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WEBINAR

HOW TO ADDRESS EXTREMISM AMONG VETERANS

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Good morning, everyone. I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy program at Brookings. And today we're privileged to host a discussion with a number of scholars and military veterans and government officials on how to deal with the increasing problem of extremism in our society and with a specific focus on extremism among military veterans.

Clearly there are a lot of aspects to our society from which we see problems of extremism emanate today. And I don't want to overstate the concern here in regard to veterans or blame them fundamentally for what's going on, but we do know that perhaps 15 percent of the attackers on January 6 were military veterans when only 7 percent of the population is veteran. And therefore we see that this problem is disproportionate in certain incidents. We've seen a roughly 300 percent increase by some measures in extremist incidents among veterans over the last decade compared with the previous decade. And certainly the panelists today are taking this problem seriously. Three of the four of them are veterans. I am not, but they generally are and also the fourth, Cynthia Miller-Idriss, is a long-standing scholar with great expertise and affiliations with many of these areas.

So let me very briefly just introduce each of the panelists and then we will begin with a fairly simple format today. We're going to first just have each person describe the problem of the extremism as they see it, and with a specific focus again on extremism in our society among military veterans. And then I will ask a second question, which is what do we do about it. And specifically from their perspectives as scholars, as activists, as government officials, where do they see the appropriate role for their own organization.

I also want to say that Bill Braniff is going to speak first, and he has been instrumental in helping orchestrate and organize a group called "We the Veterans". And We the Veterans is a broader umbrella affiliation for a number of folks, including several on this panel. And we're pleased to have conceptualized the event today with them and want to commend them for their important work.

So Bill Braniff is at the START Center at the University of Maryland. That's the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, what the acronym comes from. And also, he is an Army veteran and a West Point grad. And we're very happy to have him today on this panel.

Cynthia Miller-Idirss is a professor at American University. She runs an important initiative called "Peril", which focuses on polarization and extremism. It's hard to break down that acronym and I'm sure she'll say more in a minute. She also wrote a wonderful book, although it's disturbing, but it's a very helpful and important book called *Hate in the Homeland*, one of her numerous important publications in this general space over the years.

Scott Cooper is a Marine Corps veteran and a pilot and an Annapolis grad and a combat veteran and is currently affiliated with the Atlantic Council in Washington where he works on a number of issues concerning the military and veterans and human rights. And of course we'll have important things to say from that perspective as well.

And, finally, last but certainly not least, Shawn Turner, another Marine Corps veteran, a professor at Michigan State on leave to help now at the Department of Veterans Affairs as they think through the proper role for that Department and its immense role in our society in addressing this problem. Of course veterans' affairs are fundamentally focused on the well-being and the recovery and the healthcare of our 20 million or so veterans in this country and helping as well their families. But it certainly takes seriously this issue and I know Shawn will have things to say as well about how the Department of Veterans Affairs is trying to address in its way the challenge of extremism among military veterans.

So thank you for joining us today. We're going to go 60 minutes. We will take your questions. You can send them in any time at [Events@Brookings.edu](mailto:Events@Brookings.edu) — one more time the email is [Events@Brookings.edu](mailto:Events@Brookings.edu). And they'll be channeled to me from which I will pose some or most of them, I hope, to the panelists in that second half hour.

But first let's begin — and, again, Bill, if I could please pose the question to you and then just work down the line — how would you define the problem of extremism among American military veterans today? What's its nature, what's its magnitude, what are some of its characteristics?

Over to you.

MR. BRANIFF: Thank you, Michael, and thanks to Brookings. On behalf of all of the panelists, thanks to you and Brookings for hosting us.

So one of the things my research center does is it amasses these large data sets on different facets of violent extremism. So our radicalization team has evidence that from 1990 to September 2021 we've identified 424 criminal extremists with military service backgrounds. It's about 11.5 percent of the population of criminal extremists in the sample. Eighty-four percent of those were veterans at the time of their criminal offense. Sixteen percent active-duty Guard or reserve status and 5 percent separated during initial entry and then went on to commit their extremist crime.

Importantly, as we wind down the two longest wars unsatisfactorily in two Muslim majority countries, as you mentioned, we've seen a nearly 350 percent increase in the number of criminal offenses from individuals with military service backgrounds over the last decade when compared to each of the prior two decades. Even if you remove 6 January, it's still over a 200 percent increase. Overall numerically this is still a small but growing problem, but it's not just a numbers problem, it's a national security concern.

We're blessed with a highly professional all volunteer military. If the military brand is sullied, who's going to joint that all volunteer military in the future? And if servicemen and servicewomen and families put ideology and party first, it undermines the premise of civilian control of the military. Finally, putting party and ideology first also makes it easier for a party, a politician, or a hostile foreign influence operator, or a domestic violent extremist group, to simply play the party or ideology card and manipulate our service men and women and our veterans.

So this is really creating a soft underbelly in American society. So it's not just a numbers problem, I think this is a problem regarding American democracy and it's a problem for which we have to put a preventative ecosystem in place now before the numbers do get more concerning.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And I've got a lot of follow up questions, but I'm guessing some of them will be answered as we go down the panel, so I'll hold off for now and go next to Cynthia, please.

MS. MILLER-IDRISS: Perfect. Thanks, Michael. And I want to thank my fellow panelists for their service and also everyone in the audience who's listening, both active duty and veteran community. And thank you, Brookings, for hosting and for having us here.

