Extremism in the Veteran Community: Definitions, Assessments and Evaluation

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The Collaboratory Against Hate: Research and Action Center at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh aspires to develop and support innovative multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and cross-university research aimed at understanding how extremist hate is generated, how it circulates in online and real-life spaces, and how it polarizes society and provokes harmful and illegal acts, especially toward communities of color and other minoritized groups. We seek to develop effective interventions to inhibit every stage in the creation and growth of extremist hate groups and to minimize their destructive consequences.

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1. Purpose of the Study

First, the purpose was to identify the disparities that exist in the definition, assessment, and reporting of extremism among those in the veteran community. The second purpose was to develop and deploy a survey to one thousand veterans to better understand how this segment of the population views extremism and its elements in society, including public and private institutions, academia and media, among others. A series of one on one interviews were also conducted with veterans about the necessity of the use of violence against the government of the United States.

2. Definitions of Extremism: Contested Understandings

There is no precise definition of extremism in the literature and no legal parameters from which to discern its application to ideology and action. The result of this ambiguity is that researchers devise definitions of extremism and then measure for its existence that allows for bias to affect the evaluation of data. This occurrence is especially true because the requirement of criminal violence to substantiate the extremism is not generally required.

For example, **RAND** employs a definition that includes the following:

• Extremism is a term used to characterize a variety of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that often are on the extreme end of the political, religious, or ideological spectrum within society (e.g., white nationalist, anarchist).

• Individuals labeled as extremists (1) identify with beliefs and organizations that are on the far end of political, religious, or ideological spectra within a society and (2) advocate for activities that are outside societal norms and laws. These individuals often draw meaning from the identity that they apply to themselves and others based on their group affiliations (e.g., race, gender, religion, nationality, political beliefs) (Posard, Payne, and Miller, 2021).

The definition used by **RAND** expands the scope of extremism to include behavior and attitudes. Using such a broad definition to collect data on the number of extremist cases significantly increases the number of cases found, which has the potential to distort our understanding of the prevalence of extremism in the military.

The same issue occurs in the **Center for Strategic Studies** database and report, "The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States" (Jones, Doxcee, Hwang, and Thompson, 2021). This analysis focuses on extremism, which is defined as "the deliberate use—or threat—of violence by non-state actors in order to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact." Including the *threat* of violence (or intimidation) in the definition and coding criteria (Hoffman, 2017), greatly expands the scope of the definition and has the potential to distort our understanding of the prevalence of extremism.

The START report, by comparison, "*Radicalization in the Ranks: An Assessment of the Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military*" (Jensen, Yates, and Kane, 2022) attempts to overcome the problem of breadth by classifying criminal acts of extremism which are then classified according to their ideological affiliations. These affiliations are determined by reviewing their public statements, their extremist group memberships, and their stated motivations for committing criminal acts. The attempt to connect criminal acts with ideological disposition, however, falls short because the motivation for crimes is assumed to be ideological in all cases, ranging from trespass (January 6) to tax fraud, regardless of the mens rea of the crime. The methodology also relies only on charged crimes and not successful prosecutions. Additionally, the data is generated by a focus on right wing rather than left wing affiliations (BLM membership, for example, is not associated with the more than 14,000 arrests during the protests, the two billion dollars of property damage or the nineteen deaths that occurred).

3. The Consequences of Problematic Definitions

First, the difficulty of this methodology is that researchers are left to their own idiosyncratic measurement of extremism. As a result, the claim that the data supports the finding that veterans are more prone than the general population to engage in ideologically motivated violence is not reliable and is rife with bias. Second, researchers are also inclined to not include politically motivated violence with which they agree, including Black Lives Matter or pro-choice movements and further the scraping of internet sources also replicates this bias. Third, the inclusion of events that substantiate ideologically driven "extremism" does not always include violence and conflates crimes such as assault with non-violent crimes such as tax fraud or money laundering and even trespass. Fourth, the data relies on "scraping" of the internet, which necessarily supports the narrative in an upward trend, when in actuality, the internet resources are increasing from the 1990s onward. In other words, the increasing availability of data distorts the evidence that in fact there is a trend. The end result of the comparison of these datasets is that the narrative that veterans are more inclined to engage in politically motivated violence is suspect and does not sustain itself. In fact, veterans are no more likely that the general population to engage in politically motivated violence.

4. Survey

Given the problematic findings of previous research, the present work set out to evaluate the perceptions of those facing the charge of extremism from a different perspective: veterans. The focus on veterans in this survey was designed to illustrate several things. First, extremism as a concept is very indeterminate and politically charged and is not without consequences for groups and ideas identified under its auspices. Demonizing a segment of the population such as veterans as extremist is a narrative not supported by the data and further, is counterproductive to those that find themselves labeled as such, especially in a pluralist society that depends upon inclusion in the political process. Second, extremism is an ideological categorization and its meaning is relational to other ideas in the ideological spectrum instead of an absolute value. This means that other viewpoints and ideologies that are present in culture, politics, public and private institutions and society more generally can also be viewed as extreme.

Groups such as Antifa or BLM, for instance, were viewed as extreme just as were White Supremacists. Likewise, respondents tended to see media, academia and government under both the Biden administration and Trump administration as representing extremist ideas and actions because the ideas and actions taken were ideologically driven and did not correspond to their respective roles in society. Demonstrating that extremism is not a precise category and that its meaning is relative to other groups, institutions and ideologies present in society is an important consideration in a pluralistic and democratic society where tolerance of ideas is key to its success. History is replete with examples of labeling groups as extremist, fanatical or irrational as political in nature is designed to deprive them of legitimacy in the political process. The accusation of extremism at its worst is a sign of intolerance of political viewpoints by those employing the label and serves to quell political dissent against the powerful and alienates valuable ideological critiques of existing institutions, politics, culture and society.   Likewise, the label of extremism against any group has the consequence of demonizing those who would not take practical steps toward violence and thus further isolates them. This concern is particular poignant when it comes to veterans who face a panoply of challenges after their service has ended.

5. Interviews

Interviews were conducted of those respondents who indicated that taking up arms against the government was never necessary and alternatively was necessary at times. Reasons for supporting violence against the government included the abridgment of rights and liberties of the citizens as guaranteed by the Constitution. Many who supported violence against the government highlighted the failure of the institutions to adhere to Constitutional limits – the First Amendment, Second Amendment and Fourth Amendment. There was also disdain and concern for the lack of responsiveness that governmental institutions have to the American public and their interests in national security, economic growth and prosperity, and border control. Those who indicated that violence should not be used against the government were surprisingly supportive of using violence against other groups in society. Here, government would be the instrument of violence against citizens. Some of the reasons cited for the use of government violence ranged from executing all January 6th participants for their participation, to the elimination of one third of the population for genetic shortcomings, to the limitation of the rights and liberties of individuals to promote environmental goals.

6. Conclusions

The demonization of groups with the label of extremism is an unproductive approach that may in fact contribute to societal, political and cultural dissatisfaction and alienation and disenfranchisement that may itself lead to violence. The label of extremism is a sign of intolerance of pluralism in a democratic society and is designed to limit the participation of those designated as such in the political process, which is tasked with representing and addressing societal, political and cultural needs. The current interventionist methods of dealing with extremism - censorship, surveillance and targeted suppression – only heightens alienation and disenfranchisement and potentially makes political violence seem like the only option for those who find themselves labeled as extremists.