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WHITE PAPER SERIES

White Nationalism as an Insider Threat to DoD

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INTENT

This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.



White Nationalism as an Insider Threat to DoD

Introduction

Per the Anti-Defamation League, white nationalism is defined as “a form of white supremacy that emphasizes defining a country or region by white racial identity and which seeks to promote the interests of whites exclusively, typically at the expense of people of other backgrounds.”¹ The white nationalist ideology has gained traction among extremists in the U.S. and abroad in recent years, due in part to the rise of social media as well as heightened political polarization (white nationalism is typically categorized as a far-right wing political faction). However, a number of white nationalist extremists have committed terrorist acts in furtherance of their ideology, to include the perpetrators of the 2017 Charlottesville vehicle-ramming attack in Virginia and the 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks in New Zealand.

Concerns remain, however, regarding the presence of white nationalists within the ranks of the U.S. military. An investigative piece by the New York Times contends that the DoD “does not see white nationalists in the ranks as a major issue,” despite a significant number of cases involving white nationalism among current and former service members.² While white nationalism and other extremist activity among former service members is troubling, this paper will focus on the potential insider threat from current, active duty service members who espouse a white nationalist ideology and/or participate in activities associated with white nationalism.

Potential Threats Emanating from White Nationalist Extremists

Per the Southern Poverty Law Center, “white nationalist groups espouse white supremacist or white separatist ideologies, often focusing on the alleged inferiority of nonwhites.” Additionally, the organization states that extremist groups “listed in a variety of other categories (Ku Klux Klan, neo-Confederate, neo-Nazi, racist skinhead, and Christian Identity) could also be fairly described as white nationalist.”³ Many white nationalists will not engage in any overtly violent acts, and will instead engage in hateful activity online, in private meetings or conferences with like-minded individuals/groups, or even at public rallies. It is important to note that while some of these individuals may endorse violent acts, or promote violent policies, they may not directly engage in any kinetic actions such as assaults, shootings, or bombings.

Hate Crimes and Terrorist Attacks

White nationalists may engage in overtly violent acts in furtherance of their ideology or as a result of their inherent racial hatred. However, it is important to note that there is a fine line between hate crimes and terrorist attacks that can often be difficult to distinguish. According to U.S. Attorney Scott Brady (the prosecutor responsible for handling the October 2018 Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting), “the distinction between a hate crime and domestic terrorism is [that] a hate crime is where an individual is animated by a hatred or certain animus toward a person of a certain ethnicity or religious faith. [A hate crime] becomes domestic terrorism where there's an ideology that that person is then also trying to propagate through violence.”⁴ Due to the overlapping definitions for such violent acts, both event types have been included together in this section.



Protests and Rallies

White nationalists also regularly participate in public demonstrations, to include rallies, protests, and counter-protests. Although political speech (to include the expression of hateful ideologies) is protected under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, many of these public gatherings have turned violent. Perhaps the most notable example occurred at the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, when a wide variety of far-right activists (to include white nationalist extremists) gathered for a public demonstration. On the first day of the event, protestors and counter-protestors clashed on a number of occasions, while the second day is well-known for the vehicle-ramming attack against a crowd of protestors committed by a Neo-Nazi/white nationalist extremist.⁵

White Nationalism and the Insider Threat

Per the National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF), an insider threat is defined as “a threat posed to U.S. national security by someone who misuses or betrays, wittingly or unwittingly, their authorized access to any U.S. Government resource.” This threat can include “damage through espionage, terrorism, unauthorized disclosure of national security information, or through the loss or degradation of departmental resources or capabilities.”⁶ White nationalists within the DoD likely constitute an insider threat due to the extreme nature of their ideology, which may lead to an increased propensity for violent acts or other malicious acts such as theft of government property. Moreover, the mere adoption of the white nationalist ideology runs counter to DoD regulations regarding discrimination and extremist activity, and commanders may discipline or discharge troops who endorse such an ideology, resulting in a loss or degradation of departmental resources and capabilities as defined by the NITTF.