My research is historically on — both as an individual and in the lab that I run we focus on the rhetorical strategies, the narratives, the persuasive tactics that extremist groups and propaganda use to try to recruit people and then we design in the lab interventions that we test to see if we can interrupt those processes that are really early stage. So we call it pre-prevention work. It's not even de-radicalization or disengagement, but how do you prevent people from being persuaded by some of those extremists' rhetorical strategies.

And during the course of that work over the last 20 years, which I've done in Germany for decades and then here in the U.S. and elsewhere, a lot of that rhetorical narrative and persuasive propaganda targets the veteran community in particular, as well as active-duty troops. That's both from organized groups and from kind of more just youth culture and merchandising and cultural domains, like in t-shirts and in memes and in visual videos.

So I'm going to say very briefly a little bit about what kinds of things we see happening in the propaganda side that might speak to some of the vulnerabilities of veterans. So why is it that we're seeing this kind of uptick and a wider participation among veterans, as Bill has just documented. I mean we know there are certain vulnerabilities that we can talk about among veterans' groups where they need more support, potentially with post-traumatic stress, with the dehumanization and binary us versus thinking that they were trained as a strategic tactic needed to deploy and use in the field, but upon return may not have had the right kind of re-entry support to move past that. But more importantly for them, the vulnerability side, is what happens when they get targeted with propaganda. And that propaganda and the manipulation of the values that attracted a lot of folks to volunteer in the first place includes rhetoric that's laden with appeals to brotherhood, defense of one's people, a chance to be a part of a meaningful cause, emotional cause related to defense of the Nation, courageous heroism, the protection of an oath or a constitution, but in ways that get twisted, often arguing that their called upon to defend the country against traitors, tyrannical leaders, and trying to convert a sense of the trail or anger at the government or at mainstream society into mobilization to violent action that's framed as heroic defense of the real or the true nation. We see of course the — you know, veterans are targeted for tactical reasons and strategic reasons also. They have security clearances sometimes, communications training, weapons training,

access to munitions. Not just in the U.S. but also overseas. Where in Germany we — as I said, I spent a couple of decades there. We have seen persistent problems with veteran and active-duty troop engagement and security service engagement particularly in right wing extremism.

But overall, what this sort of means is that we see a high risk of manipulation and a high risk of vulnerability for recruitment and for targeting by extremist groups and by the propaganda that they circulate in online spaces. So when we look at that optical for the last 10 years or so, part of what's been happening is that adoption of really sophisticated visual marketing techniques by groups on the use of memes and videos and merchandising and integration into sub cultures, like the mixes martial arts, in ways that promote violence, link it to heroic defense of the Nation or to one's people, and try to commodify valor itself in a way that exploits the experiences and the emotions of veterans into believing that kind of violent and anti-democratic or antigovernment actions, including illegal threats against elected officials or law enforcement and kidnapping plots and even murder somehow reflect the engagement as courageous, revolutionary acts.

So I'm going to stop there, but just to say that that's our focus, on how the manipulation happens, what that rhetoric looks like, that the propaganda looks like, and we repeated see across sectors, across the anti-government, the white supremacist spectrum, and even just non-ideological forms, like accelerationism, which is more of a strategic tactic about collapsing systems.

We will see across the board, in whatever project we're working on, veterans are always there as a major target and it's a part of I think where the conversation should go is how that propaganda affects people.

MR. O'HANLON: Yeah, thank you very much for explaining what aspects of military culture and psychology may make some people more prone, but also explaining how people are targeted by extremists by virtue of their military backgrounds. So military veterans are often victims rather than initiators of much of this.

So now we'll turn to our two Marines on the panel and starting with Scott Cooper.

MR. COOPER: Well, thanks very much, Michael. And what an honor it is to be joining this panel.

Cindy teed it up very well, because what I would like to do today is to talk about what she was just talking about, but from a very personal viewpoint. I think most of you are probably aware in eight days we will have one of the most significant days of the year. Most of the country will be watching intently and wishing ruination upon the cadets of West Point as they play in the Army-Navy game.

I bring this up because this is one of those moments in which we come together as a community, as a country, in which we continue to have great faith in our institutions. I joined the military in 1989 and in that year, it was well before 9/11. I had many individuals that said to me, like well you see smart, why would you join the military. And that was I think in some senses the way America viewed her military, but at the same time there was respect for it. There was not the enormous lifting up on a pedestal later on. And then I saw — I'd been in the military about 12 years when 9/11 happened. And then I used to joke with my fellow veterans that somehow, I was much braver and better looking, through no fault of my own, in the way Americans viewed me. I mean the number of times people thank me for my service.

Now, that's a good thing, but here's the thing that is so different about it. If you think about it, joining the military is one of the great acts of trust. You're trusting that your country will use your life well. It's also placing enormous faith in the institutions of our country. Now, the challenge I think that we have right now is that we've lost a lot of faith in those institutions. As Cynthia was talking about, when it becomes patriotic to be against your government then there's a problem there.

I remember exactly where I was in 1995 when Timothy McVeigh blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. I think most people of my generation probably also remember that. He violated everything that we stood for in what he had been duped into believing. And I think that's a correct term, that Timothy McVeigh had been duped into believing that what he was doing was some kind of heroic act.

In the years since then, in the 26 years since then, what we've seen is that some of that rhetoric that Timothy McVeigh consumed is now becoming mainstream. And so we'll talk a little bit more about what we can do about that. But I think in describing the problem, in describing the crisis, it's one in which we have a number of people, especially veterans that are seeking for some kind of meaning and

purpose after they leave the service, that they no longer have great faith in the institutions of the country. And so reestablishing that I think is the challenge before us.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Scott, for an excellent framing and including your personal reflections and also the sobering reminder of you know, the original big act of modern time, the Timothy McVeigh bombing and what that may inform us.

