Comrades in Arms, Comrades in Hate: A Data-Driven Analysis of Military Veterans and Right-Wing Extremism in the United States

By

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Honours Bachelor of Arts, Sociology, University of New Brunswick, 2023

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the Graduate Academic Unit of Sociology

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This thesis is accepted by the
Dean of Graduate Studies

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

September, 2025

Abstract

Growing concern has emerged regarding the connection between U.S. military service and right-wing extremism (RWE), yet empirical research on this relationship remains limited. This thesis addresses this gap by quantitatively examining military experience and extremist affiliation among individuals charged in the January 6th, 2021 Capitol riot and in the broader Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset.

Logistic regression, chi-square tests, and descriptive statistics are used to estimate the likelihood of extremist involvement by military background, controlling for demographic factors, and to explore variation across service branches, organizational affiliation, and geographic characteristics.

Findings indicate a statistically significant overrepresentation of veterans in right-wing extremist groups relative to their share of the U.S. population, with notable clustering by branch. The study contributes to scholarship on extremism by highlighting how military socialization and identity may intersect with ideologically motivated unlawful behavior.

Dedication

To all those who have lost their lives to hatred and intolerance. May their memories be a blessing. ז״ל.

Acknowledgements

There are several individuals who I would like to thank for their roles not only in helping me produce this research, but also in supporting me as I reached this point in my career. Firstly, I would like to thank my dear friends in the UNB Sociology department, Mary Webster, KD Merritt, and Void Clark-Nason. Through the last two years, your friendship and guidance has been indispensable, and I could not have asked for a better support group.

I would also like to extend my utmost gratitude to Dr. David Hofmann, for sparking my fascination and love of this branch of sociology and offering constant guidance through the last four years, and to Dr. Neeru Gupta for pointing me towards the quantitative aspects of social research that had frightened me before. You have both provided me with such a unique experience and offered your vast expertise, supporting my development at every step of the way, and provided ample research and funding opportunities.

To the organizers and partners of the Consortium on Analytics for Data-Driven Decision making (CAnD3) at McGill, thank you for providing a program that offered me so many opportunities to upskill my quantitative and data-visualization skills. While running these analyses in SPSS was doable, the approaches and techniques you all exposed to me fundamentally changed the direction of this research.

To my parents, Carol Nemeroff and Lliam Harrison, thank you for your unwavering support, constant willingness to read and give feedback on my work, and taking the late-night calls to help me work through writing blocks.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Ella, who has endured the struggles of having a partner in grad school while planning a wedding, and still gave unconditional support. I love you.

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Datasets and Projects:

DOJ	Department of Justice
GWU	George Washington University
J6	January 6th, 2021 United States Capitol Riots
NPR	National Public Radio
PIRUS	Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States
START	National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

Military Institutions and Branches

ANG	Air National Guard
ARNG	Army National Guard
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
CAR	Canadian Airborne Regiment
DOD	Department of Defense
JROTC	Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps
KSK	Kommando Spezialkräfte (Germany)
MAD	Militärischer Abschirmdienst (Germany)
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
USA	United States Army/United States of America

USAF	United States Air Force
USCG	United States Coast Guard
USMC	United States Marine Corps
USN	United States Navy

Political or Extremist Groups/Terms

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
FAP	Freiheitliche Deutsche Arbeiterpartei
FPO	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs
FvD	Forum voor Democratie
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
WPP	White Patriot Party
ZOG	Zionist Occupation Government

Other Terms

CAO	Canadian Army Order
IMF	International Monetary Fund
SIT	Social Identity Theory
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor
PTSD/C-PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder/Complex PTSD
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act

1.0 Introduction

The attack on the United States Capitol that took place in Washington, D.C. on January 6th, 2021 (J6) was a rare and deeply symbolic act of political violence against the U.S. American citizens, many displaying symbols of hate, and uttering and acting upon violent threats, stormed the Capitol building, directed by outgoing Republican President Donald Trump, in an attempt to halt the legal process of certifying the 2020 U.S. Federal Election victory of his Democratic opponent, Joe Biden. Dubbed by some, such as CNN and NPR as riots or an insurrection (Cohen & Lotz, 2022; Kuznia, 2021), and by others such as Tucker Carlson and Georgia Representative Andrew Clyde as a legal protest (Cillizza, 2021; Mascaro et al., 2023), the events of January 6th, 2021 were eventually tied to the deaths of at least nine individuals – four supporters/participants and five U.S. Capitol Police Officers (Farley, 2021).

Following J6, prosecutions began almost immediately for a range of federal charges such as *Parading, Demonstrating, or Picketing in a Capitol Building*, *Entering and Remaining in a Restricted Building; Disorderly and Disruptive Conduct in a Restricted Building,* and *Violent Entry and Disorderly Conduct in a Capitol Building*, to name just a few. The earliest charge was laid on January 7th, 2021, and by early February, at least 40 people were charged for various crimes. As academic institutions and media outlets began to track the arrests and demographic information of the defendants, organizations such as NPR and the George Washington University Program on Extremism began to create databases, alongside the official Department of Justice repository. This event and these databases provided researchers with an unparalleled

population to work with as a means to further research on extremism, and a snapshot of how violent extremism can manifest.

This thesis focuses on one particularly troubling facet of the January 6th riots: the involvement of individuals with military backgrounds. The relationship between military experience and right-wing extremism (RWE) is not new. From the post-Civil War formation of the Ku Klux Klan by Confederate veterans (Horn, 1969, p. 9) to more recent high-profile cases, the entanglement between military service and extremist ideologies is longstanding (Koehler, 2019; Simi et al., 2013). In the United States, Marine Corps Lance Corporal Vasilios Pistolis violently participated in the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, later bragging on social media about assaulting counter-protesters (Thompson & Winston, 2018). Another notable American example is veteran Timothy McVeigh, one of the individuals responsible for perpetrating the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995, where an explosion targeting the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building killed 168 and injured several hundred more (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d., 2020). In Canada, reservist Corey Hurren rammed his truck through the gates of the residence of the Governor General of Canada (Rideau Hall) armed and intending to confront the Prime Minister (Humphreys, 2021), while Master Corporal Patrik Mathews was charged with weapons violations and ties to the neo-Nazi terror group *The Base* (McCristall et al., 2022).

Together, these cases reflect a broader pattern: that military experience can intersect with, and in some cases facilitate, right-wing extremism through mechanisms such as institutional socialization, identity disruption, and group-based reaffiliation (see chapters 3 & 4 for further discussion). While such examples highlight the potential for

extremist beliefs to develop within or be enhanced by military service, most research is confined to case studies to help outline mechanisms and suggest the broader prevalence of this phenomenon through anecdotal evidence (such as Amarasingam et al., 2024, McCristall et al., 2022, and Van Dongen et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, research of this sort is important to understanding the risk factors for recruitment into a RWE group, but the knowledge gap presented by a lack of quantitative studies is especially pressing in the current climate of increasing political polarization, misinformation, and distrust in public institutions.

Public discourse around extremism in the armed forces is not new, but much of the existing research has remained focused on qualitative case studies or speculative associations. Scholars such as Koehler (2019), McCristall et al. (2022), and Van Dongen et al. (2022) have laid important groundwork in identifying the push-and-pull factors that might render military personnel more susceptible to radicalization. Still, significant empirical gaps persist. These gaps are not simply academic – they have direct implications for public safety, institutional integrity, and national security. The armed forces are a unique social institution, and their symbolic and practical power can lend disproportionate legitimacy and capability to those engaged in violent extremism; furthermore, the armed forces depend on public trust and perceived legitimacy to operate effectively in a democratic society. Incidents of far-right extremism risk undermining this trust, with potential consequences for recruitment, operational cohesion, and civil-military relations.

While any form of extremism poses a threat to society, the combination of military experience and far-right ideologies presents a unique and pressing risk. The

convergence of racist and xenophobic beliefs with anti-democratic ideals and the "training, know-how, discipline, and access to material goods that may be useful in achieving medium- and long-term goals of larger Right-Wing Extremist (RWE) movements" (McCristall et al., 2022, p. 427) suggests the potential for more coordinated and lethal forms of violence. In recent years, media coverage and scholarly attention have increasingly turned to this threat. As mentioned, United States Marine Corps Lance Corporal Vasilios Pistolis, for example, who participated in the violent and deadly 2017 “Unite the Right” white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, was on active duty. Despite clear evidence and self-admissions of committing a violent assault, Pistolis received only one month in prison and a reduction in rank (Thompson & Winston, 2018). Such an arguably lenient outcome raises serious questions about institutional accountability (for further discussion, see section 3.5.3).

Despite the growing body of qualitative and case-based literature addressing the military-RWE nexus, there remains a paucity of large-scale empirical analysis where military experience is the primary variable. Helmus et al. (2023) is the only major quantitative study to date, surveying a representative sample of the U.S. veteran population to estimate the prevalence of support for political violence. They found that 17.7% expressed support for political violence, with 13.5% expressing support for the far-right political conspiracy movement QAnon. The results suggest that veterans may be susceptible to recruitment for extreme groups; however, measuring beliefs through self-report surveys is notably challenging, especially on sensitive topics like extremism and group labels. Veterans may under- or over-report certain affiliations or beliefs rather than share their true opinions out of social desirability bias. Studies targeting active-duty

personnel face even greater hurdles due to institutional culture, such as surveillance mechanisms (as will be discussed in section 4.1), and perceived risks of non-confidentiality and disciplinary action.

The J6 riots offer a unique opportunity to examine these questions with fewer of the limitations associated with self-reporting (though there are other limitations, as discussed in section 7.3). By analyzing publicly available information on those charged in connection with the riots, researchers can gain insights into patterns of extremist involvement that are based on verifiable actions rather than attitudes alone. The present study takes this opportunity one step further by comparing the J6 arrestees with similar information from individuals documented in the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset, a large-scale, cross-sectional database of offenders with independently verified extremist affiliations active between 1948 and 2022 (START UMD, 2025).

To that end, this thesis collects and analyzes information from two complementary data sources to examine military experience and connections to extremist groups or communication channels. First, the research involved compiling a new dataset from publicly available sources documenting individuals charged in connection with the January 6th, 2021 Capitol riots. This J6 dataset is analyzed alongside the PIRUS dataset using binary logistic regressions and descriptive comparisons to investigate whether military experience, and particularly veteran status, is associated with an increased likelihood of extremist group affiliation among individuals involved in politicalized criminal behaviours.

Two primary research questions guide this analysis:

1. Among individuals identified in the J6 and PIRUS datasets, is there a statistically significant relationship between military experience (particularly veteran status) and the risk of extremist group affiliation?
2. Among those with military experience, what patterns can be observed in terms of their geodemographics, branch-specific representation, and extremist group affiliation?

While not representative of the U.S. military community cumulatively, this analysis offers valuable insight into the potential risks posed by individuals with military experience who engage in criminal extremist activities. By focusing on the J6 defendants and comparing them to the broader historical PIRUS dataset, this study also circumvents some of the methodological issues that arise in survey-based approaches. The chapters that follow offer an in-depth explanation of the theoretical framework, a discussion of the relevant literature, a detailed breakdown of methods, and finally, a discussion of findings, limitations, and implications for future research and policy.

This study also contributes to a more rigorous and theory-driven understanding of the social mechanisms underlying radicalization. It draws on classical and contemporary sociological frameworks – including Role Theory, Social Identity Theory, Durkheim's concept of anomie, and the Lofland-Stark Conversion Model – to explain how military service, particularly its termination, can produce identity ruptures that predispose individuals to extremist narratives. The findings of this thesis will not only provide empirical answers to pressing policy questions but also support theory-building in the sociology of deviance, extremism, and identity.

While the present empiricisms narrow on the U.S. context, this study also provides a launching point for future research drawing on comparative Canadian data. Cases such as Hurren and Mathews underscore that similar dynamics may be at play in allied militaries, suggesting that future comparative work is warranted. Moreover, by focusing specifically on veterans, this thesis builds on recent sociological theory about the social role of the soldier, institutional disaffiliation, and the psychological vacuum that can emerge after service termination. In doing so, it offers a framework that is not only policy-relevant but also sociologically robust.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 presents a breakdown of the events of January 6th, 2021, to provide context for the subsequent analysis. Chapter 3 moves into a review of relevant literature, including scholarship on the nexus between RWE and the armed forces, global trends, and operational definitions, such as how this study conceptualizes RWE and the ways in which it manifests differently across different global regions. The following chapter outlines the theoretical framework that emerged through engagement with the literature, drawing from both classical and contemporary sociological theories including Role Theory, Social Identity Theory, Durkheim's concept of anomie, the Lofland-Stark Conversion Model, and Bentham's theory of the panopticon. These theories are used to justify the directionality assumed in this study – namely, that military experience may act as a precursor to radicalization – through a focus on identity disruption and role loss. Chapter 5 outlines the research design, data collection strategy, and analytical plan, before Chapter 6 presents the results. A discussion of the implications of the key findings, within the context of the study's

limitations is found in Chapter 7. Finally, the thesis identified some potential areas for future research and offers some concluding remarks.

2.0 The Events of January 6th, 2021

The lead-up to the January 6th, 2021 Capitol attack was marked by a confluence of social crises and political flashpoints that heightened national tensions. The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted daily life but also intensified ideological polarization around public health measures, individual freedoms, and trust in institutions (Blair et al., 2022; Golos et al., 2022; Jones & McDermott, 2022; Reinemann et al., 2022). Deemed by many on the political right as a government hoax or a vehicle for authoritarian control, and by many on the left as a catastrophic but preventable failure of public leadership, the pandemic catalyzed widespread mistrust and grievance. Lockdowns, vaccine mandates, and economic instability further deepened these divisions, as competing narratives of freedom, science, and state overreach took hold.

Simultaneously, the videotaped killing by a white police officer of George Floyd, an unarmed African-American man in Minneapolis in May 2020 sparked a nationwide reckoning with systemic racism and state violence, galvanizing protests and counter-protests that underscored deep fissures in American society. For some, these events reaffirmed long-standing calls for justice and police reform. For others, particularly within right-wing and reactionary circles, they fed into a broader narrative of social disorder, anti-white animus, and governmental failure to maintain "law and order." This period saw a marked escalation in online radicalization, conspiracy dissemination, and paramilitary organizing, especially among those who viewed Donald Trump's presidency as both embattled and uniquely redemptive (G. Davies et al., 2023; Levinsson et al., 2021, 2022).

These overlapping crises of health, race, and political legitimacy set the stage for an explosive response to the 2020 presidential election. In the wake of the growing

distrust of the government, incumbent president Donald Trump began to disseminate misinformation, claiming ahead of the election that there would be widespread voter fraud as a result of the mail in ballots (Seligman, 2020). Fueled by months of disinformation, lawsuits, and false claims of electoral fraud, the "Stop the Steal" movement took shape as a rallying cry for those who believed that democratic processes had been hijacked. Immediately following the Democrat victory in November of 2020, Donald Trump refused to concede, continuing to claim that he had won the election, and that it was stolen (Helmore & Pengelly, 2020).

As January 6th, 2021, the date of the certification of the election, moved closer, Trump supporters planned to attend a protest in Washington, D.C., at the behest of Trump. Trump, claiming that it was "statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 election" in a tweet on December 18th, told supporters to attend the protest on January 6th, 2021, saying "be there, will be wild!" (Carless, 2020). Throughout the time between the election and the planned protest, several J6'ers (participants of the J6 riots) posted on various social media platforms calling for violence and intimidation tactics, with users expressing views such as that "it will be literal war on that day. … Where we'll storm offices and physically remove and even kill all the D.C. traitors and reclaim the country" (Blake, 2021). As January 6th drew closer, media outlets and Law Enforcement Agencies began preparing for violence, unsure of what may follow (Kuznia et al., 2021; Z. Wild & Cohen, 2021; Zadrozny & Collins, 2021). On the evening of January 5th, 2021 and the early morning of January 6th, at least 10 individuals were arrested on weapons charges (Ramirez & Watts, 2021), and two pipe bombs were found outside of the Democratic

National Convention headquarters and the Republican National Convention headquarters (Fandos & Cochrane, 2021).

Finally, the "March to Save America" began on the morning of January 6th. Around noon, President Trump delivered a speech in which he claimed that "we [Trump and his supporters] will never concede!" (Karni & Haberman, 2021). During this speech, there was no explicit call to violence from the President, but several veiled calls were littered throughout. At various points throughout, Trump said "When you catch somebody in a fraud, you are allowed to go by very different rules", and that "you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength, and you have to be strong" (Savage, 2021). Throughout the speech, Trump continued to push followers to try to "stop the steal" and halt the certification process, saying "you will have an illegitimate president", and "we fight like hell, and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore" (Savage, 2021). Rudy Giuliani, one of Trump's lawyers, urged lawmakers to overturn the election and called for trial by combat at 10:47am (Cohen & Lotz, 2022)

At some point in the speech, Trump stated that afterwards, he and the protesters would walk to the Capitol, "to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women. We're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them—because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength" (Mogelson, 2021). By the time Trump finished speaking, protesters began moving, with some yelling "We're storming the capitol!" (Mogelson, 2021). As Trump ended his speech, he called for supporters to march towards the capitol, at which point the attack had already begun.

Orchestrated and led primarily by members of The Proud Boys (a now designated terrorist organization in Canada), participants overran barriers and began rushing towards the building. By 1:21pm, approximately 11 minutes after finishing his speech, President Trump was informed that the Capitol was under attack. In the ensuing chaos, rioters continued to storm the barricades put in place by local police, and assaulted several police officers. One rioter assaulted an officer with a flagpole (Reilly, 2023), and outside of the Capitol building, a set of gallows with a noose was erected. Various other incidents involving violence against police officers occurred, causing severe injuries to some, and ostensibly, the death of police officer Brian Sitnick, who suffered two strokes the following day (Hermann & Hsu, 2021).

After fighting through police barricades and engaging in fights with police officers, rioters finally broke through to the building, which was closed to the public. To enter the building, many rioters scaled walls and scaffolding and broke windows before opening doors for others to enter. The Capitol building went on lockdown, and senators and representatives were either evacuated or had to shelter in place. As congresspeople's offices were broken into and ransacked, President Trump, at the White House, continued tweeting claims that the election was stolen, and that Mike Pence – whose constitutional role as Vice President was to formally certify the incoming president's victory – did not do what he should have (overturn the election). At 2:38pm, Trump tweeted urging the rioters to "stay peaceful" (Lonsdorf et al., 2024). Around this time, representatives in the House Chambers were provided with gas masks. Around 3pm, rioters broke into the Senate chambers, rushing to the podium to take selfies and look at papers left behind. A short time later, while trying to break into the Speaker's Lobby, where lawmakers were

sheltering, Ashli Babbitt, a Trump supporter and Air Force veteran, was fatally shot by a police officer, the only Trump supporter to be directly killed in the riots.

Despite the riot beginning before 1pm, and Metropolitan Police Chief Steven Sund requesting National Guard deployment as early as 12:58pm, it took until 3:36pm for the White House Press Secretary to announce that the National Guard had been deployed. From there, the first contingent of National Guard would not arrive on scene until 5:20pm, almost four and a half hours after the riot had started (Mascaro et al., 2021). At 4:17pm, January 6th, 2021, over four hours after a violent mob began assaulting police officers and trespassing in a closed federal building, President Donald Trump uploaded a video (WBUR Newsroom, 2021), saying:

> I know your pain, I know you're hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election and everyone knows it, especially the other side. But you have to go home now. We have to have peace. We have to have law and order. We have to respect our great people in law and order. We don't want anybody hurt. It's a very tough period of time. There's never been a time like this where such a thing happened where they could take it away from all of us—from me, from you, from our country. This was a fraudulent election, but we can't play into the hands of these people. We have to have peace. So go home. We love you. You're very special. You've seen what happens. You see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know how you feel, but go home, and go home in peace.

Around 6pm, President Trump was advised to not send a tweet saying “these are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously and viciously stripped away from great patriots. Remember this day forever!” (Faulders et al., 2024), as it made him seem culpable for the events of the day. At 6:01pm, Trump posted the tweet. Within an hour, Twitter suspended Trump’s account, and removed all tweets from the day.

While the 2020 election was eventually certified in the early hours of January 7th, 2021, the riot left at least $30 million of damage (Chappell, 2021), at least 60 police officers and rioters injured (Lee, 2021) and several deaths associated with it. While not all deaths are directly attributable to the events of the day, they are commonly associated with it in media reports.

Among Trump supporters:

- Ashli Babbitt, 36, fatally shot
- Roseanne Boyland, 32, initially believed to have been trampled, later found to have died from an amphetamine overdose (Thanawala et al., 2021)
- Kevin Greeson, 55, complications with heart disease (Farley, 2021)
- Benjamin Phillips, 50, complications with heart disease (Farley, 2021).

A further five police officers died as a result of the riots.

- Brian Sitnick, 42, suffered two strokes following the riots where he was peppersprayed.
- Howard Charles Liebengood, 51, suicide (Kaplan, 2021)
- Jeffrey L. Smith, 35, suicide after injury at the riots (Hermann & Weiner, 2021)
- Kyle Hendrik DeFreytag, unknown age, suicide (Wild et al., 2021)
- Gunther Hashida, 43, suicide (Wild et al., 2021).

3.0 Defining and Operationalizing Right-Wing Extremism

This chapter contains a literature review of the various facets of research on Right-Wing Extremism, including operational definitions, contextualization of the nexus of RWE and the armed forces, and theoretical works of said nexus. These elements are central to establishing the conceptual and empirical foundations of the study. Definitional clarity ensures consistency in identifying extremist actors across datasets. Contextualizing the military-extremism relationship situates the study within existing scholarly debates and addresses recent institutional concerns.

3.1 The Radicalization Process

Understanding the complexity of the radicalization process is critical to contextualizing how and why individuals become involved in ideologically motivated extremist activities. Radicalization is not synonymous with terrorism, and not all radicalized individuals engage in violence. Rather than a singular pathway, contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes radicalization as a dynamic and non-linear process, shaped by individual, relational, and structural factors hat can lead individuals to adopt belief systems that legitimize or tolerate political violence (Borum, 2016; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). This section explores several scholarly models of radicalization, ranging from linear stage-based frameworks to multi-level taxonomies. True as it may be that there are several contending views of the radicalization process, and the important points along the timeframe, there is widespread agreement that radicalization emerges through myriad factors that interact over time. These include psychological needs, group dynamics, perceived grievances, ideological framing, and increasingly, the role of internet-mediated environments.

Earlier literature in the 1970s often framed terrorists as psychologically abnormal, characterized by personality disorders or pathological traits (Leistedt, 2016, p. 1589). As Leistedt notes, however, this "clinical disorder" view began to fall out of favor in the 1980s and 1990s, not because it was disproven by evidence, but because it was unsupported by any. More recent research has shown that radicals and terrorists do not generally exhibit psychopathology at higher rates than the general population, and that psychological explanations alone are insufficient to account for extremist involvement (Leistedt, 2016). While traits such as narcissism or paranoia have been noted in several cases, they are neither necessary nor solely sufficient for explaining radicalization. Instead, Leistedt (2016) emphasizes the importance of risk factors, persuasion techniques, social engineering, and media environments. Radicalization, in his view, is a process that involves cognitive shifts and contextual pressures rather than static personality traits.

With that in mind, Doosje et al. (2016) propose a three-phase model of radicalization: Sensitivity, Group Membership, and Action. The first phase, Sensitivity, involves an openness to alternative worldviews stemming from perceived grievances, personal uncertainty, or the quest for significance. The individual, often feeling marginalized or humiliated, becomes susceptible to narratives that provide meaning and status. This vulnerability is particularly acute when an individual is exposed to identity threats, whether personal, political, or cultural. In the Group Membership phase, individuals find psychological refuge and social belonging within radical collectives. Group processes, especially conformity, normative reinforcement, and polarization, solidify emerging attitudes. Identification with the group becomes central to the individual's self-concept, and ingroup-outgroup boundaries are drawn with increasing

rigidity. As Doosje et al. (2016) observe, radical groups offer cognitive closure, moral clarity, and prescriptive norms that reduce existential ambiguity. The final phase that Doosje et al. identified, Action, reflects a readiness to engage in political violence. Not all who pass through the earlier stages arrive here, but for those who do, violent acts are not aberrations but perceived obligations. These acts are framed as morally justified, symbolically significant, and strategically necessary.

