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On “The Alt-Right Movement and US National Security”

Charles J. Dunlap
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This commentary responds to Matthew Valasik and Shannon E. Reid’s article “The Alt-Right Movement and US National Security” published in the Autumn 2021 issue of *Parameters* (vol. 51, no. 3).

Keywords: extremism, US Capitol, military, misinformation, veterans

Because there were some people with a military connection involved in the US Capitol attack of 2021, there has been no shortage of academics and pundits seeking to use the tragedy to paint the military as rife with extremists. *Parameters* hosted one such effort in its Autumn 2021 issue: “The Alt-Right Movement and US National Security” by professors Matthew Valasik and Shannon E. Reid.¹ While they do concede “the level and extent to which support for White power sentiments has infiltrated the US military remains unclear,” their article still carries great potential to misinform readers.

Specifically, the opening paragraph claims that “[c]urrently, there is an overrepresentation of military veterans affiliated with far-right groups and the broader White power movement.” It also asserts that “[m]ost recently, this affinity was underscored by the disproportionate number of servicemembers, who participated in the failed attempt to prevent the certification of the 2020 election on January 6, 2021.”

Valasik and Reid cite an April 2021 publication by Daniel Milton and Andrew Mines of the George Washington University Program on Extremism that examines the military experience among the “Capitol Hill Siege Participants.”² What they fail to tell readers is that Milton and Mines provide a critical caveat to their assessment—they explicitly warn that “simply comparing the number of individuals with military experience to the proportion of veterans in the broader U.S. population is misleading.”

It is misleading, Milton and Mines tell us, because there is “no reason to think the arrestee population should be a representative sample of the U.S. population.” Furthermore, they point out that because the arrestees are “overwhelmingly male” a

1. Matthew Valasik and Shannon E. Reid, “The Alt-Right Movement and US National Security,” *Parameters* 51, no. 3 (Autumn 2021), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss3/3/>.

2. Daniel Milton and Andrew Mines, “This Is War: Examining Military Experience among Capitol Hill Siege Participants,” (Washington, DC: George Washington University/Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2021), <https://ctc.usma.edu/this-is-war-examining-military-experience-among-the-capitol-hill-siege-participants/>.

“better comparison for the proportion of individuals with military experience is not with the overall proportion of veterans in the US population, but with the proportion of male veterans.”

Consequently, comparing the number of male veterans in the general population with the number of male veterans arrested in the US Capitol attack of 2021 causes Milton and Mines to conclude there “actually is a very slight underrepresentation of veterans among the January 6 attacks.” Yes, that is right, an *underrepresentation*. Additionally, as of this writing (January 29, 2022), the George Washington University Program on Extremism reports 87 people with some military connection have been accused of involvement in the Capitol attack.

Here’s what these observations mean in terms of the overall population of active duty and veterans. According to a 2021 Pew Research Center report, there are approximately 19 million veterans.³ Combined with the *1.3 million* active-duty troops there is a total of about 20 million people in the United States with a military connection. What these numbers demonstrate is this: 99.99999 percent of Americans with a military connection were *not* charged with any crime in connection with the Capitol attack. Put another way, the percentage of veterans who were charged is so infinitesimal as to be statistically insignificant.⁴ The statistical insignificance is just as stark with respect to the active-duty force: only *one* person of the *1.3 million* has been charged.

Notably, in January 2022, the George Washington University Program on Extremism issued a new report updating the one Valasik and Reid cited.⁵ It acknowledged the earlier report generated intense media scrutiny regarding alleged attack participants who purportedly had military or law enforcement backgrounds. With the benefit of additional data, the program issued a corrective.

A year after January 6, evidence from the cases to date show that neither of these affiliations characterize a large proportion of the defendants . . . 82 (11 percent) of the defendants had some confirmed form of prior US military service; the vast majority of this category is former military as opposed to active-duty servicemembers.⁶

3. Katherine Schaeffer, “The Changing Face of America’s Veteran Population,” Pew Research Center (website), April 5, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/05/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/>.

