



Testimony of Jeremy Butler
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of
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before a hearing of the
House Veterans' Affairs Committee

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Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and distinguished members of the Committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify for today's hearing on the important topic of extremism within the veteran community.

I applaud the Committee for holding this hearing and I look forward to an honest assessment of the situation within the country. I do believe that extremism exists within the military and the veteran space - not because it is a rampant problem but because it exists within the broader American population. Whatever group, race, belief, religion, or viewpoint exists within American society, you will find it within the military and, by extension, within the veteran community. I believe that that is actually one of the strengths of our military and why it remains one of the most respected institutions of government - because its makeup reflects the society it serves. But not every view is one that should be tolerated within the military and veteran community and extremist thoughts - especially those that condone or advocate for extrajudicial violence should not be tolerated or allowed to spread unchecked.

I do not believe that extremist views are pervasive within the veteran space. Quite the opposite, I know that most veterans abhor extremist views and actually want to continue their service to the country after they have hung up the uniform. However, because extremist views are not pervasive does not mean that they should not be taken as a serious threat or that those who hold them are not detrimental to good order and discipline or to the overall strength of the institutions in which they are found.

Whether you believe that there are elements of extremist views within the community or if you question their existence, it should be a priority for you to investigate and understand whether or not, and to what extent, they do exist. A presence at any level degrades confidence in government, lends credibility to any extremist organization that claims members of the military/veteran community, and paints an inaccurately negative picture of the greater veteran community when we already have a large and widening civil-military divide where most Americans do not know or understand the veteran experience.



For me, this is about maintaining trust and confidence in our military and, by extension, our veteran community. For decades, public trust and confidence in our community has been high but that is slipping. There are many reasons why but the over politicization of every personal action is partly to blame. I am here to encourage you to see this not through the lens of party but through the lens of democracy. My focus, and hopefully yours, is not a condemnation of a political party or ideology but to improve and strengthen our government institutions, safeguard democracy and uphold civil rights for all.

We accomplish this by being honest about both our success and our shortcomings and then working collaboratively to fix those shortcomings. Denying that deficiencies have and continue to exist within our country does not build confidence and it does not keep with the oath that we have all taken.

If veterans are in fact being targeted and recruited by extremist groups then it is very much the duty of this Committee to understand why and to address the factors that lead to a veteran feeling open to their messaging.

Battling extremism begins with those in charge setting the example. It is what we expect of the military and should be the same for all who swear an oath to the constitution. Which includes Members of Congress.

It is often forgotten, or perhaps not even realized by most to begin with but, like every member of the military, every Member of Congress swears an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Again, like the military, Members of Congress affirm that their overarching duty lies NOT to a party, a person, or an ideology but to the Constitution. I strongly believe that the more often we all, servicemembers and Members of Congress, remind ourselves of that oath, the better we will be in carrying out our duties.

I would like to point to recent events that vividly exemplify my point. After twenty years of US involvement in Afghanistan, if one of your constituents only listened to the recent hearings conducted by the House Foreign Affairs, the Senate Foreign Relations and the Armed Services Committees, that citizen would leave convinced that there were only two possible options to explain what had gone wrong: that the US mission failed because of a poorly planned and executed Operation Allies Refuge or because of former President Trump's February 2020 Doha agreement. I will be brutally honest - it was embarrassing to watch those hearings and a disappointment to those of us focused on righting outstanding wrongs and trying to keep the country from engaging in future debacles. Many Members of Congress did not even ask questions to which they wanted answers, it was simple grandstanding. Some did not even let the



witnesses speak. Most simply asked questions designed to elicit talking points that showed that everything was the other parties fault.

For me, extremism includes putting political party over country. Especially if, like those of us in the military, you have taken an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America. If this is what our National leaders are doing, we should not be surprised when their constituency does the same. And the more citizens become polarized, the more it forces politicians to cater to a more extreme base. When citizens feel that the system is not working, they veer towards more extreme leaders to "fix" the problems. That is a cycle that will end nowhere but in the destruction of the country.

As reports of those arrested for taking part in the January 6 attack started to come out, IAVA was extremely concerned with the number of veterans that took part in the events that day. We strongly believe that even one veteran participating in an attack on the Capitol is too many. It should also be noted that veterans served admirably defending the Capitol that day. From National Guard troops to veterans within the Capitol Police. Tragically, Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, a veteran, died following his defense of the Capitol. Veterans serving as police officers is not unique to the Capitol Police. As of 2017, it was estimated that almost 20% of all law enforcement officers are veterans.¹

IAVA applauded the efforts of Defense Secretary Austin conducting a 'stand-down' to address extremism in the ranks. However, we were also concerned with reports that some units and commanders treated this training as another check in the box. This training, much like suicide prevention training, must be robust and have the full support of all levels of leadership in order to ensure it is effectively educating servicemembers on the dangers of extremism within the military and veteran communities. This training must extend through the Transition Assistance Program, as servicemembers transition to the civilian world. Leadership must be held accountable to ensure that their servicemembers are receiving the best possible training to combat attempts from any extremist group to take advantage of servicemembers.

