

Margaret Huang
President and CEO

February 10, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Austin:

We write to applaud your call for the service branches to conduct a 60-day stand-down on the issue of extremism in the military and to offer our expertise and full support for this important effort.

Now in our 50th year, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond, working in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance the human rights of all people. Each year since 1990, we have conducted a census of hate groups operating across America – one important barometer of extremism in America that is used extensively by journalists, law enforcement agencies, and scholars, among others. Our most recent report¹, released last week, identified 838 active hate groups operating across the United States in 2020.

SPLC's Chief of Staff, Lecia Brooks, presented testimony at the most recent congressional hearings on the issue, held a year ago by the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel.² SPLC's testimony emphasized that those who are indoctrinated into white supremacist ideology present a significant threat to national security and the safety of our communities. This fact was dramatically illustrated, once again, by the recent arrests of several veterans for their active involvement in the deadly January 6 insurrectionist siege at the US Capitol.

The vast majority of those who serve in our Armed Forces have no connection to white supremacy and uphold the best traditions of our nation's democratic ideals. Though the

¹ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Year in Hate and Extremism 2020*
<https://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/01/year-hate-2020>

² Testimony of Lecia Brooks, Southern Poverty Law Center, Before the Subcommittee on Military Personnel U.S. House Armed Services Committee, *Alarming Incidents of White Supremacy in the Military—How to Stop It?* February 11, 2020 <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110495/witnesses/HHRG-116-AS02-Wstate-BrooksL-20200211.pdf>

number of extremists associated with the armed forces who engage in hate crimes and criminal extremist activity is relatively small, their unique capabilities and specialized weapons training make them prime targets for extremist propaganda and recruitment.

Moreover, white supremacy ideology within the ranks is apparently disturbingly pervasive. As you are probably aware, according to a 2019 poll conducted by *The Military Times*, 36% of active-duty servicemembers who were surveyed reported seeing signs of white nationalism or racist ideology in the U.S. Armed Forces — a significant rise from the year before, when 22% reported witnessing these extremist views.³ In the same survey, more than half of servicemembers of color reported experiencing incidents of racism or racist ideology, up from 42% in 2017.⁴

The military's unique command structure makes the need for leadership in rejecting extremism and bigotry essential. Instructors, officers, and upper-class students at service academies have virtually absolute command authority over their students and subordinates, creating a unique potential for undue pressure on an individual to conform — or not to complain or report bigotry, extremist activity, or race-based intimidation — in order not to jeopardize his or her military career. Commanding officers have the authority — and the responsibility — to address problems within their ranks before they escalate and, where necessary, to discipline or separate those who participate in extremist activity.

As the service branches pause to consider how to address hate, bias, and extremism during this 60-day stand-down on the issue, we urge the Department of Defense to:

- Expand and clarify existing prohibitions against advocating for, or involvement in, supremacist or extremist causes, including revising and sharpening the provisions of Department of Defense Instructions Number 1325.06.⁵ We also urge the Defense Department to augment and complement these uniform prohibitions with education and training, uniform enforcement, protections for whistleblowers, chain of command oversight responsibilities, and reporting and transparency requirements.
- Tighten recruitment and screening processes for military enlistees to prevent induction of individuals with white supremacist and racist beliefs. All service branch

³ Leo Shane III, *Signs of White Supremacy, Extremism Up Again in Poll of Active Duty Troops*, February 6 2020. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>

⁴ Leo Shane III, *One in Four Troops Sees White Nationalism in the Ranks*. October 23, 2017. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/10/23/military-times-poll-one-in-four-troops-sees-white-nationalism-in-the-ranks/>

⁵ Department of Defense Instructions Number 1325.06
<https://www.quantico.marines.mil/Portals/147/Docs/Resources/EOA/DoDI%201325.06.pdf>

recruiters should receive uniform training on how to detect extremist activity among recruits and newly-indicted servicemembers, including training on identifying symbols and tattoos associated with hate groups and extremists that should raise red flags about a particular recruit.

- Immediately rename the ten US Army bases named for Confederate leaders.
- Expand existing Marine Corps⁶ and Navy⁷ prohibitions against the display of the Confederate battle flag and other racist symbols in workspaces, offices, vehicles, and vessels across all service branches.
- Establish and integrate anti-racist programming, courses, and training against white supremacy and extremism for all students, faculty, and administrators at US service academies – designed to facilitate a culture of respect where expressions of hate speech or other hateful behaviors are unacceptable and clearly responded to by leadership.
- Institute annual service branch voluntary, confidential climate surveys to enable military personnel to anonymously report their exposure to white supremacy and extremist views during their service. This report, focused on the erosion of unit cohesion and the impact exposure to white supremacy and extremism has on good order, discipline, morale and readiness, should be made available to the public annually, like the Department of Defense’s Annual Report on Sexual Harassment and Violence at the Military Service Academies.⁸

⁶ Removal Public Displays of the Confederate Battle Flag, MARADMINS Number: 331/20, June 5, 2020 <https://www.marines.mil/News/Messages/Messages-Display/Article/2210513/removal-public-displays-of-the-confederate-battle-flag/>

⁷ Geoff Ziezulewicz, *CNO says no more Confederate battle flags in public spaces and work areas*, Navy Times, June 9, 2020 <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2020/06/09/cno-says-no-more-confederate-battle-flags-in-public-spaces-and-work-areas/>

⁸ Department of Defense, *DOD Releases Annual Report on Sexual Harassment and Violence at the Military Service Academies*, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2069838/dod-releases-annual-report-on-sexual-harassment-and-violence-at-the-military-se/>

- Allow vetted academic researchers with strong track records on radicalization and extremism access to enlisted service members, so they may research this dangerous phenomena and produce reports offering empirical guidance and lessons learned.⁹ Use their reports, along with climate surveys, to inform the creation of evidence-informed trainings intended to inoculate against radicalization at entry, through one's military career, and reentry into civilian life.
- Expand recruitment efforts to underrepresented communities and dismantle barriers to equality and advancement opportunities for all service branches and military academies. Last summer, the Navy undertook a widescale review of issues “that detract from Navy readiness, such as racism, sexism and other structural and interpersonal biases to attain significant, sustainable I&D [Inclusion and Diversity]-related reform.” The Navy's recently-published *Task Force One Navy* report¹⁰ promotes a series of recommendations designed to improve equality in the service and promote productive and honest conversations about race, diversity, and inclusion. That comprehensive effort is worthy of replication by other service branches.
- Implement a promotion system that ensures a more transparent, equitable and diverse path to senior positions. Part of that promotion review process should include an updated evaluation of any affiliations or expressions of extremism, racism and discrimination by the candidate.

We deeply appreciate your leadership and early action to address and eliminate hate and extremism in the military. We would welcome an opportunity to meet with your staff to discuss initiatives, resources, and programs we believe could help in your mission. The time is right to bring about real, lasting, institutional changes and we stand ready to assist you in this important work in any way.

Sincerely,



Margaret Huang

⁹ Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Daniel Koehler, “A Plan to Beat Back the Far Right: Violent Extremism in America Demands a Social Response,” *Foreign Affairs*, February, 3, 2021:

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-03/plan-beat-back-far-right>

¹⁰ Task Force One Navy, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/26/2002570959/-1/-1/1/TASK%20FORCE%20ONE%20NAVY%20FINAL%20REPORT.PDF?fbclid=IwAR2Nd3W27VxCSRDv99frV8fZiygNNRSUZIQ6CqFPVKHcr9PUUKW7eqR63CU>