# HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: RADICALS IN THE RANKS

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**Ron Granieri:** Welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri** Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. In an era marked by both the threat of international terrorism and increasing domestic political polarization, sensitivity to radical movements and radical ideas takes on an increasing significance in many organizations. Perhaps most of all within the U.S. Armed Forces. Respecting the range of political opinions within the force while also being aware of potential concerns remains a complex undertaking both while individuals are serving and when they leave the force. Trying to figure out the best policies for dealing with radicalization when it is discovered remains complex. Our guest today, **Colonel Robert Payne**, who is both a U.S. Army reservist and an FBI agent has developed a particular interest in the problem of radicalization and the means to manage it or combat it since his time at the U.S. Army War College where he completed a strategy research project entitled "Radicalization within the Ranks: Countering Military Extremism." Today, we'd like to talk about his work, its relationship to policy and the ways that we should consider the problem of radicalization going forward. Colonel Robert Payne is a 2020 graduate of the U.S. Army War College. Before that he graduated from Texas A&M University and was commissioned as a medical service core officer having served 5 years active duty and 16 years in the U.S. Army Reserve. His current reserve assignment is as a research fellow assigned to the U.S. Army War College Center for Strategic Leadership, Homeland Defense and Security Issues. In his civilian profession, Colonel Payne is an FBI supervisory special agent or SSA with special background in narcotics, counterterrorism, organized crime, HUMINT operations and most recently, health care fraud. It's a delight to have you back at least virtually at the War College, Colonel Payne. Thanks for joining us today.

**Robert Payne:** Well thanks for having me, Ron. It is good to hear your voice as well.

**RG:** That's right. I guess full disclosure, when Robert was a student at the U.S. Army War College, he was in my seminar and I was an advisor on that strategy research project, so we have

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talked about these issues before. Yeah, so let's talk about your War College experiences and how you ended up choosing this topic for your strategic research project.

**RP:** Certainly. For any student at the Army War College, I think the path to selecting your strategic research project is a challenge. I mean, you kind of come into it, you're drinking from the firehose and it's hard to hone in on something. I had initially thought as a G1, I would do something more personnel based on talent management, but when I really sat down and thought about it, I wanted to do something of a topic or research that I had more passion about. So this tied specifically to my civilian profession. I've been on three joint terrorism task forces, have a significant background in counterterrorism and over the years as a current serving member of the military, it's always been a concern to me that we've had so many extremists that have ties to military service and I thought this was an excellent opportunity to have that kind of time to really dig into it and talk to some really smart people about it and expand on the knowledge base that I already had. And that's how it came to that conversation and starting to do the work I've done.

**RG:** How does the FBI deal with the problem of radicalization in the sense of, does the FBI keep track of radical movements or forces and how do we keep an eye on the problem of individual radicalization? Or does the FBI begin by looking at organizations and then it's just a matter of whether people within those organizations attract particular attention?

**RP:** I think the best way to answer that, and first and foremost in full disclosure as I talk about the topics, this is all based on my individual research and my own personal observations and in no way reflects the FBI. This is just a perspective that I've gained from the research that I've done. But to answer your question, let's first talk about really the First Amendment. We protect that. And so the right for someone to be radical in and of itself is okay. It is legal by our system. So the FBI first and foremost leads its investigations and its intelligence research based solely on those that are in potential violation of federal law, which would be someone that has an ideology, an extremist view that has now started on a path to potential mobilization. And us trying to get in front of the threat really. And we use intelligence in which to do that, so that we can really ascertain, hey, are we dealing with a true extremist that may cause harm?

**RG:** Well because the flip side of that then is within the armed forces, what kind of programs exist to increase sort of sensitivity to the potential for radicalization while respecting the range of political views that members of the forces may hold?

**RP:** So that's a great question too is what separates the average American citizen of protection by the First Amendment is a U.S. military member doesn't have those same level protections under the Code of Military Justice. So commanders have at their discretion certain policies set forth that prohibit extremist activities. That being said, it's not that easy to prove that especially if someone wants to hide that participation in a group and it's still, for anybody that's been a

military commander, speaking in any way that you may think you're infringing on a soldier or an NCO's First Amendment rights is a very sensitive thing. So things that people say can be a tip off. Things that people act or organizations they participate in are the things that could clearly let command know there's something that should be of significant concern based on extremist views or extremist behaviors.