IAVA regularly surveys our membership in order to gauge what issues are impacting them. We have a new survey underway now, which opened on September 8. However, this year for the first time ever we surveyed our membership on extremism within the military and veteran communities. Preliminary survey data shows about 3 in 10 survey participants reported personally witnessing extremism in the military ranks and among post-9/11 veterans, but while that number presents a problem, a third say it is not a problem, and a third say they do not have enough information to determine.

¹ <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2017/03/30/when-warriors-put-on-the-badge>



This speaks to the need not only for DoD to continue educating servicemembers about the dangers of extremism, but also for the need for all of leadership to take this issue seriously.

We also surveyed our membership on trust in different news sources. When asked if they trust political news from elected officials and political figures, 36% of IAVA membership reported “not at all,” with only 7% reporting “a great deal” or “a lot.” Any work by VSOs, DoD, and VA could easily be outdone if elected officials use their positions to spread misinformation.

We know that veterans are targeted by extremist groups for a variety of reasons. According to Pew Research Center, veterans are seen as more patriotic than non-veteran civilians.² Other polls show that the military is still one of the higher trusted institutions within the United States. By recruiting servicemembers and veterans, these groups hope to co-opt that trust and patriotism into their own organizations. Additionally, veterans may also be targeted because of their familiarization with military weapons and tactics. This can be an extremely dangerous combination and more can be done within DoD and VA to educate veterans on these dangers.

One of the most stressful times for a veteran is their transition out of the military. Almost 80% of IAVA members cited having at least “some challenges” during their transition. The top three challenges veterans cited were loss of identity/purpose, relating to non-veteran civilians/reintegrating with community, and readjusting to their social life. It is clear that while veterans transition they often miss the camaraderie that military service brings them. Unfortunately it can also be a time when extremist groups could target them for recruitment and seek to fill a void that the veteran feels they are missing.

Many veterans fill this void and disconnect by continued service to their communities in positive ways. Approximately half of IAVA members report volunteering, mostly in service to other veterans and servicemembers, youth, and the elderly. Half of our members that do report volunteering, do so at least five hours per week. It is clear that many veterans seek a larger connection with their communities after the transition out of the military. We believe that this role can continue to be filled by the VSO community, with continued outreach to veterans to engage them to continue their service. By putting this energy positively into volunteer opportunities, veterans may be less likely to join extremist organizations.

This responsibility can not be left to VSOs alone. The DoD must have a systematic approach to combating extremism within its ranks, and ensure that potential recruits are properly screened before joining the military. Additionally, misinformation online must not be allowed to spread unchecked through the military and veteran community. Various reports have shown how veterans are being targeted by political misinformation online from bad actors abroad. More can

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/07/key-findings-about-americas-military-veterans/>



be done to counter this misinformation and protect all Americans from propaganda that could be a gateway to radicalization and extremism. Propaganda targeting veterans on social media could be hitting them at a time when they are more susceptible to extremism due to transition

challenges. Unfortunately, some veterans might see interacting with these extremist groups as a way to give back to their communities and continuing to serve. Veterans and servicemembers must be given the proper education and training to be able to identify threats when they occur. IAVA has often stated that the culture of the DoD impacts VA. Which is why we believe that it is imperative that the DoD takes on extremism in its ranks head on, and educate servicemembers before they become veterans.

While it can be helpful to identify veterans who have already committed extremist acts, it does not give us a complete picture of all veterans who may be involved with extremist groups. Unfortunately, this is an area where the data is lacking. While we may know why these groups target veterans, more research needs to be done to understand how extremist groups recruit veterans, and how many veterans are participating within these groups. In order to enact effective data-driven policy, we must have high quality, actionable data. This will require efforts across federal agencies such as VA, DoD, and DHS to truly understand the scope of the problem. It is crucial that we have actionable data in order to solve these potential issues.

One veteran participating in an extremist organization is one too many. However, veterans are a microcosm of society. Like many other problems within American society, those problems will also exist within the veteran community. If there is an extremism problem within society, it will exist within the veteran community. And like many other problems it cannot be solved by the veteran community alone. This will require efforts across federal agencies, law enforcement, and the VSO community.

Members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA's views on these issues today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have and working with the Committee in the future.