

# Inspiration and Influence: Discussions of the US Military in Extreme Right-Wing Telegram Channels

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## About this paper

This briefing contains exploratory analysis into discussion of the military in white supremacist Telegram channels. It reveals that, while military activity is often framed within the broader context of anti-government and antisemitic ideology, white supremacist groups actively draw inspiration from the military in their preparations for violence. On a small scale, this research also identifies the possible involvement of actively serving soldiers and veterans within white supremacist discussion online.

This paper was produced with research support from Meghan Conroy.



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## Executive summary

**The violent threat the extreme right wing poses is surging globally. In the past 5 years, terrorist attacks committed by these groups have increased by 250 percent and deaths by 709 percent, according to the *Global Terrorism Index 2020*.<sup>1</sup> The threat these extremists pose was brought starkly to light on 6 January 2021, when a loosely organised mob stormed the United States Capitol in Washington D.C., emboldened by multi-month disinformation campaigns which undermined the legitimacy of the election.<sup>2</sup> Veterans or those who appeared to have ties to the American military comprised a highly visible portion of the protesters. In the subsequent criminal investigations by the FBI and other agencies, at the time of writing, 33 of the 257 charged for their involvement appear to have some tie to military service.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, recent incidents in Germany<sup>4</sup> and the US have raised questions about extremists infiltrating the police and military's rank and file.<sup>5</sup>**

In recent years, a number of cases globally have highlighted the involvement of members of the military in extreme right-wing groups. In Germany in June 2020, following military intelligence reports that there were 600 suspected far-right supporters in the army, the Federal Minister of Defence announced that the elite *Kommando Spezialkräfte* (Special Forces Command) would be partially disbanded due to concerns of radicalisation in its ranks.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, a soldier in the British Army was imprisoned after being found guilty of membership of the proscribed neo-Nazi group National Action.<sup>7</sup> In June 2020, a US Army private was indicted after planning an attack on his own unit with the neo-Nazi group Order of Nine Angles,<sup>8</sup> whose doctrine actively encourages its adherents to gain experience and skills in organisations like the military and the police.<sup>9</sup>

White supremacist groups have long sought to recruit serving members of the armed forces and veterans as part of a deliberate mainstreaming strategy.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, a number of former soldiers have gone on to lead violent white supremacist groups in the US.<sup>11</sup> This includes ex-army soldier Timothy McVeigh, who committed the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing – the deadliest act of domestic terrorism in US history.<sup>12</sup> More recently, in January 2020, the FBI arrested 3 members of neo-Nazi terrorist organisation The Base, 2 of whom had military training; 1 was a cavalry scout and the other – arguably more dangerously – was a combat engineer.<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that there are several million current and active-duty service members, and these highly visible but apparently isolated cases do not appear to be part of a larger infiltration. However, the association of the military with any extremist group is cause for concern, as it erodes the public's trust in those charged to protect and defend them.

The risk posed by the potential of military infiltration and radicalisation of service members is difficult to quantify; no database accurately tracks military service members' involvement in extremist organisations. Nor is military service necessarily the marker of heightened lethality; for example, a mechanic who was discharged at two years and a infantryman who served on multiple combat tours are very different cases, and only the latter represents a potentially lethal level of training. However, some current or former members of the military have the capability to carry out more lethal attacks, while others have training on how to build or repair firearms and explosives; as such, the potential radicalisation of any of these people remains a security concern.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, beyond the potential threat of weapons training, the symbolic value of servicemembers or veterans being committed extremists may be even more potent, regardless of whether their service was honourable or ended in general, other than honourable, or bad-conduct discharge.

In light of a landscape in which the extreme right is more violent, connected and emboldened globally,<sup>15</sup> greater understanding is needed of the role military service plays within these groups and how those with insider training, knowledge and possibly access may be radicalised. To better understand dynamics which might facilitate radicalisation of these individuals, it is essential to build a stronger evidence base around how extreme right-wing groups view the military and use ties to military service as a means of recruitment or radicalisation.

This briefing paper seeks to help fill this knowledge gap. It represents the findings of an investigation into conversations relating to the military from 224 public channels associated with extreme right-wing activity on the encrypted messaging app Telegram, examining messages sent between September 2016 and October 2020. It builds on previous research by ISD and other organisations which highlights Telegram's importance to contemporary white supremacist mobilisation – and, in particular, to violent organisations' mobilisation.<sup>16</sup>

This research highlights the complex way in which the extreme right engages with the military and situates it within its worldview. It reveals that, while military activity is often framed within the broader context of anti-government and antisemitic ideology, white supremacist groups actively draw inspiration from the military in their preparations for violence. On a small scale, this research also identifies the possible involvement of actively serving soldiers and veterans within white supremacist discussion online.

