



# MILITARY AND VETERAN EXTREMISM: ANOTHER COST OF WAR

Major (ret.) DANIEL SJURSEN, U.S. Army

Major General (ret.) DENNIS LAICH, U.S. Army

Colonel (ret.) LAWRENCE WILKERSON, U.S. Army

Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) WILLIAM J. ASTORE, U.S. Air Force

Special Agent (ret.) COLEEN ROWLEY, FBI

A publication of the Eisenhower Media Network (EMN), an organization of expert former military, intelligence, and civilian national security officials, offering credible, independent, and critical analysis.

[eisenhowermedianetwork.org](http://eisenhowermedianetwork.org)



*The disturbing scenes from the January 6 Capitol Riot—and the prominent participation of military veterans—evoked a sudden public anxiety about white supremacist extremists in the ranks. Nevertheless, most coverage in media and policymaking circles has failed to adequately frame this very real problem in its historical and systemic context—instead, dealing with it in isolation. In fact, rises in extremism are, and have always been, inextricably linked to foreign conflicts—just another, if particularly tragic, cost of war.*

# INTRODUCTION

**Maj. (ret.) Danny Sjursen**

*“I want to understand white rage. And I’m white. What is it that caused thousands of people to assault this [Capitol] building and try to overturn the Constitution of the United States of America. What caused that? I want to find that out.”*

—General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, remarking before the House Armed Services Committee, June 23, 2021

When it comes to the phenomenon of military and veteran extremism, many of the statistics are staggering. Consider a few illustrative examples: A 2019 Military Times survey found that 36 percent of military respondents had “witnessed examples of white supremacy and racist ideologies” in the ranks.<sup>2</sup> That’s an enormous segment of the U.S. military, which is still 55 percent non-Hispanic white.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in 2020, there were 68 investigations by the FBI of former and current military members pertaining to domestic extremism cases, and the majority involved anti-government motivations.<sup>4</sup> One-fourth were associated with white nationalism—though that proportion was

likely higher, since motivations are rarely discrete, and there’s often significant overlap between anti-federal government extremism and racism. The worldview and stated grievances of Timothy McVeigh—the Gulf War veteran who bombed the Oklahoma City Federal Building—offer an instructive case in point.

However, the severe problem this data exposed only garnered widespread public attention after the revelation of a more recent statistic, that 14.5 percent of the 356 people arrested for Capitol Riot charges had military connections, despite veterans and active-duty

2 Leo Shane III, “Signs of white supremacy, extremism up again in poll of active-duty troops,” Military Times, February 6, 2020, at <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>.

3 “2019 Demographics Profile of the Military Community,” Department of Defense (DoD), Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy (ODASD (MC&FP)), at <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2019-demographics-report.pdf>.

4 Tom Bowman, “Defense Official: Scores Of Current And Former Military Probed In Extremism Cases,” NPR, January 15, 2021, at <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/15/957503046/defense-official-scores-of-current-and-former-military-probed-in-extremism-cases>.





personnel accounting for only 7.5 percent of the U.S. population writ large.<sup>5</sup> In other words, service members and veterans were nearly twice as represented as civilian rioters. The disturbing scenes on January 6—and the prominent participation of military members and veterans—evoked a sudden public anxiety about (especially) white supremacist extremists in the ranks. Nevertheless, thus far most coverage in media and policymaking circles has failed to adequately frame this very real problem in its historical and systemic context—instead, dealing with such extremism in isolation. In fact, rises in extremism are, and have always been, inextricably linked to overseas combat—just another, if particularly tragic, cost of war.

