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How the Pentagon is combating the latest emerging threat: 'Extremism' in the ranks

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The Pentagon is trying to root out political “extremism” in the ranks, but its definition is so broad and blurry that some retired officers and military analysts fear it could inadvertently sweep up traditional Catholics, Republicans and others who aren’t racist or violent but simply embrace conservative, pro-life politics.

The potential unintended consequences of the Defense Department’s anti-extremism push, critics say, could be far-reaching and in a worst-case scenario could hurt military recruiting in the long run if religious Americans or those on the political right feel unwelcome in the ranks.

The Biden administration has been doing a full-court press to root out extremists in the security forces, spurred largely by the number of active-service members, veteran soldiers and members of law enforcement in the clashes at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and leaders across each service have repeatedly stressed that the initiative is aimed at identifying those who participate in potentially violent groups such as anti-government militias or White supremacist organizations, and especially those who may be willing to put their beliefs and skills into practice as happened at the Capitol.

But what constitutes an extremist or extremist behavior is subjective. The Pentagon’s official guidance using terms such as “organizations that are detrimental to good order,” which could mean different things to different people, depending on their political, social and cultural views.

“I still find [the Defense Department’s] definition of extremism in its underlying instruction ambiguous enough to remain concerned that, for example, Catholics and other pro-life advocates who equate abortion, as Pope Francis does, to the ‘murder of children’ could be branded as ‘extremists’ even if they are adamantly opposed to violence or other illegal activities,” said retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Charles J. Dunlap Jr., now the executive director of the Center on Law, Ethics and National Security at Duke University.

Few believe the Pentagon would ever intentionally single out Catholics. In a statement to The Washington Times, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby pushed back hard on the idea that a service member’s faith or politics could lead to charges of extremism.

“We take seriously our obligations to encourage service members to participate in the electoral process. They are citizens as well as soldiers,” he said. “This stand down has nothing to do with political beliefs or religion and everything to do with extremist ideology that runs counter to our oath to the Constitution and our core values.”

Still, the concerns underscore the pitfalls that confront the military as it moves through its 60-day “stand-down” period. Mr. Austin has ordered military leaders at all levels to set aside time to talk with their units about extremism, racism and discrimination in the ranks. The discussions are to be completed by early next month.

The Pentagon’s stand-down framework reiterates that military policy “expressly prohibits service members from actively advocating supremacist, extremist or criminal gang doctrine, ideology and causes.” It also says that all troops “must reject active participation in organizations that advance supremacist or extremist ideology, which includes those that advance, encourage, or advocate illegal discrimination based on race, creed, color, sex, religion, ethnicity or national origin, or those that advance, encourage or advocate the use of force, violence or criminal activity or otherwise advance efforts to deprive individuals of their civil rights.”

Gen. Dunlap and other observers say the Defense Department guidance is problematic. Service members could be reported for extremist behavior even if their actions do not violate any federal laws, the Uniform Code of Military Justice or a service’s anti-extremism policies. The Pentagon says some behaviors “may still be a concern under the U.S. government’s national security adjudicative guidelines” even if they violate no laws or extremism policies.

In practice, that system opens the door to a situation in which one individual’s interpretation of what is “hateful” or “extreme” could be used to lob damaging accusations against other troops.

“Quite clearly, [the Defense Department] considers that activity that does not violate the Constitution, or any law, regulation or extremism policy could still be categorized as ‘extremist behavior,’” Gen. Dunlap said. “Thus, those who follow the law and all the policies on extremism could still find themselves accused of ‘extremist behavior’ and have their careers suffer accordingly.”

Some former Defense Department officials fear that without proper precautions, the military could create a dynamic in which liberal-minded troops feel emboldened or even required to report their conservative-leaning colleagues, or vice versa.

“The Pentagon is in a tough spot over today’s anti-extremism push. It must strike the right balance between White House pressure for action with ensuring the military doesn’t become overwhelmed by a Salem witch trial mentality,” said J.D. Gordon, a former Pentagon spokesman who is now an analyst with One America News Network. “That could crush the all-volunteer force or alternatively turn it into a left-wing Praetorian Guard, both of which pose severe threats to national security.

“Sadly, we have seen both far-left and far-right extremists surface within the ranks recently. It’s important for the military to treat them equally, even if corporate media outlets typically don’t,” Mr. Gordon said.

Striking a balance

The Defense Department’s anti-extremism initiative is not taking place in a vacuum. It comes against the backdrop of the Jan. 6 Capitol attack, in which numerous veterans and current National Guard members reportedly participated. Other recent troubling incidents include active-duty troops or veterans posting hateful content on social media.

Whether they are on the political right or left, service members and veterans who hold extremist views are especially concerning to law enforcement because of their proficiency with weapons, organizational abilities and other skills learned in the military.

Pentagon leaders say the percentage of troops who subscribe to any kind of hateful or extremist ideology is exceedingly small but potentially dangerous.

“I really and truly believe that 99.9% of our servicemen and women believe in that oath” to the Constitution, Mr. Austin said last month. “But I would just say that, you know, small numbers in this case can have an outsized impact.”

Mr. Austin and Pentagon leaders have laid out the goals and the broad blueprint, but much of the work is taking place on the ground in Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard units stationed around the world.

Each branch has taken a slightly different approach to the stand-down. In the Navy, service members are repeating their oaths to defend the Constitution. The Navy’s guidance also singles out “paramilitary activity” and “domestic extremism” as examples of the behavior it is seeking to address. During the discussions, Navy leaders also are delivering a personal message from Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael M. Gilday.

“Now is the time for us to come together and be guided by a strong moral compass,” the message reads in part. “We must eliminate extremist behavior and its corrosive effects on our fighting force. And we must remember that we swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution above all else.”

In the Air Force, leaders have distributed videos and other instructional materials for stand-down discussions in small groups. In the Army, officials want the anti-extremism focus to continue after the stand-down period ends.

“Corrosive behaviors such as discrimination, extremism, and sexual harassment or assault have no place in our formation and tear at the fabric of the Army. Combating these corrosives cannot be a one-time spot check,” acting Army Secretary John E. Whitley said last month in a message to the force. “To maintain our combat effectiveness and remain the best army in the world, we must live the Army values each and every day.”

The Pentagon could tighten its extremism rules. Right now, the Defense Department prohibits participation, but not membership, in extremist groups.

“Membership alone is not prohibited right now, but it is something ... that [Mr. Austin] is certainly willing to look at,” Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters this week.

Specialists say that distinction underscores that the Pentagon’s chief motivation is identifying members who may turn violent.

“What I think [Defense Department] leadership is concerned about is figuring out whether they have another potential Timothy McVeigh or Terry Nichols lurking in the ranks,” said Patrick G. Eddington, a research fellow at the Cato Institute, referring to the perpetrators of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, both of whom were Army veterans.

“The key question is this: Do Defense Department leaders themselves have a clear understanding of the difference between someone who is a pre-Trump-era political conservative — like the late

Sen. John McCain or current Sen. Mitt Romney — and someone who is espousing a Trump-like proto-fascist ideology that encourages violence, and can they convey the message to uniformed personnel that any entity advocating political violence is off limits to service members? Time will tell,” Mr. Eddington said.