

Congressional Testimony (Full Statement)
House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
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Good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to offer my thoughts regarding white supremacist and anti-government extremism; a deeply troubling and vitally important issue. Before I provide some professional background, let me foreshadow the central thesis of my remarks: there is a substantial overlap between white supremacist extremism and anti-government militias in terms of ideology, organization, affiliations, and tactics. As such, many militia groups should be considered as hate groups because of their antipathy to certain government authorities as well as holding explicit bias toward various groups such as immigrants and Muslims.

I am currently a professor of sociology at Chapman University and a member of the Executive Committee leadership team at the recently awarded Department of Homeland Security Office of University Programs Center of Excellence on Terrorism Prevention and Counterterrorism Research, "NCITE." As part of this work, I partner with Life After Hate, a community-based organization founded by former white supremacists dedicated to countering violent narratives and helping individuals leave the violent far-right and rebuild their lives. I have also served as an expert witness legal consultant on more than a dozen criminal and civil cases related to right-wing extremism and domestic terrorism.

In addition, I have authored or co-authored more than 60 scholarly articles and co-authored, along with Robert Futrell at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, the book manuscript, *American Swastika: Inside the White Power Movement's Hidden Spaces of Hate* which attempts to explain how white supremacy persists across a variety of social settings.

Starting in 1996, I began monitoring extremist websites doing simple key word searches on Internet browsers and reviewing hundreds of the already thousands of these hate sites that emerged in the early days of the web. Over the past two-and-half decades, I observed the growth of white supremacy in digital spaces to what it is today; a virtual buffet of hate found across mainstream platforms all the way to more secretive encrypted forums in the darkest regions of cyberspace.

In 1997, I began conducting what social scientists refer to as ethnographic fieldwork with anti-government and white supremacist extremists across the US and abroad. That fieldwork included, among other things, attending Ku Klux Klan cross burnings, neo-Nazi music shows, racist church services, and living with extremist families to learn about their daily lives and how they come to understand the world in the way that they do. This type of research provided firsthand observation of how extremists manage to infiltrate various segments of society and blend into the mainstream. Our research has also involved conducting intensive life history interviews with more than 100 former white supremacists to obtain sensitive and in-depth details regarding individuals' childhood and adolescent experiences prior to their extremist involvement as well as their experiences during their involvement and the factors that led to their disengagement. This work includes extensive collaboration with Kathleen Blee at the University of Pittsburgh, Matthew DeMichele at Research Triangle International, and Steven Windisch at Temple University.

My ethnographic fieldwork started with a self-defined militia group in the southwestern United States; a group that represents the hybrid nature of right-wing extremism blending anti-government extremism, Christian Identity (a white supremacist interpretation of Christianity), the skinhead subculture, and various other elements. There is a longstanding overlap between white supremacist extremism and militias. The overlap during the 1st wave of the militia movement in the early 1990s is well documentedⁱ.

The second wave of the militia movement emerged following Barak Obama's presidential election. Leading up to the 2016 election, militias coalesced around Trump's campaign and eventual presidency and turned their attention toward alleged communist threats like Antifa and Black Lives Matter (BLM) while also focusing on anti-lockdown activism related to COVID-19.

Defining Right-Wing Extremism

Right-wing extremism represents a broad constellation of individuals, informal groups, and formal organizations that hold some combination of the following beliefs: ultranationalism and racism (to include xenophobic and anti-immigrant); misogyny and homophobia; and anti-government (primarily focused on anti-federal government although some elements reject all forms of government).

Observers often describe three types of right-wing extremists: white supremacist extremists; anti-government/militia extremists; and single-issue extremists (e.g., anti-immigrant, anti-gay etc.). While helpful, in some respects, these buckets oversimplify a reality that is far more convoluted where substantial overlap exists between each type.