A complementary perspective is offered by McCauley and Moskalenko (2008), who outline twelve mechanisms of radicalization across three levels: individual, group, and mass. These twelve mechanisms help to explain the more nuanced parts of Doosje et al.'s three phases. At the individual level, mechanisms include personal victimization, political grievance, the slippery slope of progressive involvement, and "the power of love", which is a dynamic in which social bonds with radicals catalyze ideological commitment. An importance facet to note, based on McCauley and Moskalenko's work is that radicalization is not always ideologically driven; interpersonal ties and emotional bonds can be equally influential. At the group level, dynamics such as polarization, isolation under threat, and intra-group competition foster escalating extremism. Groups become more radical when they perceive themselves to be in competition for resources, legitimacy, or membership, often adopting more extreme positions to distinguish themselves. Group radicalization also accelerates when members feel targeted or repressed by the state, resulting in what McCauley and Moskalenko term "condensation": the filtering out of moderates and the retention of a hardened core. Mass-level mechanisms, such as jujitsu politics (where state repression heightens group legitimacy), hate, and martyrdom, shine light on how public narratives and media spectacles can

catalyze radical beliefs. These mechanisms not only intensify ingroup solidarity but also demonize the outgroup, creating a potential breeding ground for violent mobilization.

Building on these social psychological models, Della Porta (2018) introduces a relational and political lens. Rather than focusing on internal states or group psychology alone, she emphasizes the interaction between protest groups and their external environment – particularly, the "state". Radicalization, in this view, is often the result of ongoing, tense exchanges between activists, law enforcement, and political institutions. When protest movements are met with repression, ignored by authorities, or stripped of legitimate political channels, they may escalate their tactics in response. This escalation is not necessarily irrational, but rather strategic. Violence emerges not as a sudden break from activism, but as a form of continuity within cycles of mobilization. From this perspective, radicalization is not a matter of deviant belief systems but an adaptive response to blocked pathways and antagonistic encounters. Della Porta's model helps explain why radicalization often intensifies in contexts where democratic institutions are weakening, state responses are heavy-handed, and movements are pushed into more confrontational modes of engagement.

In an increasingly digitized and online world, these interactions with group members, the out-group, and prevailing social norms that contribute to radicalization occur more and more frequently in digital spaces. Koehler (2014) and Odag et al. (2019) emphasize that the internet is not merely a tool for propaganda dissemination and the brainwashing that Leistedt argues is critical to radicalization, but also a structurally transformative medium for identity formation, group networking, and ideological training. Koehler's (2014) qualitative analysis of eight former German right-wing

extremists reveals that the internet served as both an accelerant and a gateway. Online forums allowed for the rapid development of "contrast societies," in which radical ideologies were not only circulated but normalized. The anonymity and immediacy of digital interaction reduced social barriers and created environments conducive to ideological experimentation. Interviewees reported feeling emboldened to express views they would not voice offline, and in many cases, virtual status translated into real-world standing within extremist milieus. Similarly, Odag et al. (2019) review 88 studies on online radicalization, noting that extremist actors use the internet to build cloistered echo chambers and deploy targeted recruitment strategies, especially toward marginalized or disaffected individuals. However, the authors caution against deterministic accounts: while digital platforms facilitate radicalization, they do not cause it in isolation. The absence of user-centered research and causal theorization remains a critical gap in the literature.

Across these frameworks, a unifying conclusion emerges: radicalization cannot be reduced to a single cause, stage model, or personality type. Instead, it is best understood as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon, shaped by interactions between individual identity needs, social relationships, and broader structural conditions. As will be discussed in later sections, this approach requires moving beyond ideological content alone to consider how identity formation, group dynamics, and social belonging reinforce and sustain radical commitments.

3.2 Operational Definitions

3.2.1 Towards a definition of Extremism: Awful but Lawful, and Extremist Activities

A common point of contention in research on extremism is the distinction between radical ideologies and violent extremism – specifically, identifying the threshold at which oppositional or anti-establishment beliefs manifest as extremist action or intent. Radicalism, in and of itself, is not inherently good or bad; Bötticher (2017) notes that "historically, radical political parties were key drivers in the progress towards greater democracy in a number of states. Radicalism as an ideological mindset tends to be very critical of the existing status quo, pursuing the objective of restructuring and/or overthrowing outdated political structures" (p. 75). Arguably, the difference is the willingness to utilize and frequency of violence. While radicals and radical ideologies may at times use or demand political violence, Bötticher notes that radicals use violence more pragmatically, and only in select cases where deemed absolutely necessary. Extremists, meanwhile, view violence as a legitimate form of political discourse and action, regardless of legal implications (Kaplan, 2021). Furthermore, extremism is inherently anti-democratic, while radicalism may or may not be. Bötticher argues that "democracies can live with radicals but not with uncompromising, aggressive extremist militants" (p. 75).

These differences, among others that Bötticher (2017) discusses, mean that it is critical to understand the nature of each type of group, and how they may influence democracies and governments. While all extremists are radicals, not all radicals are extremists; an individual can have "awful but lawful" ideals. It is when the ideals cross

into a willingness, or even a desire, to commit unlawful acts of violence against the masses that radicalism becomes violent extremism. This difference also highlights the distinction between two other terms that are often used interchangeably: RWE, and the Far-right. Politicians who espouse Far-right ideals and attempt to pass legislation restricting human rights fall under the umbrella of the Far-right, and Bötticher's (2017) idea of radicalism. However, members of the group Patriot Front who, armed with shields and dressed in matching uniforms in 2022, were charged with conspiracy to incite a riot at an Idaho pride event, should be considered Right-Wing Extremists (Klein, 2022). While Far-right politicians and Patriot front members held the same beliefs, the latter were ready to go out in public incite violence, and inflict it onto others. Furthermore, Nur et al. (2020) argue that when compared with radicals, extremists are often more closed-minded, and willing and able to justify any means, such as fraud and violence (p. 3).

Despite the importance of differentiating between these two terms, some scholars and journalists often use them interchangeably. Carter (2018), for example, states "we still lack an unequivocal definition of right-wing extremism/radicalism (whichever term is preferred)" (p. 1). Bötticher (2017) also highlights the related and problematic term "non-violent extremist" (p. 74), which is an oxymoronic term: extremists who are "non-violent" are either not extremists, or have yet to be given the circumstance or opportunity to commit an illegal act in the name of ideology.

Thus, for this thesis and analysis, a Right-Wing Extremist is anyone subscribing to Far-right ideologies who either has engaged, or is willing to engage in acts of violence or other crimes to further the reach and prevalence of Far-right ideals. Individuals who travelled to Washington, D.C. planning to participate in crime or violence, or individuals

who traveled without said intention but were swayed to it, constitute Right-Wing extremists at the time of the Capitol Hill riots on January 6th, 2021.

3.2.2 Defining Right-Wing Extremism

Because the focus of this thesis is specifically on right-wing extremism, it is important to understand what ideologies, beliefs, and conspiracies underpin this umbrella term. Scholarly research on RWE encompasses a wide variety of ideologies, beliefs, conspiracies, and groups that, in some combination or another, constitute RWE. Perry & Scrivens (2019) note that defining RWE is a challenging task, given the heterogeneity of ideologies and movements that make up the phenomenon. But scholars, such as Mudde (1995) and Perry & Scrivens (2019), have put forward some lists of these commonly accepted characteristics. Mudde (1995) concurs that RWE cannot be characterized by a single feature, such as xenophobia or opposing democracy. Rather, Mudde argues that RWE is made up of five core features: "nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and the strong state" (p. 206). Carter (2018), combing through the works of 15 scholarly definitions put forward since 1992, came to a conclusion that is functionally identical to Mudde's (1995) five features; the strong state, nationalism, racism and xenophobia, anti-democracy, and populism/anti-establishment rhetoric. Perry & Scrivens (2019), meanwhile, contextualize RWE as motivated by white supremacist nationalism with aspects of racial, ethnic, and sexual superiority (p. 5). Depending on the sources one draws upon, the umbrella term of RWE grows or shrinks significantly, potentially spreading to encompass racial purity movements, fanatical "Christo-fascist" beliefs, the incel movement, and many others. More contemporary understandings of RWE, such as those put forward by Perry & Scrivens (2019) and Hofmann et al. (2021), allow for the

inclusion of groups that subscribe to some beliefs and ideologies, but not others. In other words, not all RWE groups or ideologies display all aspects of the academic definitions. For example, the Canadian Freemen-On-The-Land movement and the more well-known American sovereign citizen movement maintain strong anti-government ideals and rejection of authority. But while they share ideological roots with more racist movements (Hofmann, 2019, p. 84), they do not display much overt racism or antisemitism.

Other groups, such as Aryan Nations, skinhead gangs, and neo-Nazi groups exemplify the traits more traditionally associated with academic understandings of RWE, such as racial purity, belief in "an innate biogenetic superiority" (Simi & Futrell, 2010, p. 16), and misogynistic gender roles. These types of ideological groups seem to have garnered much more attention in academic and media spaces than other ideologies. Jensen et al. (2020) note that in the 2020 version of PIRUS, among those identified since 1948 in the PIRUS database, approximately 65% had "demonstrated some expression of white supremacy, a view that people of European descent (typically Christians and especially men) are inherently superior to others and should therefore dominate social, political, and cultural institutions" (p. 2). A further 10.3% of those identified maintained solely anti-immigrant/anti-Muslim views, while 28.9% of RWE adherents in the PIRUS dataset belonged to the Sovereign citizen movement or anti-government militias, believing "that the federal government lacks legitimate governing authority" (Jensen et al., 2020, p. 2).

Another group commonly associated with the far-right, Incels, maintain misogynistic perceptions of gender commonly seen in white-supremacist and neo-Nazi ideologies, while not necessarily having racism as a core aspect; it may still come

through in some individuals, but one can be an incel without being racist. For example, during his police interrogation, Alek Minassian, the individual charged with plowing a rented van through a large crowd of people in Toronto in 2018, killing 11 and injuring 15 others, indicated that his motivations were sexually motivated revenge, with no apparent racial aspects (The Mob Reporter, 2019).

It is also important to acknowledge that most RWE adherents do not become radicalized and perpetrate acts of violence in a vacuum. Rather, a major factor in defining and understanding RWE is the prevalence and rapid propagation of conspiracy theories within RWE communication networks and communities. This is particularly important to understand in reference to the events of January 6th, 2021 at the U.S. Capitol Building, where conspiracies of a stolen election, a shadowy cabal trying to take over the nation, and many others were swirling online and through communication channels. The most common tropes and theories are relatively well known, such as those about a supposed global cabal of Jewish individuals known as the Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG), politician pedophilia and child sex-trafficking rings (e.g., Pizzagate[1]), and the Great Replacement Theory[2]. Many other conspiracy theories exist are less widely propagated, though just as problematic. Taneski & Idrizi (2020) note that a core aspect of RWE is "conspiracy theories that involve a serious threat to national sovereignty and personal freedom, and belief that personal and national 'lifestyles' are endangered or already lost" (p. 1082), and that "for them [RWE adherents], the threat is real and unavoidable, and

[1] "Pizzagate" was a widespread conspiracy theory during the 2016 US Presidential Election, claiming that a Democrat-run pedophile ring, which the Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria in Washington, D.C. was involved in. The conspiracy peddled the claim that Hillary Clinton was participating in this ring.
[2] The great replacement theory is a conspiracy theory that the white population of the western world is being replaced by unskilled, non-european immigrants. This theory has sparked several mass shootings, including the Mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019, and the 2019 Walmart mass shooting in El Paso, Texas.

comes from a specific ethnic, racial, or religious group" (p. 1082). Vegetti & Littvay (2022) also note that not all individuals who subscribe to conspiracy theories are, or will at any point be extremists or terrorists, nor will they support violent political acts. However, when examining incidents involving RWE adherents and ideologies, conspiracy theories are very frequently, if not always, a contributing factor.

For instance, a sociogram[3] developed by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) identified a minimum of 109 J6 participants with connections to the conspiracy movement QAnon, and several social media posts of individuals indicted in relation to January 6th posted social media content parroting phrases from QAnon[4]. Corey Hurren himself posted an image of a white rabbit, the alleged mascot of QAnon, with the caption "has anyone else been following 'Q' and the 'White Rabbit' down the rabbit hole and how this all relates to the Corona virus/COVID-19 situation?" (*GrindHouse Fine Foods ᴄᴀ on Instagram*, 2020). Four years earlier, Edgar Maddison Welch fired shots into the Comet Ping Pong restaurant, intending to "self-investigate" a supposed child sex-trafficking ring within the pizza restaurant, believing himself to be a rescuer of children from the aforementioned "Pizzagate" conspiracy (Kennedy, 2017; Ortiz, 2017). After Welch was arrested and sentenced, the owner of Comet Ping Pong continued to receive death threats, and even had a fire set inside his restaurant by another Pizzagate believer (Miller, 2021). Despite the fear and trauma Welch caused to the owner, employees, and patrons of the pizzeria

[3] A sociogram is a visual representation of social relationships that uses nodes to represent individuals and lines to represent connections between them. It is commonly used in social network analysis to illustrate patterns of interaction, influence, or affiliation within a group.
[4] QAnon is a hybrid Right-Wing conspiracy theory/political movement, focusing on beliefs about a global child sex trafficking cabal that Donald Trump is fighting against.

when he opened fire, his motivations, though misguided, were to protect his two daughters and other children in the country. He believed he had a responsibility to do so. In a video he recorded while driving to the pizzeria, Welch allegedly said to his daughters "I can't let you grow up in a world that's so corrupt by evil, without at least standing up for you and for other children just like you" (Miller, 2021; *"Pizzagate" Gunman Recorded "Goodbye" Video Message to His Family*, 2017).

For the purposes of this thesis, RWE is defined as a heterogeneous set of ideologies and movements that endorse or engage in the violent defense of a perceived traditional social order through appeals to nationalism, racial or ethnic superiority, authoritarianism, and anti-democratic sentiment. These ideologies frequently overlap with conspiracy theories, particularly those positing existential threats to the nation or its dominant identity group, and are often characterized by populist, anti-establishment rhetoric. While not all adherents hold every belief simultaneously, the presence of one or more of these elements, especially when paired with antagonism towards perceived "out-groups", is sufficient for classification under this umbrella (Mudde, 1995; Carter, 2018; Perry & Scrivens, 2019; Hofmann et al., 2021; Simi & Futrell, 2010).

3.2.3 Gender and Age

As a brief expansion upon the discussion of incel communities in section 3.2.2, research on radicalization and extremist violence has consistently shown that gender plays a central role in shaping both participation and ideological framing. remains an overwhelmingly male-dominated domain, with many of its core narratives deeply rooted in patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies (Mudde, 1995; Perry & Scrivens, 2019). This is particularly evident in Incel communities and male supremacist circles, where gender-

based grievance is often a primary motivator for violence. Even within groups not explicitly defined by gender ideology, hypermasculinity, militarism, and brotherhood are frequently valorized, offering a familiar social structure to those with prior military experience (McCristall et al., 2022). As such, gender is not merely a demographic trait but a key factor shaping the pathways into and expressions of RWE involvement.

Age is similarly important. Younger individuals are statistically more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors and to be in identity formation stages where radical ideologies may offer a sense of purpose or belonging. Conversely, some older participants, especially veterans, may experience role exit and social isolation, making them vulnerable to ideologies that offer a restoration of identity and agency (Jensen, 2023; Kenyon & Simpson, 2024; Klausen et al., 2016). Both ends of the age spectrum therefore warrant attention: youth for their malleability and susceptibility to online propaganda, and older adults for the potential radicalizing effects of disenchantment or disillusionment following service.

3.3 International Trends in Right-Wing Extremism and Military Involvement

The following section will address the growing number of incidents involving RWE and the armed forces in the Western World. While the empirical focus of this thesis is on RWE in the United States, comparative insights from Canada and Europe offer important contextual contrasts. These cases help illustrate the diversity of RWE's interaction with military institutions, shaped by differences in recruitment policies, reintegration practices, and political climate, and sharpen the analytical lens through which the U.S. case can be understood. The following section discusses incidents that have occurred in the United States, Canada, and Germany.

The relationship between RWE and the armed forces is not a new phenomenon. In the wake of the American Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was founded by a group of former confederate soldiers, with the first Grand Wizard being Nathan Bedford Forrest, a former Confederate general (Glass, 2016). William Potter Gale, widely considered by scholars to have revived contemporary RWE as the memory of the Second World War left the minds of the masses, was himself a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army during the Second World War, on General Douglas MacArthur's staff (Barkun, 1997, p. 66). Timothy McVeigh, the infamous domestic terrorist who detonated a bomb at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, was a veteran of the United States Army, having served in the Gulf War and briefly entered special forces training (Koehler, 2019, p. 19).

Attacks on the scale of McVeigh's have been exceedingly rare, but the motivations and problems that drove him to engage in such an act are shared by many individuals across the United States, Canada, and other developed Western nations. Concerns about the intersection of RWE and the armed forces have been expressed by multiple European nations, including Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and the UK (Koehler, 2019; Liger & Gutheil, 2022; Van Dongen et al., 2022) as well as the United States and Canada (Helmus et al., 2023; McCristall et al., 2022; Perry & Scrivens, 2019). Despite acknowledgement by these governments that there is a problem, most nations have not been forthcoming with specific information, keeping it vague under the guise of security concerns. Scholarly work on the relationship, therefore, primarily focuses on those nations that more openly discuss it, primarily the United States, Canada, and Germany.

3.3.1 Examples from The United States

The United States has seen a substantial surge in RWE incidents with connections to members of the armed forces. Koehler (2019) makes note of several incidents with RWE motivations both on American soil and with service members on deployment. These include Army specialist Jarrett William Smith distributing bomb-making information via social media and video lectures; a member of the Florida National Guard being arrested for possession of a "dirty bomb"[5]; members of the US Army's 82nd Airborne Division forming a clandestine neo-Nazi cell and murdering an African American couple; and a sniper team on active duty in Afghanistan posing for a photo in front of a Nazi Schutzstaffel (SS) flag (pp. 6-7). Smith et al. (2011) also help provide context for the American stage, discussing a group active in the 1980s known as the Carolina Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Formed by Frazier George Miller and later renamed as the White Patriot Party (WPP), this group transitioned from traditional Klan robes to more militaristic uniforms and provided paramilitary training to its members. Miller called upon soldiers stationed at Fort Bragg to provide training, and prior to his arrest on April 30, 1987, the group saw significant growth in membership and military connections (p. 345).

3.3.2 Examples from Germany

The German government and the Bundeswehr (the armed forces of the Federal Republic of Germany) have been extremely forthcoming with their data, due in part to their military intelligence branch, the *Militarischer Abschirmdienst,* or MAD which

[5] Dirty bombs are improvised nuclear explosives designed to spread nuclear material such as dust or smoke, rather than create an atomic blast.

closely monitors extremist activity. Koehler (2019) argues that it is because of Germany's openness about the Bundeswehr's struggles with RWE that Germany will appear to be overrepresented in studies, rather than actually experiencing more issues. This is by no means meant to suggest that Germany does not have numerous incidents of note. One of the most recent RWE incidents with ties to the Bundeswehr occurred in 2017, with the *Der Tag X* conspiracy, or "The X Day". *Der Tag X* was an apparent attempt by a shadow army made up of Bundeswehr soldiers, officers, and German civilians to overthrow the German government, install an authoritarian leadership system, and perpetrate an ethnic cleansing through the nation (Bolaños, 2023, p. 16). This plot was initially conceived of by an non-commissioned officer (NCO) known as Andre S. (online name *Hannibal*), who was a member of the Kommando Spezialkrafte (KSK), which is an elite special unit in the Bundeswehr. *Der Tag X* was set to be initiated by First Lieutenant Franco A., who was tasked with committing a false flag terror attack while posing as a Syrian refugee. Franco A. was also allegedly connected with an unrelated set of incidents elsewhere in Germany, still tied to RWE (Bolaños, 2023; Koehler, 2019). Van Dongen et al. (2022) also note incidents of German soldiers performing the Nazi Salute (as well as Dutch and French soldiers), and the partial disbanding of the KSK in 2019 because of deeply entrenched right-wing extremism (Van Dongen et al., 2022, pp. 18-19). Koehler (2019) also describes an incident in 2006 where KSK soldiers deployed in Afghanistan were seen with the Wehrmacht's Afrika Korps[6] symbol displayed on their vehicles (p. 13), among other incidents.

[6] The Wehrmacht's Afrika Corps was the branch of Nazi Germany's military operating in Africa during the Second World War

3.3.3 Examples from Canada

In addition to Corey Hurren and Patrik Mathews (see section 1.0), the most infamous incident in the Canadian context was the 1993 "Somalia Affair", described by McCristall et al. (2022), Van Dongen et al. (2022), and Koehler (2019). Demonstrating that RWE has been an issue for the CAF since at least the early 1990s, the Somalia Affair was a public scandal regarding the actions of the Canadian Airborne Regiment (CAR) on their peacekeeping mission in Somalia, in which two Somali individuals who attempted to break into the base, allegedly to steal food, were shot in the back and killed. McCristall et al. (2022) note that there were at least six other individuals who were killed in similar ways and circumstances during the CARs' mission in Somalia. While these shootings technically fell within the rules of engagement at the time, shortly afterward, a 16-year-old Somali teenager taken into custody by the CAR was beaten, tortured, and raped, resulting in his death; 16 trophy pictures were taken of the torture (McCristall et al., 2022, p. 413; Van Dongen et al., 2022, p. 6). Two years later, in 1995, videos surfaced of members of the CAR making extremely derogatory remarks about Somalians, casually chatting about perpetrating acts of violence and assault against civilians, and posing with bound children (McCristall et al., 2022, p. 414). The Somalia Affair was rapidly and aggressively addressed by the CAF, including the dissolution of CAR and a restructuring of the entirety of the institution. However, RWE remains an issue within the CAF. McCristall et al. (2022) assembled a table tracking several notable CAF individuals involved in RWE, including six Canadian Navy members harassing a Mi'kmaw ceremony in Halifax and openly showing their associations with The Proud Boys, a now

designated terrorist group, and Nathan Leblanc, a CAF member who beat Nirmal Gill, a temple keeper of the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara, to death.

3.4 North American RWE vs. European RWE

Given that the nexus between RWE and the armed forces is present in both North American and European militaries, it is also important to understand differences and similarities between the manifestations of RWE in both regions. While both regions have share similar underlying grievances such as xenophobia, anti-immigration sentiments, and racial (primarily White) supremacy (Ali, 2021; Auger, 2020; Koehler, 2016), there are key differences that continue to evolve. For example, Blee (2017), states that "the nations of Europe have a great variety of far-right groups, from loosely organized skinheads to electoral parties, while the USA today has no real far-right political party. Indeed, the US far right generally stays away from electoral politics in all forms" (p. 197). This has seemingly become a less notable difference with the events of January 6th, 2021, and the subsequent 2024 US Presidential election where Donald Trump and his allies leaned further into transparent far-right rhetoric, along with the appointment of people such as Kash Patel and Pete Hegseth to critical security roles. Kash Patel, Donald Trump's appointed FBI Director, has voiced staunch support for the events of January 6th, 2021, as well as threatened to use the law enforcement system to target political enemies. Illinois Democratic senator Dick Durbin has, on multiple occasions, referred to Patel as an extremist, and in January 2025, released a statement on behalf of a U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary Minority Press titled "Radical Extremists Kash Patel Would Weaponize The FBI To Target Enemies Of Trump, Not Enemies Of America", noting Patel's publication of an "enemies list" as well as threats to target journalists (*United*

States Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2025). Hegseth, Trump's Secretary of Defense, has several tattoos with images that are considered White Supremacist dog whistles, including the Jerusalem Cross, a symbol displayed at the Capitol riots and featured prominently in the writings of Anders Breivik, a Norwegian Neo-Nazi who perpetrated one of Europe's worst terror attacks in 2011 (Yousef, 2024). Hegseth also appeared on the podcast for "Pilgrim Hill's Reformation Red Pill show", where he openly endorsed a concept called "sphere sovereignty", a concept commonly associated with the extremist "Christian reconstructionism" movement (Wilson, 2025). Finally, during his time in the US armed forces, Hegseth's unit Security Manager identified his tattoos as a possible indication of extremist connections, and expressed this concern to Politico shortly after Trump's election in November of 2024 (Associated Press, 2024).