4. Schaeffer, “Changing Face”; and Will Kenton, “Statistical Significance,” Investopedia (website), April 18, 2021, https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/statistically_significant.asp.

5. Bennett Clifford and Jon Lewis, “This is the Aftermath: Assessing Domestic Violent Extremism One Year after the Capitol Siege” (Washington, DC: George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2022), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/This%20is%20the%20Aftermath.pdf>.

6. Clifford and Lewis, “This is the Aftermath,” 15.

As a result, Bruce Hoffman, a senior fellow for counterterrorism and homeland security at the Council on Foreign Relations, praised the new report saying it “dispels misinformation surrounding Jan. 6, like exaggerations of the role that active military service members played in the insurrection.”⁷

What has even less supporting data is the suggestion that the military is infested with White supremacists. To their credit, Valasik and Reid concede “little is known about the current prevalence of White power sympathies,” but point to *Military Times* polls as showing the “trend is moving in a concerning direction.” The most recent finding of these polls, the *Military Times* claims, is that “[r]oughly 31 percent of troops (57 percent of minorities) said they have seen signs of extremist behavior in the military.”⁸

Actually, the *Military Times* polls really cannot tell readers much about the prevalence (or not) of White supremacy. Why? They ask a single question on the topic: whether the respondent had “personally witnessed white nationalism or racism within the ranks of the military.”⁹ The inclusion of the word “or” makes it impossible to differentiate between “white nationalism” and “racism.” The two terms do not necessarily mean the same thing (hence the poll’s use of both in the question), and it is possible some White troops believe they are victims of racism and responded accordingly.¹⁰

Regardless, even if all polltakers understood the question as referencing anti-Black racism, the *Military Times* responses—to include the separate minority respondent figures—show the prevalence of such perceptions to be decidedly less than what polls show about civilian society. For example, polls show in the United States generally, “the vast majority (71 percent) of Black Americans say they’ve experienced some form of racial discrimination or mistreatment during their lifetimes.”¹¹

7. Caitlin Kitson, “Extremism Program Releases Report Cataloguing Demographics of Jan. 6 Defendants,” *GW Hatchet* (website), <https://www.gwhatchet.com/2022/01/18/extremism-program-releases-report-cataloguing-demographics-of-jan-6-defendants/>.

8. Leo Shane III, “Troops: White Nationalism a National Security Threat Equal to ISIS, al-Qaida,” *Military Times* (website), September 3, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/09/03/troops-white-nationalism-a-national-security-threat-equal-to-isis-al-qaeda/>.

9. Leo Shane III, “Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism Up Again in Poll of Active-Duty Troops,” *Military Times* (website), February 6, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>.

10. “Whites Believe They Are Victims of Racism More Often than Blacks,” *Social Work Today* (website), n.d., https://www.socialworktoday.com/news/dn_060311.shtml.

11. On related issues, see “Poll: 7 in 10 Black Americans Say They Have Experienced Incidents of Discrimination or Police Mistreatment in Their Lifetime, Including Nearly Half Who Felt Their Lives Were in Danger,” Newsroom, Kaiser Family Foundation, June 18, 2020, <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/press-release/poll-7-in-10-black-americans-say-they-have-experienced-incidents-of-discrimination-or-police-mistreatment-in-lifetime-including-nearly-half-who-felt-lives-were-in-danger/>.

Space limitations preclude a further dissection of the Valasik and Reid article, but let's be clear about something: the military, like American society in general, needs to stamp out racism and White supremacy.¹² In this respect, I believe Valasik and Reid have some ideas worth pondering. Exaggerating the problem beyond what the data show, however, dangerously erodes public confidence in the armed forces, diminishes the propensity of minorities to join, and gives succor to America's enemies around the world.