While many groups like the Oath Keepers claim a "race neutral" ideology, this type of disavowal strategy is common across right-wing extremist groups, including those most observers would widely recognize as white supremacist (e.g., KKK factions). In other words, there are very few individuals or groups who openly self-identify as "white supremacist." Representatives of the militia movement's second wave may claim they were responding to federal overreach during Obama's administration, but it is curious the second wave did not emerge during George W. Bush's administration following the passage of the 2001 Patriot Act which some observers have described as one of the greatest threats to civil liberties in recent historyⁱⁱ. Groups like the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, in my experience, have a range of beliefs consistent with those found among groups more commonly defined as white supremacistⁱⁱⁱ. Further, there is cross-fertilization among individuals associated with militia and white supremacist groups with some individuals going back and forth and other individuals simultaneously affiliated with both types of groups. The high degree of overlap can render clear delineations artificial and misleading.

In short, the idea that militias are race neutral is an illusion. Militias routinely oppose immigration and, in some cases, conduct armed patrols of the southern US border. Never, to my knowledge, have militia groups sent armed patrols to the northern border to monitor the flood of "illegals" from Canada. Militias also generally oppose Muslims as an existential threat to western civilization and more specifically (although inaccurate) as the primary source of terrorism. Militias' selective opposition to immigration and rejection of Muslims can only be described as xenophobic and racist. In other cases, militias often hold views about the "New World Order" that quickly bleed into old tropes regarding the "International Jew" and views on citizenship that suggest "natural or sovereign citizenship" only applies to those who gained full rights prior to the 14th Amendment; a not so thinly veiled credo that would deny Blacks equal protection under the law.

A New Problem?

On January 6th, 2021 tens of thousands of Trump supporters gathered in Washington DC to protest what was described as a "stolen election" referring to the November presidential election where Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump in what former Homeland Security cyber security chief, Christopher Krebs described as the most secure election in US history^{iv}. The Capitol insurrection represented a broad constellation of far-right extremists. January 6th's mob included hard-core white supremacists, with

well-known public figures who were live streaming the events; assorted individuals with the Confederate flag; a “Camp Auschwitz” t-shirt; a noose hung outside the Capitol as part of a staged gallows to execute known “traitors”; and a substantial presence of the anti-Semitic Qanon movement. And, of course, there were large numbers of generic “MAGA” supporters, some of whom are now, more than ever before, associated with the most extreme strands of the far right. In fact, as we speak, the radicalization of MAGA supporters is being hailed on various neo-Nazi Telegram channels.

We should not see January 6th as either new or an aberration. When people say, “as Americans, we don’t do this,” I appreciate the sentiment, but the sentiment is wrong. As Americans, we do this, and we have a long history of doing this. Pretending otherwise does not help address the problem. Violent far-right extremism (like we saw at the Capitol) has been allowed to fester for decades as these networks built a massive infrastructure in online and offline spaces where highly emotive propaganda is created and widely shared. For too long, the US has denied and minimized this problem.

On April 19, 1995, 168 Americans lost their lives when a fertilizer bomb demolished the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, OK. The three individuals convicted in connection with the attack were all military veterans and, the primary culprit, Timothy McVeigh, was deeply inspired by neo-Nazi leader William Pierce’s novel *the Turner Diaries*. Just over a year later, another military veteran and far right terrorist, Eric Rudolph, targeted the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, GA killing two and injuring over 100. Prior to his arrest, Rudolph executed three other bombings targeting two healthcare clinics where abortions were performed and a gay nightclub. Based on our research, McVeigh and Rudolph’s military background was not uncommon among domestic right-wing terrorists operating at that time. We found that among those active during the 1980s and 1990s, approximately one-third had military experience^v.

Dozens of other terror plots both those that were foiled and those that were executed followed the Olympic Park bombing over the next several years including multiple federal indictments involving militia groups many of which expressed various hallmarks of white supremacy. In 1998, long before ISIS made news for their beheadings, James Byrd Jr., an African American was beheaded by white supremacists in Jasper, TX and, a year later, 1999 became known as “the summer of hate” where multiple white supremacist shooting rampages terrorized communities across the US. During this time, our country’s most lethal “school shooting” also occurred. Often mislabeled and disconnected from domestic terrorism, Columbine’s primary planner, Eric Harris, was obsessed with Adolf Hitler and Timothy McVeigh and designed Columbine to be a bombing attack followed by sniper shots aimed at those who managed to survive the explosives. The goal was to achieve a larger body count than McVeigh^{vi}.

What is most shocking and saddening, however, is that even with this high level of targeted violence in what was clearly a wave of terrorism, many Americans failed to connect the dots. Had the perpetrators been people of color or Muslim, you can be sure the response would have been dramatically different; instead, America remained comfortable with its concerted or intentional ignorance about the longstanding threat from terrorists inside our own borders.

The 1990s terror wave was preceded by another terror wave during the 1980s when underground paramilitary cells like the Silent Brotherhood, armed encampments with military grade weapons like the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord, and roving racist skinhead gangs attacked and murdered people across the country. The 1980s followed decades of KKK and other white supremacist inspired violence that included church bombings, political assassinations, and lynchings. This may sound like

“ancient history” to some but as Merrick Garland stated in his recent confirmation hearing there is a straight line that connects the founding of the Ku Klux Klan during the Reconstruction Era to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and what happened in our nation’s capitol on January 6th, 2021^{vii}. The straight line, if nothing else, tells us this problem is anything but new.

Combatting Misconceptions

Some people looked at the images of Jan 6 and commented, “they don’t look like extremists or terrorists,” but that begs the question, “what do extremists or terrorists look like?” The answer is, of course, obvious; extremism and terrorism are not about what you look like; extremism and terrorism are defined by a person’s beliefs, feelings, and actions. If you think, feel, and act like an extremist then you are an extremist, and it should not matter whether you look like someone’s “next door neighbor” or co-worker. And, in some cases, extremists and even terrorists may wrap themselves in the US flag and/or hold positions within law enforcement and the military. I do not want to oversimplify because there are some complicated issues here in terms of defining extremism and terrorism but as we struggle with those issues, we should be cognizant of our perceptual biases that may lead to highly distorted interpretations regarding what extremism and terrorism look like.

We typically imagine white supremacists in terms of hooded Klansmen or shaved headed neo-Nazi skinheads. Such people exist but do not represent the entire spectrum of the problem. More often, white supremacy is practiced by ordinary looking White Americans (and oddly enough not always white). Sometimes they wear black robes and carry gavels; sometimes they hold PhDs and teach our young people; and yes, sometimes they wear blue uniforms with silver badges and are granted the authority to take another’s life when they deem such force is necessary.

There is a longstanding tendency to gauge a problem like white supremacy by focusing on how many groups and members exist across the country. Those numbers are important but can be very misleading. White supremacist extremism is not a membership-based movement and while organizations are important, what we are really dealing with is a broad worldview focused on ideas and emotions. The worldview spreads by shaping and promoting narratives about race, religion, gender and the like to ensure American society remains polarized. The goal is an America divided by race and politics where white domination is framed as necessary to avoid social collapse which will inevitably result in untold “white victimization.” And this goal is furthered every time a racist joke is told, a hateful meme is reposted, and, of course, every time a law enforcement officer misuses their authority, lethal or otherwise in a racist manner, white supremacy wins.

If white supremacy is a virus, it is not a foreign agent attacking us from abroad. This is a virus of our own making. It is institutionalized, embedded in our culture, and etched so very deeply in our collective psyche that we are often unaware of our own collaboration with this system. And white supremacist violence is the only form of terrorism in our country’s history that has been state-sanctioned. This problem has existed for too long unnamed, unacknowledged, and without systematic efforts in place to combat it. That time should end.

Right Wing Extremism in Law Enforcement

One facet of our research program has involved examining various social institutions and how these can become breeding grounds for white supremacist and other related forms of far-right extremism. This work has focused on the US military, prison system, and law enforcement. My colleague Brittany Friedman at Rutgers University is correct to remind us that white supremacists employed in the

American prison system are especially alarming as inmates are among the most vulnerable populations in society and the guards and administrators in those facilities wield almost absolute power over their lives. The prospect of persons committed to white supremacy holding that kind of power over inmates of color is appalling but is happening every day in our country and has been for decades.

While conducting fieldwork, I discovered a perception among my subjects that they believe law enforcement is “on their side” and their agendas are complimentary. In some cases, my research subjects claimed to be employed in law enforcement positions but more often these individuals explained having positive relationships with law enforcement who allegedly understood they were involved in extremism and offered their explicit approval. In such cases, they claimed law enforcement officers encouraged them to “clean up the streets.” This is absolutely frightening. But we need not wonder if this issue only amounts to perceptions because those perceptions stem from the stark realities of racist policing which has an extensive history in the US. White supremacy is interwoven within law enforcement like few other institutions in our country’s history. That history can be traced, in part, to the first slave patrols, but it is recent history that should give us the most pause.

White supremacist police gangs have been documented in large and small cities across the country. One of the most notorious examples during the 1980’s and 1990’s involved a group of officers in the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department, known as the Lynwood Vikings, who were described by a federal judge as a “neo-Nazi, white supremacist gang.”^{viii} Another particularly horrendous example involved the Chicago Police Department’s “Midnight Crew,” active in the 1970’s and 1980’s responsible for the torture and beating of hundreds of predominantly Black citizens.^{ix} And more recent history is also replete with such examples^x.

Since 2000, ties between law enforcement officers and far right extremist groups have been identified in at least 14 states^{xi}. Since 2009, more than 100 police departments across the country have been implicated in incidents where officers have been identified sending overtly racist emails or text messages or posting racist comments using various social media platforms^{xii}. Most recent, at least 13 off duty law enforcement officers allegedly participated in the January 6th riot, and, approximately 35 Capitol Police Officers are being investigated for possibly assisting the riots^{xiii}.

Given that there are virtually no efforts to systematically track such instances, it is likely these numbers severely undercount the true prevalence of the problem. I would love to sit here today and provide an exact number (or even a reasonably accurate estimate) of the extent of right extremists holding law enforcement positions. I cannot do that nor can anyone else because those numbers are simply not available. And they are not available for primarily two reasons.

First, the question itself is inherently difficult to answer. We are dealing with a white supremacist iceberg of sorts. The tip of that iceberg includes the smallest portion of the problem; individuals willing to openly espouse their hatred donning Klan regalia and similar uniforms while walking down main street. But there is a much larger segment of America unwilling to so openly identify themselves in such ways who harbor virtually the same hateful beliefs. These individuals live a double life of sorts using a veneer of legitimacy and normalcy to conceal their expression and support for white supremacy. In some cases, they are explicitly part of an infiltration strategy documented in the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s 2006 report related to white supremacists seeking employment in law enforcement.^{xiv} In even more cases, however, individuals who are not linked to any white supremacist groups but adhere to certain aspects of white supremacy and related forms of anti-government militancy help spread this virus through digital environments and offline behavior that may include discrimination and harassment as those opportunities emerge over the course of their professional and personal lives.

Second, to date there has not been a comprehensive national initiative to compile such data. Part of what I hope to discuss with you today is the need for such effort. The Plainview Project, the Brennan Center, and Professor Vida Johnson's research all provide important and instructive starting points for how to monitor this problem. Much like recent calls for better tracking of police-involved shootings, we have a desperate need to track officers with known affiliations to white supremacist and anti-government groups and officers who post on social media and other digital platforms words and images that express adherence to the hallmarks of white supremacy. Police accountability and reform is a complex issue but one piece, in my estimation, should involve rooting out extremists who hold a badge. Given an officer's unique authority, it is vital that we identify these individuals during the hiring process as well as during ongoing monitoring as part of performance evaluation.

While I appreciate the Constitutional complexities, we should abandon any illusion that such people simply hold hateful beliefs and those beliefs have little or no impact on their professional conduct. If there is one thing, I could leave you with, it is that such an idea is completely at odds with what we know about human behavior. In short, ideas matter because ideas influence behavior. Human behavior may not always reflect a coherent set of ideas but having hateful, racist ideas swirling around your mind most certainly affects how you perceive and judge other people as well as interpret different types of environmental contexts. Allowing white supremacists and anti-government extremists to hold positions of law enforcement authority betrays possibly the most fundamental American legal principle: equal protection under the law. Considering the gravity of this problem, a commitment is required to develop a comprehensive, national effort so that extremists in law enforcement can be systematically identified, monitored, and removed from these positions.

Where to go from here?

The suggestion that we have waited too long to address white supremacist and anti-government extremism seems undeniable, but our history of inaction should provide a sense of urgency not defeatism. Because our country is so far behind in terms of seriously addressing these issues, we tend to overestimate the "newness" of the problem. The problem, however, has been hiding in plain sight for far too long. Mischaracterizing old trends as new ones does not help us clarify the problem. In fact, it does the opposite. At the same time, action should be deliberate and mindful of unintentional consequences. We need short and long-term commitments to provide additional monitoring, investigation, and prosecution of domestic terrorism and related hate crimes. One starting point to help assess the nature and scale of the domestic terrorism threat would be to compose a Congressional commission to comprehensively and systematically investigate the tragic events on January 6, 2021.

In addition to a Jan 6th Commission and a national tracking system for extremist-related officers, we should address the need for law enforcement training around these issues. This training should focus on the threat of extremist infiltration in their ranks to raise awareness and clarify departmental policies regarding social media endorsements of extremism and offline affiliation with such groups. The Orange County Sheriffs Department in southern California recently implemented additional curricula in their required training for new and existing officers around these issues and could serve as a model for other departments in this respect.

But as the saying goes, "You can't arrest your way out of a problem" and that is no less true as we consider how to deal with this issue in a more serious manner. As part of a greater commitment to non-law enforcement prevention and intervention, the development of early anti-racist curriculum, classrooms, and schools should be a priority. We also need additional investment in disengagement/deradicalization programs to help provide "second chances." We need more creative ways of addressing the digital landscape of hate and extremism beyond de-platforming efforts and part of that discussion

should include how regulation could be used to stem the tide of digital extremism. In short, we need a major multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary effort that seeks to rebuild trust in government and reduce polarization with an emphasis on “truth and reconciliation.” Until we are willing to confront these harsh realities with open and honest dialogue, our country will remain polarized and unable to fully appreciate the true richness of a multicultural democracy.

ⁱ See *American Militias: Rebellion, Religion, and Racism* (1996). Richard Abanes, Intervarsity Press; *A Force Upon the Plains* (1997). Kenneth Stern, University of Oklahoma Press; *Rage on the Right: The American Militia Movement from Ruby Ridge to the Trump Presidency* (2019). Lane Crothers, Rowman&Littlefield.

ⁱⁱ See “Threats to Civil Liberties,” Timothy Lynch, CATO Institute. 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example Shane Bauer (2016) <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/10/undercover-border-militia-immigration-bauer/>;

^{iv} See [Krebs doubles down after threat: '2020 election was most secure in US history' | TheHill](#).

^v Simi, Pete, Bryan Bubolz, and Ann Hardman. 2013. “Military Experience, Identity Discrepancies, and Far Right Terrorism: An Exploratory Analysis. *Studies of Conflict & Terrorism* 36:654-71.

^{vi} See Cullen, Dave. *Columbine*. (2010). NY: Twelve.

^{vii} Garland , Merrick. Congressional Confirmation Hearing, February 22nd and 23rd, 2021. [Domestic Terrorism Is 'More Dangerous' Post-Jan. 6, Biden AG Pick Says \(businessinsider.com\)](#)

^{viii} See Darren Thomas et al. v. County of Los Angeles et al. (1992: 513)

^{ix} See *Beyond the Usual Beating: the Jon Burge Police Torture Scandal and Social Movements for Police Accountability in Chicago* (2020). Andrew Baer. University of Chicago Press.

^x Johnson, Vida. 2019. “KKK in the PD: White Supremacist Police and What to do about it.” *Lewis & Clark Law Review* 23, 1: 205-61.

^{xi} German, Mike. 2020. “Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism, White Supremacy, and Far Right Militancy in Law Enforcement.” Brennan Center for Justice. [Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism, White Supremacy, and Far-Right Militancy in Law Enforcement | Brennan Center for Justice](#); See also, Johnson *ibid*.

^{xii} Johnson *ibid*.

^{xiii} See [U.S. Capitol Police investigating role of 35 officers during January 6 riot | Reuters](#).

^{xiv} See “White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, Intelligence Assessment. October 16, 2006.