



by Jack Hadley

On March 19th, the DoD-wide Anti-Extremism Stand-Down chain-teaching came hurtling down from echelons on high. For me personally, I saw this cascade come from U.S. Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF) down to the 173rd Airborne Brigade, to 1-91 Cavalry Regiment, and finally to 2nd Platoon, Comanche Troop—within the span of two days. Immediately after receiving the squadron-level training, my platoon sergeant and I were required to brief our platoon. As [mandated](#) by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, it was the only priority that day.

The training went well. Honestly, better than I thought it would under the circumstances. Given the perpetually urgent task-lists facing Army units around the globe, it is understandable that many viewed the stand-down as simply “check the block” training or a distractor on the operational training calendar. However, I argue that this training was absolutely necessary and should be the beginning, not end, of our efforts to prevent violent extremism in the ranks.

We have reason to believe that cases of domestic extremism will [continue to rise](#). The nagging [proxy war strategies](#) taken by our near-peer enemies will continue to use the

internet to spread disinformation and incite extremism within our borders. Moreover, a polarized electorate makes self-professed 'disenfranchised' Americans ever more likely to act rashly—and violently—to achieve their own narrow ideological goals.

How can we limit or eliminate extremism from permeating our ranks? There is, of course, no substitute for engaged leaders and Soldiers who share bonds of mutual trust. However, organizations built on trust must also determine whether their focus is on the right mission. The following are three conclusions I drew from the stand-down training. I share them with the hope they help junior military leaders and the Profession of Arms as a whole better prepare for the threat of domestic violent extremism.

1) We are not mentally or morally prepared to defend our country against *domestic* enemies.

During our platoon-level training, several of my paratroopers were surprised to learn (or remember) that their oath obligates them to defend against all enemies, foreign *and domestic*. It's easy to understand why. Throughout basic training, and during live fire progressions, our Soldiers are training to fight Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) against a foreign enemy. This exclusive focus on the foreign threat has all but eliminated focus on the domestic threat.

This can no longer be the case. In response to the January 6th riot in Washington D.C, several thousand National Guard troops were deployed to defend the capitol against American citizens. In June 2020, [17,000 National Guard Troops](#) across 23 states were activated to D.C. to prevent protests from spiraling out of control. It's not only the National Guard who needs to worry about domestic deployments. Also in June 2020, [several hundred active duty 82nd Airborne personnel](#) were placed on 'heightened alert status,' with preparations to mobilize to Washington D.C. Thankfully, they were not utilized. To be sure, these events and decisions prompt questions of proper utilization of the military. But are we really that much more confident in our utilization in Afghanistan right now? Focus on foreign enemies should of course continue to be our main line of effort—but not our only one.

Our oath is to support and defend the Constitution. One way of mentally and morally preparing our military to respond to domestic extremism is by reviewing our Constitution and our oath to it. When I asked my platoon when they had last had read the Constitution, everyone was silent, minus one patriotic NCO with a pocket Constitution. When's the last time *I* read it? A couple years ago at least—if not in my American Politics class back in 2015. More startling still, none of us confessed any level of emotional connection to our oath.

2) The Army's nonpartisanship makes dealing with (political) extremism difficult.

During our squadron-level training, a captain on staff asked a tough question: "How should we approach the anti-extremism conversation with subordinates who actively participate (within regulation) in political groups that some describe as 'extremist?'" The facilitator, speaking consistently with the training slides from the highest levels, said that the matter hinges on the issue of 'unlawful violence' and/or the support of it. Yes, he said, the line between politics and extremist violence is thin, and there is no quick reference guide of 'extremist' organizations. But, he concluded, there is no relationship between political affiliation and violent extremism. "Unlawful violence is unlawful violence."

This is oversimplified. Removing politics from extremism is like saying that your first seven drinks have nothing to do with your sloppiness after your eighth.

The military's inability to discuss politics in relation to extremism comes from its core value of nonpartisanship. Nonpartisanship, written into regulation and enforced by military social norms, is a wonderful thing. The world's strongest military willingly subordinates itself to its civilian overseers, regardless of party, and—by extension—the American public. Not all countries are so lucky.

Perhaps we could once invoke nonpartisanship uncritically, especially at lower levels in our military. "We support the Constitution because we support the Constitution." But our nonpartisanship has been revealed by our current political stress test to be a façade for an empty political philosophy—a hollow political agnosticism, and hence a vacuum—inside our ranks. Now the key political abstractions on which our country rests, like *peaceful transfer of power* and *civilian control of the military*, cannot be automatically assumed. Likewise, with the number of veterans arrested since January 6th, we can no longer assume that *Americans generally trust the U.S. military*. We need real reasons for why we do what we do and think what we think. And sharing those reasons properly often generates political thought and discussion.