Shawn, I know that having had a previous government career, both in uniform and then at the National Security Agency and the NSC, and also with your background in communications you've thought about these issues a lot from multiple vantage points. And now you're trying to help the Department of Veterans Affairs figure out what it can and should do about the situation.

So how does it look from your vantage point?

MR. TURNER: Well, thank you, Michael, and I want to thank the panelists here for this great discussion.

I think it's important that I say at the outset that it's important we talk a little bit about what the Department of Veterans Affairs exists for and what it exists to do. It's important to say that the VA exists to provide world class access to healthcare to the veterans we serve; that's access to healthcare and access to the benefits that they've earned. And I really think that framing, that baseline understanding is important because this is a particularly challenging issue as all the panelists have pointed out here. And for the Department of Veterans Affairs it is really important — it is extremely important that we maintain the trust of the veterans that we serve.

So when we think about this issue, I make a couple of points. First of all, the Department recognizes that as veterans are — as service members are transitioning from active duty to the veteran community, there is a time period which they are particularly vulnerable to the rhetoric of these groups, like Oath Keepers and others, that Cynthia spoke about. And so they're not only vulnerable to the rhetoric of these groups, but they're vulnerable in a lot of different ways. And so from a VA perspective, what we're doing is we are focused on looking at those underlying causes that might make veterans vulnerable to domestic violent extremism.

It's important to point out that whether it is domestic violent extremism or drug use or



suicide or homelessness, whatever it may be, for us it's important to recognize that we exist to serve veterans. And part of our service to veterans is understanding that there are always reasons that people turn to extremist behavior. And it's important to point out this really is a conversation about the behavior. We have had people ask why we aren't policing the thoughts that lead to this kind of behavior. And it's really important that I say that that's not what the VA exists to do. We have veterans who need our support, who are vulnerable, and who these groups target because they are special. They're special because of the training they got while they were in the military, they're special because of what they understand and what they've learned to do. And so they're going to continue to be a target. But we want to make sure that we understand why they are turning to these groups and what they're looking for so that we can then work with community organizations, work with academic institutions, work with the private sector to strengthen their resolve and then to make sure that we are providing those veterans a constructive way to transition from active duty to the veteran community and to get that sense of belonging, that sense of connectedness that they're often missing and that often leads them to get engaged with these groups.

So I just want to set that at the outset in terms of how we look at it as we continue the conversation.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, thank you, Shawn. And I think I'll stay with you now as I go into the second big question for the panel, which is of course the policy agenda and what we should be doing. And you alluded a couple of times to where you think Veterans Affairs can help some.

But I guess I have sort of a two-part question for you. One is that broad issue of where can Veterans Affairs help. And you talked about the transition from active duty to veteran status. Is that the most important moment? Or is it really more of an ongoing role for VA? But also I wanted to ask you to just elucidate a little more on the question of mental healthcare treatment, which I'm assuming was part of what you meant when you said "healthcare", because I know that the VA spends a lot of time on mental healthcare and I have to believe as a novice in this field, but listening to some of you and reading some of your work, that mental health issues are sometimes part of the backdrop that may create proclivities for vulnerability to certain kinds of affiliation or violent action.

So how does the VA mental healthcare arena factor in here as well?

So it's a couple of questions to put on the policy agenda for you and then we'll reverse order going back the rest of the panel.

MR. TURNER: Sure, Michael.

Well, if I can start with your first question in terms of what are those most important points at which we need to be engaging military service members or veterans in order to address this issue. I will tell you that as a veteran myself and as someone who is studying this issue over the years, both in my time in government previously as well as at the VA, we need to look at the arc of a service member's time in service and their time as a veteran. And what I mean there is that from the time that someone enters military service we need to approach this issue with an understanding that whether it is while they were on active duty on one of our major bases around the country or whether it's during the time when they're transitioning or after they are out of the military, that at every point of their career they are in some way vulnerable to the rhetoric of these groups.

And so that needs to be baked into their training, it needs to be baked into the messaging, it needs to be part of how we build service members who — how we build their resistance and their resilience to these issues.

So I don't think there is a particular point at which it's more important than other times, but I will say that if it's part of the entirety of their career, that's ideal.

Now, let's talk for a minute about the transition. The transition is a point at which veterans are dealing with the challenge of sort of a loss of a lot of the things that are important to them while they were in the military. We at the VA and at the Department — and I know over at the Department of Defense are very focused on what that transition assistance program looks like and how the VA can do what we call a "warm hand off" from the Department of Defense, so that as the Department of Defense educates and trains veterans to help them understand the vulnerabilities that they face, that when they move to the veteran system and to the veteran community, that we are in a position to continue to build that resistance to these groups through education.

It's more difficult at the VA because we don't have situations where veterans are sitting

down and taking online training and what have you, but we need to work on making sure that when they are in the veteran space that they are seeing and receiving that kind of messages because it's still part of supporting the whole veteran.

If I can transition here to your question about mental health. You know, we talk a lot at the Department about the issue of mental health and whether or not that is an appropriate area for us to address this. And I would put it to you in this way, Michael — you know, when veterans are seeking mental health services through the VA our clinicians understand that when they are talking with a veteran that there are signs that a veteran may be struggling with suicide, for example, or with ideations of violence. For our clinicians it doesn't matter what the cause is because there are triggers that they see that tell them that they need to do something. And so if a veteran comes in and says, you know, I'm feeling like I might hurt a family member or I'm feeling like I might hurt a co-worker, or I'm feeling like I might go to a protest and hurt someone, that tells that clinician that that veteran is in a state of despair and needs help. And so we are thinking about this through the mental health lens, but it's important to note that it is part of what we always think about with regard to veterans who need support.

