

July 10, 2009

Hon. Joseph I. Lieberman, Chair
*Senate Homeland Security and
Government Affairs Committee*
340 Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Hon. Carl Levin, Chair
Senate Armed Services Committee
Room SR-228
Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6050

Hon. Bennie G. Thompson, Chair
House Committee on Homeland Security
2432 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Hon. Ike Skelton, Chair
House Armed Services Committee
2120 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Messrs. Chairmen:

In the wake of several high-profile murders by extremists of the radical right, we urge your committees to investigate the threat posed by racial extremists who may be serving in the military to ensure that our armed forces are not inadvertently training future domestic terrorists.

Evidence continues to mount that current Pentagon policies are inadequate to prevent racial extremists from joining and serving in the armed forces. In recent months, we have found dozens of personal profiles listing “military” as an occupation on a neo-Nazi website. Because the presence of extremists in the armed forces is a serious threat to the safety of the American public, we believe Congressional action is warranted.

The Southern Poverty Law Center has been monitoring the activities of racial extremists since 1981. In 1986, we presented evidence to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger that United States Marines were participating in Ku Klux Klan paramilitary activities and urged him to prohibit all military personnel from being members of, or participating in, the activities of white supremacist groups.

Secretary Weinberger responded forcefully. “Military personnel,” he stated in a directive, “must reject participation in white supremacy, neo-Nazi and other such groups which espouse or attempt to create overt discrimination. Active participation, including public demonstrations, recruiting and training members, and organizing or leading such organizations is utterly incompatible with military service.”

Unfortunately, Secretary Weinberger's directive proved to be inadequate. Many military commanders interpreted "active participation" to prohibit only egregious forms of hate group activity, not mere membership in such groups or activities like displaying hate group symbols or circulating extremist literature. The problem with the directive vividly came to light in December 1995 when neo-Nazi paratroopers with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg gunned down a black couple in a ritualistic, racially motivated slaying. A subsequent investigation revealed that military leaders at Fort Bragg had overlooked numerous indications that a subculture of violent neo-Nazi skinheads existed at the base.

Shocked by the events at Fort Bragg, the Army formed a task force and the House Armed Services Committee held hearings on extremism in the military in 1996. At those hearings, we testified that any type of involvement with extremist groups should disqualify someone from military service. Following the hearings and task force investigation, the Department of Defense amended its regulations to more clearly define the nature of prohibited extremist activities. Secretary William Perry made it clear that the regulations were intended to leave "no room for racist and extremist activities in the military."

Despite Secretary Perry's intentions, the amended regulations did not solve the problem. In 2006, we published a report demonstrating that members of neo-Nazi and other extremist groups continued to infiltrate the ranks of the armed forces. We presented specific examples of servicemembers who were allowed to continue serving in the military even after their white supremacist activities were exposed. Military investigators with whom we spoke attributed the problem to the intense pressure to maintain force levels while the country was at war and to the ambiguity of the existing regulations.

The fundamental problem is that Department of Defense regulations prohibiting "active participation" in extremist groups are inadequate because they can be — and apparently are being — interpreted to allow members of the armed forces to be "mere members" of hate groups or to engage in unaffiliated extremist activities, such as posting racist and anti-Semitic messages to social networking websites and email lists or maintaining online profiles filled with racist materials.

In our 2006 report, for example, we documented the case of a webpage maintained by Robert Lee West, an airman then stationed at Warner Robins Air Force Base in Georgia. West had posted an online

profile with photographs of himself in front of a swastika and a neo-Nazi banner. His webpage was filled with racist statements, including his hope that his life would lead to “death” for non-whites. When we provided this information to the Warner Robins Office of Special Investigations, we were told that the Air Force was well aware of West’s neo-Nazi identity but believed that the extremism expressed on his webpage was not sufficient to remove him from the military.

