

ARTICLE

VETERANS TREATMENT COURTS AS MODELS FOR DOMESTIC VETERAN DERADICALIZATION

RYAN ELSE*

Combat veterans in the United States have served as a critical vector for radical political groups to increase their violent capabilities.¹ As political extremism grows within the United States, it is essential that we start developing the tools to effectively intervene with these veterans in a way that is consistent with their rights in the criminal justice system. As with other criminal justice interventions, it is best that the radicalization is identified as a problem at the earliest point in the veteran's criminal offense history, before it results in significant acts of violence for which therapeutic jurisprudence may no longer be available. It is also important that the intervention specifically target the radicalization.

The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) provides models of effective deradicalization programs that have shown to mitigate the risks from a wide variety of the world's most dangerous political extremist movements.² Since forced re-education is generally unconstitutional in the United States,³

* Ryan Else is a criminal defense attorney, policy advocate, and veteran. Ryan served in the Army National Guard, in the historic 2/135 Infantry Battalion of the 34th Infantry Division, "Red Bulls," from 1998 to 2006, reaching the rank of Sergeant. He was deployed to Kosovo in 2003 and 2004. Ryan went on to graduate Summa Cum Laude from American University in Washington D.C. with a B.S. in International Relations. In May 2011, he graduated from the University of St. Thomas School of Law where he served as President of the Military Law Society. Along with Brockton Hunter, Ryan was co-author and co-editor of *The Attorney's Guide to Defending Veterans in Criminal Court* and co-founder of the Veterans Defense Project. The Veterans Defense Project worked with stakeholders to pass the Veterans Restorative Justice Act in Minnesota in 2021. Through the Veterans Defense Project, Ryan served as a consultant on the Veterans Justice Commission, which drafted a Model Policy Framework that would become a model statute called the Veterans Justice Act.

1. See Brockton Hunter, *Veterans, Violent Extremism, and Involvement in the Criminal Justice System: Historical Trends, Causal Factors, and Intervention Opportunities*, 21 U. ST. THOMAS L.J. XX (2024); TODD C. HELMUS, RYAN ANDREW BROWN & RAJEEV RAMCHAND, PREVALENCE OF VETERAN SUPPORT FOR EXTREMIST GROUPS AND EXTREMIST BELIEFS: RESULTS FROM A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SURVEY OF THE U.S. VETERAN COMMUNITY 3 (2023); AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, at 00:08 (Mighty Pictures 2024); KATHLEEN BELEW, BRING THE WAR HOME: THE WHITE POWER MOVEMENT AND PARAMILITARY AMERICA 20 (2018).

2. ARIE W. KRUGLANSKI, JOCELYN J. BÉLANGER & ROHAN GUNARATNA, THE THREE PILLARS OF RADICALIZATION: NEEDS, NARRATIVES, AND NETWORKS 159–60 (2019).

3. The government lacks the authority to force adults into any education program but does so regularly as a condition of probation or release in a criminal case. For example, DWI probationers

there are few coercive options for intervention with domestic extremists prior to their intersection with the criminal justice system. However, once an offense is committed, if the criminal justice system is engineered to identify the radicalization and intervene therapeutically, the criminal charge can be used as leverage to convince the defendant to engage in deradicalization programming the same way defendants are presently driven into chemical dependency or domestic violence programming. Just as in other types of cases, this approach turns the crisis of criminal conduct into a therapeutic intervention opportunity, in this instance to address the extremism rather than a mental health or substance abuse disorder.

This early intervention model is how veterans treatment courts (VTCs), and other specialty courts, prevent more serious and enduring criminal conduct by providing a legal incentive to the defendant to do the difficult therapeutic and prosocial efforts necessary to address the mental health, substance abuse, or other condition underlying the criminality. VTCs provide veteran defendants with the mental, emotional, occupational, and family skills necessary to create a life separate from their criminal pasts. VTCs ultimately help veteran defendants connect with mentors and community members that give them opportunities for a better life that makes future criminality less attractive. This is precisely the way in which GWOT deradicalization programs rely upon “psychologists, sociologists, educators, and clerics to open a dialogue with potential or committed extremists and persuade them that there is a better way to handle their personal and/or collective concerns.”⁴ These programs then provide them with the practical tools to allow them to support their families and gain meaning outside of the extremist organization.⁵

This Article discusses how VTCs can build off their existing structures and best practices to effectively identify veteran defendants who are radicalizing and therapeutically intervene to prevent violent extremism using the lessons learned from the GWOT. This will allow these veteran defendants to fulfill the obligation they once made to the Constitution of the United States of America, restore them to the law-abiding communities they once served to protect, and better enable them to care for their families. We owe them that effort.

I. UNDERSTANDING THE FOUNDATIONS OF RADICALIZATION: NEED, NARRATIVE, AND NETWORK

Social scientists widely cite poverty, oppression, and other injustices as the causes of extremism. In *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs,*

are regularly required to attend Mothers Against Drunk Driving classes and domestic assault probationers are ordered to attend classes aimed to reduce abusive behavior.

4. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 3.

5. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 182–83.