Violent Acts

White nationalist extremists within the DoD may plan or carry out violent acts to include hate crimes and/or terrorist attacks. In fact, the most recent documented case of an active duty servicemember plotting an attack occurred in February 2019, which will be explained in further detail shortly among other case studies. Still, an insider (or multiple insiders) could potentially plot an attack against fellow DoD personnel or target a DoD installation based upon a white nationalist ideology. Alternatively, personnel who hold white nationalist views may be more likely to carry out impulsive, unplanned hate crimes (such as assault) based on racial bias that do not rise to the level of terrorism. The level of impact to the DoD will vary depending on the severity of the violent act, but a number of different mission impacts could occur, to include death, injury, or arrest/imprisonment of personnel.

Protest-Related Insider Threats

White nationalist extremists within the DoD may also participate in the aforementioned public demonstrations. Personnel attending such demonstrations (which may include rallies, protests, and counter-protests) may be arrested for unlawful demonstration or disorderly conduct, and may engage in physical clashes with counter-protestors and/or law enforcement. Additionally, the mere visibility of military members engaged in such activity may be documented by journalists, activists, or witnesses, which would cast the DoD in a negative light. Service members engaged in public demonstrations are subject to discharge or other disciplinary action, which could have mission impacts (for example, a commanding officer who is relieved of his duties due to involvement in such demonstrations, necessitating a reshuffling of unit responsibilities).



Other Potential Insider Threats

Many white nationalist groups operate in a similar manner to gangs or terrorist organizations, with the intent to stockpile weaponry and other equipment for potential violent acts. Military members have a unique opportunity to steal weapons, ammunition, and other items that may be beneficial to an organization intent on committing/preparing for violent acts. Moreover, it is important to note that the mere presence of white nationalist sentiments can have serious impacts on military readiness. White nationalists' divisive and hateful worldview can alienate other servicemembers (particularly minority servicemembers) and degrade unit cohesion and morale.

Case Studies

The selected case studies below examine recent instances in which DoD personnel engaged in white nationalist extremist activity while still serving on active duty. There are a number of additional known cases involving active duty personnel, and a significant number involving U.S. military veterans. These case studies are not all-encompassing (nor are they representative of military servicemembers as a whole), rather, they serve as a brief snapshot into the types of white nationalist extremist activity perpetrated by DoD insiders in recent years.

Vasillios Pistolis – United States Marine Corps

Vasillios Pistolis (a Lance Corporal in the United States Marine Corps) was identified by PBS' Frontline program and the nonprofit ProPublica in 2018 as a participant in the aforementioned 2017 "Unite The Right" white nationalist rally. Pistolis bragged openly on social media about participating in violence against counter-protestors and was photographed assaulting one counter-protestor with a wooden club. As a result of this revelation, Pistolis was convicted at a court martial on charges of disobeying orders and making false statements, and was briefly imprisoned before being processed for separation from the Marine Corps. Pistolis was also reportedly a member of two identified white nationalist groups: the Traditionalist Worker Party and Atomwaffen Division.⁷ Both groups are known for violent activity, with the latter described as a paramilitary group preparing for a perceived "coming race war."⁸ Pistolis' combat training and access to weapons may have made him an appealing recruit to these organizations.