**RG:** And under what circumstances can radical views or actions or memberships lead to involuntary separation from the armed forces?

**RP:** It depends.

**RG:** That's an excellent Army War College response.

**RP:** Sir, exactly. That's one of the biggest challenges I've found in my research is DOD and the military branch services face a big challenge because there's a certain level of silos that exist amongst each branch of service and so within each branch of service, you have their law enforcement entities for example, Army CID, but you also have insider threat hubs and there's 44 disparate insider threat hubs across the DOD. And so there's no one specific executive agent that's truly tracking the concept of hey, if I have an extremist person in the ranks in this location, or what happens when they separate? Because there's a moment in time in which a person if upon a concern and under UCMJ is separated, that we have to make sure that that bridge is connected so that the National Joint Terrorism Task Force Military Operations Support Team is made aware so that they can notify the correct FBI division to assume that person back into society and began to do a logical investigation. And that doesn't always go well.

**RG:** So it doesn't always go well. Since we've started speaking very broadly, I wanted to ask you based on your research, what case studies or specific cases do you have of people who were radicals, who were in the armed forces and then engaged in radical political activity after leaving the armed forces?

**RP:** Okay. Let me answer that in three ways. First and foremost is, this is a contentious topic, no question. The idea that I'm not subscribing to is that if you serve in the military, you are prone to extremism, by no means. But what I am, based on my research, subscribing to is that the statistical population of the U.S. military that have become terrorists is very small but, of the U.S. terrorist population, of the studies that have identified extremists within the U.S. population, there is a higher statistical number that have served in the U.S. military, which I think is of the most significance concerning DOD, the United States intel community and just the United States national security. So there're several studies, the first academic that substantiated this. Academia as you well know, as you have existed in a life of, has a much greater ability to do these long research studies that I was able to pull from to prove some of this statistical analysis. And it goes

back to as early as June 2016 when the University College of London had a Department of Justice Award. They did an initial study where 71 lone offender extremists and 22 of them had military experience. So you're talking about 32%. For me, that's uncomfortable. So that's what I first thought. You move forward to the Prosecution Project, which is the Miami University of Ohio. They have an ongoing database that they've tracked since 1990 of people who have attempted or successfully conducted some violent act based on ideology, based on a view. There's 2,395 of them in that database as of a few months ago. What kind of concerned me when I looked into that one is that they have no way to verify military service outside of what's in open source.

**RG:** Okay.
**RP:** But their research was able to show 150 named people in their data sets that had been active duty or prior service.

**RG:** Out of that 2,400 people?

**RP:** Yeah. Right. But that's only what they knew. And then lastly, the one particular unique research project that so many extremist subject matter experts have referred to overtime is the University of Maryland. They do the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism called The START. Well, back in 2018, they did a profile of individual radicalization in the U.S., I think funded by the National Institute of Justice. Here is the thing on that one. You've got a database of extremists of 2,148 roughly. And when they were able to parse out the extremists within that database that they could confirm military service, it was 1,456. Again, for me, that is 15% of an extremist database having military service[1] substantiated my further concerns for why I went down this path. And then as you start pulling that out of the named ones that you knew, that the Prosecution Project was able to provide me, this goes back to April of 1995 and Tim McVeigh. Still to this day, the largest terrorist attack on U.S. soil. He was a former U.S. Army Sergeant and Gulf War veteran. Then you move forward to 2009 and everyone knows of Nadal Hassan in the rampage, Fort Hood, killing 13 soldiers and civilians. He was in Army psychiatrist based on Al Qaeda ideologies at that time having actually communicated with the AQAP leader Anwar Al-Aulaqi. Then you move forward in a more current day and there's even more examples which is