Narratives, and Networks, Kruglanski et al. sought to explain why some people who experience such injustices turn to violent extremism while others do not.⁶ Researchers and psychological practitioners find that a systemic “motivational imbalance” leads a person to the infrequent acts of violent extremism.⁷ Extremists’ motivations are “imbalanced” because the act of violence is rarely logical in terms of advancing the person’s basic biological and psychological needs such as safety, love/belonging, esteem, self-actualization, value, control, and trust.⁸

Of course, engaging in violence that will almost certainly result in the person’s own death or imprisonment does not serve the balance of these needs. An imbalance that prioritizes a psychological need, satisfied by violent extremism, explains this discrepancy. As Kruglanski et al. explain,

An interesting thing happens when a given need becomes acutely dominant in a given situation. Because our mental (attentional) resources are limited, investing them in the dominant need withdraws them from other needs. The latter are (temporarily) suppressed. They fade away as it were. As a consequence, the constraints they normally exercise on behavior are released or removed. This liberates formerly constrained behavior, and extremism is the result.⁹

In the military veteran context, this process—stretching one’s mental, attentional resources—is already familiar to veterans. During initial basic training for the military, such as boot camp, young servicemembers are taught to invest in the dominant needs of the service over their personal needs to remain comfortable, well-fed and rested, peaceful members of civilian society, and in regular contact with those they love.¹⁰ This process liberates formerly constrained behavior, such as the ability to do violence and experience extended periods of extreme self-sacrifice on behalf of the military service. This is not considered extremism because it is condoned by society, but the process is similar and should be familiar to veterans or those who regularly work with them. This understanding provides a way for those who work with veterans to understand what is needed for deradicalization. As discussed below, GWOT deradicalization programs work in a similarly comprehensive manner, making lessons from military indoctrination useful in the creation of domestic veteran deradicalization programs.

Extremist organizations seek to create motivational imbalance by appealing to certain values at the expense of others.¹¹ Charismatic leaders

6. See generally KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2.

7. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 36.

8. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 37–38.

9. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 38.

10. See Michael Bonner & Graham Ellender, *Military Training: Does It Predispose Service Personnel to Negative Mental Health Issues?*, 2 J. MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS 11, 11–12 (2022).

11. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 41–42.

and emotional appeals seek to leverage sacred values such as duty, dignity, and honor to create a “readiness to commit to the ultimate sacrifice in service of a cause . . . with a complete suppression of other concerns in different life domains.”¹² This leads to the targeted individual being willing to abandon everything they once held as important in service of the extremist organization or goal. As explained by a former Tamil Tiger suicide cadre,

Family and relationships are forgotten in that place. There was no place for love. That means a passion and loyalty to that group, to those in charge, to those who sacrificed their lives for the group. Then I came to a stage where I had no love for myself. I had no value for my life. I was ready to give myself fully, even to destroy myself, in order to destroy another person.¹³

Only a detailed understanding of the psychological and practical elements that explain *why* and *how* this radicalization process allows for the creation of a similarly powerful deradicalization process. Kruglanski et al. identify these elements as “the 3Ns of [r]adicalization: [n]eed, [n]arrative, and [n]etwork.”¹⁴

The documentary *Against All Enemies—This is How Countries End* explores the involvement of military veterans in violent extremism, particularly the demonstrations that led to the riots at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. These documentary interviews allow insights into how the Three Ns apply to the radicalized veteran population. Therefore, within each of the Three Ns discussed below, we will further discuss how that element applies to veterans experiencing radicalization.

A. *Need: A Quest for Significance*

The immediately recognizable motivations for violent extremism include vengeance, religion, loyalty to a leader, benefits in the afterlife, honor, or constructs, such as feminism.¹⁵ However, Kruglanski et al. argue persuasively that underlying all of these is a general psychological motivation they call “the quest for significance,” which is the fundamental desire to matter and to have respect.¹⁶ For example, a terrorist who agrees to commit suicide at the direction of an extremist leader appears to be acting for the approval of that leader. In the case of the Black Tamil Tiger suicide cadre, mentioned above, they were motivated by the love of their leader, Velupillia Prabhakaran, and were given the opportunity to dine with him or a major lieutenant prior to the mission.¹⁷ However, from a psychological standpoint, this is more simply seen as bestowing upon Prabhakaran “the

12. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 41–42.

13. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 42.

14. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 42.

15. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 42.

16. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 42 (emphasis omitted).

17. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 43 n.5.

ultimate authority in matters of personal significance” and the approval and dinner communicated that significance.¹⁸

A more general example is seen in revenge. The deliberate harm by another often inflicts more harm to the person’s significance than the actual material harm suffered because it renders the victim powerless to resist and this is humiliating.¹⁹ This humiliation is “significance reducing” for the victim.²⁰ James Gilligan is a psychiatrist who studies violent criminals and found that shame caused by disrespect motivated most assaults.²¹ In interviewing one of the more violent inmates, he asked, “What do you want so badly you would sacrifice everything else in order to get it?” The response was “Pride. Dignity. Self-esteem.”²²

Significance quests can be activated in three general ways: (1) through a loss of significance, (2) through anticipated or threatened loss of significance, and (3) through the incentive of potential significance gain.²³ Realized or threatened significance loss can be both personal, when experienced by an individual (like the criminal need for respect discussed above), or social, when experienced by a group when their social identity is disparaged by others.²⁴ Socially based significance loss is often targeted by extremist leaders’ propaganda when they highlight the wrongs experienced by their group.²⁵ They highlight a violent response as a way for their followers to regain lost significance.²⁶

In *Against All Enemies*, Simon Clark, Director of Foreign Policy for America, discusses the significance loss cited by leaders of American extremist organizations targeting military veteran membership:

The common ideology is simple. We had power. We should have power. Power is being taken away from us, and by any means necessary, we can get it back. . . . Whether the “we” is a white “we.” . . . Whether the “we” is an anti-government “we,” they’re all intertwined.²⁷

Clark’s analysis is powerfully interwoven in the film with an anecdote involving participants in a white nationalist rally carrying tiki torches while chanting “Jews will not replace us” and that they “are all being united because we all believe in the same thing, which is ultimately that white people have a

18. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 43.

19. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 43–44.

20. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 43–44.

21. JAMES GILLIGAN, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* 107 (1997); KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 45.