So the bottom line there is, yes, there is a mental health aspect of this, but it's not specifically related to domestic violent extremism, it's related to the support that they need across the board.

Hopefully that —

MR. O'HANLON: I just have one more follow up because this is really intriguing to think about the role of the VA in this problem. And because you are working with the VA now, I would really welcome your additional insight. So thank you for what you've already explained.

But I guess my question, to put it bluntly, is should we be thinking about broadening the mandate of the VA if we have these kind of issues among the veteran community, but fundamentally the VA is about delivering individualized healthcare and mental healthcare service to individual veterans and families rather than creating community structures? Does it make more sense to leave it like that and turn to the private sector and the NGO community to create organizations that try to create a sense of belonging and community among veterans? Or should VA be perhaps one of the big actors on this more

than it is now, which would require of course that the government instruct the VA to do this. It's not something you can easily do yourself with your current mandate. You already have a big enough challenge and a \$200 billion a year plus budget providing all the healthcare and other benefits to individual veterans. Should we be rethinking this and asking the VA to be more of a veterans community-oriented organization as well?

MR. TURNER: I think it's an important question. But I would start by saying that at the VA we talk repeatedly about the importance of maintaining the trust of the veterans. That's one of the reasons why this particular area of domestic violent extremism and what the VA does in the space is one that requires a lot of in-depth discussion. I do think there is a role for the VA to play in strengthening our veteran support organizations and making sure that those veterans who are feeling a loss of that connectedness and that camaraderie, that sense of family and support. There are always opportunities to strengthen that and that's an important role for the VA to play.

I'll leave it to others to say whether or not that should be a policy directive, but I will tell you that for the current VA leadership, if supporting veterans is about helping them feel more of a sense of community and strengthening those institutions, then that's certainly what the leadership of the VA is focused on right now. And whether there's policy that directs that or not, you'll continue to see that as a support mechanism for veterans.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And I invite, of course, other panelists, as you now speak about your recommendations, to address the same topic if you wish. What role the government perhaps more generally should play beyond what it might be already.

But you're all doing important things in your own walks of life and in the NGO space, the non-governmental space. So I look forward to your recommendations from your current vantage points.

Starting now with you, Scott.

MR. COOPER: Well, you know, I think a couple of things. One is to understand how it is that we come to believe what we believe and how, for instance, a veteran can be radicalized into being an extremist.

A good bit of my work most recently has been with an organization called Moonshot. It's

really doing some tremendous work in the online space to understand how it is that this diet of information that we're consuming can lead us to be radicalized. Timothy McVeigh was not radicalized online. Many of the veterans we see, many of the veterans that we saw on January 6 were radicalized by what they were consuming online.

And so I think, one, is coming to understand that is really critical. And then I think the other thing, which you get at, Michael, is how do we view ourselves as veterans once we've transitioned out of that. And there's two points that I wanted to make about this. One is it's really concerning to me — Sebastian Junger has talked about that — is if we view veterans on a pedestal, for one, and two, as some person that we no longer need something from, not only does your society no longer need you, but they can carry you. You are just considered a ward of the state, you should be entitled to all of those things instead of having an expectation that you still owe your country something once you've taken off the cloth of the Nation.

In 1945 General Wainwright, who had served as a POW in World War II, took over the 4th Infantry Division. And he sent a letter that every single soldier got who was leaving the 4th Infantry Division. And it's really interesting in that letter — I want to quote just a couple of line from that — as he said start being the leader as soon as you take off the uniform. If you see intolerance and hate, speak out against them. Make your individual voices heard, not for selfish things, but for honor and decency among for the rights of all people. Fast forward some almost 70 years and General Dempsey had a similar letter in 2015 when he was chairman of the joint chiefs. And in that letter, he said this, he said while the transition to civilian life brings new challenges, the American public still needs you. They need your experience, your intellect, and your character. Even out of uniform you still have a role in providing for the security and sustained health of our democracy.

I think both of those are kind of along the lines of what I hinted at earlier is that the health of our democracy, the belief in our institutions, is the challenge before us. And so I think to Shawn's point, that's part of what the VA does besides taking care of (inaudible) battle, but just building community and that we all have a responsibility for that in thinking about what the role of the veteran is in society. And then also if we find that they're spiraling downward, how do we find ways to redirect them?

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you very much.

Cynthia, now to you, please.

MS. MILLER-IDRISS: Perfect. Thanks.

I would echo everything that Shawn and Scott have already said, but maybe add just a couple of things.

I think one of the things we see with the Federal Government — for good reasons the Federal Government in general has been focused in the extremism space on the prevention of violence. And there were good reasons for that, which generally have to do with not wanting to be in the business of policing ideas or policing ideologies or infringing on free speech. And that's important. But I also think that we have to recognize that things like disinformation and propaganda and hate speech are precursors to violence. They can lead to the incitement of violence and that there's a role to play in protecting democracy and making it more resilient from within, what the Germans have long called "defensive democracy", by strengthening the mainstream in ways that make them more resilient against the propaganda and persuasive tactics that inevitably come from the fringe.

So it's not just about targeting the fringe, but about strengthening the mainstream. And I actually think the military is, of all the institutions across the government, probably I would say the best situated to develop that protective stance because it already has such strong values of multiculturalism, of diversity in the ranks, and of unity, right, and values that can be emphasized and are already emphasized around protecting the Nation. It's also the thing that makes them vulnerable to the propaganda efforts.