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[1] Editor's note – In the discussion a crucial data point was omitted seemingly creating a math error. The original statement from COL Payne's research reads as follows. *The database contained 2,148 extremists who had radicalized to violent and non-violent extremism in the United States from 1948 to 2017, coded by ideology. PIRUS noted 922 far-right extremists have made up the most extensive ideological base with 496 Islamist extremists prevalent after the September 11, 2001 attacks.36 The PIRUS research found 230 (15.8 percent) of 1,456 extremists possessed military experience in the database, while 192 (18.9 percent) were connected to DT ideologies and thirty-eight (8.7 percent) to Islamist ideology.37 The PIRUS researcher noted 692 (32.2 percent) of the 2,148 extremists in the database could not be verified as having military service or not having military service based on open source research and public records. Therefore, the primary researcher offered the number of extremists in the PIRUS project with military service would likely be higher with some uncertainty of the actual percentage.*

unfortunate. 2016, you have Micah Johnson who was a former Army Reserve soldier, but he killed 5 police officers in Dallas, Texas, all for his view of wanting to kill white people, especially white police officers. Or July 2017, Ikaika Kang who was arrested for his support to ISIS and had intended to go into downtown Honolulu and kill people. He was currently on active duty when he was about to do that and thankfully fell into another FBI sting disruption before he was able to do that. So those are just a couple of examples. And unfortunately, I could go on because there's so many more domestic extremist examples that have occurred really in the last 2 years.

**RG:** And so would you say, based on your research and based on what you've been following so far, is this a matter of the danger or the number of cases is increasing? Or are we simply becoming better able to track the cases so the evidence is becoming more visible?

**RP:** Unfortunately, I think the answer is yes to both.

**RG:** Alright.

**RP:** I think we are becoming more acutely aware of the problem. I think there is a certain level of acknowledgement that, I have to provide the DOD entities out there doing this and certainly the FBI who at any one time has hundreds of counterterrorism investigations open. And when I did my research at this time of hundreds, maybe close to a thousand, 10% they were tracking is domestic terrorism investigations that actually had a military service member whether they were former, current or had been retired. Again, those are statistical numbers that do not comfort me as a military serving member or former battalion commander.

**RG:** Right, or an agent to the FBI for that matter.

**RP:** Yes, Sir. But here's the thing. This is not a new concern. That was what was so frustrating to find in the research. I'll give you an example. The DHS Office of Intel and Analysis put out a document and in that they said, "right wing extremists will attempt to recruit and radicalize. returning veterans to exploit their skills and knowledge derived from military training in combat. These skills have the knowledge and potential to boost capabilities of extremists, including lone wolves of small terrorist cells to carry out violence. The willingness of a small percentage of military to join extremist groups because they were formerly trained, disgruntled, disillusioned or suffering from the psychological effects of war is being replicated today." When do you think that was written? That was in 2009. And that was pushed forward to Congress, and because it met so much resistance from congressional liaisons, Janet Napolitano, the Homeland Security Secretary at the time, had to apologize on behalf of producing the Intel product.

**RG:** And that's because people thought that somehow it was that it was either politically biased or somehow an insult to the service for suggesting this?

**RP:** Correct. And I can understand that. As a current serving member, in the same way that I understand it's not fair to demonize PTSD just because so many veterans have it right and that it has led us to do bad things. But here's the challenge. I remember talking to one of the behavioral analysis counterparts and he said it well when he was talking about once they become dispensed, disenfranchised with their military service, it's this sense of purpose or identity in the military that they for some reason can't reconcile. So whether they're in the military or they're about to leave the military, the military in its mission to conduct combat is asking us to do that on behalf of an ideology, a belief in our nation. But when they can't rationalize that for some reason, or they become disillusioned, it just creates this environment for radicalization and that's what ties the military. And the heightened concern is the fact that we have training and weapons, combat experience, communications, things that would make it more concerning and especially from my perspective as an investigator.

**RG:** Sure, well and so to circle back to something we started talking about. Within the service of course, people have a certain degree, they have free speech rights of a sort. If it ever gets to the point that a service member really stands out, sticks out for dangerous radical ideas or begins to be seen by comrades, by commanding officers as a threat of one kind or another, it is possible that someone can be involuntarily separated or it's possible that that person might become frustrated or might separate as well? If someone were to leave the service after having been for one reason or another identified as someone with potentially radical or dangerous views, is there any automatic hand off to law enforcement or is it just you know once you leave the service, the service has completed its responsibility for keeping an eye on you?

**RP:** As an FBI agent having worked on three joint terrorism task forces to include supervising one, dear God I hope so that the handoff occurs, that it is coordinated appropriately from the chain of command through the respective components, law enforcement agencies. In our case, Army CID or the 902nd MI Military Intelligence should be handling that kind of information. The challenge is getting in front of it and what I've seen from a personal standpoint of several investigations is that there was more value from an investigative standpoint to actually ask the service component to hold onto the service member that is expressing or there's a reason for these extremist views and the concern because there is more control that the military has because once they've been separated, whether it's voluntary or involuntary, then they're into the population and there's a lot less controls that we have. I know everyone is shocked to hear an FBI say that, but there's a lot less controls that we have to monitor that potential threat.