22. GILLIGAN, *supra* note 21, at 106; KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 45–46.

23. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 44.

24. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 44–46.

25. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 46.

26. *See* KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 46.

27. *AGAINST ALL ENEMIES*, *supra* note 1, at 18:07–18:39.

right to exist.”²⁸ While it is hard to look at modern American society and see any threat to the *existence* of white Americans, the total power that white men experienced throughout most of American history is receding.²⁹ The significance loss in this situation is not total and they do not experience the power deficit that other racial identities have suffered historically, but the significance loss relative to their past power is sufficient to motivate extremism.

A study from the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government agrees.³⁰ After analyzing 469 federal court charging and sentencing documents related to the January 6, 2021 riot, researchers gained “a unique window into the defendants’ thinking and plans in the weeks and days before the attack, as well as in its aftermath.”³¹ Their analysis revealed that “the members of the Capitol riot were far from consistent in their reasons and goals, although most seemed to share a fear of sociocultural status loss.”³²

B. Narrative: Linking Violence to the Significance Quest

Of course, many of us are on significance quests that do not involve violence. Kruglanski et al. identify the process that shifts the significance quest towards violent action:

Substantial and enduring significance gain through violence requires societal license and authorization. Such endorsement is afforded by a violence-justifying ideology. By *ideology*, we mean a prescriptive belief system shared by members of a group (e.g., a nation or a religion) and articulated in the group’s narrative.³³

The violence-justifying narrative serves two functions: (1) to highlight and dramatize the significance loss suffered by the group and (2) to identify violence as a way to regain significance by suggesting that violent actions on behalf of the group will earn an individual special status and gratitude.³⁴ Violent extremism, therefore, is not to protect cultural values, but rather is the means to gain significance based on the individual’s “belief that defense of an important cultural value would gratify [their] burning desire for significance aroused by her or his special circumstances.”³⁵

28. AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, *supra* note 1, at 18:18.

29. Kirsten Weir, *The Men America Left Behind*, MONITOR ON PSYCH., Feb. 2017, at 34, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/02/men-left-behind> [<https://perma.cc/MD4Q-5R7P>].

30. See Joan Donovan, Kaylee Fagan & Frances Lee, “President Trump Is Calling Us to Fight”: What the Court Documents Reveal About the Motivations Behind January 6 and Networked Incitement 1 (July 18, 2022) (working paper) (available at https://mediamanipulation.org/sites/default/files/media-files/j6_motivations_working_paper.pdf [<https://perma.cc/667A-B9LC>]).

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

33. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 48.

34. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 48.

35. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 49.

Showing the relationship between “Need” and “Narrative,” following the January 6, 2021 riot at the United States Capitol that disproportionately included military veterans,³⁶ Arie Kruglanski opined for the *Boston Globe*,

Participants in last week’s siege of the Capitol probably felt an acute need for significance fed from varied sources. For some, it may have been economic hardships (a loss of a job, the shuttering of a business); for others, it may have been the pandemic lockdowns, the mask mandates, and other COVID-19 restrictions that aroused their ire. Yet others may have felt threatened by claims of systemic racism and believe that the Black Lives Matter antiracist protest movement imperils their place in society. The far-right narrative binds these various strands of grievance into a package that wrongly identifies the culprits responsible for it all: Jews, who they believe dominate the deep state and are colluding with Democrats, Black people, and liberals, in taking over the country from its rightful owners—white Americans. Anti-Semitism and white supremacy are the major pillars of the far-right movement. In the aftermath of the 2020 election, this general narrative was funneled into a specific—and false—accusation: that the establishment stole the election from Trump, the leader and hero of the extremist movement.³⁷

The “narrative” transforms the motivation derived from the individual’s significance quests into a story in which the group is the hero saving, in this case, the high ideals of American democracy. Under this story, and with such high stakes, violence is not only necessary but a heroic performance of duty.

The Oath Keepers, an extremist organization who have an estimated 35,000 military veteran members, recite the oath all servicemembers take to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and *domestic*.”³⁸ The Oath Keepers always emphasize the word “domestic” to communicate that they feel an obligation to use violence to protect the United States against other Americans. These oaths are recited at political rallies in which the Oath Keepers are heavily armed and wearing military style body armor, making clear the connection between the narrative and the call to violence.³⁹

36. Tom Dreisbach & Meg Anderson, *Nearly 1 In 5 Defendants In Capitol Riot Cases Served In The Military*, NPR (Jan. 21, 2021, 3:01 PM ET), <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military> [https://perma.cc/3X72-F2HG].

37. Arie W. Kruglanski, *What Drives the Pro-Trump Mob*, BOSTON GLOBE (Jan. 11, 2021, 4:15 PM), <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/01/11/opinion/what-drives-pro-trump-mob/> [https://perma.cc/7C7U-DG22].

38. AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, *supra* note 1, at 19:57.

39. AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, *supra* note 1, at 19:57.

C. *Network: The Conduit of the Ideological Narrative*

The final link in the chain of causation of violent extremism is the array of social networks that “serve as conduits through which individuals get acquainted with, and embrace, the ideological narrative that the network espouses and that guides their attempts to earn or restore their sense of significance.”⁴⁰ Kruglanski et al. explain that these networks overcome the individual’s critical thinking skills through introductions by trusted friends or family, “[b]ecause eloquent clerics, charismatic leaders, and intimate friends are respected and trusted, the radical ideologies that they espouse are accepted on faith and aren’t carefully scrutinized.”⁴¹

Army veteran, Kristofer Goldsmith, explains how this in-group network effect is exaggerated in the veteran community due to the heavy level of trust required to serve in combat together, but that level of trusting relationship is missed when they leave the service:

When you’re vulnerable and you’re looking for family, because that’s what the people you serve with are, they look like they could be family. They look like they can provide you that sense of purpose, that mission, that camaraderie, that you had in the military. That you became dependent on, that became the center of your identity. They could give that back to you.⁴²

In a culture where veterans commonly refer to each other as “brothers” and “sisters,” it is easy to see how a group of fellow veterans could quickly gain the trust usually reserved for family.