Dillon Ulysses Hopper – United States Marine Corps

Shortly after the "Unite the Right" rally, links were drawn between the perpetrator of the vehicle-ramming attack and a White Nationalist organization called Vanguard America (the perpetrator was pictured at the rally holding a shield featuring the organization's logo). However, it was also revealed that Dillon Ulysses Hopper, the leader of Vanguard America (which has roughly 200 members spread across 28 states and a few international chapters) was an active duty Marine just a few months prior to the violent rally. He had reportedly identified a white supremacist since 2012 and had served as the leader of Vanguard America for roughly one year. Since his time as a self-identified white supremacist, he had also served as a recruiter for the Corps.^{9,10} Vanguard America is known to embrace certain paramilitary aspects, to include the open carrying of firearms, marching in military-style formations, and wearing a standardized uniform at public events. The group participated at a number of public demonstrations throughout 2017 to include the "Unite the Right" rally, and focuses on recruiting young people to include establishing a presence on college campuses.¹¹



Christopher Paul Hasson – United States Coast Guard

In 2019, Christopher Paul Hasson (a Lieutenant in the United States Coast Guard) was arrested on firearms and drug charges and described as a “domestic terrorist” by federal prosecutors. Hasson, a self-described white supremacist, had stockpiled over a dozen firearms and more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition, while a “target list” of Democratic politicians and media figures was discovered on his computer.¹² While Hasson was apparently not an active member of any white nationalist group at the time of his arrest, he had apparently communicated with a well-known Neo-Nazi figure in 2017, in which he discussed the idea of forming a “white homeland” and using “focused violence” to achieve that goal.¹³ At the time of his arrest, Hasson was stationed at the Coast Guard headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Outlook

The threat from white nationalist extremists is unlikely to diminish in the near future, and may increase due to increased political polarization (which may drive individuals to extreme ends of the political spectrum, to include extremist ideologies), as well as a significant recruiting and propaganda effort by white nationalist groups. There have also been a number of high-profile terrorist attacks by white nationalist extremists in recent years, to include the vehicle-ramming attack at the “Unite the Right Rally” and the Christchurch mosque shootings, which may embolden those who are “on the fence” about engaging in violent acts or may inspire “copycats” who seek fame and influence.

Additionally, the DoD must remain vigilant to the potential insider threat posed by white nationalist extremists. While the number of recent cases involving active duty servicemembers remains small, the case studies detailed above show that the threat cannot be discounted altogether. Moreover, military personnel are likely highly appealing recruits to white nationalist organizations due to their combat training and access to weaponry. White nationalist extremists within DoD could potentially plot attacks (including hate crimes or terrorism), engage in protest activity that leads to violence or arrests, or engage in property theft to support white nationalist organizations with paramilitary aspirations. Even the presence of white nationalist attitudes among personnel could have serious impacts on military readiness as unit cohesion and morale suffer due to the hateful nature of the ideology. Still, despite strict regulations against such extremist activity, a small number of DoD insiders are likely to engage in white nationalist activities (whether individually or as a member of a larger organization), posing a potential insider threat that must be taken seriously

Source List

1. *Defining Extremism: White Nationalism*. Anti-Defamation League.
2. *White Supremacism in the U.S. Military, Explained*. The New York Times. 27 February 2019.
3. *Extremist Files: White Nationalist*. Southern Poverty Law Center.
4. *Pittsburgh Shooting: Names of 11 Victims Released*. Yahoo! News. 28 October 2018.
5. *The Inside Story of Charlottesville – And How the Violence Could Have Been Avoided*. Newsweek. 30 July 2019.



6. *Mission Fact Sheet*. National Insider Threat Task Force.
7. *U.S. Marine to Be Imprisoned Over Involvement With Hate Groups*. ProPublica. 20 June 2018.
8. *Atomwaffen Division*. Anti-Defamation League.
9. *White Supremacist Group Leader is Former Marine Corps Recruiter*. Marine Corps Times. 15 August 2017.
10. *Leader of Charlottesville White Nationalist Group was a Marine Corps Recruiter*. Task & Purpose. 14 August 2017
11. *Vanguard America*. Anti-Defamation League.
12. *Coast Guard Officer Arrested on Gun Charges had Hit List of Prominent Democrats, Feds Say*. CBS News. 21 February 2019.
13. *Coast Guard Lt. Christopher Hasson Wrote to Notorious Neo-Nazi Harold Covington*. Southern Poverty Law Center. 21 February 2019.