**RG:** Right.

**RP:** And so it's so important that when it's seen within the ranks that the DOD and both the FBI work collaboratively in determining the best way to do that. There's a particular investigation that stood out in mind that is now since hit the news so I can more openly talk about it that kind of motivated me to look into this research and that was the racially-motivated extremist group called The Base.

**RG:** The Base, right.

**RP:** Which, ironically, is of course the English translation of Al Qaeda.

**RP:** Yes, ironically, which I don't think these guys were smart enough to even know that. But they made an open attempt to utilize military members and two of those members were former military. It extends to groups like Atomwaffen. That one was one that predated The Base, but it's still fairly recent, where in 2018, the founding member of Atomwaffen, which was a neo-Nazi white supremacist group, because Atomwaffen means "atomic weapon" in German. He was actively serving in the Florida Army National Guard and went in with the intention to get military training as he went around recruiting furthers. There there's an amazing PBS frontline exposé on it that I would encourage anyone to watch if they kind of wanted to get into the mind set of it, but they said they want to recruit veterans. And one of the former members of Atomwaffen that was interviewed, they never named him, but he said, we wanted to appeal to veterans. If you take an average 19-year old from Atomwaffen, his only experience of war is video games versus some guy like me who knows himself and war. People looked up to the military guys and we were at least using the training they had given us to hit back at them. It hit me like a ton of bricks when I heard that.

**RG:** Right. Well and so in that case, how long did he stay in the Florida National Guard before his membership in Atomwaffen actually had consequences?
**RP:** He was in. There were a lot of things, based on my open research, things he had said, asked about equipment that probably were red flags that never really just translated, that got reported. It was known I believe during the investigation, but what ultimately once he was arrested is when he was separated.

**RG:** Right.

**RP:** And unfortunately, that just happened too. This is October of 2020. The Wolverine Watchmen. So this is that self-described Michigan militia that was going to kidnap the Governor of Michigan and ignite a civil war I believe storming the state capital.

**RG:** Right.

**RP:** So thankfully again, the FBI disrupted the plot and over 13 people were arrested. Based on open source reporting, we've confirmed at least 2 of them were former or were Marines. One had just separated from active duty and one was in the Marine Core Reserve upon the arrest and I believe there may have been another member that had been former U.S. Army. Again, still highly concerning and even more and more examples of why this is a national security concern.

**RG:** So what do you think, in your SRP but also in your subsequent work and as you think about this, what sort of policy changes or policy additions do you think would help to better get in front of this problem of radicalization in the ranks and the radicalization of former service members?

**RP:** I think first and foremost, it's understanding, accepting that this is a problem. And I get it, I mean, it's contentious because the irony of military extremism itself is that when we take a military oath, we swear to defend the constitution that allows for people to have ideologies like this and radicalize, but we have to recognize that within our ranks, both current serving and those that have separated, there are people that will have a misaligned ideology that will mobilize to a violent act and kill and hurt others. So, the first is acceptance that this is a true problem. I think the next step is looking towards DOD working collaboratively with some of these academic institutions to do a much deeper dive of research. Much like the Behavioral Analysis Unit of the FBI did in what was called the Lone Offender Study. Within the Lone Offender Study which happened in 2019, they took a random sampling 52 lone offenders that had carried out violent attacks and furtherance of an ideology and radicalized and they either attempted or completed the attack. They were just samples. Well there was 52 of those. And in even in their own sample, they found that 19 of those 52 which was 37%, had served in the U.S. military. Well, we need more studies I think like that, specific to finding these extremists that have served in the military and then going to their group and their circles around them and asking questions as to what were the tripwires? What were the things that were occurring so that current studies that the DOD is doing, especially specific to their People Analytics? So the National Defense Authorization Act has asked the People Analytics of DOD to do a study through surveys and try to find extremist behaviors. It's more of that, so that we can try to get in front of the problem rather than waiting for it to happen.