## Key Findings

- In total, we identified **13,999** messages containing keywords associated with military activity, out of a broader corpus of **1,091,878** messages made across **224** public Telegram channels associated with white supremacist activity. We qualitatively analysed a random 10% sample of these, identifying **799** messages which related explicitly to discussion of the military.
- The most common types of messages were those that derived some sort of inspiration from the military, demonstrating the broader influence the armed forces has on extremist mobilisation. Of the

messages we qualitatively analysed, **338** (42%) drew inspiration from the military, including references to military history, the sharing of military training manuals and discussion of military tactics. Guides and literature publicly published by the US military featured frequently in the sample.

- A small percentage of messages analysed for this report (1%) featured individuals who described themselves as current or former US military members operating within the extreme-right Telegram ecosystem. In total, we found **6** users who self-identified as veterans and **2** users who may be currently serving members of the US armed forces. We were not able to verify whether these claims were true, and it remains possible that these are individuals role-playing as military members as a means of boosting their status and credibility. However, with this caveat in mind this engagement raises the possibility that members of the armed forces and veterans are actively engaged with white supremacist content online. Given the limited scale of this study, this phenomenon is worthy of further investigation.
- Almost counterintuitively, while the communities identified in this report draw tactical influence – and perhaps even legitimacy – from the armed forces, attitudes towards the military as an institution are almost all overwhelmingly negative. This is largely due to the perception that the US's interventions abroad serve Israeli interests rather than those of the white race. This negativity is largely framed through broader hostility towards the government and through an antisemitic worldview, which paints the US military as a tool for Israel. Where present, pro-military sentiment focuses on individual soldiers or veterans, who are deemed to be important to the upcoming struggle for the white race.

## Methodology

**To start our data collection, ISD identified 265 public Telegram channels where users had expressed support for extreme right-wing talking points. Telegram was selected as a platform due to its popularity among extreme right-wing communities and the fact that its lax content moderation policies mean it hosts a number of channels associated with terrorist organisations.<sup>17</sup>**

In particular, we focused on channels where we had identified expressions of support for white supremacist and white nationalist worldviews, which either posit the cultural or racial superiority of white people over non-whites or see the creation of a white ethnostate as desirable. As such, this analysis does not comprehensively cover the broader ecosystem of right-wing extremism – which incorporates militia movements and nativist anti-immigrant groups, among others – although channels associated with this activity were included if we found evidence of white supremacist or white nationalist sentiment being shared on them.

We used Telegram's application programming interface to scrape message data from these channels, providing us with a total set of 1,091,878 messages. We then filtered these messages using a set of 266 keywords associated with military activity, which partners at the Queens College at the City University of New York generated. The keywords ranged from terms like 'military' and 'soldier' to the US Army's ubiquitous 'hooah' to names of divisions and military ranks. This provided us with a data set of 13,999 messages, sent within 224 extreme right-wing channels, which were potentially relevant to discussion of the military.

We then selected a sample of 1,401 messages for further qualitative analysis and performed a coding exercise to identify messages deemed relevant to specific discussion of military activity. Relevant content included messages discussing current events relating to military activity, attitudes towards the US military and discussion of military content. Irrelevant messages were false positives, such as use of the term 'warrior' in religious contexts and use of the word 'general' as an adjective rather than a noun.

This process provided us with a set of 799 relevant messages relating to the military. These messages were then qualitatively analysed to identify key trends in how the extreme right discusses and seeks to gain inspiration from the military, as well as to identify any evidence of active use of these messaging channels by serving members of the military or veterans.

## Findings

**This section outlines key observations gleaned from this qualitative analysis. In particular, it details how white supremacist communities seek to gain inspiration and legitimacy from the military, while at the same time denigrating the military as a tool of Israel or Jewish people. On the one hand, the military is respected for its tactical ability and its members' willingness to die for what they believe in; on the other, the military is denigrated because its members die on behalf of the Jews rather than purer causes – like the white race.**

### Military Inspiration

The largest subset of content we identified was users drawing ideological inspiration from the military. This included drawing on military history and words attributed to historical military figures – such as Second World War Commander General George S. Patton – to justify and reinforce their ideology; the sharing of military literature and guides and discussion of military tactics and procedures, for inspiration; and the broader use of military language to frame their activity. Importantly, these discussions of the military demonstrate the broader value white supremacists see in military knowledge and a general appreciation of historical military activity, particularly where military history is framed in terms of advancing the interests of the white race as a matter of government policy. Crucially, this appreciation of military tactical knowledge points towards the value extreme right-wing groups and communities see in recruiting and radicalising current members of the military and veterans, specifically to give the appearance of increased legitimacy, efficacy and lethality of their operations. Moreover, these messages are also a signal – to not only potential recruits from the military but also others – of the seriousness with which they take their plans and preparations.

In total, we identified **338 messages (42%)** that related more broadly to the theme of military inspiration, of which:

- **125 messages (37%)** were linked to military literature and guides or contained discussion of military tactics, techniques and procedures;
- **124 messages (37%)** were related to military history;
- **89 messages (26%)** contained militarised language.