Blee's distinction was accurate at the time of publication (2017), and the installation of extremists in the US government is a relatively new phenomenon. Of course, organized fascist and neo-Nazi groups such as the American Nazi Party (founded in 1959) have existed in the United States for decades; what is distinctive in the contemporary period is the extent to which extremist figures and ideas have sought, and at times gained entry into mainstream political institutions. There have certainly been radical politicians in the United States on both sides of the political compass, but the active involvement of extremists in politics (or attempted involvement, in cases such as Kyle Rittenhouse and Mark McCloskey) represents a fundamental shift since Trump's first presidency in 2016. European nations, meanwhile, have much more open and established extreme right political parties, such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany, the French *Rassemblement national*, and the Dutch *Forum voor Democratie*

(FvD). These parties vary in their longevity, with the *Rassemblement National* being founded in 1972, and the AfD and FvD being established in 2013 and 2016, respectively; the Italian *Lega Nord* was established in 1989. Prior to the AfD, however, Germany had several other similar parties espousing Nazi and Nazi-adjacent ideologies, including the Socialist Reich Party (*Sozialistische Reichspartei Deutschlands)*, the Free German Workers Party (*Freiheitliche Deutsche Arbeiterpartei,* or FAP), and the still active National Democratic Party of Germany (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or NPD). Conversely, the United States has (until recently) avoided any mainstream, overtly dedicated far-right party that explicitly espouses Neo-Nazi and Far-right views.

Another difference is in the perceived enemy, or threat to the white race. Europe has a long history of antisemitism, but in the 21st century the primary focus of the European far-right's hostility has shifted toward Islamic and Arab immigrants. Blee (2017) argues that in the United States, the main focus is on Jews and simply "non-whites" (p. 198). However, Europe, having seen massive influxes of Middle Eastern and African immigrants due to regional instability from conflicts, has taken a turn away from explicitly targeting Jews. Rosenberger & Hadj-Abdou (2013) note that the European Far-right has evolved a view of Islam as a "backward and violent religion" (p. 149). They also call attention the increasing rhetoric framing Muslims as cultural threats, with parties such as the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), among many others claiming that Muslim immigrants, and Muslims in general are "a homogeneous group that cannot be integrated into a given national society owing to distinct ethnic, religious or traditional lifestyles" (Rosenberger & Hadj-Abdou, 2013, p. 149).

This is not to say that North American RWE does not take issue with Islam and Muslims. In a study on RWE in Atlantic Canada, Hofmann et al. (2021) describe "covert or overt expression, encouragement, and/or condoning of…Islamophobic" views as an indication of subscription to Far-right beliefs. Several mosque shootings have occurred in the United States and Canada, including a drive-by shooting of a mosque in Houston, Texas (Li, 2019), and a shooting rampage by a white nationalist in a Quebec City mosque that killed six Muslims 2017 (Watts, 2024). Especially following the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York, anti-Muslim sentiment reached a fever pitch. Blee (2017) argues that while European RWE has turned its focus to Muslims and Islam at both the individual and institutional levels, counterparts in the United States tend to maintain a focus on Jews, with a prominent conspiracy theory being the aforementioned Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG). Building on Blee's (2017) argument Mammone et al. (2013) state that in Europe, "Islamophobic discourses yield better electoral returns than anti-Semitism today" (p. 4). They further note that this does not necessarily mean there has been a major decline in anti-Semitism, but rather a miniscule one coupled with a massive surge in Anti-Islamic ideologies. It is also important to note that in the United States, anti-Black racism has historically been the bedrock of white supremacist ideologies, shaping both cultural and institutional practices of exclusion. The KKK was primarily founded as an anti-black group, with anti-Semitism as a secondary ideology appearing in the refounding of the group in the early 20th century. Islamophobia, in contrast, became more prominent later in the 20th century, especially following the first US engagements in the middle east and the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001.

Perhaps one of the most important differences distinguishing North American versus European RWE, for the purposes of this thesis, is how the different groups view democratic processes. True as it may be that anti-democratic ideologies are a hallmark of many RWE groups or far-right parties (Mudde, 1995), the inception, continued presence, and growing support for far-right parties across European nations (such as the AfD's success in claiming 20.8% of the vote in the 2025 German Bundestag election) indicates a greater willingness to participate in democratic practices, even if only to get into power. This is not to say that the European far-right is content to participate: a website and podcast known as "The Voice of Europe" was allegedly used by Russia to "funnel hundreds of thousands of euros — up to 1 million a month — to dozens of far-right politicians in more than five countries" to aid in securing political victories for Far-right parties who would be friendlier to authoritarian nations (Belton & Mekhennet, 2024). In addition to the suspected Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, domestic developments in the United States also reveal an erosion of democratic norms. The continued claims of Trump winning the 2020 election, the January 6th riots that attempted to halt the certification process, and the defiance of court orders and checks and balances by the second Trump administration collectively illustrate a pattern of contempt for democratic institutions that Right-Wing Extremists and Far-Right radicals share.

This is further exacerbated by claims as far back as 2018 that Trump could, and would like to seek a 3rd term, despite the fact that this would be a violation of the 22nd Amendment to the US Constitution, which prohibits presidents from being elected more than twice. Trump and his followers argue that since the 2020 election was "stolen" from

him, and since his first term was mired with impeachments and pushback from Congress, he is entitled to a 3rd term, asserting in mid-2020 that he was "entitled to another four years [based on] the way we were treated" (Cillizza, 2020; Solender, 2020). This has even gone so far as to have US Congressman Andy Ogles of Tennessee announce a proposal to amend the 22nd Amendment (*Rep. Ogles Proposes Amending the 22nd Amendment to Allow Trump to Serve a Third Term | Representative Ogles*, 2025)

Far-right movements in the United States reveal an approach to democracy that embraces violence – whether physical, as in the events of January 6th, or institutional, as in voter suppression and exclusionary policies – as a means of maintaining power. This dynamic is especially relevant to this research, as the military similarly legitimizes the use of force as a necessary instrument of political authority, creating points of resonance between extremist ideologies and military culture.

3.5 Existing Work on The Relationship Between RWE and the Armed Forces

Building on previous discussions of definitions of radicalization and documented incidents of RWE in the armed forces, this section examines the mechanisms of radicalization among veterans and active-duty personnel, particularly across the western nations discussed in section 2.4. Bolaños (2023) (Germany), Helmus et al. (2023) (United States), McCristall et al. (2022) (Canada), Perry (2021) (Canada), Van Dongen et al. (2022) (United States), Koehler (2019) (Europe, United States, and Canada), Simi et al. (2013)(United States), and Smith et al. (2011) (United States) all identify more or less similar factors contributing to the radicalization of active personnel, reservists, and veterans. Several of these authors also identified various institutional failures, including lowering of recruitment standards, a certain tone of ignorance from military institutions

with regard to acknowledging the problem of RWE, as well as an implied decoupling of formal policy from actual practice. However, several theoretical frameworks stand out, including Van Dongen et al.'s (2022) five problem areas, McCristall et al.'s (2022) push-and-pull factors, and Simi et al.'s (2013) concept of involuntary role exits.

3.5.1 Van Dongen et al.'s Five Problem Areas

Through their exhaustive analysis of media articles and government reports, Van Dongen et al. (2022) developed a framework for understanding the relationship between the armed forces and RWE, laying out five problem areas: (1) RWE violence perpetrated *by* individuals with military backgrounds; (2) RWE violence *facilitated* by individuals with military backgrounds; (3) ideologically motivated crimes perpetrated while deployed; (4) undermining and prevention of successful diversity and inclusion efforts; and (5) an erosion of the Civilian-Military power dynamic. Violence perpetrated by military personnel would include incidents like Corey Hurren's attempted attack at Rideau Hall and Pistolis's involvement in physical assaults at the Unite the Right Rally in 2016. Van Dongen et al. also place plots like *Der Tag X* in this category, as the incidents, had they been successful, would have been carried out by military personnel or veterans. The authors note that instances of RWE adherents with military backgrounds *facilitating* violence (problem area 2) are less common, but still an issue. Here, they discuss Jarrett William Smith, the US Army specialist who was distributing bomb-making information and giving lectures on how to do so; and Mathews' who, while potentially falling under problem area one, can also be counted in this second category, as he intended to set up a paramilitary training camp. The authors also mention that they were unable to find much evidence of resources being transferred to groups by military personnel, but assert that

"the risk is nevertheless high" (Van Dongen et al., 2022, p. 15).

Concerning problem area 3, the perpetration of ideologically motivated crimes and violence while deployed, incidents such as the Somalia affair land within this category. A lesser-known but similar incident, the Bagram torture and prisoner abuse (Golden, 2005)[7], would undoubtedly be counted in this category, among other instances of mistreatment of civilians in the Middle East by Western militaries. This is a particularly difficult area to analyze, as Van Dongen et al. (2022) argue that these types of crimes, when perpetrated in combat zones, often occur out of sight of the media, and in many cases are covered up, and sometimes even encouraged by military administration.

The most common manifestation of RWE in military personnel, according to Van Dongen et al. (2022), is in activities that hamper diversity and inclusion. While incidents that fall under this category rarely, if ever involve violence, they do involve clear, open, and flagrant displays of white-supremacist, neo-Nazi ideologies. These include the Proud Boys' interruption of an Indigenous ceremony in Halifax (mentioned above), the posting of hateful comments on social media and right-wing online forums, the distribution of RWE propaganda material, and playing or singing music that aligns with RWE ideologies (such as white power rock); all of these, while not acts of physical violence per se, are aggressions that serve to make the armed forces an unsafe space for minorities.

Finally, and perhaps most problematic, is the erosion of the Civilian-Military power dynamic. Incidents that fall under this category are characterized by a disregard for

[7] The Bagram torture and prisoner abuse case was a series of incidents at the US military's Bagram Collection Point in Afghanistan in the early 2000s, where detainees were subjected to severe mistreatment. Reports and investigations documented practices including beatings, stress positions, sleep deprivation, and other forms of physical and psychological abuse. In 2002, two Afghan prisoners, Dilawar and Mullah Habibullah, died from injuries sustained while in custody, both deaths ruled homicides.

civilian authority over the armed forces and the military's duty to civilian leadership. These would be political or actively violent movements, such as coups, to overthrow civilian leadership, or disobey orders that RWEs deem to violate laws. Though events like these rarely get beyond the planning stage, there have been several plans and plots, such as *Der Tag X*, a Spanish manifesto of former officers claiming that the government was putting Spain's unity at risk, and a French group of active and former officers publishing a letter that "was widely interpreted as a veiled threat to commit a coup d'etat" in France (Van Dongen et al., 2022, p. 19).

3.5.2 Pushing, Pulling, and Seeking

McCristall et al. (2022) frame the radicalization of military personnel and veterans as a push-and-pull relationship. In other words, some factors may push soldiers into RWE groups, and also pull RWE adherents into the armed forces. McCristall et al. identify two primary pull factors, arguing that the first primarily applies to veterans, while the second applies to both veterans and soldiers with combat experience. The first factor is a desire for structure following a departure from the armed forces. Helmus et al. (2023) make a similar claim, suggesting that the tight-knit nature of time in the armed forces creates a sense of loneliness upon departure, which may make veterans more susceptible to becoming radicalized, with RWE groups mirroring military structure and providing new social networks (p. 3). McCristall et al. compare this pull factor to a more well-established field, the study of veteran involvement in Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs (OMCs), which they argue similarly mimic the hierarchical, militaristic aspects of the armed forces while simultaneously providing a new social network (McCristall et al., 2022, p. 424).

The other pull factor noted by McCristall et al. is based on the work of Perry (2021), who found through a series of interviews that some combat veterans may embrace RWE as a result of deployment to foreign combat zones. In this case, deployment to foreign combat zones where the enemy is a different race or religion may support the development of a negative view of minorities, either in general or the specific minority they were engaged against (for example, a rise in anti-Islamic ideologies as soldiers began to return from the Middle East). Combined with the potential for a heightened state of threat perception due to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or complex PTSD (C-PTSD), this may make veterans and soldiers who have returned from combat zones more likely to join movements that espouse racist, xenophobic, or white-supremacist ideologies. Acts of violence, political or otherwise, may have a somewhat cathartic effect for these individuals, and when enmeshed within a group that normalizes such behaviour, it becomes acceptable to engage in it (McCristall et al., pp. 425-426).

McCristall et al. also note several push factors, which may influence extremist groups to try to recruit individuals in the armed forces. They note that both Patrik Mathews (see, section 1.0) and another CAF member, Erik Myggland, appeared to have been targeted for recruitment and were radicalized while in the armed forces, primarily for the access to training, skills, resources, and networks within the armed forces it would provide the RWE group. The authors also note that social capital is typically gained by the group as a whole for having members with training. Koehler (2019) reinforces this notion, citing a number of instances of online communication showing that RWEs expressed it may be advantageous to attain training (p. 5). Van Dongen et al. (2022) agree, basing one of their five problem areas on the premise that individuals with military

experience can help facilitate acts of violence by providing training and access to equipment.

A second push factor is the desire of already radicalized individuals to enlist in the armed forces to receive training themselves. While recruiting a member of the armed forces may build the groups' social capital, McCristall et al. argue that this second factor is "more personal in nature and involving the recognition and status from other members of RWE groups that a military background may offer" (p. 427); in other words, the training and skills received from joining would provide them with "military cool" (McCristall et al., 2022, p. 428) This is made evident in the Canadian context through an analysis conducted by McCristall et al. of recruitment material made by Canadian RWE groups. Similarly, Koehler (2019) mentions several incidents involving American servicemembers, including Pistolis and Smith, in which the individuals involved were believed to have been radicalized beforehand.

3.5.3 Institutional Failures: Decoupling and the Lowering of Standards

There also appears to be a pattern in which military policies around extremism are formally articulated, but inconsistently applied in practice. In a comprehensive breakdown of high-profile cases in the CAF, McCristall et al. (2022) detail several incidents where personnel maintained affiliations with extremist groups or were implicated in ideologically motivated violence, including the Somalia Affair. Despite the severity of some of these incidents, very few resulted in significant disciplinary action. For instance, of the ten individuals implicated in the Somalia Affair, only two received jail sentences; one was found guilty of manslaughter and torture and served just over three years, while another served only 66 days for his role in the torture and murder of

Somali teenager Shidane Arone. The remaining individuals were either acquitted, released from service, or received lesser administrative punishments.[8,9]

Other individuals, such as those who openly displayed affiliation with The Proud Boys, were put on probation within the CAF, with no criminal proceedings. Although the interruption of the ceremony may not have been a criminal act, warnings and probation do not seem to fall in line with the stance the CAF claims to take on countering extremism within its ranks. Canadian Army Order (CAO) 11-82 Hateful Conduct states that "it is expected that military members of the Canadian Army abide by the intent and spirit of this CAO by conducting themselves accordingly at all times, whether on or off duty", and "I [Commander of the Canadian Army, at the time of publication General Wayne Eyre] expect CA members to conduct themselves in accordance with our *Code of Values and ethics,* whether in or out of uniform, and on or off duty" (National Defence, 2020).

Germany, similarly, has funnelled significant resources into the MAD to identify and counter extremism within its ranks. However, Bolaños (2017) suggests that the German government has taken inadequate steps until recently to distance the Bundeswehr, soldiers, and officers from the undeniable historical links to the Wehrmacht and the Third Reich in a reasonable and timely manner, again drawing attention to the *Der Tag X* conspiracies, as well as incidents throughout the end of the 20th century and early 21st century. These included a Naval lieutenant calling for non-Aryans to be shot or

[8] The punishment for this conviction was a demotion from Captain to Lieutenant, as well as a severe reprimand (Report of the Somalia Commission of Inquiry, 2011)
[9] Of the two individuals convicted, Pvt. Kyle Brown received the longest sentence at 5 years – Pvt. Brown was one of two indigenous individuals implicated in the torture, with the other being deemed mentally unfit to stand trial.(Report of the Somalia Commission of Inquiry, 2011)

taken to gas chambers, and as mentioned previously, a group of KSK soldiers in Afghanistan in 2001 painting the symbol of Rommel's Afrika Korps on their vehicles.

Several scholars have also called attention to the standards of recruitment and enlistment in the nations under discussion. Van Dongen et al. (2022) and Simi et al. (2013) suggest that personnel and recruitment issues in the United States during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan led to an institution-wide lowering of enlistment and recruitment standards, and the reversal of the US military's "zero-tolerance policy", which had previously required confirmed extremists be dishonourably discharged. Bolaños discusses the effects on the German Bundeswehr of conscription and its end in 2011. He argues that when conscription was active, it was inevitable that the Bundeswehr would take in individuals with extremist ideologies. Ideally, they would be identified and removed, but this proved to be a difficult task. Koehler (2019) reinforces this argument, saying that when conscription is in place, the overwhelming volume of individuals coming into service means that various ideologies and backgrounds will be brought in (p. 3). On the other end, when German conscription ended in 2011 and the Bundeswehr shifted to an all-volunteer organization, concerns began to emerge about the type of people an all-volunteer military would attract, with the primary concern being that "if the Bundeswehr exerted a special attraction on young people who were willing to use violence, this willingness could be seen as underpinned by right-wing extremist attitudes" (Bolaños, 2023, p. 22).

3.5.4 Identity Interruptions, Involuntary Role Exits, and Extremism and Identity Maintenance

One approach from Simi et al. (2013) is especially relevant: the role of identity in shaping extremist ideologies. While not an inherently new idea, the authors apply "involuntary role exits" and identity failures/incongruences as a method of understanding why some former military personnel may seek out RWE groups to participate in. Individuals who join the military may do so to fulfil their self-identity as a warrior, or, in the words of McCristall et al., to get that "military cool". In the event of failure, or an abrupt removal from the role as a soldier (such as a dishonourable discharge, medical discharge, or failure to complete Special Operations training), Simi et al. argue that individuals may end up searching for a different way to still meet their perceived self-identity as a warrior. Given the militaristic structure of many RWE groups, joining them may help solidify that identity.

Taken together, these studies provide a strong empirical and conceptual foundation for the theoretical approach adopted in this thesis. The next chapter draws on Role Theory, Social Identity Theory, the Lofland-Stark Conversion Model, and Anomie Theory to build a framework for understanding how military socialization, role exit, and post-service transitions may interact with pathways to radicalization.

4.0 Theoretical Framework

The development of this thesis was deeply informed by recent theoretical approaches aimed at explaining the pathways between military service and RWE involvement. Rather than serving only as tools for post hoc interpretation, these theories shaped the construction of research questions, informed the selection of variables, and

guided the overall modeling strategy. Importantly, these theoretical orientations emerged alongside an early-stage review of the empirical literature: as patterns across studies became apparent, the relevance of particular classical and contemporary sociological frameworks came into sharper focus.

This has two important implications for the study's design. First, while some scholarship suggests that individuals with pre-existing extremist beliefs may enlist in the military to acquire tactical skills, legitimacy, or social capital (e.g., Koehler, 2019; McCristall et al., 2022), the dominant theoretical frameworks employed here – Role Theory, Social Identity Theory, Durkheim's concept of Anomie, and the Lofland–Stark Conversion Model – more commonly conceptualize military separation and role exit as precursors to ideological realignment. These frameworks support the decision to model military experience as an exogenous predictor rather than as an outcome of RWE affiliation. Although this directionality cannot be proven definitively, it is foundational to the study's underlying causal logic.

Second, the inclusion of age, gender, and geography as covariates is likewise rooted in theory. Each has been identified in prior literature (e.g., Davies, 2008; Fangen & Skjelsbæk, 2020; Jensen, 2023; Rippl & Seipel, 1999) as relevant to both military participation and pathways into extremism, and thus must be accounted for as potential confounding variables in any multivariate analysis.

This chapter is organized around two core components. First, it draws on foundational sociological theories – Role Theory, Social Identity Theory, Durkheim's concepts of anomie and altruistic action, and the Lofland–Stark Conversion Model – to build a conceptual vocabulary for understanding how certain identity-based and structural

conditions may predispose individuals with military backgrounds toward extremism. These frameworks help explain the psychological and social dislocations that can result from involuntary role exits, identity ruptures, or unmet expectations of purpose and belonging following military service.

Second, these classical theories are placed in dialogue with field-specific research on extremism in military contexts. The works of scholars such as McCristall et al. (2023), Van Dongen et al. (2022), and Koehler (2019), as discussed in the previous chapter, introduce applied frameworks such as push-and-pull factors, vulnerabilities, and typologies of violent actors. These models align with longstanding sociological concerns about alienation, deviance, and identity formation. By integrating classical and contemporary theory, this chapter offers a focused conceptual lens through which to understand how military service, and the transition out of it, can shape susceptibility to extremist affiliation.

4.1 Role Theory

Role theory offers a strong starting point for understanding how the institutional and identity structures of military service may predispose individuals to right-wing extremism. It highlights how internalized role expectations tied to soldier identity can influence individuals' post-service behavior, especially when that role is lost or destabilized. This chapter argues that the social role of the soldier, deeply internalized through both formal service and anticipatory socialization, can act as a bridge into right-wing extremism when disrupted. Role theory is thus not simply a tool for describing identity loss – it provides a theoretical lens to explain how certain post-service identities emerge, and why some of them take the form of violent or extremist ideologies."

In this theoretical framework, a “role” is considered to be any type of social identity that brings with it social expectations that are supposed to guide thoughts, decisions, and actions, whether those expectations are external (that is, coming from others) or internalized (Biddle, 1986).

At its core, role theory contends that individual's behave in ways that are both different and predictable, depending on their social identities and the situational context (Biddle, 1986; Franks, 2017; Hindin, 2017; Linton, 1936). This theory has been used to explain how people navigate social norms and expectations in a variety of domains. For example, the role of a mother is often seen as being nurturing and understanding and comes with societal expectations and perceptions of body-types, personalities, and responsibilities. If a mother does not meet these expectations or norms, she may be belittled or ostracized. She must be able to discipline her children without being harsh, or face criticism of being either an abusive or ineffective mother. Friends and partners may prefer mothers who meet these norms, and the mother herself may internalize these expectations as her own beliefs of what a “good” mother is. Role expectations operate similarly across domains: they inform how people are perceived, how they perceive themselves, and how they are expected to act. The soldier’s role, like that of the mother or teacher or law enforcement officer, is shaped by an external matrix of beliefs about what that role entails.

The armed forces, as a highly structured institution with complex interpersonal social regulations (between soldiers themselves, their chain of command, and with the general public), is a fertile site for the production of complicated and deeply embedded role identities. Soldiers are not merely trained to perform specific duties; rather, they're

socialized into an all-encompassing identity defined by traits such as discipline, loyalty, courage, fitness, and unit cohesion. This process occurs within a “total institution” a term Erving Goffman (1961) used to describe settings in which all aspects of life are conducted in the same place under a single authority, where daily activities are tightly scheduled, and where individuals undergo a “stripping” of their prior identity through institutional routines and surveillance. While Goffman applied this term to settings like prisons and asylums, his observations extend meaningfully to the military, which similarly imposes strict codes of conduct, synchronizes group behavior, and isolates members from broader civilian life. While specific role expectations can vary across rank and specialization, the overarching role of soldier comes with a powerful set of normative expectations, formed and reinforced within a total institution. Thus, the role of “soldier” is not simply an occupation, but rather, frequently becomes a dominant social identity and a source of personal meaning that continues well after one’s service has ended, continuing to shape how the individual sees themselves.

The role of soldier does not just extend beyond the duration of service, but in many cases can even begin before an individual enters military service. Through anticipatory socialization (Merton, 1968), individuals who aspire to join the armed forces may internalize the role of soldier based on cultural narratives, media representations, family history, or personal aspirations. In cases like these, even aspiring servicemembers (those who never formally enlist, or who fail to complete training) can experience a powerful identification with the role. As an example, Alexandre Bissonnette, the perpetrator of the Quebec City mosque shooting in 2017, indicated that his attack on Muslim-Canadians was driven by revenge. In 2014, a series of shootings in Canada's

capital led to the death of Canadian Armed Forces Corporal Nathan Cirillo, who was on sentry duty outside of the National War Memorial. Bissonette himself had not served in the CAF but had a connection to them through the Canadian Army Cadets, a youth organization affiliated with the CAF that can help prepare youths for service (Perreaux, 2018). Bissonnette's reasoning for targeting a mosque was that the perpetrator of the 2014 shootings was a man of Syrian descent. Anticipated identity can be just as profound in forming an identity as actually serving a full career or life in a role. When an individual exits a role, particularly in an involuntary manner (such as a dishonorable discharge, medical discharge, or being rejected from the armed forces), the outcome has the potential to be profoundly destabilizing.

Regardless of the point in an individuals career where they adopt the role and the accompanying social expectations, an exit from the role or failure to attain it can cause significant psychological strain. Ebaugh (1988) notes that with both voluntary and involuntary role exits, there is a sort of "vacuum" experience that occurs, where the individual no longer occupies the role they had been in, but has yet to enter into a new role (p. 204). When individuals experience an involuntary role exit, there is an abrupt severance from a social identity that they either held, or sought to develop. This sudden break can lead to a state of anomie and liminality within that vacuum experience, where the individual grapples with a loss of purpose and a disruption in their established identity. In the case of veterans and servicemembers exiting the armed forces, it is a well-documented issue that many experience trouble reintegrating with civilian life and society (Danish & Antonides, 2013; Jacob et al., 2020; Messecar, 2017).