**RG:** And I guess that's where we get into the interesting challenge for law enforcement for anything like this, is how do we measure the effectiveness of policy? Because we certainly can't measure it thinking that somehow, we're going to eliminate all danger. We don't measure the effectiveness of law enforcement based on the complete abolition of crime. Well, at least not so far. How do we imagine how we as a society or how any of these institutions would measure the effectiveness? I guess first you have to start with collecting the information as you've talked about, but thinking ahead, what would effective policies towards radicalization look like?

**RP:** I think the first thing it has to do with awareness and training. So DOD has done this well to some extent across service components. We have insider threat hubs, we have annual trainings, but it has to go further than that, especially among the command ranks because if I am a commander and I had my First Sergeant or my Command Sergeant Major and we have a problem within our formation and it's brought to our attention, it is our natural military culture to want to handle it, and that is not always the best answer when we're talking about extremism. Because we may not want to handle it head on or just tell them to shut up. We may want them to continue their behavior so that we can employ the appropriate mitigation or monitoring to determine if it truly is a greater concern. But to measure what you're asking, the FBI has developed this for quite some time, 100 years later, **w**e measure our success by how we mitigate threats. Now a metric of arrests, how many indictments we have, those are metrics, but at the end of the day, if we've mitigated threats that is the true success, especially for those that work counter terrorism. So the ATTFs, I like to often describe my existence is we're the fire extinguisher on the wall. You don't want to have to break that because something really bad has happened if you're mobilizing the full force of the FBI's counterterrorism efforts.

**RG:** Right.

**RP:** And in this instance, there is a lot more collaboration I think that could be done within DOD to try to get after and mitigate this because it's so siloed. You have a tremendous opportunity because the law enforcement entities sit at the Russell Knox location at Quantico, so there are already altogether. I think it's just at a moment in time where there's enough congressional oversight, there's enough media attention that it's potentially a good idea to start talking about a military extremist task force and maybe a specific DOD reporting database that would change so that not each service component has insider threat reporting. So it goes into one place.

**RG:** Right.

**RP:** Because I think there's a potential for losing things between the space between the cases. NCIS maybe doing one thing while Army CID is doing another, and they may not even have the ability to deconflict.

**RG:** Right. And so the idea to use your fire extinguisher analogy, the idea is not that you're going to outlaw fires but you hope that if people take care to control the collection of flammable materials and store them properly and keep an eye on them and install smoke detectors and make sure to change the batteries, then we would probably be safer even if we will never be 100% safe.

**RP:** Right and I think one of the challenges DOD is up against is it's a large entity and there's a lot of bureaucracy. There's a lot of people that are really trying to do the right thing but I will say

this, the one entity within DOD is the Insider Threat Management Analytics Center, they called DITMAC and I was speaking to a unnamed behavioral advisor during the course of my research and what just shocked me is when he was talking about the receipt of any potential threat within DOD of an extremist or even an insider threat, he said, if I think my neighbor is a terrorist, I know who to call: the FBI or through their local police. But if I think that person, military or DOD civilian in the unit or cube next to me is a terrorist, I'm not exactly sure who to call. And that concerns me is an investigator and as someone who has looked at this topic for some time.

**RG:** Interesting. Well one can hope that with further research we'll figure out who should be called and how people can call them. That's not the most hopeful thought upon which to end this, but it is a practical point that we can think about going forward. But unfortunately, we are just about out of time for this conversation. It's a complicated subject. Colonel Payne, thank you so much for joining us to talk about your research and to talk about this and I hope that our listeners have found this conversation as illuminating as I did. So thanks very much, Robert Payne.

**RP:** Absolutely. I'm glad to do it and appreciate getting this message out to others and anybody that wants to collaborate. Since I'm still a research fellow assigned to homeland defense and security studies at the Army War College, I'm open for business to collaborate and help further this research.

**RG:** Outstanding. Thanks so much. And thanks to all of you for listening in. If you want to contact Colonel Payne, please do through the Army War College, but in general, thank you for joining us and listening to A Better Peace. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send us suggestions for future programs. And after you have subscribed to A Better Peace on the podcatcher of your choice, because of course you would like to subscribe to A Better Peace, we ask that you rate and review this podcast so that others may find it as well to continue to grow this community so that we can continue to have these sorts of conversations. We're always interested in hearing from you and we hope that you are interested in hearing from us, but until next time, from the War Room. I'm Ron Granieri.