Charles J. Dunlap

Major General Charles Dunlap retired from the Air Force in 2010 after more than 34 years of service. He is a graduate of St. Joseph's University, Villanova Law School, and the National War College. He teaches at Duke Law School and is the executive director of its Center on Law, Ethics and National Security. His 1992 essay, "The Origins of the American Military Coup of 2012," was selected for the fortieth anniversary edition of *Parameters*.

12. Charlie Dunlap, "Is It Really True That the Active Duty and Veteran Ranks Are Rife with Extremists? Get the Facts before You Decide," *Lawfire* (blog), December 10, 2021, <https://sites.duke.edu/lawfire/2021/12/10/is-it-really-true-that-the-active-duty-and-veteran-ranks-are-rife-with-extremists-get-the-facts-before-you-decide/>.

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The Authors Reply

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Keywords: alt-right, White power, domestic violent extremist, US Capitol, propaganda

As the authors of “The Alt-Right Movement and US National Security,” we appreciate the time and effort spent by retired Major General Dunlap to respond with his insights into the article. While we can understand his concern about misrepresentation or overemphasis on the involvement—or risk of involvement—of active-duty or discharged servicemembers in the White power movement, he is missing the broader perspective the article emphasizes, namely, “that the number of individuals with military experience among the January 6, 2021, perpetrators is concerning.”¹ As of today, the number of individuals with military experience who have been arrested for attacking the Capitol has only increased, representing 120 of the 753 individuals, or 15.9 percent of those charged in federal court.² Furthermore, it is naive to assume these 120 individuals represent the entirety of active or discharged servicemembers who participated in Capitol attack of 2021.

The overarching goal of our article was to reinforce Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s assertion that extremism is “not new to our country, and sadly, not new to our military” and provide practical strategies that better equip the US military to frustrate the recruitment efforts of White power Domestic Violent Extremists (DVEs) at attracting members from their ranks.³ Refreshingly, on December 20, 2021, the Department of Defense updated the language of *Department of Defense Instruction 1325.06*, defining “active participation” in “extremist group(s)” more broadly and potentially facilitating the ability for the US military to begin rooting out support for White power DVEs by active-duty servicemembers.⁴

1. Daniel Milton and Andrew Mines, “This Is War: Examining Military Experience among the Capitol Hill Siege Participants” (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2021), 42.

2. Michael A. Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane, “Radicalization in the Ranks: An Assessment of the Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military” (START: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, College Park, Maryland, 2022), <https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Final%20Report%20for%20SAF%20CDM.pdf>.

3. “Video: A Message from the Secretary of Defense on Extremism,” *DOD News* (website), US Department of Defense, February 19, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2509632/a-message-from-the-secretary-of-defense-on-extremism/>.

4. Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Instruction 1325.06*, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132506p.pdf>.

While updating and implementing *Department of Defense Instruction 1325.06* is a much-needed starting point for addressing sympathy toward White power DVEs by active-duty servicemembers, Major General Dunlap is correct in pointing out the fact that the majority of servicemembers arrested (91 percent) were discharged from the US military and had been, on average, “separated from military service for nearly 15 years.”⁵ This fact further reinforces our argument the US military should be making a concerted effort to support servicemembers as they exit the armed forces, particularly if the act of leaving is not voluntary, as this transitional phase may put them most at risk as “disillusionment, trauma, lack of opportunities, and removal of the rules and safeguards” make them vulnerable to the pull of White power DVEs.⁶

Our position is concentrated on the need for the US military to confront this problem head on finally. Similar to focusing on the risk factors associated with mass shootings, gang-related violence, or even suicide, it does not involve the majority of citizens in society, but a minority. Yet the behavior of that minority produces serious consequences for the rest of us. So we can all agree within the whole of the US military and its veterans, the involvement of individuals in the White power movement may be small, but the risk to those who are involved and to those who come in contact with them is important. The Capitol attack of 2021 is one example of the reasons we should all be concerned about the interaction between the White power movement and the US military. It was not a one-off event (though it was certainly one of the most dramatic in recent history) and we can also look at the Oklahoma City bombing and a range of smaller tragedies.⁷