So one of the things that we have to do I think is invest during active duty — you know, during the transition assistance program, during recruitment phases, and throughout the military, not just leaving it to the veterans community itself to deal with this, but to actually have a strong period of time during active duty where people are taught and really coached to recognize propaganda, conspiracy theories, persuasive extremist tactics, like scapegoating, like fearmongering, the kinds of things that are coming their way. So we call it inoculation. In our research lab we do research on preventative inoculation, attitudinal inoculation, which is really a media and digital literacy strategy that is ideologically neutral that teaches people about the kind of tactics — and we've identified several dozen different kinds

of persuasive tactics, like the brave truth teller, right. So you'll see categories of things that happen where somebody is saying I'm really at great personal risk to myself going to tell you like it really is, or I'm not telling you what to think, but do your own research — we call it DYOR — that shows up all the time. Certain kinds of rhetorical strategies that are convincing. And when you're taught to recognize them, you start to see the scaffold of these frameworks for what they are. And then you make determinations that are just a little bit better informed. And what we find in our research is that teaching people about those persuasive tactics, propaganda strategies, scapegoating, fearmongering, and others, it actually dissuades them from ideological support for extremist movements and behavioral intention to engage, whether that's with funding or by actually engaging in violence.

So teaching them about the tactics also helps them think more critically about the ideology, but you're not coming right at them with the ideology itself.

So what the government can do I think is invest in some of these strategies at scale during things like the transition assistance program where you're helping people with their reintegration and not just leaving it to the veterans' affairs side to sort of say now, we have this problem, what do we do with it. Not to say that veteran affairs doesn't have a role to play, but I think that it's a bigger holistic situation that really starts of course even earlier in high schools and earlier with media literacy, digital literacy. But certainly for this population I think should be that much earlier.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And I'm glad you talked about bringing it to scale, because that does lead me to one follow up question before I turn back to Bill, which is to what extent, if we do these things better within the veterans' community, can this be a pilot program for the society writ large? Because we know that — even though today we're focused on veterans and extremism and, you know, Bill quoted some statistics at the beginning and I did too, it's not as if most extremist acts in the United States are the result of veterans' actions.

Cynthia, you talked earlier about how often they are taken advantage of by others who recognize the vulnerability. Bill's statistics show that even though there is a somewhat disproportionate prevalence of these kinds of actions among veterans, it's still the minority of the total number of extremist actions of the country. Like I said, 15 percent of the January 6 rioters were veterans, which means 85

percent were not. So if we get this right in the veterans' transition programs, is this something that we can perhaps take to other parts of our society, like high schools and other places where people may benefit from hearing this kind of inoculation against extremism?

MS. MILLER-IDRISS: Absolutely. And I love your use of the word evidence because I think one of the most important things, we can do is provide evidence about what works. In part because we know that a lot of previous counters messaging efforts, including those funded by the Federal Government, in some cases have backfired, particularly when you're leading people — you know, trying to address conspiracy theories, for example, people often dig in their heels more. They take those counter messaging campaigns when they're targeting ideas as evidence of the conspiracy itself.

So I think it's really important to pilot, to scale up with evidence once you know that something is effective at reducing behavioral intention, at reducing actual engagement, at reducing attitudinal support, and also improving recognition and the resilience side of it, not just reducing, but improving and strengthening people's sense of belonging or purpose, but also in the case of attitudinal inoculation, their ability to recognize and be resilient to the propaganda.

So, yes, I think that's absolutely critical. I think scaling up, I think using it as a pilot, and thinking about what are the other populations. I mean the nice thing about attitudinal inoculation is that you're not targeting anybody. Really everybody needs it. We're talking about everybody needing to have access to these kinds of skills and to be more critical consumers of what they run into online.

And the last thing I'll say about that is we used to think of extremist content as a destination that had to be sought out. And I think increasingly it's important for people to realize that it's much more likely that it comes to you wherever you're spending time online. You're going to encounter it, your kids are going to encounter it, your employees are going to encounter it. So how can you make people more resilient to it? This is not just about targeting veterans; this is about equipping everybody with the tools to be more resilient.

And then the final thing I'll say, just as a plug, totally self-serving, which is that one of the things that we have struggled with in this country is a lack of integrated expertise across disciplines. So these tend to be conversations that are held primarily in the security space. And we need to have — and



I say this because I'm a professor of education — more people involved in these conversations who come at it from health and human services, from the Department of Education, from social work, from backgrounds that really are about resilience and not just about risk. And I think that until we bring in experts who can really think about strengthening resilience, we're always going to struggle with band-aid solutions that are about preventing violence in the last possible minute rather than why is the guy there with the gun in the first place.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

So, Bill, over to you. And then after that we will turn to some audience questions. But I look forward to your thoughts about policy recommendations and initiatives going forward.

MR. BRANIFF: Thank you.

We've been immersed in this discussion, this intellectual discussion, and these challenges as a research center for the last 17 years. And we've absorbed all of the things that Cynthia just said. I fully agree with this idea, we need a multisectoral, multidisciplinary approach. We have to cover the spectrum of the life course of the service person from intake training through active duty, Guard and reserve status, transition, and then into their time as veterans. The VA can't lead in terms of securitizing this issue. It has to be focused on risk factors.

We've spoken to the VA clinicians, we've spoken with the VA leadership, and we've spoken with the DoD in terms of insider threat on these, and we've just soaked all this stuff up. And what we've arrived at, at We the Veterans, is a mission statement that flips the script, right. We're tired of admiring the problem. Our goal is to coalesce and empower the 17 million strong veteran and military family community to protect American democracy.