For individuals who strongly internalized the role of "soldier", either through active service or anticipatory identification, the end of that role may prompt efforts to reconstruct the identity through alternative means. This is where Role Theory helps to explain pathways into extremist ideologies. McCristall et al. (2022) and Koehler (2019) have both pointed out that RWE groups often fetishize military culture, valorize violence, and offer tight-knit organizational structures that mimic the armed forces. These parallels can make extremist groups appealing to individuals who are seeking to preserve, restore, or repurpose their soldier identity.

The case of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, is illustrative here. After failing out of special forces training and withdrawing from the U.S. Army, McVeigh experienced the loss of a role he had come to define himself by (Jackson & Dorning, 1995; Russakoff & Kovaleski, 1995; Wright, 2007). McVeigh's post-discharge behavior, marked by withdrawal, instability, and identification with anti-government movements, suggests he struggled to reestablish a coherent identity after his exit from the military (Russakoff & Kovaleski, 1995).

He was, by many accounts, unable to reestablish a coherent post-service identity, moving to a farm and struggling to hold a job. While experiencing this post-role exit anomie, compounded by the losses and shame associated with excessive gambling, McVeigh was exposed to the growing anti-government movement, and witnessed the Waco Siege, a standoff between a religious cult and the ATF. RWE offered McVeigh the opportunity to utilize his skills from the armed forces to engage in activities that he deemed necessary/warranted to protect the people of the United States, helping him re-occupy a self-perception of warrior or defender. A similar logic can be seen in Corey

Hurren's attempted attack on Rideau Hall in 2020. Hurren, a CAF reservist, saw himself as defending the nation from perceived internal threats, believing that the federal government had betrayed its citizens and that violent action was justified (Humphreys, 2021). As Farinelli (2021) argues, many RWE actors understand themselves not as aggressors, but as protectors of their communities and values. This framing draws directly on the social role of the soldier, and thus connects seamlessly with prior military identities. While most individuals would, as Ebaugh (1988) states, simply search for a new role to occupy, some roles, such as that of a soldier, may be so deeply ingrained in an individual that they seek out other methods of attaining or maintaining this role (McCristall et al., pp. 424-426).

As discussed in Chapter 2, Helmus et al. (2023) further underscore this pattern with empirical data showing that many veterans involved in extremist movements expressed belief in conspiracy theories such as the Great Replacement Theory. These beliefs frame demographic or political change as an existential threat to "the nation," activating the same protective instincts and expectations tied to the soldier role. In this way, Role Theory does more than explain identity loss; it also helps make sense of how deviant roles emerge as substitutes for lost institutional ones, particularly when those substitutes offer symbolic continuity with the original identity.

4.2 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Complementary to role theory, social identity theory (SIT) emphasizes how individuals define themselves in relation to group membership rather than role occupancy alone, and can be used to understand both military socialization, and the mindset of individuals who turn to RWE. SIT provides insight into the development of the "us-

versus-them" mindsets so commonly associated with dogmatic ideologies and extremism. Initially developed by Tajfel & Turner (1986), SIT provides a complex approach to understanding how positionality in society may affect self-perceptions and actions by understanding how senses of self and self-esteem are derived not only from the social roles that individuals occupy, but from their membership in different social groups.

Tajfel & Turner (1986) argue that it is incredibly rare, and perhaps even impossible that the nature of interaction between people is governed only by interpersonal relationships and individual characteristics (p. 277). Rather, while these relationships and characteristics play a part, interactions are also strongly influenced by the social groups that the individuals belong to. Social groups can be based on shared characteristics, such as race, nationality, gender, etc., but they can also be based on far more trivial things such as age group, hobbies, or sports team allegiances. These social groups can help create strong senses of belonging, which may be particularly beneficial to individuals who have recently suffered an involuntary role exit and are searching either for a new role to occupy, or for another group to be a part of that lets them satisfy the previous role. Tajfel & Turner (1986) also noted that individuals tend to perceive their in-group as superior to others, and engaging in social comparisons based on group membership statuses can help to boost self-esteem (p. 286). Burke & Stets (2009) expanded further on Tajfel & Turner (1986), arguing that traditional role theory has "focused on the categorization of the self as an occupant of different *roles* in the social structure such as being a student, worker, or spouse" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 112). Rather than focusing solely on roles as the basis for identity, Burke & Stets (2009) define two different concepts, social and person identities. Person identities focus on

internalized social characteristics that the individual perceives themselves as having, such as being violent or non-violent, ethical or unethical, etc. (p. 112). Social identities, however, are viewed differently than in role theory. Rather than being a role to be occupied in social situations, Burke & Stets (2009) view social identities as "based on individuals' membership in certain groups, as in persons being democrat, Latino, or catholic" (p. 112). Membership in a social group such as the armed forces carries with it several aspects that tend to make it an integral part of identities, aligning people not only with a specific group, but providing an even stronger sense of in-group pride as a result of the intense camaraderie formed by shared experiences of struggle (McCormick et al., 2019).

Social identity does not always rely on formal membership or direct participation. Individuals may also develop a strong sense of self from aspirational or vicarious affiliations. That is, people often identify with groups they hope to join or that they idealize from a distance. The distinction between person and social identity helps clarify how attachment to the soldier identity can form even in the absence of official enlistment or combat experience. Someone who has never served may still come to see themselves as possessing the essential qualities of a soldier at the level of personal identity: disciplined, prepared, willing to sacrifice, and morally aligned with the ideals of national defense. This sense of personhood may then be projected onto an imagined group identity, generating a strong sense of affinity and belonging with the military community, even without direct inclusion. In this sense, person identities can act as a precursor or "psychological gateway" into a social identity, anchoring the individual emotionally and morally to a group they do not formally belong to.

This is particularly noteworthy in environments that promote anticipatory socialization (Merton, 1968), where individuals begin to adopt the norms, values, and behaviors associated with a role or group they aspire to join. Youth involvement in organizations like the Canadian Army Cadets or Junior Reserves Officers Training Corps, participation in military-style survivalist communities, engagement in tactical hobbyist forums, or even immersion in pro-military video games and media content can all cultivate this anticipatory identification. These experiences provide opportunities to rehearse and internalize both the personal traits and symbolic markers of military life. In turn, individuals come to view themselves as "soldiers in spirit," primed to defend the nation or uphold a particular set of values—despite never formally entering the institution.

In some cases, the emotional investment in the soldier identity can be so powerful that failure to realize it through formal channels (e.g., failing to enlist, being medically discharged, or aging out of eligibility) can create a profound sense of disillusionment or grievance. This perceived loss of identity or belonging can lead individuals to seek alternative spaces where their self-perceptions as warriors, protectors, or patriots are affirmed. Here, the overlap of personal and social identities becomes crucial: the individual not only believes they are "a soldier at heart," but also seeks recognition of that identity by joining groups, such as RWE organizations, that mirror military structures and valorize the traits they have internalized.

Moreover, the in-group/out-group dynamics central to SIT help explain the appeal of extremist ideologies to disaffected individuals. The process of group identification often involves not just feelings of belonging but also perceptions of superiority, termed

"positive distinctiveness" (Tajfel and Turner, 1986, p. 287). Tajfel and Turner (1986) observed that individuals tend to inflate the virtues of their in-groups and denigrate out-groups in order to boost self-esteem (p. 286). This process of "positive distinctiveness" is particularly pronounced when individuals feel that their in-group is under threat. In the context of military service or veterans' culture, such perceived threats may be existential – rooted in narratives about national decline, cultural replacement, or betrayal by civilian institutions. Belief in conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement, for instance, offers a simplified narrative that allows individuals to frame social and demographic change as an assault on their group, their identity, and their nation.

In this way, the link between SIT and extremist violence becomes clearer. In observing content posted and espoused by RWE adherents (such as Edgar Maddison Welch's video where he laments the world his children will grow up in if he does nothing, and Bissonnette's claimed fears that his family was at risk of an Islamist terror attack) that many right-wing extremist actors see themselves as defenders, not aggressors—motivated not by hatred alone, but by a warped sense of loyalty and duty to their group or family. This sense of protectionism, when refracted through the lens of SIT, becomes a potent motivator for violence. When one's group is imagined as being under siege, violence can be rationalized as self-defence. And when one's group identity has already been framed in militaristic, sacrificial terms, as is common among those steeped in soldierly ideals, the threshold for justified violence may be significantly lowered.

4.3 Anomie

Durkheim's (2005/1897) seminal concept of anomie helps to provide a foundation for understanding the psychological and sociological dislocations that may follow military discharge or failure to integrate into military life. Originally developed to explain rising suicide rates in 19th century Europe, the concept of anomie has since been expanded to account for a broader range of deviant behaviours. In this research, anomie is not examined as a precursor to suicide, but as a condition that may give rise to extremist violence – a conceptual shift supported by contemporary applications of Durkheimian theory in criminology and terrorism studies.

Anomic suicide is a result of periods of social upheaval, economic crises, or general disruptions in social norms that lead to a breakdown in the social order. In circumstances like these, individuals may end up feeling disconnected from social expectations and norms which can result in lack of moral or social guidance – the state of anomie. Durkheim's examples of social states that may cause anomic suicides include financial crises, broadly shifting economic conditions such as Prussia's increase in territory in the late 1860s, rapid migration or urbanization, or cultural shifts. Times of unregulated and rapid social change can incur negative impacts such as unemployment, widespread bankruptcy and financial ruin, leading to a breakdown in social fabric and social norms as individuals feel desperate and disconnected from society. Anomic suicide is the result of the state of hopelessness, despair, and normlessness that follows, where individuals may feel there is no other way out, or that existence has become meaningless.

Building on Durkheim, Merton (1938) reconceptualized anomie as a disjunction between culturally prescribed goals and the institutionalized means available to achieve

them. In his strain theory, deviance arises not merely from normlessness, but from structural pressure: when legitimate avenues for achieving socially sanctioned success are blocked, individuals may adapt through innovation, ritualism, retreatism, or rebellion. In the context of veterans, Merton's framework suggests that if individuals internalize societal values such as patriotism, loyalty, or economic success, but find themselves alienated or structurally excluded after service, whether through unemployment, social isolation, or perceived betrayal by the state, they may be pushed toward deviant adaptations. In some cases, this may include violent extremism, which offers both a sense of meaning and an oppositional response to perceived societal failure.

In the context of military personnel and veterans, this framework becomes especially pertinent. The armed forces constitute one of the most structured and normatively dense institutions in society. Every aspect of military life – from dress codes to interpersonal communication, from physical comportment to moral expectations – is governed by a strict code of conduct. Soldiers are not simply workers performing tasks; they are members of a total institution (Goffman, 2007), wherein the boundaries between personal and institutional identity are often blurred. This immersive social environment provides individuals with a clear sense of purpose, belonging, and structure. Role Theory, as discussed earlier, captures how deeply the identity of "soldier" can become ingrained. But Durkheim's theory of anomie explains what happens when that identity is disrupted or lost. Discharge from the military, particularly when involuntary or unplanned, can produce the exact kind of social dislocation that Durkheim described. Veterans may return to civilian life only to find that the moral and social rules they had internalized no longer apply. In many cases, the civilian world may appear chaotic, fragmented, or

morally incoherent compared to the ordered and purpose-driven environment of the military (such as questioning of authority in the workplace). This transition is often accompanied by a loss of social status, community, and identity – all of which can contribute to a sense of normlessness. The individual is no longer sure what is expected of them, what their purpose is, or how they are meant to act within their new environment.

This process can be further exacerbated by a lack of institutional support. Numerous studies have documented the difficulties veterans face in reintegrating into civilian society, citing high rates of unemployment, mental health struggles, and social isolation (Danish & Antonides, 2013; Jacob et al., 2020; Messecar, 2017). These conditions compound the sense of anomie by reinforcing the perception that the structures of civil society are either indifferent or hostile to the individual's wellbeing. When the military institution exits the individual's life, and civilian institutions fail to take its place, a normative vacuum emerges – precisely the condition Durkheim associated with deviance.

This vacuum can be particularly disorienting for individuals who entered the military at a young age, had prolonged service (beyond the typical 2-6 years, depending on branch (*Service Commitment*, n.d.)a), or who had few other sources of identity outside their service. In such cases, the soldier role may not simply be one identity among many, but the cornerstone of the self. The sudden loss of that role constitutes not just a change in occupation, but a rupture in one's moral and psychological world. Individuals in this position are at greater risk of turning to alternative structures that promise to restore the coherence and meaning once provided by military service. RWE organizations often

provide precisely this kind of substitute structure. Many of these groups, such as the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, emulate the organization and symbolism of the military, using uniforms, hierarchies, and codes of honour to evoke the familiar order of military life. They also offer a clear moral narrative – one that frames the world in binary terms of good and evil, loyalty and betrayal, insiders and outsiders. For individuals in a state of anomie, these narratives can be powerfully attractive. They offer a sense of clarity and direction that is often absent in the disordered reality of civilian life.

Importantly, the attraction to such groups is not necessarily rooted in ideological conviction from the outset. Rather, it is the structural features of the group, such as its discipline, its hierarchy, and shared rituals, that resonate with the individual's previous experiences. The ideology may come later, adopted gradually as the individual becomes more embedded in the group and begins to derive identity and meaning from it. This mirrors Durkheim's observation that suicide was not always the result of intense personal suffering, but often emerged from prolonged periods of detachment and drift. The transition from anomic dislocation to extremist engagement can be understood as a form of deviant adaptation. When legitimate means of regaining structure and identity are unavailable or insufficient, some individuals may seek out illegitimate or deviant alternatives. The goal is not necessarily to rebel against society, but to reconstruct a sense of order and purpose that has been lost. Violence, in this context, is not experienced as chaotic or senseless, but as morally justified and even necessary – a way of reasserting meaning in a world perceived as hostile or broken, regardless of whether or not the individual entered the group believing the world was hostile and broken.

McVeigh's case, then, can be understood as more than just a loss of identity—it reflects a collapse of the normative scaffolding that once structured his worldview. What began as a role disruption, as discussed in Section 3.1, became an anomic drift toward deviance when civilian life failed to offer a meaningful substitute. The ideological violence he eventually embraced was not born solely of extremist belief, but of a broader collapse of social regulation, purpose, and belonging. In this way, Role Theory and Anomie Theory are not contradictory but complementary: the former explains the destabilizing loss of identity, while the latter illuminates the conditions under which that loss may lead to deviant reintegration. For veterans facing similar disruptions—especially those without support systems or alternative forms of meaning—anomie offers a compelling theoretical lens for understanding how violence can emerge not just as an act of rebellion, but as a misguided attempt to reestablish order, coherence, and personal relevance within a disorienting moral landscape.

4.4 The Lofland-Stark Conversion Model

Lofland and Starks' (1965) theoretical framework aimed to establish the pathway an individual may take throughout identity formation or identity crisis to get to the point of anomie, and how said anomie is rectified. This section outlines the seven steps of the Lofland-Stark Conversion Model for how individuals may undergo a transformation into ideological commitment, culminating in participation in deviant or extremist action (displayed in Figure 1)

Figure 1. *The Lofland Stark Conversion Model*

Lofland, J., & Stark, R. (1965). Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective. American Sociological Review, 30(6), 862. https://doi.org/10.2307/2090965

Originally developed through ethnographic work with a group of religious converts in the early 1960s, Lofland and Stark's model provides a seven-step process that helps illuminate how social dislocation, unmet psychological needs, and affective attachments to ideological groups can coalesce into total ideological dedication. While initially applied to religious conversion, the model has since been adapted to a range of

deviant behaviors, including political extremism, terrorism, and cultic affiliation. Its emphasis on structural, emotional, and social dimensions of conversion makes it an especially useful tool for analyzing the trajectory from military identity loss to violent extremism.

The first condition in the model is a period of enduring, acute tension. Lofland and Stark describe this as a sense of profound discontent rooted in a mismatch between an individual's envisioned ideal life and their actual circumstances (1965, p. 864). These tensions are not necessarily unusual or extreme in content—they include issues such as romantic failures, career stagnation, marginalization, financial hardship, and personal identity crises. What is notable, however, is the subject's perceived inability to reconcile these tensions using conventional coping strategies. Importantly, Lofland and Stark emphasize that the kinds of tensions their subjects reported were widespread in the general population. What made their respondents different was not the presence of suffering per se, but how that suffering was processed and resolved (or, more accurately, not resolved) through available social structures (p. 867).

Military discharges, failed enlistments, and medical separations often constitute precisely this kind of acute tension. They represent not only the loss of a job or role but the collapse of a deeply internalized identity, as explored in previous sections. As mentioned previously, Alexandre Bissonnette was a member of the Canadian Cadet Corps in his youth, indicating early exposure to military structure and values. While he did not pursue a military career, this anticipatory identification may have shaped aspects of his worldview. His subsequent life path, including studies at Laval University and employment at Héma-Québec blood donor services (Fundira, 2017; Newton et al., 2017),

appears to have lacked the same structured identity roles valorized by military service, reflecting a consistent pattern: when structured identities rooted in order and purpose are disrupted or unfulfilled, some individuals may gravitate toward rigid ideological frameworks that mirror those same qualities. This emphasizes the broader theoretical link between military socialization and the appeal of structured extremist groups.

Similarly, Marc Lépine was rejected from the military prior to committing the École Polytechnique massacre in 1989, killing 14 young women in an anti-feminist tirade (Eglin & Hester, 2003). Alek Minassian, the man who drove his van into a crowd in Toronto in 2018, was briefly affiliated with the CAF approximately 6 months before his attack, and withdrew 16 days into basic training (Frisk, 2018). Though these individuals did not complete service, their rejection or inability to integrate into the military represents an important loss of aspirational identity. Each of these men experienced significant disruptions to their projected life trajectories and encountered social rejection or alienation. In theoretical terms, this state of tension forms the groundwork for seeking deviant resolution.

The second condition involves the presence of a unique problem-solving perspective – a cognitive framework that leads individuals to reject conventional or mainstream solutions in favor of more radical alternatives (Lofland & Stark, 1965, pp. 867 - 868). In the original study, the converts' worldview was grounded in religious absolutes; they sought to resolve their personal crises not through incremental reform or institutional assistance, but by adopting a radical and redemptive religious framework. Lofland and Stark emphasized that while the sources of tension were often mundane or broadly shared, the distinctiveness of the convert's outlook lay in their belief that only a

total transformation, be it spiritual, moral, or ideological, could offer resolution. The individuals studied by Lofland and Stark had attempted to reconcile their grievances through conventional religious channels (such as attending churches or participating in mainstream faith communities), but found these inadequate. The decisive shift came when they embraced an alternative that demanded personal transformation and offered a complete reordering of their worldview.

This perspective is easily mappable onto extremist violence, particularly among military affiliated individuals. In these cases, the unique problem-solving perspective is often shaped by a militaristic logic: one that prizes action over deliberation, identifies enemies with moral clarity, and understands conflict as a legitimate means of restoring order. For example, after McVeigh's discharge from the military, he grew disillusioned with the U.S. government, particularly following the Waco Siege. McVeigh came to view violent resistance as the only viable response to what he perceived as tyranny (Russakoff & Kovaleski, 1995). For him, traditional democratic processes and civic engagement no longer offered meaningful solutions. Instead, he adopted a framework in which violence was justified as a protective and corrective act, in line with what he saw as his continued moral duty as a defender of the American people. Minassian's identification with the incel subculture is similarly illustrative (The Mob Reporter, 2019); the incel worldview offers an absolute explanation for personal and social failures and prescribes retaliatory violence as a legitimate outlet. Lépine framed his violence as a righteous response to feminism, which he viewed as the source of his struggles (Eglin & Hester, 2003). Bissonnette, whose online activity revealed admiration for far-right figures and mass shooters, turned to violence as a means of affirming an identity rooted in protectionism

and retribution (Coletta, 2018). Each of these cases demonstrates how conventional social responses to stressors—therapy, peer support, institutional grievance procedures—were either unavailable, ineffective, or rejected. Instead, these individuals adopted a worldview in which violence became a coherent solution to perceived grievances.

The third condition in the model is the emergence of a seeking disposition. Lofland and Stark define seekers as individuals who actively pursue new ideologies, affiliations, or belief systems to resolve their discontent (1965, p. 868). In the original study, this step involved converts visiting multiple churches or religious movements before ultimately joining the cult in question. The seeker is not passive; they are engaged in an intentional, often trial-and-error process of finding a belief system or community that resonates with their internal struggles and provides existential clarity. Lofland and Stark emphasize that this stage is what differentiates the truly committed convert from others who experience similar tensions but never take transformative action.

In the context of extremism and military-affiliated individuals, seeking can take many forms, including attempts to find meaning in structured civilian careers, participation in political or religious communities, or engagement with ideologically charged literature and media. McVeigh, for example, first tried holding down a job on a farm, and turned to gambling in attempts to find something to ease the tension he was experiencing. It was only after these failed, or caused even more tension that he explored anti-government literature and the broader militia movement after his discharge, immersing himself in narratives that affirmed his growing resentment toward the U.S. government. Curtis Allen, a US Marine veteran, before plotting an attack on Somali Muslim refugees, had become increasingly engaged with Islamophobic and anti-

government rhetoric, building networks with others who shared his views (US Department of Justice, 2019). While not all seekers ultimately join extremist groups, those who do often arrive there through prolonged searching and frustration with conventional outlets. It is here that the individual's active pursuit of meaning intersects with the ideologies readily available in their social environment

The fourth condition is the occurrence of a turning point – an identifiable event that dramatically alters the convert's social or psychological trajectory and brings them into direct contact with the new belief system (Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 869). In the original study, these events included things like moving to a new city, dropping out of school, or experiencing the dissolution of a key relationship. Lofland and Stark emphasized that these events were often ordinary rather than extraordinary; what made them important was the way they opened up space for ideological transformation. The turning point may serve to sever existing attachments or reinforce the futility of old coping mechanisms, thus increasing receptivity to the new worldview. In extremist contexts, the turning point might be a traumatic event (such as the Waco Siege for McVeigh), significant economic hardship (perceived or legitimate) as in the case of Curtis Allen, or broader sociopolitical developments such as increased immigration or perceived loss of cultural dominance. For Lépine, the turning point may have been rejection from the CAF coupled with personal grievances about women's increasing societal visibility. These events function to collapse any remaining faith in mainstream institutions and accelerate the trajectory toward radical alternatives. The turning point often marks the psychological moment where violence becomes thinkable – not yet

inevitable, but newly rationalized within a mental framework where violence is an acceptable medium of bringing about change.

The fifth condition involves interaction with the ideological group, during which affective bonds begin to form. According to Lofland and Stark (1965, p. 871), this contact is rarely purely intellectual; rather, it involves an emotional or interpersonal connection that makes the new belief system feel personally relevant. This might include befriending a member of the group, feeling seen or validated by ideological rhetoric, or discovering a community of like-minded individuals. The emotional resonance of this stage is essential: belief does not arise solely from doctrine but from the social warmth and affirmation that group membership can provide. Among extremist actors, this bonding can occur through online echo chambers, personal networks, or shared participation in ideological events or subcultures. McVeigh formed bonds through participation in gun shows and militia meetings. Allen and his co-conspirators regularly met to share anti-Muslim conspiracy theories, which eventually culminated in plans for violence. The deepening of affective ties with an ideological community not only reinforces the worldview but also increases the social and emotional cost of leaving it. This step also intersects with documented efforts by RWE groups to actively recruit military personnel and veterans, recognizing their tactical training and social credibility. As discussed in the literature review, studies by Koehler (2019) and McCristall et al. (2023) have identified targeted outreach efforts by RWE organizations to individuals with military backgrounds, further increasing the likelihood of affective bonding in this population.

The sixth condition is the severing of extra-ideological ties. In Lofland and Stark's study, this often involved leaving one's family, quitting school or work, or moving away from a prior social network (1965, p. 872). The goal of this step is not necessarily isolation per se, but rather the elimination of competing frameworks that might challenge or dilute the new belief system. The convert becomes increasingly insulated, surrounded primarily by those who share and affirm their ideological stance. This process may be gradual or abrupt, and often follows the strengthening of affective bonds in the previous stage. With extremist radicalization, this condition is frequently observed in individuals who sever familial or social relationships (such as blocking and refusing to speak with individuals who disagree with far-right beliefs), and retreat from civil institutions that once anchored them. Timothy McVeigh distanced himself from peers and support systems he considered ideologically inconsistent, discarding affiliations that interfered with his worldview. Alexandre Bissonnette, prior to his mosque shooting in Quebec City, became increasingly absorbed in online far-right spaces and isolated from dissenting views. Similarly, Marc Lépine and Alek Minassian both demonstrated social withdrawal and disengagement from normative institutions leading up to their attacks (Eglin & Hester, 2003; Frisk, 2018). The cumulative effect of these severances is the construction of an insular, ideologically homogeneous environment that reinforces the convert's belief system while eroding the legitimacy of alternative perspectives. This narrowing of the social world plays a critical role in ensuring that the individual's belief system remains unchallenged and increasingly ingrained.