### Military literature, tactics and techniques

The largest subgroup of posts we identified within the category of 'military inspiration' related to discussion of military tactics or techniques. This included 95 messages containing military or paramilitary literature or guides. These materials were largely publicly available manuals from the US military, but they also contained warfighting guides from other sources. The content shared in this category is diverse and includes first-aid guides, survival skills, combat skills and field manuals on training. The majority of these guides were shared in a 'boogaloo'-related channel primarily set up for preparation for an upcoming civil war.<sup>18</sup> There is no evidence that any material shared is classified or has been leaked by members of the military, and much of it is publicly accessible through military websites or sites like the Internet Archive.

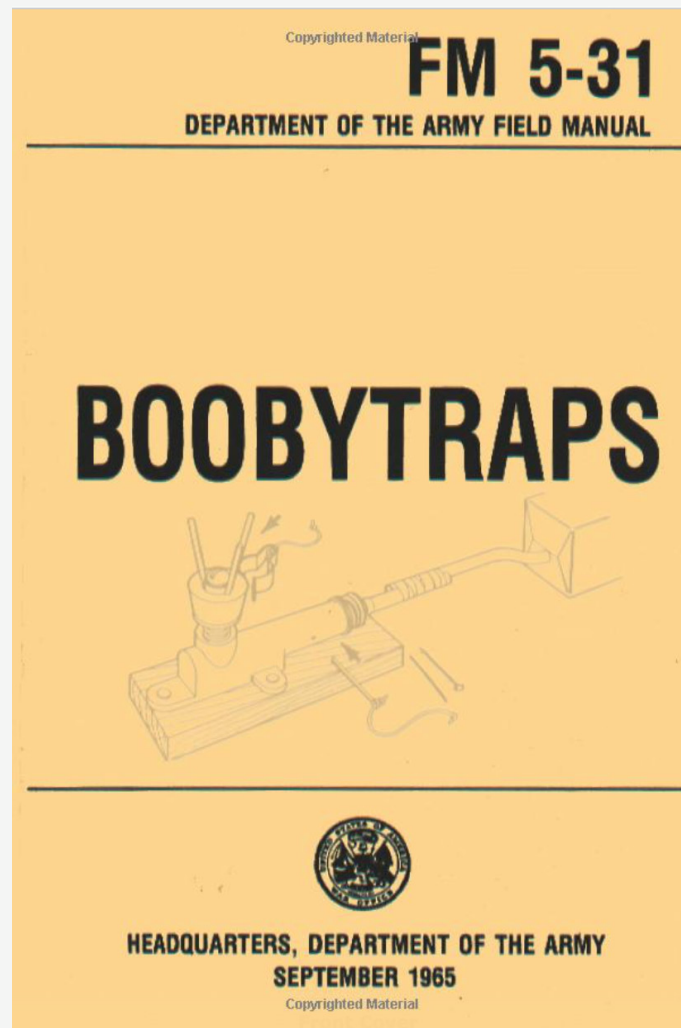
As well as sharing military-produced training material, a number of messages directly reference the equipment, tactics, techniques and procedures used by the armed forces. This includes discussions around what gas masks and boots the military uses, the lethality of different weapons, the best weapons to use in urban conflict, principles of marksmanship and guides on conducting ruck marches. However, closer analysis suggests the sharing of these guides may be driven by posturing, as opposed to serious tactical knowledge. For example, the *Law of Land Warfare* includes guidance on the Geneva Conventions, which are absolutely at odds with conduct imagined in the race war, suggesting it was posted by a user who had little understanding of its contents.

Beyond material produced by the US military, we identified a message – shared in three channels – asking users if they 'ever wonder how on earth we could ethnically cleanse America and establish a White ethnostate', with a link to a 'fictional guide on how such an endeavor could be theoretically completed, written by an anonymous US military veteran and general of a militia'. The guide referenced in this message is a 145-page pdf, titled *FM 6-2003 Ethnic Cleansing Operations*, released on 4 July 2003. Despite this document being nearly two decades old, it is a clear example of the potential white supremacist groups see in utilising military knowledge and techniques in a coming race war. The author claims to be both a US military veteran and a long-time militia member, and presents ideas