Our theory of change is that if we can harness the incredible strengths and talents of the veteran and family community and build on the foundation of civics, not politics, we can crowd out vulnerabilities related to extremism and polarizing dis and misinformation.

Let me give you a data point. Students at the Citadel created a program called mission continues as part of the invent to prevent program. And as part of their research they surveyed veterans from South Carolina. Seventy-eight percent of the veterans they surveyed in South Carolina responded

that they felt that it was their personal responsibility to prevent violent extremism. We just need to ask them to reenlist — 78 percent of 17 million is 13,260,000 veterans out there who are part of veterans organizations and broader military families that can create this preventative ecosystem if we're smart enough to harness and orchestrate and enable and empower that community. We the Veterans wants to serve as the tether between DoD, VA, and then the veterans population. I fully embrace this idea that it has to cover the spectrum that — the primary prevention that Cynthia is talking about is essential, right. Working with DoD to help inoculate future veterans to the recruitment pitches and the propaganda we know they will be exposed to is critical. But when we go look at our research it's really important to highlight that the average time between when someone leaves service, whether that's active military, active reserve or Guard status, the average time between then and when they engage in that criminal extremist act is 10 years. Ten years of separation. The VA often doesn't have relationships with these individuals at that point in time. A large percentage of our veterans don't engage with the VA, perhaps other than receiving benefits.

And so the community that is actually best placed and has to be empowered to address the bulk of the issue — again, 84 percent of the instances of criminal extremism occur among veterans, on average 10 years after they leave service — the community that's best placed to engage in this preventative work is the veteran and military family community itself. So ultimately, they have to lead. And what We the Veterans is trying to do is take a public health approach to this issue.

But what does that mean? It's strengths based, right. Again, we have incredible protective factors in our veteran and military family community. We need to build on those incredible protective factors. It has to be multidisciplinary, as Cynthia mentioned. We are already convening working groups that involve academics, Silicon Valley, U.S. government, across the spectrum of relevant U.S. government agencies, veterans organizations, educators, right. We have to have this multisectoral approach. It has to be multilevel. It's not just about the individual, it's about the individual, it's about their family, it's about their community. You can't just treat the individual in isolation and think you can address this issue. We want to work with the VA on secondary prevention. Absolutely, as Shawn said, dealing with underlying or risk factors that make someone more vulnerable to violent extremism.

And then tertiary prevention, something we haven't talked about today. Rehab and reintegration, no veteran left behind. We need to create an environment where people who want to leave conspiratorial or extremist movements can do so. They can find another veteran to help pull them back into pro social behavior. This requires resources, but it's an essential part of this overall risk mitigation strategy.

In order to do this — the last thing I'll say — we're building these multisectoral working groups, one on disinformation, on extremist violence prevention, and the third on civics, on building on self-governance, civic principles, American democracy, to crowd out vulnerabilities to these anti-democratic extremist and conspiratorial narratives, as well as hostile foreign influence operations.

These multisectoral working groups will be research informed. We're in this for the long haul. We're going to measure and evaluate what we do because we need to get better at it over time. We need to be good stewards of resources when the government chooses to empower us to engage in this mission or when the private sector chooses to empower us to engage in this mission. So we will be transparent, we will measure and evaluate what we do.

And it's got to be based on partnership. So We the Veterans are ready to help empower veterans and military families across the country, to work with private and public sector, and to take all of these lessons that we've been talking about today and embody them in research and informed practice.

Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Let me clarify one thing just for my own knowledge and understanding. This 84 percent figure that you're using, what is that mean? Because my understanding is that — again, veterans are about 20 million people in our society out of 250 million adults and 300-some million total population, so less than 10 percent of the population. And 15 percent of the January 6 rioters were veterans. But this 84 percent number, that's — you're not saying that 84 percent of all violent extremism in the United States comes from veterans, are you?

MR. BRANIFF: Not at all. Not at all. Thank you for clarifying.

Of the criminal extremist population that has a military service background, of the 464 individuals in our data set who have some sort of military service background and then engage in a

criminal extremist act, those criminal extremist acts, 84 percent of the time occurred when that person was a veteran, 16 percent of the time when they were on active duty, 4 or so percent of the time they were kicked out during basic intake training. So if the DoD insider threat programs, for example, are supposed to ferret out this problem, they have access to maybe 20 percent of the problem of criminal offenders, but 84 percent of that population of criminal offenders, they're offending well after they're out of military service.

But no, we're not talking about 84 percent of criminal extremists, were talking about 84 percent of those military service backgrounds are veterans at the time they engage in that crime.

MR. O'HANLON: And just to —

MR. BRANIFF: Yeah.

MR. O'HANLON: That's great. Thank you. And just to belabor the obvious here, but of course those veterans and others that are listening, we all want to underscore we know that the vast preponderance of veterans have no association with these acts. And I just did a quick calculation in my head, and I think that 464 number you mentioned is somewhere in the general range of .001 percent of all people who have been veterans since 1990. So this is a disturbing and concerning problem, but it's a tiny minority.

So here's what I'd like to do. We have about 15 minutes to go, we have about 10 questions from the audience. But I haven't had time to really scan them all. So I'm going to actually just read them all to you right in one fell swoop, and please take a note about which one or two you might want to respond to. We'll just go through the panel. This will be your final wrap up as well. And in the same original order, Bill, Cynthia, Scott, and Shawn.

And I'll begin with a question from Martha Raddatz of ABC News. Do you think that any of the efforts the Pentagon has undertaken in the last year have done any good? So just a good concise question from our journalist friend.

Another question, vets are particularly vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups. What measures are you aware of that are aimed at mitigating the targeting of vets by radical groups? And of course, Cynthia, you've already spoken to this, but obviously inviting other possible responses.