The seventh and final condition is total ideological commitment. This stage involves not only belief in the ideology but full behavioral alignment with its demands

(Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 873). In the original study, converts demonstrated this commitment by relocating to communal residences, adopting new routines, relinquishing personal goals, and submitting entirely to the authority of the movement. The convert's life became structured around the dictates of the ideology, eroding any space for alternative perspectives or competing obligations. This was not merely intellectual agreement – it was existential reorientation. Among extremist actors, this form of commitment often manifests in readiness to engage in violence, active participation in group strategy, or complete devotion to spreading the ideology. McVeigh's bombing of the Murrah Federal Building is perhaps the most well-known example, reflecting not just ideological belief but complete behavioral dedication to an act of mass violence. Curtis Allen's planned attack, had it not been intercepted, likely would have caused more damage and fatalities than McVeigh's (Levine, 2021). Bissonnette's calculated attack on a place of worship, targeting Muslim congregants, likewise demonstrated the culmination of ideological absorption into action. In both cases, the perpetrators exhibited unwavering belief that their actions were morally justified and strategically necessary. The ideology had become the axis around which all other commitments rotated, rendering alternative moral systems irrelevant or threatening. The willingness to risk or sacrifice one's own life, and to take the lives of others, reflects the profound transformation that Lofland and Stark observed: a move from disorientation and discontent to an unyielding conviction that violent action is both justified and required.

This final stage represents the culmination of the conversion process, where the individual ceases to be merely disaffected or radicalized and becomes an agent of ideological enforcement. The journey from anomic drift to violent certainty is not

spontaneous – it is structured, contingent, and shaped by cumulative social and psychological ruptures. In this sense, the Lofland-Stark model does more than describe individual cases: it offers a roadmap for understanding the architecture of extremist commitment, particularly among individuals whose military experiences render them uniquely susceptible to identity-based dislocation and ideological recruitment.

4.5 The Panopticon

While this thesis focuses primarily on veterans rather than active-duty personnel, this choice is not merely a function of data availability – it is theoretically grounded in the differential conditions of visibility, accountability, and identity management across the military-civilian boundary. In particular, Foucault's (1977) expanded concept of the panopticon provides a valuable framework for understanding how the constant possibility of surveillance within military institutions may deter open expressions of deviance or extremism among active-duty members.

Initially developed by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century and popularized by Foucault (1977), the panopticon is conceptualized as a mechanism of disciplinary power in which individuals internalize the gaze of authority due to the ever-present possibility of observation. Within such systems, individuals self-regulate their behavior, not merely because of direct coercion, but because they are embedded in structures of visibility that make them continuously accountable. The military is a prototypical example of this form of disciplinary power: it is a space where hierarchies are rigid, movement and conduct are regulated, and the presence of surveillance is not only accepted but embraced as a condition of institutional order.

This disciplinary function is not limited to physical spaces. As Elmer (2003) argues, contemporary surveillance regimes increasingly extend into digital infrastructures through what he terms "profiling systems" and "data flows," in which subjects are rendered visible not just through bodily presence but through patterns of communication, association, and behavior. Within the context of the armed forces, this suggests that digital monitoring, whether formal (e.g., institutional oversight) or informal (e.g., peer reporting, algorithmic flagging), may further amplify the panoptic effect. Soldiers exist within a networked system of control where private sympathies or affiliations that deviate from institutional norms are liable to be detected and punished, either administratively or reputationally.

This logic helps explain why active-duty personnel may be less likely to appear in datasets of known extremists, or if they do, may present with more ambiguous or peripheral indicators of radicalization. As noted in the literature review, the German Military Counterintelligence Service (MAD) reported a significantly lower proportion of confirmed extremist cases compared to suspected ones, an asymmetry likely reflective of both underreporting and the difficulties of detection within disciplined institutions. Such institutions often exert pressure not only to conform outwardly but to mask or suppress internal dissent.

In contrast, veterans, having exited the formal disciplinary apparatus of the military, are no longer subject to the same institutional surveillance. While they may still carry the internalized expectations and norms of military life, their visibility to authority is diminished. This post-service context allows greater latitude for ideological experimentation, including with extremist ideologies that would have been sanctioned

within the armed forces. Thus, the focus on veterans in this thesis is not only methodologically pragmatic but theoretically justified. By foregrounding the role of surveillance and disciplinary power, this section clarifies why extremism may manifest differently across the active-duty/veteran divide – and serves to frame the main research hypothesis to be tested in the datasets: that veterans may be more likely to surface in criminological investigations of right-wing extremist affiliation.

5.0 Methodologies

This chapter outlines the methods and materials used for operationalizing the military-extremism relationship, including: (i) the creation and analysis of an original database (referred to as the "J6 database"); and (ii) the secondary analysis of an existing database (the "Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States" or PIRUS database).

5.1 Raw Data Collection for the January 6th Capitol Hill Riots (J6) Database

5.1.1 Information Sources and Target Population

The creation of the original quantitative J6 database involved utilizing open-access information on individuals charged in connection with the J6 riots (see section 2.1) at the US Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Construction of this database started populating (henceforth referred to as the J6 database) started in March of 2024 using information published by the National Public Radio (NPR) media organization (NPR, 2025) in tandem with a sociogram produced by START (START UMD, 2023), which shows connections both between individual actors, and connections to extremist groups/ideologies. For initial data collection, these two sources were used given their methodological rigor and credibility. START, housed at the University of Maryland and funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, is recognized internationally for its empirical research on terrorism, radicalization, and political violence. The organization maintains multiple peer-reviewed datasets, such as the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), and routinely collaborates with academic, governmental, and intelligence partners. This institutional pedigree and history of producing high-quality,

transparent datasets support the use of START as a credible source for constructing the J6 sociogram.

The creation of the original quantitative J6 database involved utilizing open-access information on individuals charged in connection with the J6 riots (see section 2.1) at the US Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Construction of this database (henceforth referred to as the J6 database) started in March of 2024 using and triangulating information from multiple sources for identification of the target population and capture of different analytical variables – including the US Department of Justice Capitol Hill Breach database (U.S. Department of Justice [DOJ], 2025), academic research databases such as from START and George Washington University's Program on Extremism (*January 6 Data | Program on Extremism | The George Washington University*, n.d.; START UMD, 2023)

These sources were reviewed to assess their usefulness in providing explicit indications of military service and extremist connections as sufficient evidence of either characteristic. After preliminary exploration of the data, the dataset was refined and expanded to further incorporate new individuals charged following March 2024, as well as independently verify all military backgrounds/demographic information based on the official US Department of Justice Capitol Hill Breach database (removed by the Trump Administration from the DOJ website as of January 2025)[10], along with the George Washington University (GWU) Program on Extremism Capitol Hill Siege database

[10] Following President Trump's blanket pardon of all J6 participants, the official DOJ database was removed from the internet – it was formerly housed at https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/capitol-breach-investigation-resource-page, which now returns with a "page not found". Unfortunately, it was removed without warning, so saving a copy of it was not possible – however, for the purposes of replicability, the Internet Archive does still maintain at least some of the pages formerly housed at the link.

(*January 6 Data | Program on Extremism | The George Washington University*, n.d.). Due to the complexity and diversity of data presented across the four sources, all information was collected manually and entered using Microsoft Excel.

In refining my approach, the DOJ database was used as the primary inclusion marker of criminal behaviour in the J6 riots, which saw the sample size rise from 1,358 to 1,396 at the end of data collection. Collection of names and information (such as age and home state) was re-done manually, from October 14th, 2024 until October 24th, 2024. From October 29th, 2024 until November 19th, 2024, DOJ information was cross referenced with information from the other databases listed above. Providing the individual appeared in both the DOJ database and another database, their information was included. If an individual appeared in a different database but not in the DOJ database, their inclusion/exclusion was contingent upon the existence of court documents supporting their participation in the riots. As an example, the START sociogram, produced included two individuals who did not appear in any other database, and aside from being named in an initial complaint, did not appear in any court documents. As a result, their information was excluded. However, an individual who appeared on the GWU database, but not with the DOJ, had court documents supporting their initial arrest, plea, and court outcome.

It is also important to note that individuals were only included in the database if there was a criminal complaint/arrest warrant issued. According to the FBI, anywhere between 2,000 and 2,500 individuals participated in the riots, or at the very least entered the Capitol building (Levine, 2021). However, as of the presidential pardons issued on January 25th, 2025 following the re-election of Donald Trump in the 2024 federal

election, only between 1,300-1,600 had been arrested or had warrants for arrest issued. To align with the set definition of extremism indicated in chapter 2, and to ensure timely analysis given the rapidly evolving political environment in the US, the target population under investigation was limited to those who were charged.

The finalized J6 database was imported into RStudio for additional cleaning and for analysis.

5.1.2 Outcome Variable: Group Affiliation

As the outcome of interest, affiliation with an extremist group, ideology, or communication network was verified using the same general process of military status collection. Following an initial appraisal of raw data from the NPR database and the START sociogram, further triangulation included the consultation of court documents such as the sentencing memoranda and FBI affidavits. In a few high-profile cases, such as Edward Vallejo and Elmer Stewart Rhodes III, associations with extremist groups were widely reported in the news media, so additional supporting legal documents were not sought out. News articles were also consulted for verification in other cases if court documents did not reveal a connection to an extremist group, but initial sources did. In some cases, the START sociogram identified individuals as having connections to networks and group chats used to coordinate travel to D.C., such as an invitation-only encrypted Signal group chat called “OKFL Hangout”. Since these group texts/chats were reported during criminal investigations as having been used to plan and prepare for the riot, they were included as indicators of extremist group affiliation. Connections to ideologies, such as QAnon or White Supremacy/White Nationalist, were also coded as having an extremist group affiliation.

For the analysis, the nine potential group affiliations per individual were condensed down into a binary variable, where if GROUPAFFIL1 ≥ 1, GroupAffil_Binary=1. This set the outcome variable as binary – either the individual had a group affiliation, or they did not.

5.1.3 Key Predictor: Military Service

Identification of military experience was a multi-step process. Initially, the START sociogram was the primary source, as it lists military and law enforcement (LEO) backgrounds. While this was initially considered sufficient, for the purposes of replicability and future studies, multiple sources were triangulated in the creation of the final database. Some information on military/LEO ties was also found upon consultation of court documents retrieved through the NPR database. As the primary indicator, however, individuals would often have military experience listed in the sentencing memoranda from both prosecutors and defense attorneys as an aggravating/mitigating factor. For example, the government's memorandum in support of motion for detention in (*The United States of America v. Edwards Vallejo*, 2023), states that "Vallejo, who previously served in the United States Army, used his military training to participate in an attack on our core democratic traditions" (p. 18). Individuals whose sentencing memoranda or memoranda for detention included some such phrase or related specific language (e.g. veteran) were coded as having military experience. In all but one case of this information being present in court documents, the branch of service was identified as well.

When not indicated in court documents, news articles were searched for to see if there was any connection. The process for this was simply entering the name of the

individual into a search engine, followed by "J6", which consistently pulled up at least one full page of news articles. This additional step did not add many individuals to the list, but did reveal a few who had, for example, entered military training but failed out, or been removed. If after a review of at least 5 news articles about the individuals arrest or sentencing there was no indication of military service, and they were not indicated in any other database/source, the individual was marked as no service. In one scenario, Mark Grods, his military service was indicated in a court document, but the branch of service was not. In an attempt to verify, his LinkedIn account was consulted, where he had openly posted about his service in the United States Army, as well as his previous experience with the Canadian Cadet Corps, a youth training program for the Canadian Armed Forces.

Two analytical variables were coded for military experience. A binary variable indicated whether or not the individual ever served in the military. A multi-categorical variable distinguished the branch of military service, with several combinations of the branches of the US Armed Forces (Army, Marines, National Guard, Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard).

5.1.4 Confounder Variables: Demographic Characteristics

Individuals' demographic characteristics included in the multivariate analysis were age and gender. Prior research has established associations between these demographic characteristics and both radicalization pathways and military service, making their inclusion necessary for isolating the independent effect of military background (L. Davies, 2008; Fangen & and Skjelsbæk, 2020; Jensen, 2023; Rippl & Seipel, 1999).

Coding of demographic characteristics occurred simultaneously with identification of individuals in the DOJ database, including *age, gender, homestate, and law enforcement background* (if present, done to build out the database for future research). This information was also cross referenced with all other databases to ensure accuracy as of January 2025. Age was determined and coded into the database as the age at participation, rather than age as of data collection, to support the "snapshot" aspect of the database. Gender was determined either through photographic evidence provided in the raw sources or references to defendants' title in court documents (e.g., Mr./Ms.).

Additional geographical descriptive analyses were elaborated by participants' place of origin. Home state was often indicated in the press briefings provided in the DOJ database. While attempts were made to cross reference with other sources, the information was not always consistent. In some cases for example, the NPR database would display the state in which the individual was arrested, rather than the state they originated from. When examining participants in the J6 riots by home state/jurisdiction, the geographic distribution was compared with the 2020 US Population Census (US Census Bureau, 2021) to determine relative over- or under-representation of each state. The over/under ratio was calculated by dividing the percentage of the J6 population who were from each state by that state's proportion in the US population (e.g., with New York state representing 6.09% of the total US population, but 5.73% of the J6 population, the equation would 5.73/6.09 = 0.94). From here, values were broken down into categories of relative over- or under-representation to simplify visuals across 51 jurisdictions (50 states plus Washington, D.C.). A value of 1.00 meant the J6 participants were proportionally representative of that state's total census population. If a state's value was 1.50 or more,

it was categorized as strongly overrepresented by J6 participants; slight overrepresentation was by a factor of 1.01 to 1.49. Any state at or under 0.99 was categorized as underrepresented.

5.2 Data Extraction and Cleaning for the PIRUS V5 Database

5.2.1 Data Source and Target Population

This study also drew upon an existing database of historical information on extremist criminal behaviours, known as the "Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States" or PIRUS V5 compiled by researchers at the University of Maryland (2025). This comprehensive Excel-based dataset contains de-identified information on the backgrounds, attributes, and radicalization processes of individuals engaged in ideologically-motivated criminal activity covering the period 1948-2022. According to the PIRUS codebook, individuals were included if was (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2023):

1. Arrested;
2. Indicted of a crime;
3. Killed as a result of his or her ideological activities;
4. Is/was a member of a designated terrorist organization;
5. Or, associated with an extremist organization whose leader(s) or founder(s) has/have been indicted of an ideologically motivated violent offense

PIRUS distinguishes four primary ideological categories: Islamist, Far-right, Far-Left, and Single-Issue, along with additional subcategories. To align with the theoretical scope of this thesis, all datapoints for Islamist, Far-Left, and Single-Issue individuals

were filtered out, leaving only Far-right actors. This selection was performed using the filter function in Excel, excluding all other ideological categories. After filtering, the dataset was reduced from 3,529 to 1,926 individuals as my target population. Beyond this filtering, the dataset was left untouched, and all further refinement (i.e., using specific variables such as military experience, extremist affiliation, gender, and age at the time of the incident) was done in RStudio.

It is important to note that the PIRUS dataset is treated as entirely independent from the J6 database, with the intention of adding more rigor to the study. Based on the reported end date of data collection of 2022 from START, it is highly likely that there is overlap in both datasets. However, this could not be accounted for due to the deidentified nature of PIRUS. As such, the coming analysis of PIRUS is intended to support the theoretical conclusions drawn from the J6 analysis.

While the ideological classification in PIRUS reflects a relatively high degree of methodological consistency, it nonetheless involves interpretive decisions. Classifying belief systems, especially in cases involving overlapping or ambiguous ideological commitments, requires some degree of subjective judgment. PIRUS classifies individuals into four main ideological types: Far-right, Far-Left, Islamist, and Single-Issue. According to the codebook, “Single-Issue” includes individuals motivated primarily by one cause such as anti-abortion violence, anti-government taxation views, environmental extremism, or anti-police sentiments (START, 2023, pp. 17–18). However, it is possible that some individuals classified under the “Single-Issue” category were in fact animated by far-right themes or ideologies, especially when the motivating issue overlaps with RWE frames. These potential ambiguities were considered during the filtering process,

but for analytic clarity, only cases explicitly classified as Far-right were retained for this study.

5.2.2 Outcome Variable: Group Affiliation

Right-wing extremist connection was captured in the PIRUS dataset as a categorical variable with four possibilities; no group membership, membership in an above-ground political movement or activist group such as Greenpeace or Moms for Liberty, membership in an informal group such as a homegrown militia, and membership in a formal extremist group or movement, such as Al-Qaeda, QAnon, etc. (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2023, p. 18). Further information is available within the PIRUS dataset on the individuals role within a group, length of time as a member, competition for power within the group, and whether they actively reached out to an extremist group to become a member. However, for the purposes of this study, such information was not required.

Similar to the J6 dataset, the PIRUS variable was binarized, with 0=no group affiliation, and >1=group affiliation.

5.2.3 Key Predictor: Military Service

Military service was captured in the PIRUS dataset as a binary variable, titled "Military". This variable only identifies whether the individual was ever in the US military. Once extracted in RStudio, all individuals who had 1 indicated (i.e., yes, they had served) were then filtered again through the following variable, Military_Status_Arrest, which indicates if the individual was serving or not at the time of arrest (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2023, pp. 35-36). A third variable is present in the dataset, Foreign_Military,

which indicates if the individual was ever in a foreign, non-US service. Only three individuals among the Far-right actors in PIRUS had served in a foreign service; two had also served in the US armed forces and were veterans, and the third was a South African immigrant. Due to a lack of familiarity with the function and order of the South African military, as well as a lack of information on when the individual served (whether it was before or after the end of Apartheid), this individual was excluded.

5.2.4 Confounding Variables: Demographic Characteristics

Individuals' demographic characteristics included in the analysis were age and gender. Age was identified in PIRUS as a continuous variable, indicating the age at which the plot/attack the individual participated in was perpetrated or uncovered. For example, Timothy McVeigh, born in 1968, perpetrated his attack in 1995, at the age of 27. Gender, meanwhile, was indicated as a dichotomous variable, with 1=female and 2=male.

When looking to the state information of these individuals, PIRUS catalogues the location "most commonly associate with the individual plot/activity" (START UMD, 2025, p. 11). The longevity of the data also required a slightly different approach to determine the Over/Under representation. While J6 was a single event that could be assigned to a specific year for population reference, the PIRUS dataset spans from 1948 until 2022. As such, the median year of incidents was calculated for each state in RStudio. Then, each median year was assigned to its most proximal decennial US census (i.e., if the median year was 2013, the 2010 US Census was used) to determine the representative population (IMF, 2022). After completing this calculation, only three were needed: the 2000, 2010, and 2020 censuses. Only these three were needed as the median

incident year for each state happened to fall within the range of these three reference points. This does not mean that there were no incidents in earlier decades, but rather that when calculating state-level medians, the representative year in each case was closes to one of these three censuses. From there, an identical analysis was carried out on the PIRUS dataset, determining if states were over or underrepresented.

Table 1. *Key Variables*

Type	*Variable Name*	*Used in Model*
Outcome	Group Affiliation	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Key Predictor	Military Affiliation	1, 2, 5
Key Predictor	Branch of Service	3
Key Predictor	Veteran Status	4
Control Variable	Age	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Control Variable	Age^2	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Control Variable	Gender	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

5.3 Statistical Analysis

The analytical strategy for this thesis involved descriptive (univariate), bivariate, and multivariate inferential statistical techniques, tailored separately to the J6 and PIRUS datasets. Given the binary nature of the outcome variable (whether or not an individual had an extremist group affiliation), binary logistic regression was selected as the multivariate inferential method. Logistic models are particularly well-suited for estimating the probability of a dichotomous outcome while adjusting for multiple covariates (Field, 2018) Results will be presented as odds ratios, computed via exponentiation of regression coefficients, which are useful for policy and theoretical interpretation, and are calculated by exponentiating each regression coefficient.

An odds ratio less than 1.0 indicates a negative association between the predictor and the outcome - that is, the predictor is associated with lower odds of the outcome occurring. An odds ratio greater than 1.0 indicates a positive association, meaning the predictor is associated with higher odds of the outcome. An odds ratio of exactly 1.0 indicates no statistically significant association between the predictor and the outcome.

5.3.1 Analysis Plan for J6 Database

The J6 database was analyzed using descriptive (univariate and geospatial), bivariate, and multiple regression techniques. First, descriptive statistics give context on the demographic and ideological characteristics of individuals charged in connection to the January 6th Capitol Hill riots. These included frequency distributions of the retained categorical variables, including, military background, branch of service, affiliation with extremist groups or networks, and gender. For age, which was captured in years and treated as a continuous variable, mean and median values were calculated, both for the full sample and disaggregated by military status.

At the bivariate level, to assess whether there was a statistically significant association between military background and extremist affiliation, a Pearson Chi-Square test was conducted. Chi-Square tests are non-parametric statistical tests used to determine whether there is a significant association between two categorical variables. It evaluates whether the distribution of observations across categories in one variable differs depending on the category of another variable. The test functions by comparing the observed frequencies in a contingency table (i.e., the actual counts of cases in each combination of categories) to the frequencies that would be expected if there were no association between the variables (i.e., if the variables were independent). The test statistic is calculated using the formula $\chi^2 = \sum(O_i - E_i)^2/E_i$, where O_i = observed value, and E_i = expected value. The higher the chi-square value, the greater discrepancy between observed and expected values; the lower the p-value (the further below the $\alpha = 0.05$), the stronger the evidence is against the null hypothesis. The statistical hypotheses for this test are defined as:

- H_o= the distributions (proportions) of those with military background and extremist affiliation are the same
- H_a= the distributions (proportions) of the two variables are not the same.

The threshold for significance was set at the standard $\alpha = 0.05$. Multiple binary logistic regression analysis followed to assess the predictive value of military background on group affiliation while controlling for relevant covariates. The dependent variable was a binary indicator of extremist group affiliation (0 = no affiliation; 1 = has an affiliation).

The statistical hypotheses for military status (binary and later expanded to include branch-level distinctions) as a predictor in the regression models are:

- H_o= $\beta_{MilitaryBackground}$=0 (i.e., there is no association between military background with the outcome of extremist affiliation)
- H_a= $\beta_{MilitaryBackground} \neq 0$ (i.e., there is an association between military background with the outcome of extremist affiliation)

where β is the regression coefficient for a given predictor variable (in this case, MilitaryBackground). Specifically, $\beta_{MilitaryBackground}$ quantifies the log-odds change in the likelihood of an individual being affiliated with an extremist group associated with having a military background, compared to not having one, while holding all other variables in the model constant. The posited null hypothesis (H_0) is that military background has no effect on the likelihood of extremist affiliation. In contrast, the alternative hypothesis (H_a) posits that military background is associated with a statistically significant difference in the odds of extremist affiliation.

Interpreting the β coefficient in this logistic framework involves assessing whether the log-odds of the outcome are statistically significantly higher or lower for individuals with military experience. For ease of interpretation, results will be presented as odds ratios, which are calculated by exponentiating each coefficient (i.e., exp(β)). An odds ratio less than 1 indicates that the predictor is associated with lower odds of the outcome occurring, whereas an odds ratio greater than 1 indicates that the predictor is associated with higher odds of the outcome occurring. An odds ratio of exactly 1 would suggest no association between the predictor and the outcome.

Due to literature suggesting that radical ideologies and affiliations may manifest differently at younger versus older age groups (see section 3.2.3), combined with empirical evidence of non-linearity in the relationship between age and the log odds of group affiliation (confirmed via the Box-Tidwell test), a quadratic term for age (Age^2) was introduced in all models beyond the initial simple regression.

Ultimately, 5 models were tested:

1. **Model 1:** GroupAffiliation predicted by binary military status only (i.e., simple regression by whether or not the individual has military experience). (Functionally identical to Chi-Square)
2. **Model 2:** GroupAffiliation predicted by binary military status, gender, age, and age^2.
3. **Model 3:** GroupAffiliation predicted by multi-categorical branch of military service (Army, Navy, Marines, Marines, etc.), gender, age, and age^2.
4. **Model 4 :** GroupAffiliation predicted by multi-categorical military status (active duty, veteran, non-military), gender, age, and Age^2.