In an unpublicized Pentagon report from October 2020, a range of concerning behaviors were discussed about how military members interacted with neo-Nazi and White power propaganda. For example, a Florida National Guard member is a cofounder of Atomwaffen Division, and another Atomwaffen Division member was removed from the Marines after his participation at the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Three self-proclaimed Bugaloo Bois, an Army Reservist and two veterans, were arrested for planning to incite

5. Jensen, Yates, and Kane, “Radicalization in the Ranks,” 20.

6. Matthew Valasik and Shannon E. Reid, “The Alt-Right Movement and National Security,” *Parameters* 51, no. 3 (Autumn 2021), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss3/3>.

7. Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 135–55; William Branigin and Dana Priest, “3 White Soldiers Held in Slaying of Black Couple,” *Washington Post* (website), December 9, 1995, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/12/09/3-white-soldiers-held-in-slaying-of-black-couple/1f11ca9f-9fe2-4e28-a637-a635007decaf/>; Matt Kennard, *Irregular Army*, 45; Arno Michaelis and Pardeep Singh Kaleka, *The Gift of Our Wounds: A Sikh and a Former White Supremacist Find Forgiveness after Hate* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018); Michael A. Peters and Tina Besley, “White Supremacism: The Tragedy of Charlottesville,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 14 (2017): 1309–12; and Paul Szoldra, “These Are the Faces of Extremism in the Military: It Only Takes One to Wreak Havoc in the Ranks,” *Task & Purpose* (website), April 23, 2021, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/us-military-extremism/>.

violence at a Black Lives Matter protest. These are just a small subset of cases which underscore the need to have a better understanding of the depth and breadth of the White power problem in the US military.

Major General Dunlap's rebuttal also ignores the ongoing recruitment of active and discharged servicemembers by these groups. Groups like The Base explicitly worked to screen for new members with military experience. The Southern Poverty Law Center reviewed audio recordings between members of The Base and 100 prospective recruits.⁸ Of these 100 recruits, 20 percent reported they were active duty or had military experience. This concern was also highlighted in the Pentagon report stating: "Despite a low number of cases in absolute terms, individuals with extremist affiliations and military experience are a concern to US national security because of their proven ability to execute high-impact events."⁹ This is the double-edged sword of the interaction between the White power movement and the US military. The White power movement has elements which attract members of the US military, and these groups also actively look to exploit that attraction. This process has repeated itself as we shifted through different periods of active military action and removal of troops from long-term deployments.¹⁰ As Kathleen Belew has repeatedly discussed, the disillusionment and anomie that was present after the Vietnam War was a critical element in the growth of the White power movement in the early 1980s.¹¹

While our article was not intended to be an indictment of the US military, it is focused on the need to meet a well-documented problem head on. Ignoring the serious problem caused by the small proportion of active and discharged servicemembers who are involved in, or being recruited by, the White power movement just because the majority of servicemembers are not involved is short-sighted and dismissive. The consequences of membership in these groups can be life-altering and damaging to the individuals and their families and the broader military community. To dismiss anyone who is involved in this movement as unimportant for prevention and intervention does a major disservice to individuals who have placed their livelihoods in the hands of the US military.

8. Samantha Springer, "Secret Tapes Show Neo-Nazi Group The Base Recruiting Former Members of the Military," NBC News (website), October 15, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/secret-tapes-show-neo-nazi-group-base-recruiting-former-members-n1243395>.

9. Dan De Luce, "Pentagon Report Warns of Threat from White Supremacists within the Military," NBC News (website), February 25, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/pentagon-report-warns-threat-white-supremacists-inside-military-n1258871>.

10. Valasik and Reid, "Alt-Right Movement," 6–7.

11. Belew, "Bring the War Home," 20–23.

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