Beyond being attractive as an emotional in-group, the network serves as an epistemic authority which “defines for individuals the factual (how things are) and the normative (how things should be) reality and hence serves as a basis for shaping their beliefs and attitudes.”⁴³ Here, Kristofer Goldsmith is again insightful on how this is experienced by combat veterans. In discussing the leader of the Oath Keepers, Stuart Rhodes, who was sentenced to eighteen years in federal prison for seditious conspiracy related to the January 6, 2021 riot,⁴⁴ Goldsmith states:

When I was twenty-one and severely damaged from a war . . . when a guy like Stuart Rhodes comes along with a Yale law degree and they see the eye patch, they don’t know that he shot himself at a range, but they assume he’s a combat wounded vet. And [he] says, like, “Hey, you can support and defend the constitution

40. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 51.

41. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 51.

42. AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, *supra* note 1, at 30:30.

43. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 54.

44. See Carrie Johnson, *Stewart Rhodes, Oath Keepers Founder, Sentenced to 18 Years for Seditious Conspiracy*, NPR (May 25, 2023, 6:47 PM ET), <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/25/1178116193/stewart-rhodes-oath-keepers-verdict> [<https://perma.cc/WDV4-G7UB>].

of the United States standing with us.” And [he] just repeats the words of the Second Amendment. That’s all it took for me to be like, okay, you know. You know, you’ve got the pedigree. You’ve got the background. So why should I challenge that? You know, I have no basis in experience or education to challenge it.⁴⁵

This lack of critical challenge to epistemic authority is further complicated by the rank dynamics of military culture. Michael Washington, a mental health therapist that specializes in working with veterans, explains,

Part of the problem for the young veteran, too, is that some of these manipulative voices are former high ranking military leaders. . . . So, when you hear somebody who held sway over you when you were in uniform and now they’re out and they’re still commanding that respect, that has just such a strong purpose.⁴⁶

The network also serves as the practical support and distributor of rewards for acts on behalf of the group. The practical support can be in the form of communication or material support. One Harvard study, *President Trump Is Calling Us to Fight*, details the intensive social media communication leading up to the January 6, 2021 riots at the United States Capitol. The study also noted as part of this communication network far-right influencers like Alex Jones and Tim Pool.⁴⁷ These platforms were used to amplify that it was a “historic” moment that required extreme action.⁴⁸ They were also used to coordinate the participants to ensure sufficient people showed up ready to answer this historic call to action.⁴⁹

The distribution of rewards is the final function of the network by “dispensing respect and appreciation to individuals who implement its narrative in action.”⁵⁰ In groups such as Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys, traditional rewards such as rank or status are replaced with morale patches on their body armor that serve to show ingroup membership and their social status relative to other extremists.⁵¹ For example, the Oath Keepers patch is made in the same black and gold arch as the coveted U.S. Army Ranger Tab that is recognizable by soldiers and veterans across service branch or era as a sign of being an elite combat arms soldier.⁵² This reward function within any extremist organization built on the remnants of military culture brings to mind two quotes of Napoleon Bonaparte on the power of awards, “A soldier will fight

45. AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, *supra* note 1, at 27:34.

46. AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, *supra* note 1, at 48:43.

47. Donovan et al., *supra* note 30, at 18–19.

48. Donovan et al., *supra* note 30, at 18–19.

49. Donovan et al., *supra* note 30, at 18–19.

50. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 54.

51. *Identifying Far-Right Symbols that Appeared at the U.S. Capitol Riot*, WASH. POST (Jan. 15, 2021, 2:56 PM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/far-right-symbols-capitol-riot/> [https://perma.cc/8QC5-MHHR].

52. *Id.*

long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon. Glory and honor are greater incentives to achieve excellence than money or other inducements”⁵³ and “Give me enough ribbons to place on the tunics of my soldiers and I can conquer the world.”⁵⁴ In discussing for the *Marine Gazette* how to get enlisted Marines to a higher level of combat proficiency, two serving officers observed that it is important “for military units with unique capabilities to distinguish themselves with symbols to display a camaraderie through recognition of a shared standard of professionalism.”⁵⁵ Returning to the Ranger Tab that the Oath Keepers model their logo after, soldiers compete fiercely for the opportunity to attend Ranger School, the Army’s toughest course with a high fail out rate, where they will be sleep and food deprived while performing around-the-clock infantry exercises in swamps, mountains, and a hostile garrison environment that makes basic training look easy.⁵⁶ Similarly, the Oath Keepers’ tab is used to provide the same sort of distinction among its members and within the community of other extremist organizations, albeit at a much lower cost to the individual to attain it. As discussed below, this reward function will become equally as powerful when used in the deradicalization process.

II. THE DERADICALIZATION PROCESS: REFRAMING THE EXTREMISTS’ THREE NS

Understanding of the Three Ns of radicalization allows for the crafting of programs that undermine them or use the same principals to persuade the radicalized to return to moderate law-abiding society. Kruglanski et al. analyzed the deradicalization experiences from the GWOT to arrive at general guidance for engineering deradicalization. Below, this Article examines the pathways to deradicalization and then, by examining particular programs from the GWOT, identifies the elements of successful deradicalization programs. This will enable discussion in the next section about how the American criminal justice system can be shaped and utilized to deradicalize veterans early in their criminality, before they commit offenses too serious for therapeutic intervention.