To test the validity of using a logistic approach, multicollinearity between predictors was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), a function that calculates the variation inflation factors of every predictor within a logistic regression model. This was based off of a basic logit model with GroupAffiliation as the outcome variable, with the primary predictor being binary military service, adjusting for gender and age. While VIF values of 10 or above indicate serious multicollinearity, values around 1 indicate little to no multicollinearity (Field, 2018, p. 298). The results of this test are discussed in more depth in section 5.3.

Model fit was evaluated using the Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2, a likelihood-based statistic that ranges from 0 to 1 (Nagelkerke, 1991). While the more commonly interpreted R^2 value in linear regression represents the straightforward proportion of variance in the outcome explained by the predictors, logistic regression does not model variance in the same way. Instead, the Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 reflects the degree to which the model improves upon a null model (one with no predictors) in terms of log-likelihood. Although it should not be interpreted as "explained variance" in the traditional sense, higher values indicate better relative model fit and can be used to compare the explanatory power of different models. As a result of this complicated interpretation, there is no universally agreed upon "good" pseudo-R^2.

Additionally, few quantitative studies on terrorism and security studies have sections which discuss the model fit. Of those that do, such as Shymko & Babadzhanova (2023), Pseudo-R^2 values tend to fall within the range of 0.05 to 0.25, consistent with expectations for models attempting to predict complex, low-base-rate outcomes like ideological violence or extremist affiliation where there are undoubtedly further

complicating factors at play. In light of this, the Pseudo-R^2 values reported in the results section should be understood as benchmarks for relative model performance rather than indicators of absolute explanatory power.

5.3.2 Analysis Plan for PIRUS

The PIRUS dataset was subjected to a similar analytical approach as the J6 database, beginning with descriptive statistics to examine the distribution of military service, group affiliation, demographics, and geographics among the target population of individuals identified as right-wing extremists engaged in criminal behaviours. Descriptives by group affiliation, gender, and age were reported both for the full sample and by military status.

As in the J6 analysis, a bivariate analysis used the Pearson Chi-Square test for association between military background and group affiliation. The null and alternate hypotheses were defined identically to the J6 analysis, with:

- H_o= the distributions (proportions) of those with military background and extremist affiliation are the same
- H_a= the distributions (proportions) of the two variables are not the same.

Logistic regression models were also employed for the multivariate analysis. The dependent variable was binary group membership (0 = no group; 1 = affiliated with a group). Independent variables included military status, gender, age, and age^2. The statistical hypotheses were the same as defined for the analysis of the J6 database (section 4.3.1).

Being that PIRUS does not maintain information on branch of service, only one model was estimated:

1. **Model 5**: GroupAffiliation predicted by multicategorical military status (Active Duty, Veteran, Non-Military), gender, age, and age^2.

As with J6, all continuous variables were tested for linearity in the logit. The Box-Tidwell test successfully ran on the PIRUS dataset. VIF scores were calculated to assess multicollinearity, with all values falling well below the accepted threshold of concern.

5.4 Research Ethics

The nature of the data used for this thesis warrants classifying it as text-based research, with all information collected through open databases under third-party governance, news articles, publicly available court documents made available under the United States Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and social media profiles. As Hibbin et al. (2018) explain, there is a prolonged ongoing debate as to whether social media research constitutes human based research. However, the examination of social media pages that was conducted to verify extremist group affiliation only accessed publicly available postings (i.e., those searchable by Google and not requiring a login). As most, if not all social media platforms provide individuals with the opportunity to tailor their privacy options to make content more or less private, the social media postings that were viewable were also be considered public, readily available information. Further, there was no engagement or interaction with the individuals who posted the content, ensuring that this remained a text-based study rather than human research. As a result, this study did not require internal institutional research ethics board (REB) approval under the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, Chapter 2, Section A.

6.0 Results

6.1 Descriptive Analysis: J6 Database

The total population size following the end of data collection for the January 6th database came to 1,396 individuals who had been charged with, sentenced, or identified by the FBI and Department of Justice as having participated in the J6 riots (Table 2). Of these, 86.% (1,201) were male, and 14.0% (195) were female. Reflecting an apparent overrepresentation of veterans and active military individuals at the riots, 14.5% (202) of participants had some form of military affiliation, compared to 6% of the total U.S. population (Schaeffer, 2023). Of these 202, 97% (196) were male and 3% (6) were female. Military experience was far more common among men in the dataset than women. While 16.3% of men had military experience, this was true for only 3.1% of women. In total, men with military backgrounds made up 14% of the sample, compared to just 0.4% for women (Table 2).

Table 2. *Distribution of Participants in the J6 Riots by Military Experience and Gender*

Gender	Had Military Experience (Number and %)	No Military Experience (Number and %)	Total J6 Participants (Number and %)
Male	196 (97%)	1,005 (84%)	1,201 (86.0%)
Female	6 (3%)	189 (16%)	195 (14.0%)
Total	202 (100%)	1,194 (100%)	1,396 (%)

Of the 202 individuals with military experience, 6% (12) were current or former members of the Air Force; 42% (84) were members of the Army; 33% (67) were members of the Marines; 4% (9) were members of the National Guard; and 15% (30) were members of the Navy (Table 3). None were members of the Coast Guard.

When compared to the combined active-duty and veteran composition of the U.S. armed forces (US Department of Defence, 2024; US Department of Veteran Affairs, 2024), individuals with Marine Corps backgrounds were markedly overrepresented: while Marines make up approximately 11.4% of the total military population, they accounted for 33% of military-affiliated J6 participants. All other branches were underrepresented, with the Army showing the closest proportional alignment, comprising 42% of the J6 military sample, compared to an estimated 43.1% of the total US military population. As a supplementary comparison, military representation within the J6 sample was also evaluated relative to the overall U.S. population. Based on 2024 estimates of 340 million people, Air Force-affiliated individuals (active and veteran combined) make up approximately 1.02% of the total U.S. population, compared to 0.86% in the J6 sample. Army affiliates represent roughly 2.5% of the general population, yet accounted for 6% of J6 participants. Marines, who comprise just 0.66% of the total population, were heavily overrepresented at 4.8% of the J6 sample. Similar patterns held for the Navy (1.21% of the population vs. 2.2% of J6) and National Guard (0.41% vs. 0.64%) (Tierny, 2024; US Department of Veteran Affairs, 2024).

Of the 12 Air Force members, 10 were male and 2 were female (83% and 17%, respectively) Males represented 99% (83) of the Army members, with only 1 female (1%). Similarly, 99% (66) of members of the US Marine Corps were male, with only 1 female (1%). All 9 National Guard members were male, and 93% (28) of Navy members were male, compared with only 7% (2) being female (Table 4).

Table 3. *Distribution of J6 Participants with Military Experience by Service Branch*

Branch	Total	% of Military Population
Air Force	12	6%
Army	84	42%
Marines	67	33%
National Guard	9	4%
Navy	30	15%
Coast Guard	0	0%
Total	202	100.0%

Table 4. *Distribution of J6 Participants with Military Experience by Service Branch and Gender*

Branch	Male (N, % of Branch)	Female (N, % of Branch)
Air Force	10 (83%)	2 (17%)
Army	83 (99%)	1 (1%)
Marines	66 (98%)	1 (1%)
National Guard	9 (100%)	-
Navy	28 (93%)	2 (7%)
Coast Guard	-	-
Total	196 (97%)	6 (3%)

Among those charged in connection to the J6 riots, ages ranged from 18 to 80, with a median age of 40 and a mean of 41.5. Military and non-military participants exhibited similar age distributions. Non-military individuals ranged from 18 to 75 years old, with a mean age of 41.1, while military-affiliated participants ranged from 19 to 80,

with a slightly higher mean age of 43.4. The age variable was missing for 63 individuals (~4%), as birth year was not indicated in any court documents or news articles.

A total of 328 (23.5%) of the J6 participants were found to have some connection to an extremist group, ideology, or communication network. Despite the J6 population overall being heavily male-dominated, there was little difference in the prevalence of group affiliation along gender lines. 22.1% (43) of females were found to have a group affiliation, while 23.7% (285) of males did.

In addition to being the two most heavily represented branches, the Army and Marines had the highest number of extremist connections, with 30 out of 84 Army members and 26 out of 67 Marines having connections to an extremist group or network. The next highest was the Navy, with 16 of 30 sailors having connections; the Air Force and National Guard both had 5 members with connections, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. *Distribution of J6 Participations with Military Experience by Service Branch and Extremist Group Affiliation*

Branch	No Group Affiliation (N, % of branch)	Group Affiliation (N, % of branch)
Air Force	7 (58%)	5 (42%)
Army	54 (64%)	30 (36%)
Marines	41 (61%)	26 (39%)
National Guard	4 (44%)	5 (56%)
Navy	14 (47%)	16 (53%)
Coast Guard	0	0
Total	120 (59%)	82 (41%)

Of the 202 identified J6 participants with military affiliation, 186 (92.1%) were veterans; these 186 veterans also account for 13.3% of the total J6 population. 42.5% of veterans were affiliated with a named extremist group such as the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, or Three Percenters. This is double the group affiliation rate among non-military individuals (20.6%). Veterans also represent 13.32% of the total J6 population, but they account for over 24% of all identified group members The breakdown of group affiliation by veteran compared to active-duty and non-military status is shown below in Table 6.

Table 6. *Distribution of J6 Participants with Military Experience by Extremist Group Affiliation and Veteran Status*

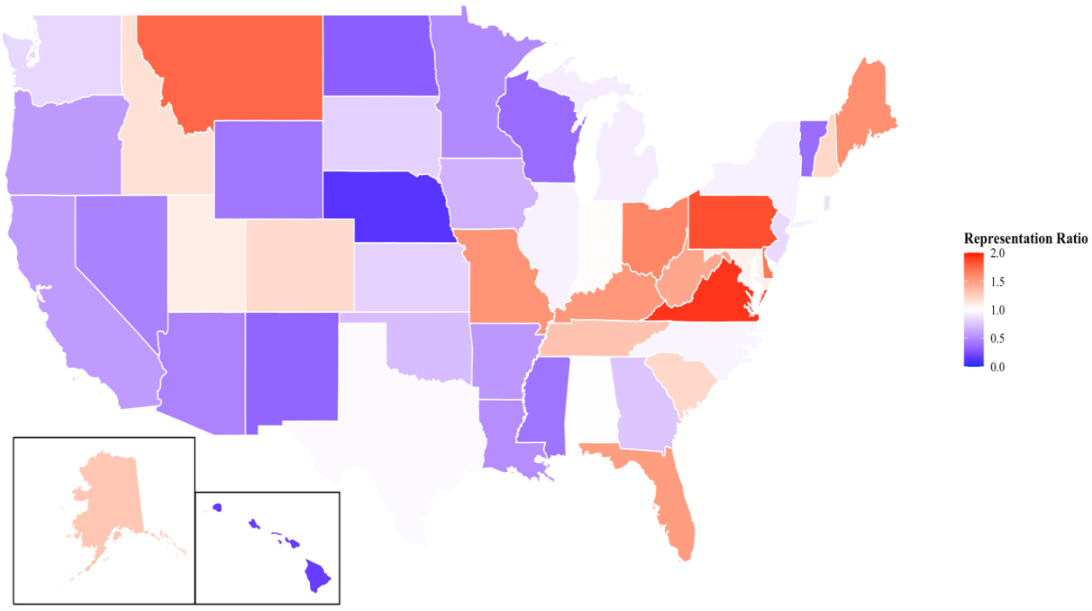
Military Status	Group Affiliation (N and %)	No Group Affiliation (N and %)	Total
Non-Military	246 (21%)	948 (79%)	1,194
Active Duty	3 (19%)	13 (81%)	16
Veteran	79 (42%)	107 (58%)	186
Total	328 (100%)	1,068 (100%)	1,396

When looking at geographical distribution, no states were perfectly proportional to the total population, as represented in Table 7. A choropleth heatmap is shown in Figure 2, where darker blue colouring represents a stronger underrepresentation, and darker red indicates a stronger overrepresentation. Washington, D.C far outweighs all other states, with a population-weighted factor of 10.33. No other state exceeded twice the representation, with the next highest being Virginia, at 1.97.

Table 7. *Distribution of US Jurisdictions by Population Over- or Under-Representation of J6 Participants*

Relative Population Representation	Number (and %) of States	State Abbreviations (by descending ranked order)
Strong Overrepresentation (1.5+)	9 (18%)	DC, VA, PA, MT, DE, OH, ME, MO, KY
Slight Overrepresentation (1.01-1.49)	11 (22%)	FL, WV, TN, AK, NH, SC, CO, ID, UT, MD, IN
Proportional Representation (1.00)	0 (0%)	
Underrepresentation (<=0.99)	31 (60%)	AL, TX, NC, IL, NY, MI, RI, NJ, WA, KS, SD, GA, OK, MA, IA, CT, CA, OR, AR, LA, MN, AZ, NV, WY, MS, VT, WI, NM, ND, HI, NE
Total (50 States plus Washington DC)	51 (100%)	

Figure 2. *Choropleth of Population Over/Under Representation of States at the January 6th Riots*



6.2 Descriptive Analysis: PIRUS V5 Database

Of the individuals with RWE motivations, 92.4% (1,778) were male, 7.6% (147) were female, and one had missing gender data.

Three-quarters (75% or 1,438 individuals) did not serve in the military, while 20% (389) did at some point; 5% (99) of individuals had unknown status of military background. Ultimately, individuals with missing values for any of the variables of interest (military status, group affiliation, gender) were removed from further analysis – given that there was no theoretical support for assuming non-random distribution of those with missing categorical values. This removal brought the valid target population size to 1,814.

The gender breakdown of those with RWE connections was 1,670 males (92%) and 144 females (8%). The number of individuals indicated as having military experience was 385, or 21%. Of these 385, 99% (380) were male, and 1% (5) were female (Table 8).

Table 8. *Distribution of Individuals Motivated by Right-Wing Extremism in the "Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States" (PIRUS) Database by Military Experience and Gender*

Gender	Military Experience (N, and %)	No Military Experience (N, and %)	Total Population
Male	380 (99%)	1,290 (90%)	1,670 (92%)
Female	5 (1%)	139 (10%)	144 (8%)
Total	385 (100%)	1,429 (100%)	1,814 (100%)

Of the individuals identified in PIRUS with RWE connections, the youngest was 16 years at the time of arrest, and the oldest was 88. The median age is 35 years old, and

the average age is 37.3. Age was missing for 39 individuals in PIRUS, though the reason for these missing values is undocumented.

Of the 385 individuals identified as having military service, 84% (323) were veterans, while 16% (62) were active duty. The median age of non-military individuals is 35, with the median for military individuals is slightly older at 37. The average age of non-military individuals is 36.9 years old, and the average age of military individuals is 38.7 years.

Of the 1,814 individuals, 76% (1,373) were identified as having any one of the three types of RWE connections, outlined in section 4.2.2, with the other 441 (24%) being considered lone actors. These were collapsed into a binary variable. Among individuals with group affiliations (N = 1,373), 120 (9%) were female and 1,253 (91%) were male. When considering all individuals coded as right-wing extremist (RWE), 83% of females (N = 144) and 75% of males (N = 1,670) were affiliated with a group. Of the 1,429 non-military individuals, 1,074 (75% of non-military individuals) were members of groups. Of the 385 military members, 299 (78% of military individuals) were members of groups (Table 9).

Table 9. *Distribution of PIRUS Individuals Motivated by Right-Wing Extremism by Group Affiliation and Military Status*

Military Status	With Group Affiliation (N, and %)	No Group Affiliation (N, and %)	Total Population (N, and %)
Non-Military	1,074 (75%)	355 (25%)	1,429 (79%)
Military	299 (78%)	86 (22%)	385 (21%)
Total	1,373 (100%)	441 (100%)	1,814 (100%)

A further breakdown of group affiliation among veterans versus active duty members is shown in Table 10, showing that only 6% (112) of the total population was active duty, compared to 15% being veterans. Of active duty individuals, only 39% maintained a group affiliation, compared to 75% of non-military members, and 93% of veterans.

Table 10. *Distribution of PIRUS Individuals Motivated by Right-Wing Extremism by Group Affiliation and Veteran Status*

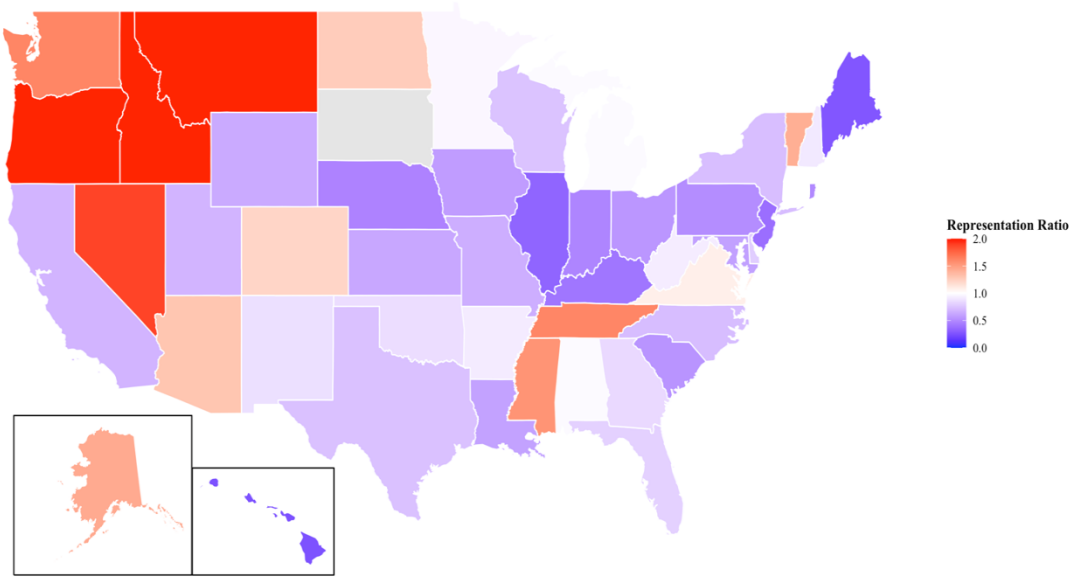
Military Status	Group Affiliation	No Group Affiliation	Total Population (N, and %)
Non-Military	1,074 (75%)	355 (25%)	1,429 (79%)
Active Duty	44 (39%)	68 (61%)	112 (6%)
Veteran	255 (93%)	18 (6%)	273 (15%)
Total	1,373 (100%)	441 (100%)	1,814 (100%)

Similar to the geographic analysis performed for J6 participants (Figure 2), Table 10 shows the population- and time-weighted distribution by state of extremist activity for individuals motivated by RWE in PIRUS. As could be expected, Washington, D.C. far exceeds any other activity location, overrepresented in PIRUS. This pattern may have been compounded by the classification of location for persons in the PIRUS data according to where the event occurred (i.e., including J6 events in Washington, D.C.), whereas in the stand-alone J6 database individuals were primarily classified by home state. Other locations with strong over-representation of RWE individuals in PIRUS including Montana, Idaho, and Oregon (6.4, 4.8, and 2.6, respectively). South Dakota does not have any right wing entries. A further choropleth is shown in Figure 3.

Table 11. *Geographic Distribution of PIRUS Individuals Motivated by Right-Wing Extremism by Relative Over-or-Under-Representation of States*

Relative Population Representation	Number (and %) of States	State Abbreviations (in descending ranked order)
Strong Overrepresentation (1.50+)	8 (16%)	DC, MT, ID, OR, NV, WA, TN, MS
Slight Overrepresentation (1.01-1.49)	6 (12%)	AK, VT, AZ, ND, CO, VA
Proportional Representation (1.00)	0	
Underrepresentation (<=0.99)	36 (72%)	MI, AL, MN, WV, AR, NH, NM, OK, GA, FL, DE, WI, TX, NY, NC, CA, UT, MO, MA, WY, KS, LA, MD, IA, OH, SC, PA, RI, IN, NE, KY, CT, NJ, IL, ME,
No Entries	1 (2%)	HI, SD
Total (50 states plus Washington DC)	51 (100%)	

Figure 3. *Choropleth of Over/Under Representation of States in the PIRUS Dataset*



6.3 Multivariate Analysis: Predictors of RWE Affiliation among J6 Participants

6.3.1 Verification of Assumptions

Binary logistic regressions are predicated on several assumptions to ensure unbiased parameter estimates. One such assumption is that the outcome variable is both binary and exogenous—that is, not causally influenced by the independent variables in a way that violates temporal logic or creates feedback loops. In this study, group afiliation is specified as a binary outcome (see section 4.1.2), indicating whether or not an individual was identified as affiliated with an extremist group.

It is important to note that while this specification satisfies the statistical requirement for a binary outcome, the assumption of strict exogeneity warrants clarification. Given existing literature suggesting that some individuals may join the military already radicalized, in order to gain tactical skills or social legitimacy, the causal direction between military background and extremist affiliation may not be unidirectional. However, this analysis does not claim a causal pathway from military experience to extremism. Rather, it aims to identify statistically significant associations between veteran status and extremist group involvement, consistent with an associational (not explanatory) modeling approach.

The second assumption is that each observation is independent, meaning the results for one case should not be influenced by or connected to the results of another case. In practice, this assumption cannot be fully verified with the J6 data, as participants may have travelled together, belonged to the same organizations, or otherwise influenced one another's involvement. This introduces the possibility of correlated errors, which is acknowledged as a limitation of the analysis.

The third assumption, no multicollinearity, requires that none of the independent variables within the model are highly correlated with each other. This assumption was checked using the vif(logit_model) function (see section 4.3.1) Running this test returned vif values of 1.033 for the binarized military background,, 1.040 for Gender, and 1.020 for Age. As such, the third assumption is validated.

Finally, the fourth assumption required is a linear relationship between continuous predictor variables and the log of the outcome. The only continuous variable within the J6 database is age. Because age can exhibit non-linear relationships with various social behaviours, including extremism (see section 4.1.4), a Box-Tidwell test was conducted to assess whether age met the assumption of linearity in the logit for binary logistic regression. The Box-Tidwell test is typically used to determine whether a continuous predictor (such as age) has a linear relationship with the log-odds of the dependent variable in logistic regression. This test works by introducing an interaction term between the continuous predictor and its natural logarithm (i.e.,AGE×logf_0(AGE)AGE×log(AGE)) and assessing the significance of that term. In this case, the standard boxTidwell() function from the "car" package in R (Posit Team, 2025) returned an error due to NA, NaN, or Inf values, stemming from missing values for age, where some individuals age could not be found. Missing values, when passed into a natural logarithm function (such as is done with the Box-Tidwell test through R), produce undefined results, as the test cannot compute log transformations for missing or zero values. As such, the Box-Tidwell test was manually computed using the following steps:

1. Filter for valid cases, excluding any rows where AGE was missing (as noted in Section 6.1, 63 cases in J6 and 39 in PIRUS lacked valid age data, and were excluded from analyses involving age) (since log⁡(0)\log(0)log(0) is undefined).
2. Create a new variable representing the interaction between AGE and its natural logarithm (i.e., AGE×log⁡(AGE)\text{AGE} \times \log(\text{AGE})AGE×log(AGE)).
3. Run a logistic regression model with AGE and the interaction term as independent variables predicting group affiliation.

