is concerning, they do not represent the vast majority of current military personnel and veterans. Indeed, individuals such as Brian Sicknick, the Capitol Hill police officer killed by at least two individuals who have since been implicated in his death,<sup>90</sup> help remind us of this fact. Sicknick was a military veteran himself, having served for six years in the New Jersey Air National Guard, deploying to Saudi Arabia and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>91</sup> Although the military has an extremism problem, it also has a tremendous reservoir of capable, motivated, patriotic individuals who honor their oaths to the Constitution and care deeply about what the military as an institution stands for. Discussions in the media and policy should take account of this fact in how they report and deal with this issue.

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<sup>89</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Video: A Message from the Secretary of Defense on Extremism,” DoD News, (February 19, 2021). <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2509632/a-message-from-the-secretary-of-defense-on-extremism/>.

<sup>90</sup> Spencer S. Hsu, Peter Hermann, and Emily Davies, “Two arrested in assault on police officer Brian D. Sicknick, who died after Jan. 6 Capitol riot,” *Washington Post*, (March 15, 2021). [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/legal-issues/two-arrested-in-assault-on-police-officer-brian-d-sicknick-who-died-after-jan-6-capitol-riot/2021/03/15/80261550-84ff-11eb-bfdf-4d36dab83a6d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/legal-issues/two-arrested-in-assault-on-police-officer-brian-d-sicknick-who-died-after-jan-6-capitol-riot/2021/03/15/80261550-84ff-11eb-bfdf-4d36dab83a6d_story.html).

<sup>91</sup> Oriana Pawlyk, “Police Officer Killed in US Capitol Siege Was Air National Guard Veteran, Deployed to Iraq,” *Military.com*, (January 8, 2021). <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/01/08/police-officer-killed-us-capitol-siege-was-air-national-guard-veteran-deployed-iraq.html>; Michael L. Diamond, Susan Loyer, Suzanne Russell, and Greg Tufaro, “NJ hometown ‘in shock’ after Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick dies in D.C. riot,” *My Central Jersey*, (January 8, 2021). <https://www.mycentraljersey.com/story/news/local/2021/01/08/brian-sicknick-nj-capitol-police-officer-died-dc-riots/6593972002/>.

Our analysis and its findings, based on the cases that have emerged as of March 31, 2021, may change as more detailed information develops. And more information is almost certainly forthcoming, both as more individuals are charged and as cases make their way through the legal system. We have also touched on several avenues that demand further research, not least of which is the role of trauma and other factors that tend to feature more prominently in military populations. We hope that this report adds to our current understanding of extremism in the military community, and that more research on the Capitol Hill siege military arrestees is forthcoming.

The siege on Capitol Hill was a stark reminder that extremism in and around the military is an issue that demands attention. To combat it, we need a longitudinal, preemptive approach that takes ownership for those who fail to honor the highest values for which the military stands, past and present. Institutional change is necessary, and it needs to happen smartly and quickly.

Program on Extremism

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AT WEST POINT