A. Three Pathways to Deradicalization

Deradicalization can occur through either an independent decision by the radicalized individual or organization, or deradicalization may occur

53. Emilio F. Iodice, *Lessons from History: The Astonishing Rise to Leadership and Power of Napoleon Bonaparte*, 15 J. VALUES-BASED LEADERSHIP 1, 19 (2022).

54. Andrew Parker and Joshua Waddell, *Keeping Fire from Private Prometheus*, MARINE CORPS GAZETTE, Aug. 2021, at 60.

55. *Id.*

56. *Ranger Course*, U.S. ARMY, <https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/artb/student-information/> [https://perma.cc/7MDB-5LUB] (last visited Dec. 4, 2024); Joshua Skovlund, *Everything You Need to Know about Ranger School*, TASK & PURPOSE (Jan. 31, 2024), <https://taskandpurpose.com/military-life/army-ranger-school/> [https://perma.cc/8VSS-W5UJ].

through an engineered deradicalization program.⁵⁷ Throughout the GWOT, both individual extremists and whole extremist organizations have decided that violent extremism was no longer the best path towards significance and their substantive goals.⁵⁸ In the case of individuals, they often decide that participation in the extremist activities bring more shame than significance, often by finding disappointment in hypocritical leadership or by finding the violent methods inconsistent with the values they espouse.⁵⁹ In terms of the psychological needs discussed in the previous section, “the motivational imbalance prompted by a disproportionately aroused quest for significance seems to be reduced here by a resurgence of previously suppressed needs for safety, comfort, etc.”⁶⁰

Likewise, entire extremist organizations have made top-down decisions to deradicalize. It is notable that in the cases cited by Kruglanski et al. (e.g., Egyptian Islamic Group (Gemmah Islamiyah), Islamic Salvation Army, and the Algerian Armed Islamic Group), the decision to deradicalize came only after violence became ineffective and the groups were experiencing significant costs and suffering from the forces combating their organizations.⁶¹ The ability of the leaders to deradicalize the members of the organization was dependent on their hold on the organization through charisma or other elements of the groups social network. This “underscore[s] the importance of the social network element in producing” radicalization or deradicalization and “[t]hose groups that successfully deradicalized . . . had a strong and unified leadership that wielded considerable influence over their followers.”⁶²

For purposes of criminal justice system intervention, however, the examples of deradicalization through outside influence are more useful. Kruglanski et al. observed,

Individuals may spontaneously deradicalize because they are extricated, voluntarily or forcibly, from the group dynamics (i.e., the network) of the violent organization. . . . Outside the sphere of influence of the group norms, individuals may be able to listen to other voices and reflect on their life course in a less constraining manner⁶³

They cite examples of this extraction occurring when an individual is incarcerated or joins the military.⁶⁴ Given the power of charismatic leadership to deradicalize followers, it is therefore possible for a leader to be targeted

57. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 139.

58. See KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 139–42.

59. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 139.

60. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 140.

61. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 140–42.

62. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 142.

63. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 140.

64. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 140.

for deradicalization then be used to persuade others to deradicalize, taking advantage of the network to reverse the tide of radicalization.

B. Elements of a Successful Deradicalization Program

Kruglanski et al. studied five deradicalization programs in depth to compare how each addressed the Three Ns: Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Singapore, the US program in Iraq, and Sri Lanka.⁶⁵ In their analysis, which is deeper than appropriate for this article, they spend pages analyzing each program's approach to the Three Ns with a section heading under each program for "Need," "Narrative," and "Network."⁶⁶ They summarize their findings as,

[T]he need element (quest for significance) has been represented by the respect accorded to detainees in rehabilitation centers and by programs that augment their capability to obtain honorable work upon release Theological dialogues and discussions about the true nature of Islam and its rejection of wanton violence represent the narrative element of deradicalization. And the recruitment of detainees' families or ex-militants as agents of deradicalization mobilize the network process⁶⁷

However, for this article to be able to identify key elements of an ideal or generalized deradicalization program, it is more effective to generally see how the programs collectively addressed the Three Ns. Below is a discussion of each of those elements based on Kruglanski et al.'s assessment of what worked and what could be improved upon in the five deradicalization programs they studied.

1. "Need" as Addressed in the Five Deradicalization Programs

The successful deradicalization programs utilized very *practical* ways to allow the individual radical to pursue their need for significance and self-worth in non-extremist ways.⁶⁸ First, it is worth noting that these programs all start with an act of humiliation that produces significance loss for the extremist when the person is initially arrested or captured and goes through an initial period of incarceration. This prevents them from being able to support their families both monetarily and with their physical presence. Therefore, there is a deficit of needs the extremist and their family is experiencing when the deradicalization program is offered to them. It also serves to separate the detainee from the network, "it is probably more effective to first break [the group's] dynamic before addressing the ideological

65. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 147–70.

66. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 147–70. For a deeper understanding, it is recommended the reader seek out the full text.

67. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 169.

68. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 147–66.

narrative and the detainee's needs" so the detainee should be separated from any leadership or active members of the group.⁶⁹

Then, the successful programs offer to fill those needs in new, law-abiding ways by offering social services to the family and the opportunity extremist to earn compensation and access to their families.⁷⁰ The Saudi program is identified by Kruglanski et al. as one of the most successful.⁷¹ It starts with providing for the detainee's family by providing a salary paid to the family, schooling for children, family healthcare, and other benefits.⁷² When the detainee enters the program, their label changes to "beneficiaries" and they are treated accordingly,

When beneficiaries start their home leave from the Care Center, each is given 2000 Saudi Riyals to buy gifts so as not to go home empty-handed, which would be humiliating Upon release, those detainees who are no longer seen as prone to extremism are provided with jobs, apartments, cars, and government grants.⁷³

This is all made available to detainees willing to enter the deradicalization program, but such benefits, and even release from incarceration, are not guaranteed, so the extremist must earn this status and the corresponding benefits.⁷⁴

While all five programs provide for increased respect of the deradicalization participant relative to detainees, the Saudi program was the only one to provide direct financial inducements.⁷⁵ Kruglanski et al. found these inducements important to the success of the Saudi program,⁷⁶ but other programs were successful to a lesser degree without it. The only program that failed in this regard is the Yemeni program, "[a]ccording to testimony, inability of released detainees to find employment and provide for their families constitutes a major humiliation and frustration. This inability may have pushed former extremists to gravitate right back to Al Qaeda"⁷⁷ This serves as a caution that any deradicalization program must keep an eye on the practical needs of its participants.

All the other programs, however, engineered ways for the participants to make significance gains and enhance their ability to ensure their families are cared for. The Singapore program provided extensive care to detainees' families, allowed weekly family visits, and offered detainees vocational

69. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 169.

70. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 148.

71. See KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 147–48.

72. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 148.

73. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 148 (internal citation omitted).

74. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 149.

75. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 147–66.

76. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 152.

77. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 154.

education opportunities.⁷⁸ The US program in Iraq leaned heavy on educational opportunities, which were seen as so valuable that “[t]here have even been cases where detainees have pleaded to stay longer in the detention center to complete the educational classes they were taking.”⁷⁹ The Sri Lankan program also labeled their participants as “beneficiaries,” but focused the benefits more on the participants’ self-care through the offering of “a variety of courses for self-expression and reflection, such as art and yoga classes” as well as sport and other athletic activities in an open facility that did not feel like a prison.⁸⁰

Any deradicalization program must address participants’ psychological needs for significance gain. The best programs seek to provide for the physical needs for the participants and their families’ as well. Some offer opportunities to gain the valuable skills that will enable them to care for their families, and some offer direct financial assistance. A criminal justice based deradicalization program should be able to meet these needs on a spectrum, depending on the needs of each individual participant. In the veteran context, the resources to meet these needs are often already available through the Department of Veterans Affairs or other organizations that serve veterans, a benefit that will be discussed in more detail in Section III.

2. “Narrative” as Addressed in the Five Deradicalization Programs

All five programs analyzed by Kruglanski et al. used various forms of counseling and education to counteract the ideological narrative of the extremist organizations.⁸¹ To be effective, the programs must first confront the problem of “communicator credibility” by having this counseling and education come from, or be endorsed by, people the detainee will trust and respect.⁸² In the programs in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Singapore, and Iraq, this meant using respected Islamic clerics, academics, and counselors.⁸³ In the Sri Lankan program, the Tamil Tigers were already defeated, so the focus was on shifting the “beneficiary thinking away from violence and separatism” using “successful and well-respected persons in the Tamil community engaged as mentors and role models, reflecting a sense of responsibility and a shared future that is achievable through unity rather than divisions.”⁸⁴

Once the programs have the attention of the participants through credible communicators, they must craft a narrative that is respectable and relatable for the participant but that still undermines the violent extremist

78. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 157.

79. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 160.

80. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 163–64.

81. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 147–69.

82. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 151.

83. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 149–61.

84. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 164 (internal citations omitted).

ideological narrative.⁸⁵ In the programs in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Singapore, and Iraq, to varying degrees, the clerics and counselors would present a narrative of Islam that rejected violence.⁸⁶ This strictly religious approach is of limited value in the American criminal justice setting with its First Amendment limits on government promotion, limitation, or use of religion.

The Sri Lankan program had a more secular approach, so it is more useful for this analysis. In fact, the Sri Lankan program used a lot of the counseling methods frequently ordered for probationers in US criminal courts, such as anger management and cognitive behavioral training,

[I]mplementing a wide range of courses to facilitate the acquisition of interpersonal skills deemed pivotal to beneficiaries' adherence to peace and future reinsertion into mainstream society. In that regard, beneficiaries' participation in emotional intelligence and counseling training courses appears to have been important vectors of change. In these sessions, beneficiaries were taught different techniques to manage and express their emotions, cope with adversity, help others in need, and resolve conflicts in a peaceful way.⁸⁷

These types of services will sound very familiar when we turn to discussing the conditions ordered by judges overseeing VTC participants in the US. It is also notable that Kruglanski et al.'s study of the program found a zero percent recidivism rate in the Sri Lankan program, so the effectiveness of these protocols is well-established.⁸⁸

3. "Network" as Addressed in the Five Deradicalization Programs

All five of the programs also took efforts to target the extremist network that the detainee was a part of.⁸⁹ The first step in undermining the extremist network is segregation.⁹⁰ The most successful programs systematically separated the participants.⁹¹ First, they were separated from leadership and other influential members of the extremist organization, then, from the general population of inmates.⁹²

Next, the successful programs worked with families and the detainee to strengthen their bond, so, with the extremists segregated out of the

85. See KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 169.

86. See generally KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 149–61 (discussing throughout programs aimed to correct violent interpretations of Islam and the Qur'an).

87. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 164.

88. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 166; *but cf.* KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 166 (acknowledging the recidivism rate may be influenced by the Sri Lankan military's defeat of the extremists).

89. See generally KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 149–65 (discussing throughout the goals and tactics of the five countries' deradicalization programs).