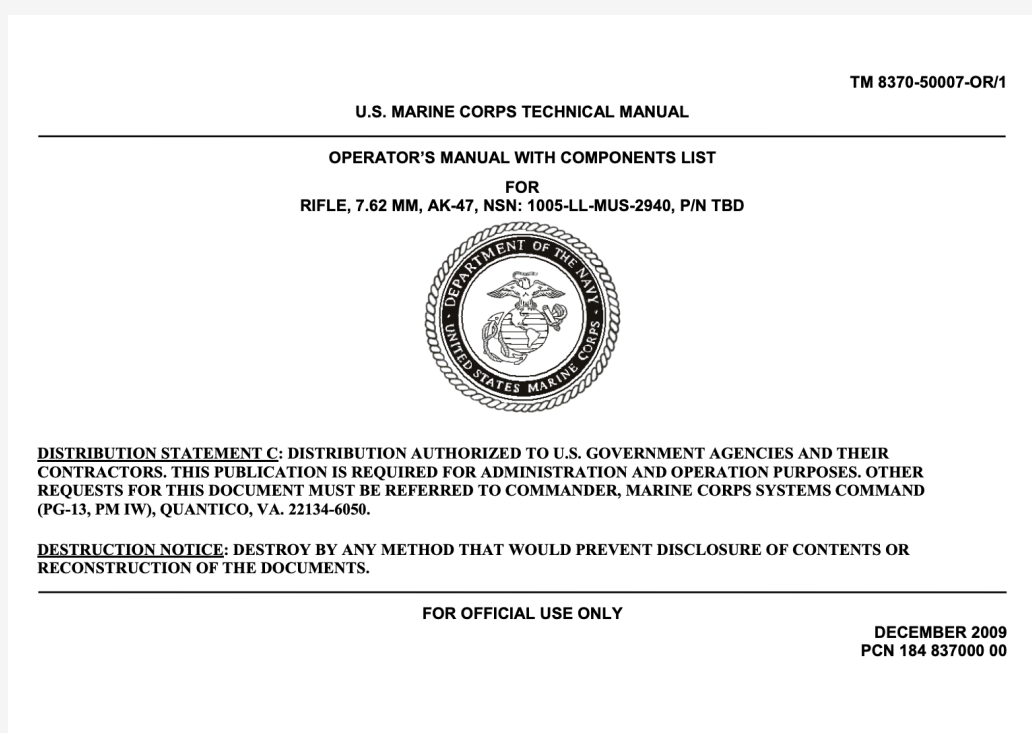
on how users can prepare for a race war. The pdf is broken into seven chapters and four appendices, the latter of which contain a psychological warfare poster (for distribution 'in White neighborhoods bordering Black ones'), a list of US military bases and a list of Amtrak stations ('for use in deportations and troop movements'). Chapter 3, titled 'The Scrub Brushes of Ethnic Cleansing,' provides an overview of weapons ideal for conducting ethnic-cleansing operations and what to look for when raiding a National Guard Armory. The author also provides a list of military nomenclature (e.g. ammunition colour codes, National Stock Numbers, Department of Defense Identification Codes) to make such raids more expedient.

As with the sharing of other field guides, the document reveals white supremacists' limited knowledge of the US military's day-to-day functionality, blurring understandings between the planning of a military operation and combat skills. However, although it is not a legitimate military source, the *Ethnic Cleansing Operations* field manual represents a clear scope of the threat posed by far-right extremists with military knowledge – namely, their thinking about how to procure more arms. This gives the discussion of a possible race war a seriousness that goes beyond mere online posturing.



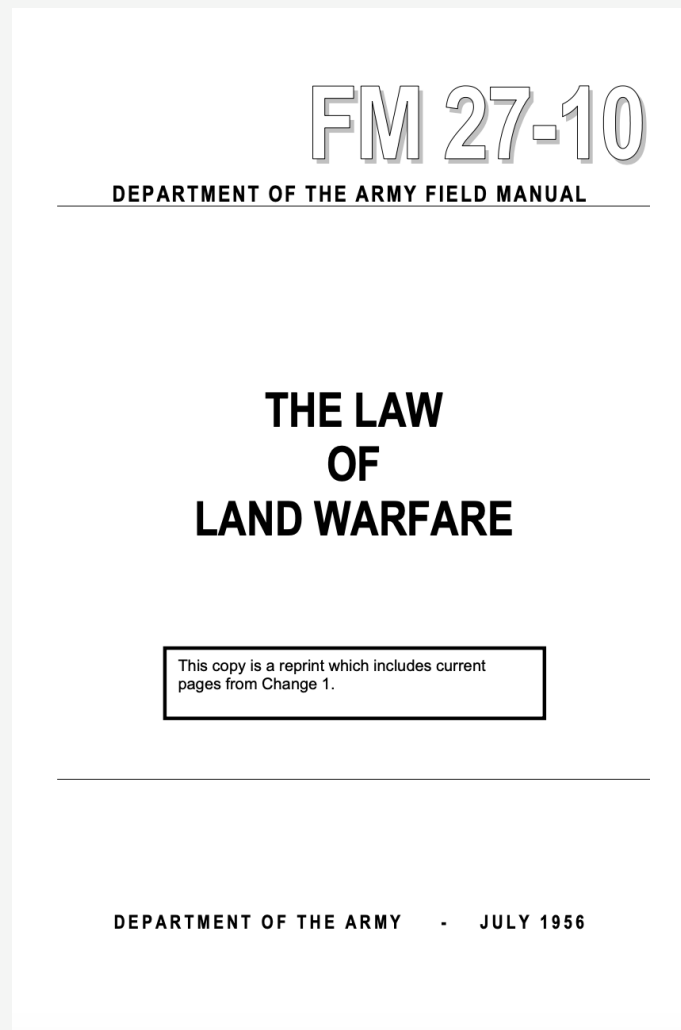


**Figure 1**  
Department of the Army Field Manual FM 5-31: Booby Traps



**Figure 2**

US Marine Corps Technical Manual. (Please note, although this material is stamped *For Official Use Only* its distribution in white supremacist channels was not vetted or approved by any sources at the Department of Defence)