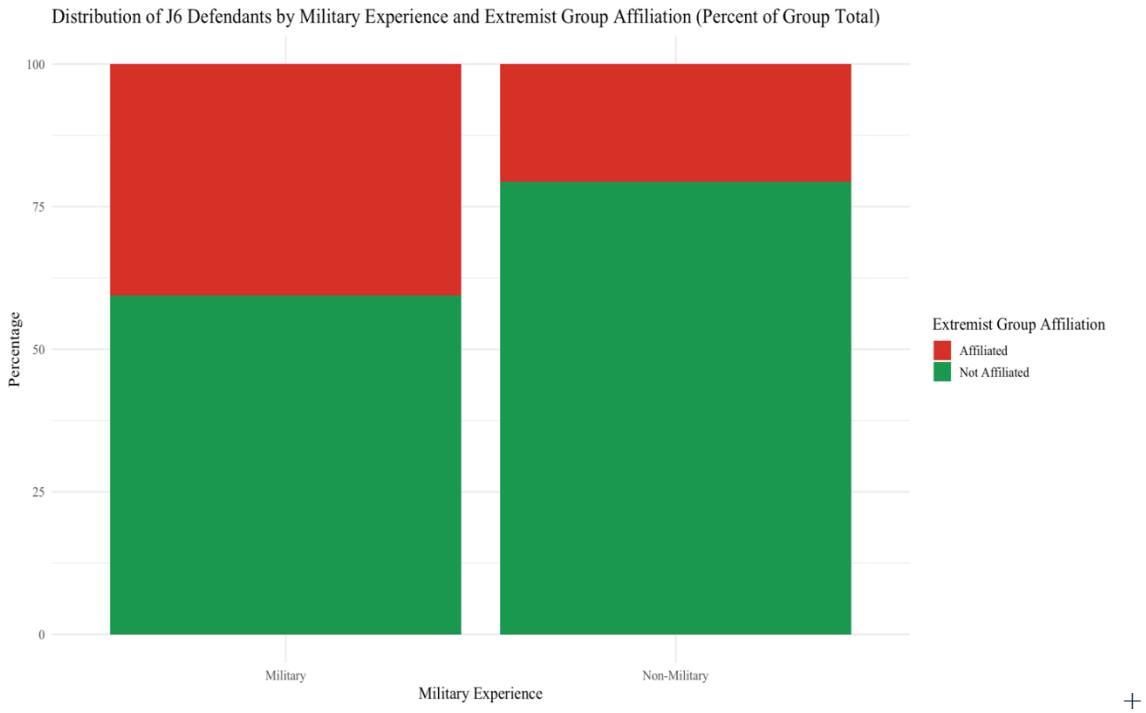
With this approach, the Age_Log_Interaction returned with a p-value of 0.008242, indicating that age violates the linear assumption. To account for this, a quadratic term (AGE^2) was added to the regression model. Including a quadratic term allows the model to capture curvilinear relationships, such as U-shaped or inverted U-shaped trends, between age and the outcome. While the linear term (Age) represents a constant rate of change, the squared term introduces flexibility, enabling the slope to vary at different points along the age spectrum. This approach allows the model to more accurately reflect patterns where the likelihood of group affiliation may increase up to a certain age before leveling off or declining – thereby satisfying the assumption of linearity in the logit for age without sacrificing the variable's continuous nature.

6.3.2 Chi-Square Significance Testing

Before proceeding with the logistic regressions, Chi-Square tests were done to examine the bivariate nature of the association between the outcome of interest and key hypothesized predictor. In the case of this Chi-Square test, the set null hypothesis was H_o= The distribution of Extremist Affiliation is the same as the distribution of Military

Experience, while the alternate hypothesis was H_a= The distributions between the two variables are not the same, with the set $\alpha = 0.05$. The $\chi^2 = 37.308$, with p = 1.009e-09, indicating evidence of significance of association (Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Distribution of J6 Defendants by Military Experience and Extremist Group Affiliation (Percent of Group Total)*



6.3.3 Results from the Logistic Regressions

With bivariate significance established between RWE group affiliation and military experience, a simple binary logistic regression model was run specifying the hypothesizeds direction of the relationship; MilitaryBackground as predictor of ExtremistAffiliation similarly showed significance, with p = 1.49e-09, thus allowing to reject the null hypothesis (Table 12). The coefficient returned was 0.968 – yielding an exponentiated coefficient, or odds ratio, of 2.6. In other words, individuals with a military background had 2.6 times the odds of being affiliated with an extremist group compared

to non-military individuals. This means that, relative to civilians, the odds of extremist affiliation were significantly higher among those with military experience. Those participating in the J6 riots with a military background were more than twice as likely to have RWE group affiliation than those without military experience.

Table 12. *Results from the Simple Binary Logistic Model of Military Experience as a Predictor of Extremist Group Affiliation among J6 Participants*

Predictor Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	Z-value	P-value	Exponentiated Coefficient (Odds Ratio)
Intercept	-1.349	0.071	-18.853	<0.001	0.259
Has Military Background (ref: No Military Experience)	0.968*	0.160	6.046	<0.001	2.633

** p<0.05; ref=reference group*
Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 Value = 0.0369

Despite the strength of evidence on the association indicated by the p-value in Table 11, the model fit test to produce the Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 returned with a value of only 0.03697, indicating a relatively weak model fit. To account for additional potential predictors of RWE group affiliation, a multiple binary logistic model was made including MilitaryBackground, Gender, Age, and Age^2. This model produced a higher Pseudo R^2, at 0.1524, indicating a much improved model fit. Participants in the J6 riots with any form of military experience remained significantly more than twice as likely to have connections to extremist groups or networks compared to non-military individuals, all else being equal (Table 13). Gender was not a significant predictor of RWE affiliation, after adjusting for military experience and age.

Table 13. *Results from the Multiple Binary Logistic Model of Predictors of Extremist Group Affiliation among J6 Participants*

Predictors	Coefficient	Std. Error	Z-value	P-value	ExponentiatedCoefficient (Odds Ratio)
Intercept	-2.708	0.807	-3.354	<0.001	0.067
Has Military Background (ref: No Military Experience)	0.821*	0.166	4.951	<0.001	2.27
Gender: Female (ref: Male)	-0.081	0.195	-0.412	0.680	0.92
Age (years)	0.084*	0.034	2.485	0.0129	1.09
Age^2	0.0009*	0.000386	-2.496	0.0126	0.99

** $p<0.05$; ref=reference group*
Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 Value = 0.1524

With significance of the association between any form of military background and RWE affiliation established, another multiple regression was produced for a more granular investigation by service branch, as broken down in sections 4.1.3 and 5.1. Gender remained a non-significant predictor, while age and age^2 maintained their significance. Compared to those who had never served in the military, those with experience in the Army, Marines, National Guard, and Navy were all significantly more likely to have RWE affiliation (Table 14). Members of the Air Force were not statistically more likely to have extremist affiliations than civilians. As previously described (section 5.1), the Coast Guard had no apparent representation among J6 participants.

Table 14. Results from the Multiple Logistic Regression Model of Service Branch and other Predictors of RWE Group Affiliation among J6 Participants

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	Z-value	P-value	Exponentiated Coefficient (Odds Ratio)
Intercept	-2.733	0.809	-3.376	<0.001	0.065
Branch of Military Service (ref: No Military Experience)					
Air Force	0.765	0.591	1.293	0.196	2.149
Army	0.579*	0.244	2.382	0.017	1.786
Marines	0.767*	0.267	2.873	0.004	2.154
National Guard	1.533*	0.692	2.217	0.02	4.634
Navy	1.429*	0.393	3.637	<0.001	4.179
Gender: Female (ref: Male)	-0.077	0.196	-0.392	0.695	0.926
Age (years)	0.086*	0.034	2.529	0.011	1.090
Age^2	-0.0009*	<0.001	-2.563	0.010	0.999

** $p<0.05$; ref=reference group*
Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 Value = 0.0821

Lastly, Model 4 sought to determine if there was a significant difference in extremist affiliations by military status in terms of active service duty at the time of the J6 event, being a veteran, or not having any military background, while still accounting for participants' demographics (specifically, age and age^2). The regression results indicated that active-duty members were not more or less likely than civilians to have RWE affiliation, but veterans were 2.8 times as likely (Table 15).

Table 15. *Results from the Multiple Logistic Regression for Military Status and Age as Predictors of RWE Group Affiliation among J6 Participants*

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	Z-value	P-value	Exp. Coefficient (Odds Ratio)
Intercept	-2.736	0.711	-3.847	<0.001	0.065
Military Status (ref: No Military Background)					
Active Duty	-0.146	0.654	-0.223	0.823	0.864
Veteran	0.879*	0.169	5.209	<0.001	2.409
Age (years)	0.079*	0.034	2.326	0.020	1.083
Age^2	0.0009*	0.00039	-2.364	0.018	0.999

** p<0.05; ref=reference group*
Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 Value = 0.073

6.4 Multivariate Analysis: Predictors of RWE Affiliation among Radicalized Individuals in PIRUS

6.4.1 Verification of Assumptions

With the first assumption of a binary outcome met (see Section 4.2.2), the second assumption is the independence of observations, meaning that the errors in the model are assumed not to be correlated across cases. In practice, this assumption cannot be fully verified with the PIRUS data, as individuals may have belonged to the same organizations, interacted with one another, or been subject to similar contextual

influences. This introduces the possibility of correlated errors, which is acknowledged as a limitation of the analysis.

Before proceeding with the multiple regression analysis among individuals radicalized with far-right ideologies in the PIRUS database, and similarly to the verification of assumptions for the models among the J6 participants (section 5.3.1), empirical testing for risk of strong multicollinearity between predictors was done using the vif() function. Military background, gender, and age all returned with values slightly above 1 (max 1.22), falling well below the recommended threshold of 4.0 for concern. Finally, the Box-Tidwell test function in R worked for the PIRUS dataset, showing significance on the log of age, indicating a non-linear result. To fix this, as with the J6 dataset, the quadratic of age was introduced to further models.

6.4.3. Results from the Logistic Regression

As seen in Table 16, results of the multiple logistic regression (Model 5) indicated that, among the individuals in PIRUS, veterans were significantly nearly twice as likely (odds ratio=1.9; $p<0.05$) than non-military individuals to have extremist group affiliations; active-duty military members had the same likelihood as non-military individuals to have extremist group affiliations. Unlike J6, a gendered pattern did emerge, with an exponentiated coefficient below zero at a significant alpha. The negative coefficient for gender indicates that, controlling for other variables, females were significantly less likely than males to exhibit group affiliation. The odds ratio of 0.527 shows that women had lower odds of group affiliation compared to men.

The Nagelkerke-R^2 value for model 5 was 0.050, suggesting a slightly lower fit for the more heterogenous PIRUS data.

Table 16. Results from the Multiple Logistic Regression for Military Status and Age as Predictors of RWE Group Affiliation among PIRUS Individuals

Coefficients	Estimate	Std. Error	Z-value	P-value	Exp. Coefficient (Odds Ratio)
Intercept	2.490	0.556	4.475	<0.001	12.059
Military Status (ref: No Military Background) Active Duty*	0.315	0.290	1.085	0.27793	1.371
Veterans	0.643*	0.318	2.025	0.04283	1.902
Age	-0.01095*	0.00322	-3.401	<0.001	0.989
Age^2	-0.0000462	0.0000425	-1.088	0.27677	0.999
Gender: Female (ref: Male)	-0.641*	0.234	-2.736	<0.001	0.527

** $p<0.05$; ref=reference group*

7.0 Discussion

This chapter provides syntheses of the key empirical results of the study, and situates them within broader theoretical, scholarly, and policy contexts. Findings are integrated with the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 4, and it contains discussion of the study's empirical contributions to existing knowledge, assesses practical implications for policy and intervention, and outlines directions for future research.

As the preceding analyses demonstrate, military experience, and particularly veterans status, is a statistically significant predictor of affiliation with an extremist group or network among the two datasets observed. Logistic regressions, supported by descriptive and multivariate analyses of both the J6 and PIRUS datasets highlight not only the elevated odds of group affiliation among veterans, but also their consistent overrepresentation relative to general U.S. population benchmarks. While the datasets are distinct in their structure, it is important to note that they are not entirely independent, and some individuals may appear in both. Nevertheless, their convergence in pattern and outcome reinforces the observations.

7.1 Key Findings

This study set out to examine whether military experience is statistically associated with extremist group affiliation, particularly within the context of right-wing extremism. Drawing on parallel logistic regression analyses of two datasets – individuals charged in the January 6th U.S. Capitol riot (J6) and the broader scope of individuals in the PIRUS dataset – the results provide consistent support for the primary hypothesis: military experience, and veteran status in particular, is significantly associated with extremist group affiliation.

Across both datasets, individuals with military backgrounds were more likely than non-military individuals to be affiliated with extremist groups. In the J6 sample, this relationship held even after adjusting for age, gender, and non-linear age effects, with military background remaining a strong predictor. In PIRUS, this pattern became apparent when disaggregating veterans from active-duty personnel, suggesting that the post-service period may be particularly significant for understanding pathways into group-based radicalization. These findings align with theoretical models of identity disruption, most notably Role Theory and the Lofland–Stark Conversion Model, which emphasize the vulnerability that can arise following institutional role exit. Veterans, having left behind a structured and identity-rich environment, may experience a loss of purpose and belonging – conditions that can make ideologically structured groups especially appealing as substitutes for prior forms of identity and affiliation.

The regression models and descriptive analyses, coupled with the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 3, support that extremist group membership may function as a maladaptive resolution to role exit, providing veterans with new anchors of identity and mission. This aligns with social identity theory, which posits that individuals strive to maintain a coherent and positively valued self-concept through group affiliation. One illustration of this can be found in the Marine Corps, which cultivates an unusually strong sense of collective identity and cohesion. Turnbull (2020) argues that the process of enculturation in the Marine Corps exerts a greater influence on its members than other branches do on their servicemembers, reinforcing a shared sense of loyalty, purpose, and distinctiveness. This intensified identity formation may make the psychological disruption of role exit more severe, increasing the appeal of extremist groups that offer a

similarly close-knit structure and sense of purpose. Notably, Marines were the most overrepresented branch among J6 participants in this study, relative to their share of the overall U.S. military, suggesting a possible empirical link between immersive service experiences and post-service vulnerability to extremist affiliation. The statistically significant relationship between veteran status and extremist group membership thus suggests that some individuals attempt to reconstruct their former military identity through participation in extremist networks that replicate key aspects of military social structure.

This association was not only statistically significant but also observable in descriptive patterns of group affiliation. Veterans were disproportionately likely to engage in collective, structured forms of far-right extremism. In PIRUS, 93.4% of veterans were affiliated with an extremist group, compared to just 39.3% of active-duty personnel and 75.2% of non-military individuals. In J6, although active-duty service members were present, veterans were far more likely to be affiliated with extremist groups and communication/planning networks, such as the Proud Boys, Three Percenters, and chats used to plan participation in J6. This distinction illustrates a key tenet of role theory – specifically, the temporal vulnerability that emerges during role exit. To reiterate, role theory posits that individuals derive a sense of purpose, identity, and behavioral norms from the institutional roles they occupy. When those roles are relinquished, as in the case of military-to-civilian transition, individuals may experience uncertainty, disorientation, and a loss of social anchoring. Thomas (2022) affirms that this loss of institutional structure and identity is among the most profound challenges facing transitioning service members, often resulting in psychological distress and a

disconnection from previously held roles and norms. The veteran, unlike the active-duty soldier, no longer operates within a structured hierarchy that prescribes conduct and community, and is no longer housed within the panopticon of institutional surveillance. In this transitional phase, the role vacuum, as described by Ebaugh (1989), where the old identity is shed but the new one has not yet been fully formed or recognized, emerges. Extremist groups, particularly those with paramilitary aesthetics and strict codes of belonging, may fill this void by offering a sense of continuity, purpose, and camaraderie that mimics military service. In this way, it is not military service itself that elevates risk of extremism, but the unsettled period following separation, when institutional belonging recedes and the individual is left to renegotiate their identity in the absence of former social scaffolding.

The elevated rate of far-right extremist affiliation among veterans in this study aligns with existing literature that views anomie not only as a psychological disruption, but as a structural condition that fosters political violence. Durkheim's (2005/1897) original formulation linked anomie to normlessness and moral deregulation during periods of rapid social change. Merton (1938), however, argued that anomie is embedded within social structure itself, manifesting when culturally defined goals are promoted without providing all social groups with equal access to legitimate means of achieving them. In the context of military-to-civilian transition, the abrupt loss of institutional purpose, social validation, and behavioral regulation may foster precisely the kind of disjuncture Merton described. This interpretation is consistent with Blais et al. (2010), who found that anomie, which they defined as the loss of compelling norms to interpret social change (p. 3), creates conditions conducive to insurgency when combined with

triggering events. Their work suggests that social structures which foster high expectations while simultaneously undermining the means to achieve them are inherently unstable. Similarly, Blazak (2024) argues that young white men may gravitate toward white supremacist groups not only out of economic frustration but also because of identity confusion and a perceived loss of status. Taken together, these perspectives bolster the interpretation that veterans may be vulnerable to extremist recruitment not solely due to individual psychological traits, but because of systemic contradictions that generate normative dislocation during reintegration. The finding that extremist affiliation remains significant even after adjusting for other variables suggests that military exit is not merely a personal transition but a structural rupture. It disrupts access to stable roles, shared values, and sources of identity – conditions under which extremist ideologies can offer simplified moral frameworks and substitute communities. Rather than emerging solely from personal pathology, radicalization in this context may reflect a broader breakdown in the mechanisms that ordinarily provide social regulation and belonging.

In addition to these predictive relationships, descriptive patterns also help to further underscore the significance of military affiliation. Individuals with military experience were markedly overrepresented in both datasets when compared to population benchmarks. In the J6 sample, 14.5% of individuals had military backgrounds, compared to approximately 6% of the general U.S. population (Schaeffer, 2023). This figure aligned with earlier estimates by Dreisbach (2021), Milton & Mines (2021) and Watson & Legare (2021)of military participation in J6, lending credibility to the original dataset compiled for this study. Similarly, in the PIRUS dataset, 21% of individuals were identified as having military experience. Although PIRUS covers a broad historical range

(1948 – 2022), even peak periods of military service, such as during the Second World War, when rates hovered around 11-12% (Vespa, 2020), remain well below the PIRUS figure, reinforcing the observation of military overrepresentation in extremist cases.

Furthermore, military veterans were not evenly distributed across branches of service among the J6 participants, compared to the general population of U.S. military veterans. As discussed in section 5.1, the US Marine Corps was heavily overrepresented, while all other branches were underrepresented with varying strengths (such as the US Army comprising 41.6% of the J6 population but 43.1% of the total). These patterns are consistent with findings from previous research, including Helmus et al. (2023), whose nationally representative survey of veterans identified elevated support for extremist beliefs and political violence among Marine Corps veterans in particular.

Group affiliation rates within the J6 dataset also reflect the complexity of branch-level differences. Over half of Navy (53.3%) and National Guard (55.6%) veterans were affiliated with an extremist group, compared to 41.7% of Air Force veterans, 38.8% of Marine Corps veterans, and 35.7% of Army veterans. While these proportions may appear to contradict expectations based on overall ideology scores (e.g., Marine Corps alignment), they are likely influenced by the small sample sizes for certain branches. For example, because the Navy and National Guard together accounted for only 19.3% of the J6 military sample, each individual with a group affiliation in these branches has a proportionally greater effect on the affiliation rate. Taken together, these results support the view that branch of service is not a neutral variable, but a potentially meaningful factor in shaping the pathways and organizational forms of radicalization. Although this study cannot definitively establish (nor does it seek to) why such differences emerge, the

combination of descriptive and statistical results reinforces the idea that military socialization varies meaningfully across branches—and that some may be more conducive to the adoption or reinforcement of extremist identities.

Gender was not a consistent predictor across models: in the J6 dataset, it was not statistically significant, while in the PIRUS dataset, women were significantly less likely to be affiliated with extremist groups. These results are consistent with prior literature noting the male-dominated nature of both military service and right-wing extremist movements (Hinojosa, 2010; Szitanyi, 2020). Given the highly skewed gender ratios in both datasets and the limited number of female military-affiliated individuals, gender was included as a control variable rather than as a focal point of analysis. Future studies explicitly focused on gendered radicalization trajectories would be better positioned to assess these dynamics in depth.

Finally, although the models did not explain a large share of outcome variance, the Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 values were consistent with expectations for behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. In the J6 models, for example, values ranged from 0.0369 in Model 1 (military status only) to 0.1524 in Model 2 (military status, gender, and age controls), with Models 3 and 4 producing values of 0.0821 and 0.073 respectively. These figures represent modest but meaningful gains in model fit and are comparable to other research in this area (Metin, 2012; Richter, 2021; Shymko & Babadzhanova, 2023). Given the complex nature of radicalization, such levels of explanatory power are reasonable and suggest that military background contributes to understanding extremist affiliation.

7.2 Implications

Empirically, this study offers a significant and novel contribution to the study of military involvement in extremism, (which as discussed in Chapter 2, has been limited quantitatively) by combining quantitative and descriptive methods across two distinct and complementary datasets: one event-specific (January 6th defendants) and one covering a longer time span (PIRUS). While previous research has often focused on the symbolic value of military service within extremist propaganda or examined military experience as one of several individual-level predictors, this study systematically analyzes military experience as a key independent variable in predicting extremist group affiliation. In doing so using regression-based methods and disaggregates active-duty and veteran status, it offers an analytical distinction that is often obscured in prior work.

This study directly addresses long-standing calls in the field for more rigorous, data-driven examinations of the relationship between military service and extremism. For example, Helmus et al. (2023) noted the urgent need for empirical investigations that move beyond anecdotal or journalistic accounts and offer statistical clarity on whether veterans are indeed overrepresented in extremist movements. This thesis responds to that call by providing what appears to be the first side-by-side regression models of military experience and group affiliation in two large datasets, each with different sampling logics, time frames, and ideological scope. The convergence of findings across J6 and PIRUS, despite their methodological and temporal differences, strengthens the generalizability of the results and offers greater confidence in the robustness of the observed associations.

Another key contribution lies in the consistent pattern of findings that demonstrate the elevated risk associated with veteran status as distinct from active-duty military service. Much of the public discourse around extremism and the military has failed to differentiate between these categories, leading to a conflation that risks stigmatizing currently serving personnel. By statistically disaggregating these groups, this research shows that the increased risk of extremist group affiliation is largely concentrated among veterans, not active-duty members. True as it may be that active duty participation is still certainly a concern worth further investigation, this finding not only presents an opportunity for refining theoretical models of radicalization but also has important implications for public understanding, media coverage, and policy design. It suggests that the transition out of military life may be equally important as the experiences and socialization that occur within service itself.

This thesis contributes to the literature by quantitatively confirming a trend that has been suggested qualitatively: that veterans are not only present within extremist populations but appear more likely to affiliate with structured extremist groups. In both datasets, individuals with military backgrounds were significantly more likely to be members of named organizations (e.g., the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, or Three Percenters in the case of J6) compared to their non-military peers. This suggests that veterans may not only be overrepresented numerically, but may also play distinctive roles in terms of organizational embeddedness, logistical coordination, or ideological discipline. This insight reinforces earlier case-based analyses (e.g., Koehler, 2019) and survey work (e.g., Helmus et al., 2023) that have posited a link between military

experience and higher levels of strategic or operational capacity within extremist networks.

This thesis advances methodological clarity in a field often constrained by data availability. By drawing on both an event-based dataset (J6) and a dataset with a longer timeframe (PIRUS), it avoids the potential pitfall of overgeneralizing from single-case analyses. The employment of increasingly complex statistical models, from bivariate chi-square tests to multiple logistic regressions with several confounders (including quadratic terms to account for non-linearity in relationships), to triangulate findings and test for robustness helps to strengthen the credibility of the results and sets a standard for future empirical work in the area. The work adds to a growing interdisciplinary body of literature that links radicalization to processes of identity loss, social belonging, and institutional transition. While many studies have explored how prisons, universities, or online communities serve as radicalization nodes, the role of military service and separation has remained underexamined. By placing the veteran experience at the center of its analytical frame, this thesis contributes to an under researched chapter in the sociology of extremism – one that emphasizes not just ideology or grievance, but the institutional trajectories through which vulnerable individuals may come to find meaning, identity, and belonging in extremist spaces.

Furthermore, the findings of this study carry a number of significant implications for public policy and institutional practice, particularly in the areas of veteran reintegration, counter-extremism, military organizational culture, and early intervention design. While the results should not be interpreted as deterministically linking military service to radicalization, they do identify meaningful statistical associations that warrant

policy attention and a more refined understanding of the conditions under which veterans become disproportionately involved in organized extremist activity.

First and foremost, the data, combined with the theoretical framework and existing literature, point to the post-service transition period as a critical window of vulnerability. Reintegration programs, whether run through the Department of Veterans Affairs, state-level supports, or nonprofit veteran service organizations, have traditionally focused on tangible metrics such as employment, housing stability, or access to health care. While these remain vital components of post-service well-being, they may not fully address deeper identity-based needs or the psychosocial dislocation that can follow separation from the military. This study's findings suggest that the loss of institutional structure, camaraderie, and mission can create a vacuum into which extremist ideologies may insert themselves, particularly when accompanied by social isolation or perceived cultural displacement. As such, it may be beneficial for reintegration programming to be expanded to include identity continuity and purpose-centered interventions, such as such as veteran peer mentorship programs, purpose focused workshops and coaching, and more robust civic reintegration pathways. Programs such as these, in tandem with existing services, may help veterans develop post-service meaning and rebuild civilian social networks in ways that reduce the appeal of radical groups.