90. See KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 139–40.

91. See KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 161–62, 165–66.

92. See KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 161, 165.

detainee's life, the family was a dominant influence on the detainee.⁹³ The programs then trained the family and relied upon them for support during aftercare from the program.⁹⁴ The Saudi program went as far as to recruit the families "to help oversee [the detainee's] activities and report on any tendencies to revert to their former, extremist modes of attitudes and behavior."⁹⁵

The Sri Lankan program, with zero recidivism, had a very sophisticated system of building the family network in order to exclude the influence of the extremist network over the detainee.⁹⁶ Detainees were allowed no visits other than immediate family and the program paid all expenses for the families to visit and stay at the facility for periods of time.⁹⁷ Counseling also focused on recalling the nostalgic, pre-extremism family history in the mind of the detainee and encouraged a future in which the family is the detainee's primary network once again.⁹⁸

The important task to any deradicalization program in this regard is to first separate the participant from the influence of the extremist network via incarceration.⁹⁹ In the VTC context, this could be continued post-incarceration with no contact orders, supervised by the court and law enforcement. Then, using credible communicators, like discussed in the narrative section above, VTC programs must reorient the participant to values and personal connections outside the extremist network. These programs may be family-centric in identifying a replacement network, but it is conceivable that any pro-social group could be used in this function. Any criminal justice based deradicalization program can use this principal to ensure that the participants have a supportive, healthy network of supporters to assist them as they leave the program. Ideally, like the Saudi program, this network could be trusted to report on participants progress or backsliding, as is often expected of families of defendants on supervised intensive release in the US.

C. *Why Deradicalization Is Best Accomplished with Shortened Incarceration*

All the deradicalization programs involved in Kruglanski et al.'s study were conducted with incarcerated individuals who earned their release through the deradicalization program.¹⁰⁰ This is necessary given the severity of the terrorism detainees offenses. It is also necessary for the segregation and need-building purposes discussed above.

93. See KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 152, 157–58, 161–62, 165–66.

94. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 149–65.

95. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 152.

96. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 165.

97. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 165.

98. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 165.

99. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 140.

100. See KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 144–45.

But there are a few reasons why lengthy periods of incarceration are not ideal in the context of an American criminal justice system deradicalization program. First, as Kruglanski et al. observe, prisons can be conducive of radicalization because they are degrading, confusion-creating environments populated by people who use violence as a currency.¹⁰¹ As they explain further,

[P]risons contain all the basic ingredients that may foster radicalization. The motivational element of significance loss is there, and if the radical, violence justifying ideology is present as well and reinforced by the penitentiary's social networks (e.g., led by articulate and charismatic radicalized inmates), the likelihood of prison radicalization should be high indeed.¹⁰²

Kruglanski et al.'s independent two-year study of inmates in a prison confirmed this hypothesis when they wrote, "We found that, over time, our respondents tended significantly more to endorse radical Islamism, became more anti-Western in their attitudes, and tended to endorse violence more as a way of dealing with perceived enemies."¹⁰³

This advocates for a short term of incarceration to induce the necessary initial significance loss and to segregate the participant from the extremist network, but not a lengthy period of incarceration that would expose the participant to the radicalizing forces of prison. Also, it should be acknowledged that a participant's segregation from the extremist network could be accomplished through no contact orders and probationary supervision instead of incarceration. Technology such as ankle bracelets and monitoring of online activity make such supervision much more feasible than it would have been even a decade earlier.

This is consistent with some of the limitations inherent in a criminal justice intervention, which is best done when the subject is early in criminality—when defendants commit less serious offenses so shorter sentences are all that are available to courts. Most specialty courts, like VTCs, acquire participants involving offenses that would otherwise be eligible for probation, or at least not such serious offenses that presumptive prison sentences of more than five years apply.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, these courts are working around short periods of initial jail time, followed by intensive conditions supervised by probation, rather than the lengthy prison terms studied by Kruglanski et al. Crafting those conditions so they address the Three Ns to accomplish deradicalization will be critical. With an understanding of

101. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 142–43.

102. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 143.

103. KRUGLANSKI ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 146.

104. See Linda Truitt, *NIJ's Courts Research: Examining Alternatives to Incarceration for Veterans and Other Policy Innovation*, NAT'L INST. OF JUST. (Nov. 1, 2021), <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/nij-courts-research-examining-alternatives-incarceration-veterans-and-other-policy> [<https://perma.cc/ZU5E-4YFY>]; MINN. STAT. § 609.1056, subd. 1(2) (2023).

theoretical underpinning of the Three Ns and their practical applications in deradicalization programs, we are now ready to explore how VTCs can be utilized to deradicalize veterans who have been drawn into extremist networks.

III. VETERAN TREATMENT COURTS AS DERADICALIZATION PROGRAMS

VTCs are a form of specialty court—or problem-solving court—that differs from drug or mental health court only in that they target the military veteran population and leverage the services of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and other veteran service organizations or resources.¹⁰⁵ VTCs are similar in their general goals to the deradicalization programs, discussed above, in that they are designed to address the underlying causes of the undesirable conduct of the participant, criminality in the case of the VTC, and violent extremism in the case of the deradicalization programs. The discussion below will explain how VTCs are structured, operated, and leverage incentives, punishments, and community assets to reach these goals. With that understanding, we can then show how VTCs currently operate within the Three Ns framework presented by Kruglanski et al. Finally, we will discuss how, with minor modification, VTCs or an extremism-specific new specialty court can be adapted to deradicalize violent extremists as they enter the criminal justice system on early offenses.

While the author will cite external sources where appropriate, this section of the Article will largely rely upon the author's professional experience in VTCs and justice-involved veteran policies. This writer is a veteran himself with more than thirteen years' experience as a criminal defense attorney working in VTCs, co-author and co-editor of *The Attorney's Guide to Defending Veterans in Criminal Court*,¹⁰⁶ and cofounder and policy attorney for the Veterans Defense Project nonprofit. During that time, this writer helped create VTCs, passed a veterans sentencing statute, and served on the Veterans Justice Commission that led to the creation of model veterans sentencing legislation within the American Legislative Exchange Council called the Veterans Justice Act.