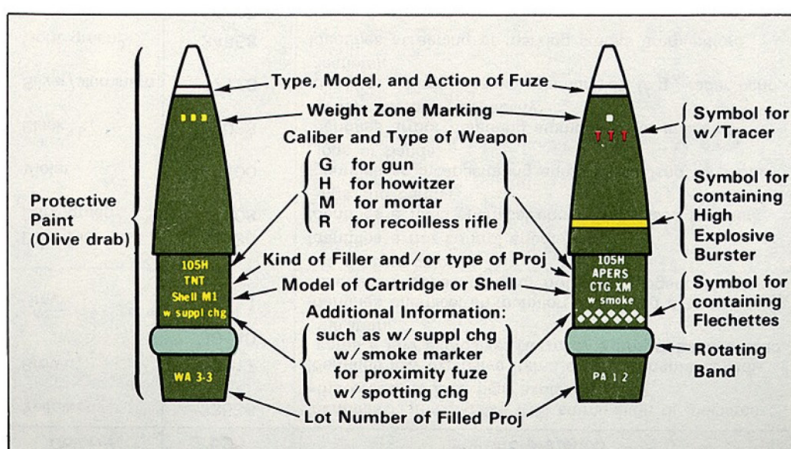


**Figure 3**  
Department of The Army Field Manual FM 27-10:  
The Law of Land Warfare

### Military Nomenclature

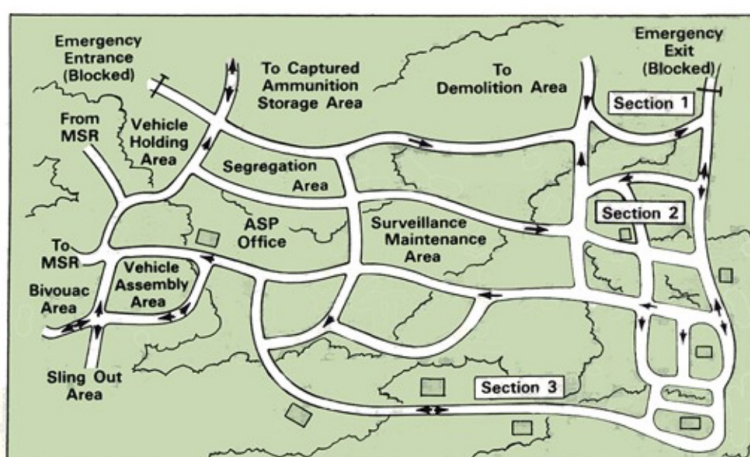
Making sense of the mishmash of military abbreviations is especially important in ethnic cleansing operations. Should you walk into a military armory and find yourself standing in front of thousands of similar boxes, it will be obvious that you cannot devote a week to opening them to find out what's inside. With this in mind, the next several pages will take you through ammunition color coding, NSNs, and the DODIC system.

In addition to being able to locate desired materials in a weapons storage facility or Ammunition Storage Point, it is important to know the markings on individual artillery shells.



*In order to get maximum effectiveness from each round, use the right tool for the job.*

The following graphic illustrates the typical configuration of a field Ammunition Supply Point (ASP). Once racially purged US federal forces are merged with White coalition forces, expect all supply depots to be constructed in this form.



*An ASP facility is very large, with up to 700 meters between each section.*

*Source: U.S. Army Ammunition Handler's Handbook.*

**Figure 4**

Screenshots taken from Chapter 3 of Ethnic Cleansing Operations



The use of military manuals demonstrates how members of white supremacist communities are seeking to utilise military knowledge to inform their preparation for – and potential execution of – violent and insurrectional activity and an upcoming civil war, which they see as inevitable. While it is difficult to determine the extent to which these groups and individuals are actively and practically using these materials, their use nevertheless reinforces the fact that these communities use digital fora to not only share ideological material but also push forum members to prepare to take action. These discussions demonstrate how these individuals and communities are actively using military expertise, whether as a foundation of their plans or as a way to signal their gravitas. In both cases, these discussions highlight the strategic importance of recruiting and radicalising serving members of the military and veterans, for both their possible knowledge base and their high level of regard, which might be used to recruit and radicalise others.

### Militarised language

Militarised language was also common throughout the coded messages, ranging from using army phrases like ‘hooah’ to laying out guidelines for ‘op sec’ (operational security). In some messages, users encourage one another to ‘start thinking like a general,’ and assert that: ‘The most important quality a warrior can have is not that he is prepared to kill - but that he himself is prepared to die and has made his peace with death’. These messages speak to very different levels of military service – and the distinctions matter. ‘Thinking like a general’ invokes thinking beyond tactics to operations, strategies, sustainment and logistics, whereas being ‘willing to die’ invokes a soldier more likely to be in harm’s way. This seems to indicate that the author does not actually understand the differences between responsibilities at different ranks.

The use of militarised language reinforces the idea that some white supremacist communities see themselves in a pseudo-military fashion. While the vast majority may not have military service, they seek to replicate what they perceive to be military behaviour – in both their activity and their conceptions of organisation – to fight the race war, demonstrating the broader influence perceptions of the armed forces have on extreme right-wing communities. Framing their discussion of the race

war through a military lens suggests these groups have a conceptual framework for their activity which is more sophisticated than uncoordinated, small-scale attacks.

### Historical military inspiration

Historical references to the military contained discussions of both US and other historical contexts. One of the key ways historic imagery and discussions of military history are used is to justify white supremacy as the natural or correct path for the future of white people.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 37% of these historical messages related in some way to the Third Reich and the Wehrmacht in the Second World War. A number of these messages includes links to pictures of German soldiers and quotes from Adolf Hitler, serving to demonstrate an admiration of the Third Reich’s aesthetic and actions. An additional 8% of messages referred to the allies in the Second World War, including two antisemitic quotes attributed to General George S. Patton. In these discussions, Patton – who was notably antisemitic<sup>19</sup> – exemplifies previous military commanders who were not operating in service of the Jews, in contrast to depictions of the current military in the channels we studied. Noting this distinction highlights the US extreme right’s desire to frame its activity within a historical tradition of antisemitism as formal government policy.

Outside of Second World War imagery and quotes, we also found discussion of colonial history. This included imagery from the Rhodesian Bush War, as well as a widely shared post discussing the Battle of Rorke’s Drift, as depicted in the 1964 film *Zulu*. These discussions framed historic colonial violence against non-whites as a template for an upcoming race war: ‘the White Race’s fight against the Colored Horde in the future is going to be just like this and we will slash there [sic] numbers’. Rhodesia is frequently associated with white supremacist ideas of white genocide, as well as a racist uprising of blacks against whites, and some violent white supremacists have idealised the Rhodesian Bush War.<sup>20</sup>

As well as drawing ideological inspiration from military history, these channels seek to use such history for tactical inspiration, as well as to glamorise revolutionary activity. In five of the channels we analysed, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* was used to frame discussion

of insurrectionary violence. Similarly, a number of discussions used the Battle of Blair Mountain to romanticise uprisings against the US and villainise the US Army as an oppressive force – one that crushed the largest popular uprising of ‘the people’ since the American Civil War. This discussion is part of a larger trend of coopting various symbols and events across ideologies, as well as framing it as a practice run for the next civil war.

### Attitudes Towards Military

Given broader concerns around extreme right-wing groups recruiting and radicalising members of the US armed forces, we sought to identify messages relating more broadly to the US military. In total, we identified **437 messages** in this category. These included **296 messages relating to current events** (such as conflicts the US is currently engaged in) and **141 posts containing general discussion of the military**, including memes and jokes made at the expense of the armed forces, conspiracy theories relating to military deployment against US citizens and depictions of the military in the media.

Within this discussion, we then sought to determine the broader attitudes expressed by the communities studied towards the military and soldiers. We hypothesized that this could help to identify narratives which could be used to radicalise both serving members and veterans of the armed forces, turning someone from a trusted insider to an insider threat. In total, we identified:

- **65 messages (14%)** which were hostile to the military;
- **40 messages (9%)** which were sympathetic to soldiers.

### Anti-military (anti-government) attitudes

On the surface, 14% of the messages analysed read as hostile towards, or critical of, the military. However, a closer reading suggests the true target of this hostility was not the military itself; rather, it was either a conception of who controls the military or a depiction of the government as no longer representing its people. Hostility to the military was often interlinked more broadly with hostility towards the US government, which was presented as an oppressive force complicit

in the downfall of the white race. This draws on long-standing conspiracy theories, including the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which posit that Jews control various governments as part of a long-term strategy to establish Jewish global hegemony and wipe out the white race.

In a number of cases, the military was presented as an institution corrupted by the forced recruitment of women and people of colour for politically correct reasons, and the erosion of the military’s traditional white male dominance was lamented.<sup>21</sup> As one message noted: ‘We have 20 million former military in the United States, most of whom are men, right-leaning and white. The former military is also less diverse than the current military’.

A more nuanced analysis of these hostile messages, moreover, reveals that this hostility is repeatedly framed in explicitly antisemitic terms. The armed forces were deemed to be a puppet of the ‘Zionist Occupied Government’ (ZOG)<sup>22</sup> or ‘Zio-America’ – that is, as a tool for Jews in their alleged struggle against the white race. Linked to this was a strong opposition against ongoing US wars in the Middle East, which were presented as the will of Israel and further evidence of Jews’ subversion of US institutions. In a number of instances, it was suggested that, rather than being stationed abroad, white soldiers should be posted within the US to defend its borders against non-white migrants, who are presented as ‘invaders’.<sup>23</sup>

More broadly, this hostile content demonstrates how white supremacists situate the military in a broader conspiratorial worldview, in which the primary concern is the degradation of the white race at the hands of Jews, who secretly control the government. In this way, this anti-military framing both protects white members of the military as heroes and positions them as working inside a corrupt institution whose aim is to destroy the white race. This explicitly links to the ‘white genocide’ conspiracy theory,<sup>24</sup> which has been inspirational in a number of terrorist attacks, including the March 2019 attack in Christchurch, New Zealand.<sup>25</sup>

This hostile content also points towards a possible pathway through which soldiers and veterans could be radicalised to turn against the governments of the countries they have sworn to protect and defend.

Studies suggest that individuals who are involuntarily separated from the military may be at higher risk of becoming disillusioned with the government or its military policies during or after military service.<sup>26</sup> The broader conspiratorial worldview presented by white supremacists provides an alternate target for this anger or sense of betrayal – the Jewish people. The true enemy in this framing is thus neither the military itself nor the country served, but rather the supposed shadow arm of the Jews, which has corrupted the government ruling these institutions. The result is that mobilising against the government or military is framed as an act of liberation, rather than one of insurrection, sedition or treason.

### Attitudes towards soldiers and veterans

In comparison to the hostile attitudes expressed towards the military, as a tool of corrupted governments, few messages were overtly anti-soldier. Instead, messages that conveyed anti-government or anti-military sentiment were largely framed in relation to supporting the Israeli government, rather than focusing on the activities of individual soldiers. However, we did identify some conversations which were implicitly violent towards soldiers; for example, through speculation on the outcomes of a civil war:

We have roughly 400 million guns, roughly 8 trillion bullets, the vast majority of which are owned by the right wing. And 10-15 million Americans have 'alt-right' beliefs, are already done with trump [sic], and have already abandoned political solutions ... The US government has at its disposal around 1 million current military members at its disposal [sic] for a civil war in the United States, about 3 per 1000 people. And the left would be completely reliant on the military and police to 'fight' against insurgent white people who opposed them in a civil war. The raw numbers are massively in our favor.

In a number of instances, we identified messages either discouraging white men from joining the military or encouraging currently serving white men to leave service. More broadly, these calls related to the belief that white soldiers would be risking their lives for non-whites, or would be called on to act against the interests of the white race.

Overall, messages about service members and veterans tended to be explicitly pro-soldier. For example, messages conveyed appreciation to veterans for their service, or condemned violence committed against veterans by minorities. Consistent with the aforementioned anti-government messaging, veterans were also often depicted as victims, stabbed in the back by a government that is supposed to represent them.<sup>27</sup>

The simultaneous appearance of hostile messages about the military and positive messages about soldiers demonstrate how attitudes towards the military are situated within a broader white supremacist worldview, with a primary focus on preserving the white race and protecting white people against hostile forces – particularly Jews. Positive sentiment towards (white) veterans and soldiers potentially points towards their status as being willing to die for a cause, as well as their potential operational and tactical usefulness to the broader white supremacist cause, reinforcing the broader focus on military guides and training materials in the channels analysed earlier in this report. These positive depictions of service members and veterans also provide a stark contrast to the anti-government – and, more specifically, antisemitic – sentiment found in hostile messages related to the military. This contrast underscores a strong 'stabbed in the back' message that then justifies the use of violence against the government, which, in their worldview, promotes a Zionist agenda and works against white supremacist interests. These distinctions draw a line between noble soldiers and corrupt government, and provide a heroic pathway for members of the military community to betray their oaths to the governments of the countries they have served. Put another way, turning against a government believed to be corrupt does not constitute betraying your nation – it is heroic to stand against a tyrannical force. This grants others a moral justification to take the same action, and serves as a recruitment tool for the white supremacist agenda.

### Attitudes Towards Opponents of the US Military

Interestingly, some of the communities examined here appear to embrace the concept 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'; **18 (2%)** of 799 relevant messages contained pro-Iranian content. While these are small volumes, they are noteworthy because they represent a departure from the pervasive aggression against Muslims found across the channels analysed.

Messages included content which expressed sympathy with Qasem Soleimani or broadly opposed US interventions in the Middle East, most of which related to the antisemitism common across these channels. In particular, Soleimani's death was linked to the activity of the 'ZOG,' and was framed more broadly within the suggestion that President Trump was a tool of Zionist control during his time in office. Such conversations were not limited to Telegram; the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) also noted a surge in antisemitic responses to the killing of Soleimani from high-profile white supremacists.<sup>28</sup>

Importantly, this case study highlights the pervasive antisemitism which dominates white supremacist ideology – and even surpasses hostility towards other non-white countries and communities.

### **Extremism in the Military**

Among the messages analysed, we identified a relatively small group of users of these channels whose message content suggested they were current or former members of the US military. We found six instances of individuals making comments suggesting they were veterans, including one user who said: 'I'm embarrassed to have ever been [in] active duty within the military' and another whose message signature stated: 'Air National Guard June 88-August 88'. One individual, who claimed to be a Marine Corps veteran who was injured in their second tour of Afghanistan, offered to assist other members of the channel to obscure their identities:

I have Nord VPN accounts I will give you. I have an unlimited supply of them. They will work forever and if they ever stop working I will replace them. If anyone wants one hit me up I give them free, but the kikes have put me on a do not hire blacklist and I have been having so much trouble since I was DOXXED by the SPLC [Southern Poverty Law Center], and the ADL.

Here, interestingly, military service serves as a status indicator without drawing on in-group rivalries or distinctions, which are common in military service. These in-group distinctions appear to be overridden by identity as a white supremacist, but their absence from this discussion also reinforces the possibility that

individuals using these chat channels have limited in-depth knowledge or experience in the military.

Additionally, we identified two instances of individuals making comments suggesting that they may be currently serving in the military; one user said they were 'on active duty with the army,' and another said: 'In the military, when we say "neutralize a threat" we mean shoot a guy in his fucking face'.

It is important here to emphasise that the number of such messages is small – 1% of the total number of messages analysed – and that, given the pseudonymous nature of Telegram, we were unable to verify these users' claims. Nevertheless, these messages do demonstrate the likelihood that active-duty members of the military, as well as veterans, are actively engaged in white supremacist conversations on Telegram. They further demonstrate that military credentials – whether true or forged – are being used as a legitimising tactic. Given the broader preoccupation with violent racism on these channels, and the focus on repurposing military knowledge to prepare for civil war, such activity is concerning and worthy of additional analysis. Furthermore, there appears to be limited focus on the actual skill sets these apparent veterans or current service members would bring to white supremacist activity, even though skills gained differ dramatically depending on an individual's service record, suggesting that perceived military experience may be more valuable to these communities than actual skills and knowledge.



## Conclusion

**White supremacists discuss the military as a means of status signalling, and hold up the few individuals with military backgrounds who have successfully carried out attacks as heroes of the movement. This report reveals the presence of military content in white supremacist Telegram networks, and shows how this content works to signal the legitimacy of their cause. Their interest in military literature, gear, history and tactics, and their sentiment towards the military, indicate these users' belief that they are preparing for a civil war which will place them in opposition to their government. By positioning the government as corrupt and no longer drawing its authority from the consent of the governed, these groups use military status as a means of legitimising the use of violence against these governments. The apparent presence of currently serving members of the armed forces and veterans within these channels provides an advantage to recruitment, while also raising the possibility that military training may be used against US citizens, as these extremist groups pursue their objective of creating a white ethnostate.**

Telegram may be an encrypted platform, but its channels are publicly accessible. While many of the channels in this sample promote violence and hate speech in plain sight, it must be assumed that even more explicit conversations are happening in private spaces, enabling the coordination and planning of the violence these users so frequently espouse. These private spaces may be significantly more concerning, because the people in the military who have engaged in violence are typically less likely to brag about it. The broader concern is that the people boasting about 'shooting a guy in his fucking face' may be much less likely to have any relevant skills or experience, but instead provide a legitimising voice to the use of violence. Many users articulate their awareness of researchers and law enforcement conducting social-media investigations on the platform, and they warn other channel and chat participants to take care when using threatening language.

With the global growth of the extreme right, the monitoring of these actors' online activity is essential. Though Telegram has taken steps to deplatform certain channels, many of those in our sample are still active – including those that claim to be affiliated with terrorist organisations, such as Atomwaffen, a small but violent accelerationist movement

dedicated to the breakdown of the nation state.

Despite the loosely organised nature of contemporary extreme right-wing groups, the consistent inspiration these channels draw from military influences is a cause for concern. The Telegram channels analysed here sit at a nexus of militaristic posturing, white supremacist views; and at best, a tacit approval of violence; and at worst, a desire for it. In light of activities at the US Capitol on 6 January, the broad adoption of arguments legitimising the use of violence against the government is particularly concerning.

The juxtaposition between holding service members, veterans and military information in high regard on the one hand, and holding governments supposedly corrupted by vilified (Jewish) interests in contempt on the other, provides a pathway by which self-identified patriots may enact violence against their own governments – and yet cast themselves as heroes. The rhetoric of 'fighting for America' and 'protect and defend the Constitution,' on display at the 6 January Capitol attack, echoes the oath all service members take when they join the military. Thus, the violence can be framed as heroes protecting the Constitution from a corrupt government, as opposed to insurgents seeking to overthrow the legitimate government. The anti-government rhetoric on display leading up to the Capitol attack echoes the same antisemitic, anti-government rhetoric seen in some of the Telegram channels analysed in this report. That veterans played a highly visible role in the attack underscores the power of these messages of justified violence against the government.

While we cannot claim the messages analysed in white supremacist chatrooms on Telegram contributed directly to the events of 6 January, the connections between the content of those messages, the visible presence of people who appeared to be affiliated with the military, the patriotic rhetoric and the premeditated violence suggest such messages can, indeed, have serious real-world consequences. Whether or not there is a true or pervasive link to the military community, the appearance of this connection serves as a potentially powerful tool for strengthening right-wing extremism. The perceived presence of the military community in both the online chatrooms and the 6 January attack on the Capitol serve to give these views the appearance of mainstream acceptability – and help to broaden their reach and appeal.

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