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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0514

January 29, 2021

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
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Co-Chair, Democratic Women's Caucus
Senior Whip

President Joe Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Lloyd Austin
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

The Honorable Avril Haines
Office of the Director of National Intelligence
Washington, DC 20511

Dear President Biden, Secretary Austin, and Director Haines:

In recent years, I have become increasingly alarmed about the connections between military servicemembers and violent extremist groups. I believe that the current approach of the Department of Defense (DoD) and the U.S. Government more generally is insufficient to the threat from these extremist movements.

On February 11, 2020, the Military Personnel Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee convened a hearing on the risks posed by white supremacists and violent extremists in the military. Witnesses testified that, for decades, violent white supremacist groups have targeted military servicemembers for recruitment, especially because of their training, which makes terrorist attacks more achievable and lethal. Further, witnesses said that dozens of white-supremacists who are active-duty servicemembers and veterans have been arrested in recent years for planning and engaging in terrorist attacks and murders. Recent surveys have found about one-third of servicemembers have seen signs of white supremacy or racist ideology in the Armed Forces.¹

Unfortunately, last year we saw horrific illustrations of why the stakes are so high. In June 2020, an Army soldier was accused of plotting with a neo-Nazi group to ambush his own unit.² In the

¹ Leo Shane III, "Signs of white supremacy, extremism up again in poll of active-duty troops," *Military Times*, 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/>.

² Allyson Chiu, "U.S. Soldier Plotted with a Satanic Neo-Nazi Cult to Stage 'Murderous Ambush' on His Unit, Feds Say," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/23/army-attack-ethan-melzer-satanic/>.

same month, an Air Force sergeant with ties to the extremist boogaloo movement was charged with murder for killing a federal security officer in Oakland, CA,³ and three current or former servicemembers with ties to the same movement were charged with planning a violent attack on peaceful protestors in Las Vegas.⁴ As investigation continues into the recent attack on the Capitol, there are increasing reports of rioters with military affiliations.⁵

The Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act includes provisions to improve tracking and reporting of white-supremacist and violent-extremist activities by servicemembers and to establish a Deputy Inspector General responsible, in part, for monitoring and evaluating DoD's response to these threats. But these actions are not nearly enough. At the insistence of President Trump, the conferees dropped my provision to create a standalone violent extremism offense under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, despite DoD's support for this policy change.

Perhaps most importantly, DoD and the U.S. Government at large are not effectively screening servicemembers and other individuals with sensitive roles for white-supremacist and violent-extremist ties. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Gab, Parler, and 4Chan, are frequently used by domestic terrorist groups to recruit members and plan violent attacks, including in some of the above cases involving military servicemembers. These platforms were crucial for planning the January 6, 2021, domestic terrorist attack upon the U.S. Capitol and the Congress of the United States. Yet social media is not reviewed during the military's accessions process or even as part of the background investigation process for security clearances, despite collection and reporting of other intrusive, private data, such as financial and behavioral health information.

This gap is inexcusable. The Director of the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA) has explained that DCSA is exploring ways of reviewing social media information as part of the background investigation process and is piloting social media reviews for foreign military students, but that he is unable to do more because DCSA has not been directed by the Director of National Intelligence, Office of Management and Budget, and Office of Personnel Management to update security background investigations to review social media. This situation clearly needs presidential leadership.

President Biden, I call on you to issue an Executive Order identifying white supremacy and violent extremism as a critical threat that must be considered as part of the security clearance

³ Neil MacFarquhar and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Air Force Sergeant with Ties to Extremist Group Charged in Federal Officer's Death," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/16/us/steven-carrillo-air-force-boogaloo.html>.

⁴ Michelle L. Price and Scott Sonner, "Prosecutors: 3 Men Plotted to Terrorize Vegas Protests," *The Associated Press*, June 3, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/6223153093f08fa910c4ab445771b773>.

⁵ Greg Jaffe, Dan Lamothe, and Julie Tate, "Conspiracy theories and a call for patriots entice veterans at the Capitol," *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/military-veterans-capitol-riots-protests/2021/01/15/7774da50-5763-11eb-a817-e5e7f8a406d6_story.html. Evan Perez, Shimon Prokupez, Katelyn Polantz, and Barbara Starr, "Two Men Carrying Plastic Restraints During Capitol Riot Charged by Feds," *CNN*, January 10, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/10/politics/eric-munchel-larry-rendell-brock-capitol-riot/index.html>. Tom Dreisbach and Eric Westervelt, "Authorities Identify Woman Killed by Police During U.S. Capitol Rioting," *National Public Radio*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/congress-electoral-college-tally-live-updates/2021/01/07/954446008/authorities-identify-woman-killed-by-police-during-u-s-capitol-rioting>.

adjudication process and directing all relevant agencies to update the background investigation process to incorporate a review of social media information to identify white-supremacist or violent-extremist ties. This would involve, at a minimum, updating the Office of Personnel Management's Standard Form 86 to ask applicants for national security positions to disclose all social media platforms on which they participate and all social media handles used and to grant permission to share nonpublic social media information with investigators. Further, DCSA should be directed to develop practical means to review social media information to identify white-supremacist and violent-extremist activities among applicants for security clearances. If a phased approach to developing and implementing this change is needed, I recommend that the review of social media information begin first with military servicemembers who are considered for security clearances at the Top Secret level, followed by the Secret level, and then followed by other cleared civilian and contractor employees.

Secretary Austin, in addition to offering full cooperation with the above request, I also ask you to direct the military services to establish procedures to review the social media activity of recruits as part of the accessions process, including the development of guidance to assist recruiters in identifying extremist groups and activities.

While I believe strongly that the actions recommended in this letter have been justified for quite some time, the appalling events at the Capitol this month—and the central role of social media in their planning and organization—offer a new sense of urgency. The screening processes for servicemembers and others in critical national security positions are outdated. Modernizing background investigations to bring them in line with these new realities should be among your highest priorities as the new administration commences. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jackie Speier". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jackie" being more prominent than the last name "Speier".

Jackie Speier
Member of Congress