



Assessing the Impact of Right Wing Extremist Organization Propaganda on Radicalization and Support for Domestic Political Violence among Individuals with Military Service

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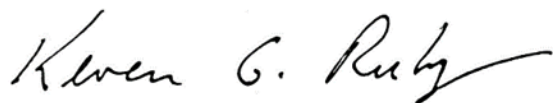
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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keven G. Ruby". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Keven" and last name "Ruby" being clearly legible, and "G." as a small middle initial.

Keven Ruby

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the factors associated with the appeal of right-wing extremist organizations (REOs) and domestic political violence among Americans with military experience. To understand the role of REO messaging and the unique contribution of military experience and risk factors for radicalization, the study fielded a survey experiment on sample of 843 American adults with military experience no longer serving (i.e., veterans) under the age of 65 and a matched sample of 820 American adults without military experience (total N=1,663). The survey includes questions to establish baseline support for REOs and the distribution of common risk factors including military and post-military experiences. The survey also measures the impact of different REO video appeals on support for REOs and political violence using non-military population as a control. Results find that support for REOs and political violence was statistically higher among veterans, and that veterans were more likely than non-veterans increase support for REOs and support for political violence after watching videos. The project also identified risk factors and vulnerable sub-populations among individuals with military service.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Major Goals

This study investigates the factors associated with the appeal of right-wing extremist organizations (REOs) and domestic political violence among Americans with military experience, specifically, US military veterans no longer serving in the US military. The study had two goals: (1) Assess the scope of support among veterans for extremist groups and ideas and whether factors specific to military service and veteranancy contribute to increased risk of such support; and (2) Assess the vulnerability of veterans to extremist messages produced by militia groups and anti-government political activists and support for violence in politics.

Approach

A survey experiment was used to investigate the role of REO messaging and the unique contribution of military experience and risk factors for radicalization. The survey, fielded on behalf of the research team by the survey firm NORC at the University of Chicago, sampled 843 American adults with military experience representative of veterans under the age of 65 and no-longer serving in the US Armed Forces and a demographically matched sample of 820 American adults without military experience for a total N of 1,663. The survey asked over 150 questions covering: (1) general political beliefs, belief in political conspiracies, and support for REOs and violence in politics; and (2) factors related to military service, including military background, combat experience, and post-service attitudes toward the military and government; and (3) non-military factors including personality variables, religiosity, and economic hardship. Veteran and non-Veteran subjects were then assigned to watch one of four REO recruitment or conspiracy videos (a total of eight conditions) followed by the “Emma” military recruitment video (for a total of two videos each). After each video, subjects were asked questions about the video and re-asked selected battery of questions regarding support for REOs, extreme political positions, and the US military (pre-post design). Analysis included assessing baseline support for REOs and extreme political positions among veterans, the causal role (if any) of military service and veteranancy (in comparison to the matched non-veteran sample), and the impact of the videos and associated risk factors. Both veteran and non-veteran samples were weighted to reflect veteran demographic and service benchmarks.

Main Findings

First, even without weighting the veteran sample closely approximates veteran population demographic and military service benchmarks for veterans under 65. For example, the veteran sample is 68% white and 84% male, compared to 69% white and 84% male according to the 2022 veteran population estimates provided by the National Center for Veterans Analysts and Statistics. 48% of the veteran sample served in the Army (compared to NCVAS estimate of 46%) and 6% officers (compared to 7%). Weighting brings the sample even closer into alignment with known population values.

Second, the survey found support for REOs and political violence among the veteran sample. Survey results suggest an estimated 13% of veterans have favorable impressions of militias like the Oath Keepers and 11% of White nationalist groups like the Proud Boys (vs. 7% favorability for either REO among comparable non-vets). The survey also found veterans more likely to support political violence to restore Donald Trump to the presidency: 12% of veterans agree that the use of force to restore Donald Trump to the presidency is justified (vs 7% for non-veterans), and twice as likely to agree they would be willing to personally use force to restore Trump to the White House (10% vs 5%). U.S. veterans under 65 are 78% more likely than demographically comparable non-veterans to hold these sentiments.

Third, veterans were more likely to hold political conspiracy beliefs. 33% of veterans reported believing the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump and that Biden is an illegitimate president (vs 25% of non-vets) and were also more likely to believe conspiracy theories such as QAnon and Demographic Replacement (15% vs 11%). Even as veterans scored higher on baseline indicators of support for REOs and political violence, they were consistently more favorable toward the US military than non-veterans.

Fourth, we identified multiple factors among veterans associated with insurrectionist sentiments – defined as violent support for restoring Trump and comprising an index of three question (election stolen, force justified to restore Trump, and personal willingness to use force to restore Trump). Most prominent among them are current political beliefs, especially beliefs in right-wing conspiracy theories such as the “great replacement” and ideas associated with QAnon, increasing expected insurrectionist sentiments by as much as 22%. Of the military-service factors investigated, only combat experience is statistically significant, while other variables, such as rank, are not. Post-service factors, including disillusionment with service and PTSD, are also associated with increased insurrectionist sentiments. Other general societal factors, like economic insecurity, also show statistical significance, as does childhood trouble with the law.

Fifth, our statistical analysis, which draws on the methods of causal inference to identify the average treatment effect of risk factors and average causal direct effect of veteranacy in context of mediating factors, finds a positive and statistically significant causal effect of veteranacy on insurrectionist sentiments, increasing support by an average of 5% over demographically matched non-veterans, even when controlling for demographics, party identification, and pre-treatment variables. Further, the effect of veteranacy is not wholly mediated by political beliefs or ideology. The results are robust to hypothetical factors not controlled for in the analysis, confirmed by sensitivity analysis.

Finally, while analysis of the survey experiment are ongoing, preliminary results show that veterans are more susceptible than non-veterans to militia recruitment and political extremist videos, with patriot militia extremist video resulting having the largest impact. Among Veterans, the Three Percenter video caused increases in 4 of 11 factors related to support for REOs and political violence. The Three

Percenter video was also the most impactful for non-veterans, with statistically significant increases in 2 factors that overlap with 2 of the four of factors that increased in the veteran sample.

Veterans were more likely to have support factors increased by any video. After two videos – Patriot Front and Tucker Carlson -- veterans were the only group to show any statistically significant increase, and in two other videos – Three Percent and Emma – had more insurrectionist factors increase than their non-veteran counterparts (4 vs 2 and 2 vs 1 respectively). The main negative effect of all five videos (including the US military’s own new recruitment video Emma) was to increase support for white nationalist groups like the Proud Boys, increase anti-immigrant sentiments, and to lower support for the US military.

Opportunities for Training and Professional Development

Nothing to report.

Dissemination of Research Results

Dr. Robert Pape has briefed the results of this research to government stakeholders at the highest levels of the US government and to academic workshops on civil military relations and extremism.

- Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin at the Pentagon, 9/19/2022 (in person)
- Chief of Staff for the Secretary of the Veterans Administration, 10/11/2022 (in person)
- Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, Homeland Security Advisor to President Biden 9/20/2022 (in person)
- Former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and Former Chairman of the Chief of Staff Martin Dempsey, 6/21/2022 (via Zoom)
- Workshop of scholars of American civil military relations, including Peter Feaver, 9/23/2022 (via Zoom)

Drs. Pape and Ruby are also in the final stages of completing an article for submission to an academic, peer-reviewed journal.

IMPACTS

This project has identified evidence of risk factors and vulnerable sub-populations among individuals with military service. It provides valuable diagnosis of the relationship between US military service and militant group recruitment, particularly with respect to the role of video messages designed to attract veterans and intensify support for right-wing extremist organizations (REOs), their ideologies, and their goals.

The study contributes to the scholarly understanding the role of mobilizing videos, military service, ideology, and societal factors in shaping support for political violence in the American context. The methods used in the study advance the application of survey experiments in the study of political violence. Further, the analysis, which uses the latest methods of causal inference to identify the causal contribution of specific risk factors and mediating effect,

These findings will contribute to DoD messaging, counter-messaging, and other policies aimed at countering violent extremism.

Most critically, our results speak to the importance of further research to understand the evolving relationship between individuals with military service and violent political sentiments. The twentieth century has seen political uprisings where individuals with prior military service have played significant roles. Knowing more about the relevant conditions and mechanisms of the involvement by individuals with military service in contentious and violent politics would help better understand the relationship between the military and society and so improve our security while maintaining the foundations of democracy.

CHANGES/PROBLEMS

Nothing to report.