We presented our 2006 report to Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and urged the Pentagon to adopt a zero-tolerance policy. In addition, forty members of the U.S. House of Representatives sponsored a resolution put forward by Representatives Eliot L. Engel and Artur Davis urging Secretary Rumsfeld “to immediately institute a zero-tolerance policy with regard to racial and ethnic extremism in the military.” They noted that extremists in the military “pose a major domestic security threat to the Nation and undermine the cohesiveness of its fighting force.” Senator Richard Shelby emphasized in a letter to Secretary Rumsfeld, “Of all institutions in our society, the U.S. military is the absolute last place extremists can be permitted to exist.”

Despite the evidence and the concerns expressed by Members of Congress, the Pentagon, through Under Secretary David Chu, claimed that the armed forces already maintained a zero-tolerance policy and declined to take further action.

We followed up with another report in December 2007 that included several more cases of extremists in the military. Again, we were told by Under Secretary Chu that the military’s policies were adequate. Under Secretary Chu asked us to provide specific examples of servicemembers taking part in extremist activity. We replied that we had done so repeatedly, only to see no action taken.

We are not alone in our concerns.

In July 2008, the FBI issued a report indicating that the problem of extremists in the military may have worsened. According to the report, “Sensitive and reliable source reporting indicates supremacist leaders are encouraging followers who lack documented histories of neo-Nazi activity and overt racist insignia such as tattoos to infiltrate the military as ‘ghost skins,’ in order to recruit and receive training for the benefit of the extremist movement.”

This past April, the Department of Homeland Security expressed

concerns to law enforcement officials that right-wing extremists currently pose the most significant threat of domestic terrorism and that they may attempt to exploit the combat training and experience of returning veterans.

The April 7 DHS intelligence assessment – “Right-wing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment” – warned that the current economic and political climate is similar to that of the 1990s, when right-wing extremism experienced a resurgence. At the time, the growth of extremism led to an increase in violent acts targeting government facilities, law enforcement officers, banks and infrastructure sectors. This extremist activity culminated in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing by Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh.

We continue to find many examples of extremists who claim to be serving in the armed forces. In recent months, one of our researchers found approximately 40 personal profiles that listed “military” as an occupation on the Internet social networking site New Saxon (essentially a racist version of Facebook), which is operated by the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement. (We are sending documentation under separate cover.) Examples include an individual who says he is about to be deployed with the Air Force overseas and is looking forward to “killing all the bloody sand niggers!” Another poster who claims to be currently serving in Iraq writes that he “hate[s] illegal immigrants with a passion and feel[s] every true red blooded, white American should do whatever it takes to stop the foreign invasion.” He lists Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* as one of his favorite books. Another poster currently serving in Afghanistan lists as his favorite book *The Turner Diaries*, which was written by neo-Nazi leader William Pierce and served as a blueprint for the Oklahoma City bombing. Many of the profiles include pictures of the posters in military uniform.

A criminal case that arose late last year involving a servicemember in North Carolina illustrates the dangers of allowing white supremacists to serve in the military. After Marine Lance Cpl. Kody Brittingham was arrested for armed robbery in December 2008, investigators reportedly found white supremacist materials and a journal detailing a plot to assassinate President Obama in his barracks at Camp Lejeune.

Since 1994, the military has discharged more than 12,500 servicemembers simply because of their homosexuality. It seems quite

anomalous that the Pentagon would consider homosexuals more of a threat to good order than neo-Nazis and other white supremacists who reject our Constitution's most cherished principles.

Clearly, the overwhelming majority of U.S. servicemembers reject extremism and are dedicated to serving and protecting the highest ideals of our country. Just as clearly, there will never be a fail-safe system that prevents extremists from infiltrating the military. But we owe it to our courageous men and women in uniform, and to the American public, to remain vigilant to ensure that the ranks are as free of extremists as possible.

Thank you for your consideration of this very serious issue.

Sincerely,



Morris Dees
Founder

cc: Hon. Susan M. Collins
Hon. John McCain
Hon. Peter T. King
Hon. John M. McHugh
Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano
Secretary of Defense Robert Gates
Under Secretary of Defense David S.C. Chu