## **Empires Come Home: An Historic Context**

### **Maj. (ret.) Danny Sjursen**

There is, in fact, a historic track record for the military community's current radicalization problem. As a 2009 Homeland Security report described, after every American war, returning veterans have infused and reenergized white nationalist extremist groups.<sup>6</sup> For example, the report revealed that returning combat veterans helped fuel every surge in Ku Klux Klan membership in the group's history. This general phenomenon even applied to the aftermath of America's last longest war. The historian Kathleen Belew analyzed the appeal of white-power groups to Vietnam War veterans in her book *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*.<sup>7</sup> In it, she explained how many of these disenfranchised veterans came to see the state as the enemy and true patriotism as opposing their own government.

Empires in decline tend to behave badly, and that applies as much at home as abroad. As past and present transnational examples indicate, severe cases sometimes include senior active and retired military officers seeking to undermine—or even overthrow—the democratically-elected governments they once served. In 1961, a slew of French Army officers and Algerian-born French-settler terrorists attempted a failed coup against national hero President Charles De Gaulle, rather than see him make peace and grant independence to Paris’s colonial possession of Algeria. This year, in a (so far) less grave encore, thousands of French soldiers and veterans—along with dozens of retired generals—signed two successive open letters warning of a civil war, and vaguely threatening a military coup, if Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron doesn’t double-down on Paris’s eight-year ongoing war in West Africa and get tough on “barbarian” Muslim immigrants at home.<sup>8</sup>

Troublingly, France’s two tortured experiences with would-be-putschists finds a disturbingly similar corollary in today’s tribally-divided America. Recall that this past May, more than 100 retired general officers penned an open letter publicly questioning the legitimacy of the last presidential election, arguing, essentially, what the Capitol rioters had—that “establishment elites” stole the 2020 election from Donald Trump.<sup>9</sup> Then, in June, Trump’s first national security advisor, retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, delivered especially egregious comments, suggesting the need for an American coup d’etat that’s similar to the one unfolding in Myanmar.<sup>10</sup> This politicization and radicalization of both rank-and-file and senior officers inverts the U.S. military’s long-promulgated tradition of public nonpartisanship—and constitutes a potentially serious threat to the democratic processes of the republic they swore to protect.

---

5 Nan Levinson, “The Far Right in Uniform: How Extreme Is the U.S. Military?” TomDispatch, April 6, 2021, at <https://tomdispatch.com/the-far-right-in-uniform/>

6 Kathleen Belew, “Veterans and White Supremacy,” New York Times, April 15, 2014, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/16/opinion/veterans-and-white-supremacy.html>.

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

8 Hugh Schofield, “French soldiers warn of civil war in new letter,” BBC.com, May 10, 2021, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57055154>.

9 Jim Golby and Peter Feaver, “Former military leaders criticized the election and the administration. That hurts the military’s reputation,” Washington Post, May 15, 2021, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/15/former-military-leaders-criticized-election-administration-that-hurts-militarys-reputation/>.

10 Donnie O’Sullivan, “Flynn says he didn’t endorse Myanmar-style coup after he appears to back plan in video exchange,” CNN.com, June 1, 2021, at <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/31/politics/michael-flynn-qanon/index.html>.



# Blowback 101: Framing America in an Age of Endless War

**Ltc. (ret.) William J. Astore**

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, America has been at war. A U.S. military vision of global reach and global power morphed into a global war on terror (GWOT). The GWOT led to invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—wars that were based on lies and which promoted atrocities. Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction, the leading issue, publicly, in America's decision to invade in 2003. Afghanistan had no direct role in the 9/11 attacks; indeed, 15 of the 19 Al Qaeda terrorists were Saudi nationals. Yet the Afghan War was waged both in the false name of avenging 9/11 and of preventing such attacks in the future.

Both wars cost thousands of American lives, grievously wounded tens of thousands, and both failed. Temporary gains secured by U.S. troops at high cost in "surges" in Iraq and Afghanistan proved fragile and reversible, two words used by General David Petraeus himself, to qualify them.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, whether Petraeus or a series of otherwise forgettable generals led these wars, progress proved elusive, even as real money was being squandered (the two wars are estimated to have cost America more than \$6.4 trillion by May 2021).<sup>12</sup> Yet as Army Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling wrote in 2007, a private losing a rifle suffers quicker and more adverse punishment than generals who continually lose wars.<sup>13</sup>

America's wars have proven to be losers, and shamefully so, yet no senior leaders have been punished or even demoted. Bewildered troops returning home from these meaningless wars often discovered grim prospects, despite slogans of "support our troops" and "20% off mattress sales," ostensibly held in honor of veterans and their service. Donald Trump, a reality TV star and failed casino owner, gained popularity and eventually the presidency in part by promising to end America's wasteful, winless wars overseas. It was a promise he failed to keep.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Trump's message about these fruitless wars was noteworthy, demonstrating the domestic impact and blowback of our open-ended and disastrous foreign military interventions.<sup>15</sup>

---

11 Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Danny Sjursen, "Tread Carefully: The Folly of the Next Afghan 'Surge,'" *TomDispatch*, June 29, 2017 at <https://tomdispatch.com/danny-sjursen-fighting-the-war-you-know-even-if-it-won-t-work/>

12 Cost of War Project, Watson Institute, Brown University, accessed on May 27, 2021 at <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/>

13 Paul Yingling, "A Failure in Generalship," *Armed Forces Journal*, May 1, 2007 at <http://armedforcesjournal.com/a-failure-in-generalship/>

14 Jonathan Swan and Zachary Basu, "Episode 9: Trump's War with His Generals," *Axios.com*, May 16, 2021 at <https://www.axios.com/off-the-rails-trump-military-withdraw-afghanistan-5717012a-d55d-4819-a79f-805d5eb3c6e2.html>

15 Zaid Jilani, "Study Finds Relationship between High Military Casualties and Votes for Trump over Clinton," *The Intercept*, July 10, 2017, at <https://theintercept.com/2017/07/10/study-finds-relationship-between-high-military-casualties-and-votes-for-trump-over-clinton/>

Winless, seemingly endless, and often brutal wars have had a brutalizing impact on the troops who served. A state of constant war, James Madison warned, is corrosive to democracy.<sup>16</sup> Wars without progress, wars without purpose, wars unsupported by the people (Congress has not issued a formal declaration of war since World War II), breed alienation, bitterness, and dismay. They also foster extremism.

Nearly one in five of the Capitol rioters charged for their actions on January 6, 2021, were military veterans. White supremacy is a known and increasing problem in the U.S. military.<sup>17</sup> In response to riots and extremism, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in February 2021 ordered military units to observe a one-day stand-down to address extremism. Remarkably, troops had to be reminded that attempts to seize seats of power in the U.S. government, as during the Capitol riot, were contrary to their oaths to the Constitution and against the law.

And it's not just rank-and-file service members who apparently require lessons in civilian primacy. A letter signed by 124 retired generals and admirals warned of Marxism and socialism within the U.S. military and questioned President Joe Biden's mental and physical fitness to serve as commander-in-chief. The civil-military divide manifested by this letter echoed a similar one in France where right-wing military officers warned of a civilizational struggle within France allegedly being aggravated by Muslim immigration and Islamism.<sup>18</sup>

Extremism within the U.S. military undeniably exists; manipulation by senior leaders spouting big lies remains a serious concern, as do groups such as QAnon and the Oath Keepers, which specialize in radicalization via misinformation. Yet the ultimate source of radicalization within the U.S. military, and possibly within the wider U.S. society, is war itself. Wars that are waged without the people's support, under false pretenses, and with no profit to society other than to America's military-industrial-congressional complex are conducive to rampant corruption and societal decay.<sup>19</sup>

Endless wars and the deep wounds that come from them have served as an ideal incubator of extremism in America. The first and most vital step in ending extremism, therefore, is to end these undeclared wars and the resentments, violence, and hatred they breed.

---

16 "No Nation Can Preserve Its Freedom in the Midst of Continual Warfare," Bracing Views, June 28, 2013 at <https://bracingviews.com/2013/06/28/no-nation-can-preserve-its-freedom-in-the-midst-of-continual-warfare/>

17 Talia Lavin, "The U.S. Military Has a White Supremacy Problem," The New Republic, May 17, 2021 at <https://newrepublic.com/article/162400/us-military-white-supremacy-problem>; Jasper Craven, "Armed and Angry: How the Military Turns Troops into Extremists," The New Republic, March 2021, pp. 6-7 and at <https://newrepublic.com/article/161121/military-veterans-extremism>; Ken Klippenstein, "Pentagon Plans to Monitor Social Media of Military Personnel for Extremist Content," The Intercept, May 17, 2021 at <https://theintercept.com/2021/05/17/military-pentagon-extremism-social-media/>

18 Bryan Bender, "'Disturbing and Reckless': Retired Brass Spread Election Lie in Attack on Biden, Democrats," Politico, May 11, 2021 at <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/05/11/retired-brass-biden-election-487374>. On France, see "Anger as Ex-Generals Warn of 'Deadly Civil War' in France," BBC News, April 27, 2021 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56899765>

19 Christian Sorensen, "A People's Guide to the War Industry," Consortium News, May 24, 2021 at <https://consortiumnews.com/2021/05/24/a-peoples-guide-to-the-war-industry/>. Part one of a five-part series.



# Poisoned Well: Life Cycle of a Hypothetical Extremist

**Maj. Gen. (ret.) Dennis Laich**

There's an inherent irony at work in America's increasingly unhealthy civil-military relationship: Since the end of the draft in 1973, the resultant, revised recruit-to-soldier-to-veteran life cycle of the all-volunteer force (AVF) actually informs the Pentagon's growing extremism problem. National defense now falls to a tiny slice of the citizenry, a cohort mainly drawn from the third and fourth socioeconomic quintiles and largely motivated by unprecedentedly ample enlistment bonuses that would still seem irrelevant to the wealthy and well connected.<sup>20</sup> More crucial is that today's military recruits are geographically unrepresentative of the demographic whole. Especially in ground combat units—the South, Mountain West, and other rural regions are highly overrepresented, but coastal and suburban areas are underrepresented, in the military's ranks.<sup>21</sup>

Incidentally, these militarily overrepresented regions are the very ones most infused with white nationalism, as well as anti-government groups and sentiments. As one active Army captain emailed subject expert Nan Levinson, "The military recruits heavily from the same population that extremist organizations do—socially isolated, downwardly mobile, and economically vulnerable young men." Another, Black Navy veteran Jonathan Hutto—who actively challenged the racism he encountered while serving—has written that his shipmates didn't need to be "inculcated with racist-fascist ideology," since they had been primed for it in the sorts of families and communities many of them hailed from.<sup>22</sup>

Worse still, with the U.S. military (especially the U.S. Army) regularly struggling to find enlistees, those exhibiting extremist predispositions or emotional maladies are less likely to be rejected by recruiters, who are under intense pressure to make numbers.<sup>23</sup> Many of these ideological and behavioral issues are actually aggravated, rather than resolved,

---

20 Douglas Kriner and Francis Shen, *The Casualty Gap: The Causes and Consequences of American Wartime Inequalities* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2010).

21 Nick Martin, "The Military Views Poor Kids as Fodder for Its Forever Wars," *The New Republic*, January 7, 2020, at <https://newrepublic.com/article/156131/military-views-poor-kids-fodder-forever-wars>.

22 Nan Levinson, "The Far Right in Uniform: How Extreme Is the U.S. Military?" *TomDispatch*, April 6, 2021, at <https://tomdispatch.com/the-far-right-in-uniform/>.

23 Todd South, "Rising costs, dwindling recruit numbers, increasing demands may bring back the military draft," *Military Times*, November 19, 2019, at <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/11/19/rising-costs-dwindling-recruit-numbers-increasing-demands-may-bring-back-the-draft/>.

during military—and especially combat—service. In the post-9/11 era, many fresh troopers can count on exposure to a combat tour or two...or five. During and after those deployments, an already troubled service member often grapples with death, PTSD, TBI (traumatic brain injury), and an exploding military-veteran suicide problem, along with other service-related injuries inherent to endless war-making.<sup>24</sup>

Such seeds of distrust, frustration, alienation, and betrayal often only grow after discharge—since unemployment, homelessness, and substance abuse are traditionally part and parcel of the veteran experience. Senses of purpose, camaraderie, or even identity may seem lost. Our hypothetical veteran is by now so far down the road to extremism that they could once again become a prime recruiting target—this time for organized hate groups offering that very sense of lost purpose. Only now that rancor is likely to be redirected at the very institutions and society that the veteran once served but has come to believe responsible for their current alienation.

## Pacifying the People: Warrior Cops and Criminals

**SA (ret.) Coleen Rowley**

Three profoundly tragic events during this past year exposed just how deeply the disease of militarism is now rooted in American life. First, a global pandemic struck the U.S. with particular intensity and lethality—the government’s unpreparedness revealing the extent to which misplaced military spending means real trade-offs in public health and services.

Next, yet another police killing of an unarmed Black man, George Floyd—amid a long-running epidemic of these tragic encounters—brought tens of millions into the streets to protest such injustice. The often disproportionate, aggressive, and violent response from the police—carrying, and clad in, high-tech military gear—provided countless citizens in-your-face reminders of the Pentagon’s peddling of equipment, training, and warrior culture to local law enforcement.

Finally, America’s democratic fabric-shaking January 6 Capitol Riot was littered with a disproportionate number of active—and a great many more veteran—military and law

---

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Howard Suitt, III, “High Suicide Rates among United States Service Members and Veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars,” Brown University Watson Institute Cost of War Project, June 21, 2021, at [https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Suitt\\_Suicides\\_Costs%20of%20War\\_June%2021%202021.pdf](https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Suitt_Suicides_Costs%20of%20War_June%2021%202021.pdf).



enforcement personnel among the perpetrators. Many were veterans of U.S. overseas counterinsurgency campaigns and, paradoxically, also vocal supporters of “Blue Lives” and vehement critics of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The facts about such blowback from our decades-long cultivation of militarism speak for themselves. In a 2016 New York Times piece, an anthropology professor at George Washington University found that:

...military veterans account for a disproportionate number of mass shooters. Veterans account for 13 percent of the adult population, but more than a third of the adult perpetrators of the 43 worst mass killings since 1984 had been in the United States military. It is clear that, in the etiology of mass killings, military service is an important risk factor. And the numbers for suicide are even worse: A recent study in *Annals of Epidemiology* found that military veterans kill themselves at a 50 percent higher rate than their civilian counterparts.<sup>25</sup>

Recall that Timothy McVeigh and John Muhammad both served as highly decorated Army sergeants in the first Gulf War. The former bombed the Oklahoma City Federal Building in 1995, killing 168 individuals and injuring more than 680 others in the largest act of domestic terrorism ever committed. The latter was better known as the “DC Sniper” who killed 10 random people and wounded many others in 2002 around the Washington, D.C., area. Speaking of his experience in Kuwait in a pre-execution interview, McVeigh claimed he’d decapitated an Iraqi soldier with a blast from his armored vehicle’s 25mm cannon, then celebrated—plus had been ordered to execute surrendering prisoners, but was shocked by the sight of carnage on the Iraqi Army’s retreat route out of the Kuwait, which was infamously dubbed the “Highway of Death” after U.S. air strikes devastated clogged convoys of fleeing enemy vehicles and soldiers.<sup>26</sup>

Contemporary examples include Afghan War veteran Micah Xavier Johnson, who, in 2016—in the deadliest single incident for U.S. law enforcement since 9/11—ambushed and killed five police officers in Dallas and injured nine others (as well as two civilians).<sup>27</sup> More recently, Air Force police officer Steven Carillo was charged with the 2020 shooting deaths of a sheriff’s deputy and a federal security officer in Oakland, California. In addition, a group of

---

25 Hugh Gusterson, “Veterans and Mass Shootings,” *New York Times*, July 21, 2016, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/opinion/veterans-and-mass-shootings.html>.