By the way, some of these questions came in early in the hours, so we may have already addressed some of them.

Third, what are key drivers of radicalization.

A fourth, what can be done to ensure that military training is not used against the U.S.?

Fifth, how hard is it to identify extremism in the ranks to get an accurate count of service members with extremist views?

Sixth, any thoughts on engaging our junior service members with civics education as part of professional training early in military service?

Next, is there any one of the services that seems to be doing better than others at addressing this problem? I'm paraphrasing a little.

Next, what is the psychology about veterans that somehow can make them prone or vulnerable or potentially targetable? And again, Cynthia and others have already gotten to this. But to put it bluntly, the audience member asks why would they want to tear down the fabric of a country that they sacrificed so much to defend.

And I'm almost done.

Is there a way to screen for extremist members joining the Armed Forces effectively than we're doing today?

Another question, could we go too far in this and start treating this problem sort of like a red scare latter day hunter for communists where we start to develop this preconception that veterans are prone to extremism or right wingers and really overdo it.

And then, finally, a question about confederate iconography and whether we should be addressing this issue even more comprehensively in terms of renaming military bases and so forth.

And so with apologies with that fire hydrant approach to asking the questions, I'm hopeful that each of you might have latched onto one or two in particular.

And now I will turn the floor back to you for any responses and other thoughts you may want to add in in what will be our final round. We've got about three minutes for each of you, starting with Bill.

MR. BRANIFF: Those are a lot of questions to chew on.

So U.S. Army — I'm sorry, not U.S. Army, the Office of People Analytics within PERSEREC has a survey that they put out to the Department of Defense community, and they've added questions to try to identify the extent of — the percentage of individuals in the ranks who have witnessed extremist behavior to content while on active duty. And we helped them form some of those survey questions at my research center. These are incredibly talented survey methodologists. But that method alone is not necessarily going to get you that answer. It's one data point, it's not a perfect measure. Focus groups and interviews and other kinds of methods would probably be helpful at triangulating that answer, but it's a very difficult question to answer. And frankly we are all every day, as Cynthia said, exposed to extremist ideas and behaviors. It's almost pervasive. So that's a difficult area.

In terms of screening, we are working with the Department of Defense. We produce these large data sets on individual level behaviors and mobilization to violence. We have identified both protective factors and risk factors that are statistically valid and the insider threat hubs within the Department of Defense use those data to try to help screen. Again, an imperfect method. And frankly it's good if you can identify someone, but it's not sufficient. You then have to provide wrap around services for that individual to de-risk them. If we merely eject that person from the ranks, they just become the local law enforcement and local community's problem and you haven't really de-risked the situation. So screening is necessary, not sufficient.

The Pentagon stand down, how effective is that. I mean I personally gave several training events to military units during that stand down and those were productive sessions. But one time training isn't going to do it. I think the answer remains to be seen. There is an independent report being done currently that should wrap up soon. It will be briefed to the Secretary of Defense and that will drive the DoD's more institutionalized response going forward. I'm hoping they will adopt a public health approach as we've sort of discussed here. But I think it remains to be seen how important the stand down will wind up being for the DoD.

In terms of just a last comment, if I may, this is not a massive issue numerically. And the question about can we overdo this — we can absolutely overdo it. And this why We the Veterans are

taking a strengths-based approach. The veteran and military family community is amazing. They contribute in so many ways across the country and the question is how can we lean into those strengths, how can we amplify, orchestrate, empower that community. That will do a lot to crowd out vulnerabilities on the margins. And that is what we're talking about, we're talking about the margins when it comes to criminal extremism.

But to Cynthia's point, extremist ideas and anti-democratic ideas are becoming more pervasive. And that is a threat to democracy, even if it doesn't necessarily result in the same public safety kind of acts of violence. And so this is a very big issue with some very small numbers associated with it. And that's one of the reasons why it's a difficult policy challenge. And it's one of the reasons I think that the veteran and military family community has to lead. This is a hard policy challenge for the Federal Government to lead on.

Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

By the way, there was one final question about how do you even define extremism. And I note, bill, you talked about violent extremism, so that's part of the answer, but I'll add that to the list for others.

And now I'll go to you, Cynthia.

MS. MILLER-IDRISS: I'll just start with that question just since it might be useful.

In our lab we define extremism as a way of thinking that positions the world into us versus them such that the other group poses an existential threat to your own group that typically has to be thwarted with violence and then often with the framing of it being heroic violence, to save your people, right. So it's not just an all-negative thing, but often framed in positive ways that are about saving your people. So we see that with framing around — that's a pretty ideologically neutral framing around a sense of threat and an us versus them kind of thinking.

So I'm just going to address three things.

One, on the key drivers of radicalization, this is a huge topic. Obviously, I can't completely go into it, but there are a couple of different points. One, what I have found in interviews with

youth — particularly with youth in and around extremist scenes of the last 20-25 years is that they tend to be mobilized into violence or into ideologically extreme ways of thinking by two primary emotional cues. One is a desire to belong to something bigger and better than themselves, need for a sense of purpose that sometimes results from a lack of — I mean more isolation or a lack of belonging. And they can be recruited in with that brotherhood belonging. Positive calls toward loyalty and having somebody's back.

The other is often a sense of anger or reaction to a sense of betrayal. And that is sometimes framed as resistance or as rebellion. And so there's these kind of twin emotional cues that happen, one which is a kind of pulling toward something positive, the other, which is resisting something. And they often get distinguished from one another — or not really distinguished from one another, linked together in really complicated ways, and framed as again heroic engagement and resistance or rebellion or revolutionary acts that are courageous.