Recognizing this, my platoon sergeant and I resolved to contextualize the anti-extremism conversation for our platoon as much as possible. First we shared that the training originated in response to the January 6th capitol riot—a fact that was not communicated in the slide deck or training for us. Second we made it clear that we as leaders personally disapproved of the riot, while *not* pre-silencing anyone who might disagree. Third, we opened the floor to an honest discussion, ensuring our platoon members felt comfortable sharing their political affiliation (as appropriate) for making their points during the

conversation. These three steps, taken to affirm the trust already shared in our unit, led to a productive conversation about many of the issues underlying extremism, including politics.

I'm not saying the solution is to include more partisanship. However, we do need a content-filled political philosophy to generate healthy discussion and reinforce true allegiance to the Constitution. May our country not find its military, lacking a substantive political philosophy under the guise of nonpartisanship, an empty cave ready for habitation by extremist squatters.

3) As a Profession, we need to update our attitude towards the internet.

Cyber warfare is not new. Nevertheless, our traditional conception places cyber warfare in a neat separate category of warfighting. Something the nerds behind computers defend against and, if we're lucky, cooler nerds employ offensively. We also conceive of cyber and electronic warfare in a tactically relevant way to the average Soldier. That's why we train proficiency with map, protractor, and compass in case the DAGR gets jammed. Likewise, we practice employing alternate tactical radio communications plans for when the Integrated Tactical Network is compromised.

In 2021, cyber warfare isn't that simple. The character of the battlefield is changing. At the highest levels, there are complex policy issues concerning, for example, [Huawei's hardware platforms](#) and [TikTok's data sharing practices](#). These examples underscore the point most relevant even to the lowest levels: the internet is not the safe place it once was—or we once thought it was.

It is time for us to make two conceptual shifts. The first shift is to recognize that threats to our military can be carried out as attacks against servicemembers in their civilian lives. Cyber warfare has spilled out of the military boxes of 'strategic' and 'tactical' level warfare into the phones in everyone's jeans pockets, even on the weekends. No doubt unsuspecting Soldiers are matching on Tinder or Bumble with enemy intelligence agents, unknowingly providing them information about our weapons, schedules, or assessments of the chain-of-command that our adversaries will then, in turn, try to exploit. The second conceptual shift is recognizing that our cyber warfare 'enemy' is not only Russian or Chinese hackers, but also domestic extremist groups. Since January 6th, we know that domestic extremist groups are finding success [recruiting servicemembers](#) and veterans over the internet. Not only are servicemembers being targeted *as civilians* but *by fellow Americans*.

How should the Army respond? "Everyone is a safety officer." We can benefit from applying this logic to cyber warfare as a sort of battle drill, while DoD leaders work to build more

robust strategies. But at the tactical level, are we as servicemembers and small-unit leaders prepared to make private sacrifices for our public security? We worship the internet—we give it all our free time, we share with it all our private thoughts, we entrust to it our most prized photographs. Is it too hard to imagine a military capable of making disciplined moves to curb the internet's sway over us? We have too long treated the internet as a vast playground, a Central Park spanning the world over; are we ready to treat the internet as a battlefield with no clear sides, on which ground can be gained or lost?

Closing Thoughts

Many senior military leaders, strategists, and political theorists are way ahead of me; very few of these thoughts are striking or original. Why then, as a platoon leader, say anything? Is this not all a distraction from the more urgent METL task training and competence expected of me, my peers, and our platoons?

I argue that this conversation is not only worth junior leaders' attention, but necessary. Necessary—even if cliché—because today's junior officers are tomorrow's senior leaders, and today's privates are tomorrow's senior NCOs. If we're not making modest efforts to think about these issues now, our military is at greater risk of becoming vulnerable to slow-growing but dangerous domestic extremist threats.

Therefore I offer three simple suggestions for junior leaders to act on personally and with their units. Each one flows from my three main points. First, peruse the Constitution once a year and talk honestly with colleagues about its (in)significance to you. Second, talk politics and be prepared to listen to different opinions. And third—perhaps the hardest of the three—examine yourself as a citizen of the internet. If small unit leaders can do these things personally, and perhaps even encourage their subordinates to do the same, our military will be better prepared for the wide range of challenges it will face in the coming decades.

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