26 Dale Russakoff and Serge F. Kovalski, “An Ordinary Boy’s Extraordinary Rage,” *Washington Post*, July 2, 1995, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/oklahoma/bg/mcveigh.htm>.

27 Emily Shapiro, Julia Jacobo and Stephanie Wash, “Dallas Shooting Suspect Micah Xavier Johnson Had Rifles, Bombmaking Materials in His Home, Police Say,” *ABC News*, July 9, 2016, at <https://abcnews.go.com/US/dallas-shooting-suspect-wanted-kill-white-people-white/story?id=40431306>.

former Marines were charged in plots to kidnap Michigan's governor, and a separate scheme to storm the Michigan Capitol and ignite a "civil war."<sup>29</sup>

The cultural lionization of overseas war also contributes to the development and popularity of "warrior training" for police officers.<sup>30</sup> Many officers who reveled in driving their military-surplus tanks around foreign towns, or who traveled to Israel to learn how the IDF handles domestic (Palestinian) "terrorism," naturally came to equate their workplaces to war zones, and those they serve to overseas "enemies." Police thus gravitated to more usage of excessive force and looser "law of war" standards for applying deadly force. But what's often tolerated in war is not allowed under the Constitution. Although many bewildered politicians, pundits, and public citizens may feign shock and scratch their heads trying to "seek a motive" after the next horrible, senseless outbreak of domestic killing, the terrible cost of America's "perpetual wars" should by now be glaringly obvious.

## An Uncomfortable Reality: Christian Chauvinism in the Ranks

**Col. (ret.) Lawrence Wilkerson**

Rising extremism in the military's ranks takes many forms and has many causes. Touchy as the subject is, the uncomfortable truth is that rising religious fundamentalism is one key factor. In December 1791, Congress approved the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution—henceforth known as the Bill of Rights. The first of these declared: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." Even a passage from the Constitution's original text—in Article VI—states: "...no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification for any Office or public Trust under the United States."

Today, the American tapestry is far more variegated than ever before. Jews, Muslims, agnostics, atheists, Zoroastrians, Mormons, Hindus, Buddhists, and a host of other faiths infuse our citizenry—and our military. Yet the old fundamentalist Christian sub-tradition remains as strong as ever. There have been at least three pronounced periods of Christian religious revival in America, usually labeled by historians as "Great Awakenings" (circa 1730–1775,

---

29 Associated Press, "Former Camp Lejeune Marine charged in plot to kidnap Michigan governor," October 10, 2020, at <https://abc11.com/daniel-harris-joseph-morrison-gov-gretchen-whitmer-gov-grethcen/6927091/>.

30 Alain Stephens, "The 'Warrior Cop' Is a Toxic Mentality. And a Lucrative Industry," Slate, June 19, 2020, at <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/06/warrior-cop-trainings-industry.html>.



1790–1840, and 1850–1920). Another, fourth “awakening” kicked off in the mid-to-late 20th century and remains in full swing. It is this revival that partly influences the extremist elements in today’s U.S. Armed Forces. The modern military’s regional demographics all but ensure some of these fundamentalist adherents end up in uniform.

The South has always contained a significant—if not the lion’s—share of such fundamentalist Christians. Fully 40 percent of today’s U.S. Army comes from seven states, all of them members of the old Confederacy.<sup>31</sup> Based on a number of other socioeconomic and cultural factors discussed earlier in this report, young people from this region are particularly predisposed to military service. Exacerbating these circumstances is the evolving nature of the military’s Chaplain Corps. Until recently, chaplains came mostly from what are often called “mainline” Christian denominations: Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics, etc. Rabbis, too, derived mainly from Orthodox and Reformed Jewish origins. Today, fundamentalist strains of Christianity and Judaism have replaced these traditional faiths as the predominant sources of military chaplains.<sup>32</sup>

That’s why it’s not uncommon to see “Soldiers for Jesus” banners, Bible verses engraved on rifles and dog tags, and U.S. Air Force Academy team locker rooms plastered with religious slogans and banners—all clear violations of regulations.<sup>33</sup> Active and veteran military members’ higher education sources—both before and during their service tenure—have also proven a fundamentalist pipeline. One example is Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, a self-described military-friendly school that educates several thousand service members annually. In May 2021, Liberty graduated 5,494 military personnel, including 1,835 to active duty. That’s thousands of service members given the directive—per the school’s explicit website headline—“to go ‘all in’ and take [the] Gospel to the ends of the world, wherever duty calls.”<sup>34</sup>

Many senior military officers turn a blind eye to such infractions, either because they are sympathetic to such beliefs or fear discouraging recruitment from the fundamentalist-laden

---

31 “Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness, “Population Representation in the Military Services: Fiscal Year 2016 Summary Report,” at <https://www.cna.org/pop-rep/2016/summary/summary.pdf>.

32 2012 MAAF Department of Defense Religious Preference and Chaplain Support Study, at <http://militaryatheists.org/demographics/>

33 Joseph Rhee, Tahman Bradley and Brian Ross, “U.S. Military Weapons Inscribed With Secret ‘Jesus’ Bible Codes,” ABC News, January 15, 2010, at <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/us-military-weapons-inscribed-secret-jesus-bible-codes/story?id=9575794>.

34 Chris Rodda, “Thousands of Liberty University Military Graduates Instructed to be Government-Paid Missionaries,” Daily Kos, May 17, 2021, at <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2021/5/17/2030849/-Thousands-of-Liberty-University-Military-Graduates-Instructed-to-be-Government-Paid-Missionaries>.

35 Danny Sjursen, “The Empire Comes Home: Counterinsurgency, Policing, and the Militarization of America’s Cities,” Common Dreams, October 12, 2017, at <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2017/10/12/empire-comes-home>.

regions that provide crucial enlistees during these times of difficulty in meeting quotas for an all-volunteer military. This is not to imply that all or most service members are fundamentalists, nor that all evangelical or fundamentalist Christian branches are inclined to white nationalism or anti-government extremism. Most of the military is made up of sound material. However, given the almost inevitable infusion of Christian fundamentalists—and other smaller but significant extremist-inclined minorities—it might turn out that We the People might be getting effective war-fighters for our money, but probably less optimal citizens for the democracy to which these troops will eventually return.

---

## CONCLUSION



It may be something of a cliché that distant wars have a way of coming home, but that doesn't make it any less true. For example, domestic policing today has been “Baghdadified” in the United States. Over the last 40 years, as Washington struggled to maintain its global military influence, the nation's police have progressively shifted to military-style patrol, search, and surveillance tactics.<sup>35</sup> However, much less discussed is the militarization of the other side of the law—the white nationalists, militia-movements, and anti-government extremists that have garnered so much attention since the January 6, 2021, Capitol Riot.

That phenomenon, of increasing extremism in the ranks and among veterans, needs to be understood as a systemic result of U.S. military recruiting practices, cultural traditions, and the historically inevitable costs of war. Send millions of young men and women off on 20 years of ineffective and unwinnable foreign military adventures, and the consequences are legion; revitalized radicalism at home is just one disturbing example. Ultimately, the irony is this: The tragic losses of life in America's ongoing war at home must count as domestic casualties of this generation's foreign forever wars.