Second, the data suggests that veterans who do become radicalized appear to be more likely than civilians to affiliate with structured extremist organizations. This has implications for threat monitoring and early warning system design. Most existing counter-extremism frameworks are built around ideological signifiers, digital behavior, or network mapping, and focus on interdiction as opposed to early prevention. While these

remain essential, the findings here suggest that veteran status itself should be understood as a contextual factor, particularly when combined with other known indicators such as abrupt separation from service, prior disciplinary issues, or difficulties with reintegration. Policymakers may consider designing multifactorial risk screening protocols (perhaps modeled after public health risk stratification) that integrate veteran status alongside behavioral indicators, and doing so in ways that are ethically sensitive and protect against blanket surveillance or stigmatization.

Third, the branch-specific differences revealed in this study imply that radicalization risk may not be equally distributed across the armed forces. The pronounced overrepresentation of Marine Corps veterans in the J6 dataset, as well as elevated group affiliation rates among Navy and National Guard veterans, may reflect distinct organizational cultures, training environments, or mission profiles. While this study does not assign causality, it strongly suggests the need for branch-level audits and cultural diagnostics**,** particularly around the intersection of political socialization, tolerance for conspiracy beliefs, and normative views on violence and loyalty. The military may benefit from incorporating counter-extremism awareness modules into professional military education, as well as assessing whether certain organizational subcultures inadvertently reinforce worldviews that are later exploitable by extremist movements.

Another promising direction lies in strengthening exit and transition programming at the point of discharge. While the military has made strides in improving the Transition Assistance Program, much of its current curriculum remains employment-focused (*TAP - Online Courses*, n.d.) A reimagined transition curriculum that includes identity coaching,

psychological resiliency, and cultural reintegration training could better equip departing service members to manage the emotional turbulence of civilian re-entry. Tailoring this programming by branch, rank, or deployment history could further increase its salience and uptake. Of critical importance, though, policy design must also be highly careful to avoid casting suspicion indiscriminately on the broader veteran population. The overwhelming majority of veterans do not engage in extremist activity, and indeed, many are key figures in democratic institutions, public service, and civil society. Misplaced suspicion can deepen mistrust between veterans and civilian institutions, potentially increasing the appeal of anti-government narratives. Thus, precision targeting of interventions is crucial. Factors such as abrupt or involuntary separation, lack of post-service community support, and markers of social isolation should guide risk identification more than veteran status alone.

Finally, strategic counter-narratives represent an important but often underleveraged tool in this space. Extremist groups frequently co-opt military symbols, valorize combat experience, and market themselves as heirs to patriotic or warrior traditions. Counter-narratives that highlight alternative veteran identities, centered on democratic participation, civic leadership, mutual aid, and post-service purpose, can serve both as ideological inoculation tools and as powerful recruitment deterrents. These should be crafted with input from veterans themselves and should avoid didacticism in favor of storytelling, peer engagement, and media campaigns that uplift the diversity and dignity of veteran lives.

7.3 Study Limitations

As with all empirical research, this study is subject to certain limitations (some methodological, others structural) that are critical to acknowledge for both the interpretation of results and the framing of future research. These limitations relate to data collection practices, representativeness, scope of variables, temporal assumptions, and interpretive boundaries. While these factors do not undermine the significance of the findings, they do require a measured understanding of what can and cannot be concluded from the data.

The January 6th (J6) dataset used in this thesis was compiled manually by myself, cross-referencing multiple publicly available resources including the U.S. Department of Justice, the George Washington University Program on Extremism database, news reports, social media sites, and court filings. This process was conducted methodically and with considerable attention to detail. However, the manual nature of the collection process necessarily introduces the potential for human error. In some cases, identifying whether an individual had military experience required triangulating information from incomplete or ambiguous sources, such as vague biographical references, aliases, or court filings that mentioned service history without specificity. Furthermore, cases such where there was brief but no formal interaction with the armed forces would have been missed, unless clearly indicated in documents. As a result, it is possible, indeed likely, that some individuals who had military experience were not identified as such, and thus were conservatively classified by default as civilians. This would bias results toward the null and suggests that the observed effects may actually be underestimates rather than overstatements. It is also possible, though much less likely given the coding requirements

for identifying military service, that some individuals identified as having military service were civilians.

Another limitation relates to the assumption of independence of observations. In the J6 dataset, independence cannot be guaranteed, as participants may have travelled together, belonged to the same organizations, or otherwise influenced one another's involvement. This introduces the possibility of correlated outcomes, which must be recognized as a limitation of the analysis.

There is also a broader issue of representativeness and attrition within the J6 dataset. While the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021, was an unprecedented event, it occurred under unique political and social conditions and cannot be assumed to reflect broader trends in radicalization or military involvement. Estimates suggest that approximately 10,000 individuals attended the rally preceding the attack, and 2,000–2,500 entered the Capitol building (Zou & Logan, 2022), yet only around 1,500 individuals had been arrested or charged as of December 31, 2024, when this study's data collection was formally closed. Although prosecutions continued into January 2025, they halted following President Donald Trump's blanket pardon of participants on January 25, 2025, after which the Department of Justice removed its public-facing J6 databases. As a result, the dataset captures only a subset of those involved. These individuals may differ systematically from those not charged - being more visible, more violent, or more easily identifiable - introducing selection bias. This, in turn, affects the representativeness of the dataset: while some observed patterns (e.g., veteran overrepresentation) may generalize, the unique circumstances and selective nature of the J6 sample limit the extrapolative

power of the findings. Nonetheless, consistency with findings from the broader PIRUS dataset suggests that these patterns are not idiosyncratic to J6 alone.

Additionally, the PIRUS dataset was developed by START at the University of Maryland, widely regarded as a strong resource in extremism research. To reiterate, PIRUS offers a comprehensive account of individuals in the United States who have engaged in or supported ideologically motivated criminal activity from 1948 onward. Still, no dataset is immune to limitations. Although PIRUS benefits from extensive documentation and transparent variable definitions, its reliance on publicly available information, such as media reports and court records, means that unprosecuted or undetected cases of radicalization – particularly non-criminal or ideologically sympathetic individuals – may not be captured. The dataset is intentionally skewed toward individuals whose behaviour crosses a legal threshold or becomes publicly visible, meaning it may not represent the full spectrum of extremist sympathizers. In fact, given that each dataset is grounded upon criminality, both exclude non-criminal sympathizers and actors.

As with the J6 dataset, the assumption of independence also cannot be fully verified in PIRUS. Individuals are often embedded in networks, organizations, or peer groups, meaning their pathways into extremism may be interrelated. While PIRUS is coded at the individual level, these relational ties create the potential for correlated cases, which should be acknowledged when interpreting statistical associations.

The issue of biased early prosecutions in the PIRUS dataset also warrants specific attention. It is likely that certain cases from the early decades of the dataset may have been omitted due to lower institutional and scholarly attention to extremism at the time.

In the earlier decades included in PIRUS, such as the 1940s, 1950s, and into the early 1960s, right wing violence was not typically classified or recorded in systematic ways. This means that some earlier individuals who may have had military service, and who met the behavioral thresholds for inclusion in PIRUS, were never documented. As a result, the presence of veterans in the dataset may be undercounted during earlier decades, leading to a form of historical bias.

Another limitation of this study involves the absence of additional hypothesized contextual variables. While both datasets included a military status variable, they lacked information on length of service, deployment type, combat exposure, discharge type, or post-discharge social isolation or mental health challenges. Such variables could have added nuance to the analysis. Prior research, such as by Perry (2021), has shown that combat experience, especially in racially charged conflict zones, can contribute to post-service radicalization. While some aspects may be quantifiable from information in the public domain (e.g. court filings or LinkedIn profiles), time and resource constraints made it infeasible to collect for reliably and consistently populating the original J6 dataset. Meanwhile, the anonymized nature of how PIRUS is disseminated for research use negated my ability to seek out this type of information for triangulation.

Similarly, the group affiliation was treated as a binary variable in both datasets, without accounting for the type or depth of involvement, which limits interpretive nuance. This simplification was necessary due to time constraints but may overlook important variation in the nature of individuals' engagement with extremist groups.

The manual coding process used in building the J6 dataset may introduced another source of potential underreporting. Due to the presence of pseudonyms or aliases

in court documents, some individuals may have been missed altogether or incorrectly excluded. In some cases, discrepancies emerged between raw data sources. For instance, a few individuals listed in the George Washington University extremist database could not be verified through court records and were therefore excluded. This reflects a broader issue of inconsistent documentation and fragmented public records.

Along with this, while the ideological classification in PIRUS is generally robust, some subjectivity is inevitable when coding complex belief systems. As discussed in section 4.2.1, individuals may hold overlapping or ambiguous ideological commitments. The PIRUS classification into one of four mutually exclusive categories – Islamist, far-right, far-left, or single-issue – may obscure these subtleties. Some individuals who were placed into the "single issue" category may hold additional motivations that remained unverified, and which may have otherwise been considered broad or hateful enough to be classified in the RWE definition. That said, this limitation is common across all ideological research, and the PIRUS team's transparent documentation helps mitigate the problem.

Another analytic limitation concerns the treatment of PIRUS as a time-insensitive dataset. Although PIRUS is covers more than seven decades of data, this study treated it as a static dataset for comparative purposes against the J6 database. As a result, temporal dynamics in veteran radicalization, such as changes over time in recruitment patterns or political contexts, were not explored. This is a missed opportunity, and future research would benefit from modeling time trends from the PIRUS data, such as by analyzing changes within particular political cycles.

Finally, this research does not suggest, or aim to suggest, a causal relationship between military service and extremism. The presence of statistical association does not inherently mean that military experience causes radicalization – to argue such is not only incorrect, but irresponsible. Most veterans are not extremists. Most extremists are not veterans. Being a veteran does not mean an individual will become an extremist. What this study does demonstrate is that veterans are disproportionately represented in certain extremist populations, and that this overrepresentation holds even when controlling for factors such as age and gender. The goal is not to pathologize military service, but to identify where structural vulnerabilities may exist and how they might be addressed through proactive, evidence-based intervention.

8.0 Future Research

This study represents one of the first quantitative investigations into the relationship between military experience and RWE group affiliation in the context of the J6 riots. While it offers valuable empirical insight into this relationship, it also raises important questions that extend beyond the scope of the current data. Future research is therefore essential to build on the findings presented here and to further explore how military experience intersects with political extremism in varied contexts.

First, there is a clear opportunity to expand the present analysis by adding variables to the J6 dataset. Due to the time constraints of this thesis, details such as date of arrest, charges laid, and legal outcomes were not systematically integrated into the dataset. The opportunity could arise to analyse whether military experience or group affiliation are associated with prosecutorial outcomes such as plea agreements, sentence length, or conviction rates, as well as the severity of charges. Such extensions could offer deeper insight into how the justice system processes may reflect or reinforce institutional biases. Ideally, further expansion would also include information on the length of military service, whether the individual was deployed to a combat zone, and the nature of their discharge.

Second, the framework and methodology developed here can be applied in comparative international studies. For example, similar analyses could be conducted using Canadian or European datasets, where right-wing extremism intersects with different military cultures and institutional structures. In Canada, notable cases such as Corey Hurren and Patrik Mathews suggest a parallel dynamic, but further analysis is needed to determine whether the same patterns observed in the U.S. hold in different

sociopolitical contexts. Expanding the study geographically would also test the generalizability of the theoretical models employed in this thesis. As of June 2025, there do not appear to be any comparable datasets.

Third, future research could complement the present quantitative approach with qualitative methodologies. In-depth interviews or ethnographic studies, such as the research conducted by Perry (2021) with veterans involved in extremist activities, those who disengaged, or those who know those engaged, could provide valuable context for the statistical patterns identified here. This would offer insight into subjective meaning-making, perceived grievances, and identity ruptures that may not be fully captured by binary variables. Such work could also assess the explanatory power of the Lofland-Stark model, Role Theory, and Social Identity Theory in real-world radicalization narratives.

A fourth avenue for exploration involves institutional factors within the U.S. armed forces. Future studies might investigate how internal dynamics, such as recruitment strategies, disciplinary systems, or command climate, shape susceptibility to extremism. Researchers could leverage the United States' Freedom of Information Act requests or work with military justice records to identify structural failures or blind spots. Such investigations would contribute to a more systemic understanding of how military institutions manage (or fail to manage) ideological threats within their ranks.

Another promising direction involves the use of intersectional analysis to explore how gender, race, and class mediate the military-extremism nexus. Although gender is included as a covariate in this study, future work could more fully interrogate how masculinity, whiteness, or experiences of marginalization influence both susceptibility to extremist messaging and group affiliation. For example, do gender-nonconforming

veterans or veterans of colour experience different pressures or motivations in the radicalization process? Future research could also explore how algorithmic environments interact with military identities to shape radicalization trajectories. Given the significant role of online forums and social media platforms in contemporary extremism, studies might analyze how military-coded language or symbolism is deployed within these spaces. Natural language processing tools could be used to track how military culture is appropriated in extremist online networks.

Finally, future studies should evaluate policy interventions aimed at preventing veteran radicalization. Few deradicalization or reintegration programs explicitly address the needs of military-affiliated individuals. Evaluations of rehabilitation programs like Life After Hate (U.S.) or EXIT Sweden could assess their relevance and effectiveness in a military context. Comparative policy analysis could also identify promising practices for armed forces, veterans' affairs departments, and civil society organizations.

9.0 Conclusions

This thesis has examined the relationship between military experience and affiliation with extremist groups, with particular attention to the events of January 6th, 2021 (J6) and broader patterns across the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset. Motivated by long-standing anecdotal and case-based evidence of military involvement in RWE movements, this research sought to contribute quantitative clarity to a field that has been historically dominated by qualitative or journalistic inquiry. By constructing a new dataset of J6 defendants and pairing it with PIRUS, this study explored two central questions: whether military experience is associated with higher likelihood of extremist group affiliation, and whether distinct demographic or branch-level patterns exist within this association.

Several key findings emerged. First, military experience – particularly, veteran status – was associated with significantly higher odds of group affiliation, as demonstrated both in descriptive statistics and supported through binary logistic regression. This affirms longstanding theoretical assumptions about the skillsets and socialization patterns that may make individuals with military training more appealing to or susceptible to extremist organizations. Second, among individuals with military experience, there were meaningful patterns by branch, with certain service branches overrepresented relative to national military composition statistics. These findings suggest that military socialization does not occur in a vacuum and that the specific institutional contexts in which service members are embedded may influence both susceptibility to and expression of extremist ideology.

This study also contributes to the theoretical literature on radicalization by drawing on frameworks such as Role Theory, Social Identity Theory, Durkheim's concept of anomie, and the Lofland-Stark Conversion Model. Together, these perspectives help explain how identity disruption, particularly following the termination of a military role, can produce a sense of dislocation that increases receptivity to extremist narratives. Importantly, this research foregrounds the directional hypothesis that military experience may contribute to radicalization, rather than presuming pre-existing extremist beliefs as the sole explanation for post-service involvement.

While offering novel insights, this study is not without limitations. The available data restricts the ability to draw causal conclusions and limits generalizability beyond the sampled populations. Furthermore, the data used for the J6 defendants was reliant on public records and secondary databases, which, while rich, may still omit important details such as length of service, combat exposure, or discharge type. Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable empirical snapshot and lays a foundation for more nuanced future investigations.

Ultimately, this thesis makes several important contributions. Empirically, it demonstrates a significant association between military experience and group-affiliated extremism among individuals arrested in connection with J6 and those in the PIRUS dataset. Theoretically, it integrates classical and contemporary frameworks to propose a compelling narrative linking identity rupture, institutional disconnection, and radicalization. Methodologically, it emphasizes the value of linking independently curated databases to uncover previously obscured relationships. Collectively, these

contributions help fill a longstanding gap in both the sociological and security-focused literature on extremism and military involvement.

As democratic societies continue to grapple with threats posed by domestic extremism, especially from ideologically motivated actors, it is imperative that researchers, policymakers, and military institutions alike better understand the intersection of service and radicalization. This thesis offers one step in that direction, advocating for continued vigilance, research, and institutional accountability in addressing extremist threats emerging from within.

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Appendix A: Codebook

Group Affiliation

Raw Variables: GroupAffil1 through GroupAffil9

- **Description**: These nine columns record the extremist groups or communication channels an individual was affiliated with. Each column contains a numeric code corresponding to a unique group (e.g., 4 = Oath Keepers). Individuals may be affiliated with multiple groups; up to 9 affiliations were recorded. A value of 0 indicates no known affiliation in that slot.
- **Type**: Categorical (multi-response; numeric ID)
- **Value Range**: 0–65

0. No known group affiliation
1. Sovereign Citizens
2. Free PA
3. Ohio State Regular Militia
4. Oath Keepers
5. Texas Freedom Force
6. Jan 5/6 DC OP Intel team
7. Oath Keepers of Georgia
8. DC Security Leadership
9. Boogaloo
10. OK FL DC OP Jan 6
11. DC OP Jan 6 21

12. OKFL Hangout

13. DC Op North Carolina

14. Veterans For Trump

15. NC OK County Leaders

16. Leadership Intel Chat

17. California Patriots-DC Brigade

18. Texas Three Percent

19. American Patriots

20. Genesee County Volunteer Militia

21. People's Rights

22. State of Appalachia

23. Unknown Virginia Militia

24. American Phoenix Project

25. Three Percenters

26. Patriot Prayer

27. Guardians of Freedom III% (B Squad)

28. Woodland Wild Dogs

29. The Highwaymen

30. Dixie Defenders

31. MOSD Leaders Group

32. Patriot Boys of North Texas

33. Sons of Liberty NJ

34. Unknown Militia

35. Boots on Ground Group

36. MOSD Members Group

37. White Knights

38. Patriots 45 MAGA Gang

39. QAnon

40. Proud Boys

41. Fraternal Order of the Alt-Knights

42. Operation Rescue

43. Anti-Abortion

44. Resist Marxism

45. Super Happy Fun America

46. White Supremacist Nationalist

47. The Unforgiven

48. Aryan Nations

49. American's Frontline Doctors

50. America First "Groypers"

51. PowerHouse Patriot

52. Unknown Skinhead Group

53. Patriot Front

54. Angry Vikings

55. American Regulators

56. American Patriot 3%

57. Nationalist Socialist Club 131 (New England 131, or White Defense Force)

58. Tie identified by NPR but not specified, requires further investigation

59. Murder the Media

60. 1% outlaw Motorcycle Gang

61. Grey Ghost Partisan Kentucky Rangers

62. Snowflake News

63. Insurgence USA

64. Civilized Awakening

65. Patriot Movement

Gender:

Raw Variable: Gender

- **Description**: Self-identified gender of the individual, recorded as binary in the available datasets
- **Type**: Categorical (binary)
- **Values:**

  1 = Female

  2 = Male

Age:

Raw Variable: Age

- **Description**: Age of the individual at the time of offense (J6) or radicalization (PIRUS).
- **Type**: Continuous numeric
- **Range**: [Specify min and max, e.g., 18–84 if known]

Military Background:

Raw Variable: MILITBACK

- **Description:** Indicates whether the individual has a military background and, if so, identifies the branch or branches of service. Individuals with multiple branches are coded with unique composite values.
- **Type:** Categorical (nominal, multi-class)
- **Note:** Later collapsed in analysis
- **Values:**

  0=No military

  1=Marines

  2=Army

  3=Air force

  4=Navy

  5=Coast Guard

  6=National Guard

  7=Marines, Army

  8=Marines, Air Force

  9=Marines, Navy

  10=Marines, National Guard

  11=Marines, Coast Guard

  12=Army, Air Force

  13=Army, Navy

  14=Army, Coast Guard

15=Army National Guard

16=Air Force, Navy

17=Air Force, Coast Guard

18=Air Force National Guard

19=Navy, Coast Guard

20=Navy, National Guard

21=Coast Guard, National Guard

22=Marines, Army, National Guard

23=Known servicemember, branch unknown

24=Army national guard, air force

25=Army National Guard, Navy

26=Army and national guard

27=Air national guard

Military Status:

Raw Variable: MILITSTATUS

- **Description**: Indicates the individual's military service status at the time of involvement with armed forces or most recent available record. Captures whether they served in the Regular Forces, Reserves, both, or if status is unknown.
- **Type**: Categorical (nominal)
- **Val**ues:

  1=Regular Service

  2=Reserves

3=Both

4=Unknown

-99=N/A

Veteran Status:

Raw Variable: VET

- **Description**: Captures whether the individual was an active-duty service member, a veteran, or if their service status could not be determined.
- **Type**: Categorical (ordinal)
- **Values**:

  0=Active

  1=Veteran

  2=Unknown

  -99=Not Applicable

Law Enforcement Organization Background:

Raw Variable: LEOBACK

- **Description**: Indicates whether the individual had a known background in law enforcement and, if so, at what level or capacity. This includes civilian law enforcement roles as well as military police
- **Type**: Categorical (nominal)
- **Values**:

  0=No LEO background

  1=Local/State

2=Federal

3=Known affiliation but unclear

4=Military police

States:

Raw Variable: HOMESTATE

- **Description**: U.S. state or jurisdiction of residence or origin for the individual at the time of the January 6th attack or arrest. Typically reflects state of residence, but in some cases, may reflect legal domicile or most recent known location.
- **Type**: Categorical (nominal, 51 levels by descending alphabetical order)
- **Values**:
    1. Alabama
    2. Alaska
    3. Arizona
    4. Arkansas
    5. California
    6. Colorado
    7. Connecticut
    8. Delaware
    9. Florida
    10. Georgia
    11. Hawaii
    12. Idaho
    13. Illinois

14. Indiana

15. Iowa

16. Kansas

17. Kentucky

18. Louisiana

19. Maine

20. Maryland

21. Massachusetts

22. Michigan

23. Minnesota

24. Mississippi

25. Missouri

26. Montana

27. Nebraska

28. Nevada

29. New Hampshire

30. New Jersey

31. New Mexico

32. New York

33. North Carolina

34. North Dakota

35. Ohio

36. Oklahoma

37. Oregon
38. Pennsylvania
39. Rhode Island
40. South Carolina
41. South Dakota
42. Tennessee
43. Texas
44. Utah
45. Vermont
46. Virginia
47. Washington
48. West Virginia
49. Wisconsin
50. Wyoming
51. DC

Sequential ID:

Raw Variable: SEQID

- **Description:** Numerical sequential identifier assigned to each individual in the dataset for anonymization purposes. Used to uniquely distinguish cases for internal tracking, data merging, and reproducibility purposes.
- **Type:** Numeric (integer)
- **Values:** 1 to 1396

Arrest Date:

Raw Variable: ARRESTDATE

- **Description:** The date on which the individual was officially arrested or charged in relation to the January 6th U.S. Capitol riot, as reported in court records, Department of Justice statements, or credible open-source documentation.
- **Type:** Date (MM-DD-YYY)
- **Values:** Ranges from January 7th, 2021 to January 25th, 2025
- **Notes:**
    - Collection of this variable is ongoing as of June 3, 2025

Curriculum Vitae

Samuel Nemeroff

Education:

B.A (Hons) in Sociology, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, 2020-2023

Publications:

Nemeroff, S., Gupta, N., & Miah, P. (n.d.). The gender wage gap in the Canadian pharmacy workforce in the wake of Covid-19. *Canadian Pharmacists Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1177/17151635251329427

Presentations:

"From Service to Sectarianism: Military Experience Among the January 6th Rioters," *The 9th Annual Society for Terrorism Research Post-Graduate Conference,* (July 2025, London, England)

"From Service to Sectarianism: Military Experience Among the January 6th Rioters," *The 9th Annual Society for Terrorism Research Post-Graduate Conference,* (June 2025, St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland)

"The Role of Sport in Radicalization to Extremism", *Guest lecture delivered to SOCI3263 – Sociology of Sport,* (March 2025, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB, Canada)

"WEB Dubois, Racial Capitalism, and Black Reconstructionism", *Guest lecture delivered to SOCI3004 – Theoretical Foundations of Sociology,* (November 2024, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB, Canada)

"Education Against Extremism: A Critical Literature Review and Next Steps, *in Extremism and Violence, 2023 Annual American Society of Criminology (ASC) Conference,* (November 2023, Philadelphia, PA, USA)

Awards:

2023 – 2025	Open Scholarship, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB.
2023 – 2024	Board of Governors Merit Awards for Graduate Studies, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB.
2023	Sandra Budovitch Memorial Prize, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB, CA Dr. Florence Snodgrass Bursary Fund for New Brunswick Students, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB. UNB Special Bursary, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB.
2021 – 2023	Edwin Jacob Special University Scholarship, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB.