



VFRL Supports SecDef Actions to Counter Extremism in the Military

The members of Veterans for Responsible Leadership (VFRL) salute the recent decision by Secretary of Defense Austin to [take immediate actions to counter extremism in the military and to establish a Countering Extremism Working Group](#). As Secretary Austin wrote in his memo detailing his directions, “The vast majority of those who serve in uniform ... do so with great honor and integrity, but any extremist behavior in the force can have an outsized impact.”

VFRL members were pleased to note the prioritization of countering veteran extremism. Among the immediate actions, Secretary Austin required updates to the service member transition process, to ensure that members leaving the military are trained on their potential targeting by extremist groups. This provides new veterans the tools they need to recognize, resist and report recruitment efforts by these groups, if they choose to do so. Many extremist groups prize the recruitment of veterans because of their martial and leadership skills and the legitimacy they provide the groups. Veterans can be vulnerable to these groups if they are missing the identity, purpose, or a sense of order they enjoyed in the military. Providing this training and resource to veterans can help them avoid extremism and shine a spotlight on groups who are targeting military veterans.

VFRL also supports the other immediate actions ordered by Secretary Austin, including a review of the military policies that define “extremist behavior” and prohibited actions; a review of processes for screening new military recruits for extremist behavior; and the commission of a study on extremist behavior in the military, to determine the scope of the problem.

The commissioning of a study is an overdue action, one that has been recommended in multiple Congressional Hearings on extremism and white supremacy, and most recently in the [House Armed Services Committee Hearing on Extremism in the Armed Forces](#) held on March 24, 2021. Both the left-leaning and right-leaning witnesses in that hearing noted the lack of hard information on the extent of the problem in our military. American University Professor Dr. Audrey Cronin included a study in her recommendations to the committee, stating, “The most immediate problem is an absence of good data;” and Texas Representative Pat Fallon (R-Texas) also noted the issue, asking, “Where’s the data and evidence that suggests that extremism is rampant in our military?” The insurrection at the Capitol on January 6th revealed the presence of an outsized number of extremists with military backgrounds – almost twenty percent of those arrested were veterans. Whether that percentage is an accurate reflection of extremism in the military or not, the study ordered by Secretary Austin will address this glaring issue head-on, and allow the military to best allocate their training resources based on the data.

With these immediate actions, Secretary Austin has appropriately focused the Department of Defense on identifying, preventing, and eradicating extremism in the US military, from recruitment to retirement. The members and leadership of VFRL support Secretary Austin’s directive and attention on extremism in the military.

For these efforts to bear fruit, they must be consistent and ongoing. We look forward to future updates from the Department’s new Countering Extremism Working Group, and stand ready to support its work.



Veterans for Responsible Leadership (VFRL) (<http://vfri.org>) Veterans for Responsible Leadership (VFRL) is a diverse nonpartisan organization whose mission is to uphold the integrity of American democracy from those who seek to undermine and subvert its institutions, the rule of law, and electoral system for personal or political advantage. We exist to advance adherence to our founding ideals through shared sacrifice, civic engagement, and political leadership. Its members believe that service to the country shouldn't end when they take off the uniform, and all are asked to sign the Veteran Code (<http://veterancode.org>) to keep faith with their oath, their country, and their fellow veterans.