Related to that I would just pick up on something Shawn said earlier, which I think is also really important, about a sense of loss. So one of the most common denominators across extremist movements and mobilization of violence is you find people who have either experienced or afraid of some sort of loss, right — it's very common — and they are called upon then to restore something. So whether that's a caliphate or a white ethnostate or defend your Second Amendment rights or an election got stolen from you or whatever it is, right, there are these rhetoric and narratives about loss or precariousness or fear of something being lost. And so we have research — really interesting research showing that people are not more likely to join the far right — for example, right wing extremist movements if they are unemployed, but they are more likely to join if they grew up in a household with unemployed parents. So it's that fear that you could lose something that can often mobilize rather than actual loss. It's not the most disenfranchised among us who join up with extremist movements, but those who feel precarious and often precariousness mixed with a sense of entitlement to something, to have that thing that you might have taken away from you.

So I could go on that for a while.

Just on identifying extremism in the ranks, one thing I'll say is that other countries — and this is a place where I think we can learn from other countries and their investment. So Germany has its



own independent military agency that is tasked with eradicating — with investigating and eradicating extremism in the ranks. They are constantly modifying what they do to respond to ongoing threats, including over the last year or two being called upon for more transparency to the public and now have a public facing website where anyone can look and see how many active investigations are, what's going on, what are the stats involved. I mean we are so far from ever having that level of transparency or data collection, but just the idea that there could be something like that, that there are strategies out there that could be modeled or drawn upon as we start to think about this.

And, yeah, I think that's it. I think I'll stop there and hand it off. There's a lot more I could say, but we have only a few minutes, so.

MR. O'HANLON: Perfect. Thank you very much.

And, Scott, over to you next.

MR. COOPER: Thanks very much. I'm going to just kind of piggyback on a few of the things that Cynthia talked about. I'll address three things — the key drivers, civics education, and then the psychology of veterans.

I think key drivers really has to do with diet. And by that, I mean the diet of information that they consume. One of the things — I've spent a lot of time in the Middle East before and after 9/11 and it was almost impossible for us to understand how people on the Arab street can believe that 9/11 was some Jewish conspiracy. And you're like, wait a minute, how do you come to believe that. And yet what we have right now is a number in the veteran community that have been duped believing other conspiracy theories that have come to really resonate with them.

Coupled with that, I think among the veteran community there is this sense of victimhood as they're seeking to belong once again. It's what I would call the John Rambo problem. And they are told over and over again that your government has failed you. And that really starts to resonate with them. And it's quite threatening. And something we need to think about and address.

With respect to civics education, I think that we should quadruple the size of junior ROTC programs in the country. If you think about it, that program is about teaching civics education. If we could take this thing to scale. There are 3,275 junior ROTC programs in the country, there are 24,000 high

schools in the country, which means that we only have junior ROTC programs in 13 percent of our high schools. I didn't have the pleasure of having that because we didn't have one at my high school in Wyoming where I grew up. But I also know I learned about civics education from Mr. Kwitzel (phonetic) because she taught me what it meant to be engaged civically. I mean most of us don't remember much, if any, from our teachers. It's that kind of civic education that we need.

And then the last thing about the psychology of veterans, and it's something that concerns me and something we need to talk about a little bit more. I'm told over and over again that I'm special. I watched with alarm a lot of the postings of my friends that I served with on Facebook and social media around Veterans Day. The notion that somehow, I am better than the rest of American society is troubling to me. Yes, I served eight tours overseas, seven of them in combat, but my sister who teaches elementary school back in Wyoming I think has done more for our community and our country that I ever have done. And I think it's important that we as veterans don't try to put ourselves above the rest of society and we figure out a way to remind that, yes, thank you for your service, but there's lots of other people that have been doing very good work too.

MR. O'HANLON: Very nicely said. God bless your sister and all other public servants across the land. We'll add that point.

And, Shawn, now over to you before we wrap up.

MR. TURNER: Thanks, Michael.

I'll be brief and just say a couple of words about how I think we all need to look at this challenge based on the conversation we had today.

Veterans, they serve our country, they put themselves in harm's way willingly and they ask very little in return. And I think as part of our effort to take care of them we need to make sure that as Cynthia has said, as Scott has said, as Bill has said, that we give them the tools to recognize that they're being targeted by these extremist groups. And when these groups break through, when they break through to these veterans and these veterans are on a path to violence, we at the VA need to make sure that we're there for them and that we recognize that they're on that path and that we give them the resources, we give them the support that they need to get them off of that path, and to get them back to

where they need to be as veterans.

And I think, as Bill said here, the most important thing is that we recognize that this is not just the VA issue, this is not just the DoD issue, this is going to take a collective effort involving the veteran community, the private sector, nonprofits, communities, and family members across the country to address this issue.

And so to the panel members here who are working in this space doing the research and bringing this collective together, I think it's the right thing for veterans and that's part of the reason why I really appreciate this conversation.

Thank you all for allowing me to participate.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, thanks to all of you from my colleague Vanda Felbab-Brown and myself in particular. She runs a non-state actors initiative at Brookings which addresses these sorts of issues internationally as well as at home.

But thank you to all who are watching too for all you care about in this country and for those of you who are veterans, for your service. And we appreciate the continued involvement.

I want to really thank the four panelists for remarkable expertise, very succinct and compelling presentations, and amazing work you're all doing to address these kinds of challenges across the country. And join in also wishing everyone an early happy holiday season from Brookings and all of our other organizations represented on this panel.

So signing off with best wishes for the rest of the month and for the weekend. Thank you.

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