A. Structure of VTCs

Like other problem-solving courts, the core of a VTC is its team members: the judge presiding over the court, prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation agents that specialize in this court, program coordinators, and

105. See Jamie Rowen, *Worthy of Justice: A Veterans Treatment Court in Practice*, 42 LAW & POL'Y 78 (2020).

106. BROCKTON D. HUNTER & RYAN C. ELSE, *THE ATTORNEY'S GUIDE TO DEFENDING VETERANS IN CRIMINAL COURT* (2014).

service providers for both treatment and social services.¹⁰⁷ One thing that sets a VTC apart from other specialty courts is the presence of representatives of the VA called Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists (VJOS), the county's veterans service officer (VSO), and, sometimes, representatives of veterans service organizations, such as the American Legion or other organizations dedicated to veteran homelessness or other specific needs. These resources enable VTCs to bring great resources to bear in rehabilitating the veteran and meeting their basic needs, such as disability benefits, mental health or substance abuse treatment options, and educational or vocational benefits from the VA.¹⁰⁸ Justice for Vets, an organization within All Rise,¹⁰⁹ develops best practices for VTCs, outlining "key components" mandating that staff receive interdisciplinary education and develop partnerships among the VA and other community partners.¹¹⁰

A veteran defendant usually enters a VTC following an admission of guilt with some agreement as to the legal benefit they will receive if they successfully complete a VTC program's requirements. The system of legal incentives varies widely from court to court, and the programming often differs based on the severity of the offense. Most VTCs have limits on what offenses are eligible, taking only the "low hanging fruit" of minor misdemeanor offenses. However, in recent years the focus has shifted to focusing on veterans considered "high-risk and high-need" on the recognition that these are the defendants that pose the greatest public safety risk and therefore should be prioritized in efforts to reduce their likelihood to reoffend by treating the underlying causes of their criminality.¹¹¹

After an admission of guilt, and in some cases a period of local jail time, the veteran defendant is placed on probation with the primary condition that they comply with the requirements of the VTC and graduate from the VTC prior to being discharged from probation. The VTC then sets conditions such as mandatory sobriety monitored by testing,¹¹² completion of treatment programs recommended by the multidisciplinary team, and prosocial activities such as finding employment, educational opportunities, or attending groups. The veteran defendant regularly attends court appearances as frequently as once per week to supervise their progress, but appearances usually reduce to biweekly and then monthly. At one of their

107. NAT'L DRUG CT. INST., *THE DRUG COURT JUDICIAL BENCHBOOK* 23 (Marlowe & Meyer eds., 2017).

108. See MATT STEINER, *THE VBA IN VETERANS TREATMENT COURTS: ACCESSING THE FULL RANGE OF SUPPORT* 1–4 (2012).

109. All Rise is a national non-profit organization that trains, organizes, and funds treatment courts throughout the United States. See *About—All Rise*, ALL RISE <https://allrise.org/about> [<https://perma.cc/74N9-DEQS>] (last visited Dec. 29, 2024).

110. JUSTICE FOR VETS, *THE TEN KEY COMPONENTS OF VETERANS TREATMENT COURTS* ¶¶ 9–10 (2008).

111. ALL RISE, *ADULT TREATMENT COURT: BEST PRACTICE STANDARDS* 7 (2023).

112. JUSTICE FOR VETS, *supra* note 110, at ¶ 5.

first appearances, there is a professional assessment of what the veteran defendant needs in terms of mental health or substance abuse treatment, social services such as housing, and other planning of how to meet the needs of the veteran defendant. The veteran defendant is often assigned a mentor who is also a veteran, whose primary job it is to provide an “active, supportive relationship, maintained throughout treatment” to increase the likelihood that a veteran defendant will succeed in treatment and adopt sober, law-abiding behavior.¹¹³

At each appearance, the VTC team members meet prior to court at a meeting usually called “staffing.” At this meeting, the court discusses each participant appearing in the court that day with the multidisciplinary team. For example, probation will report on whether a veteran defendant is submitting to urine analysis testing to assure sobriety. The VJOS have access to the VA records to report to the court if the veteran is attending court ordered treatment programs and the VSO can report on the veteran accessing services, such as educational or vocational benefits.

When a veteran defendant appears in front of a judge, the progress or failures are addressed in open court, in front of the other veterans. A graduated system of incentives and sanctions are used to promote success and deter failures.¹¹⁴ Justice for Vets sees as critical that the veteran comply with the treatment regimen that is the product of a coordinated strategy and that the judge, as leader of the VTC team, has ongoing interaction with the veteran in an active, supervising relationship.¹¹⁵

A new trend among specialty courts is the expansion of services to the families and children of program participants.¹¹⁶ Researchers found that participants did better in their rehabilitative work when their children remained with them, and the needs of the family were supported by the court and treatment.¹¹⁷

Once the veteran defendant has completed the treatment requirements, maintained sobriety, and other parameters of the program for a set period, they become eligible to graduate. To graduate, the veteran defendant is usually required to submit an application that includes essays designed to reflect on their progress through the program and how it has benefited the veteran defendant and their family. This reinforces the lessons learned while in the program and, when it is read or referred to in open court, serves as a peer-teaching tool to other participants. At graduation, short speeches are made by the members of the VTC team and the veteran defendant's

113. JUSTICE FOR VETS, *supra* note 110, at ¶ 4.

114. See, e.g., NAT'L ASS'N OF DRUG CT. PROFESSIONALS & NAT'L DRUG CT. INST., LIST OF INCENTIVES AND SANCTIONS.

115. JUSTICE FOR VETS, *supra* note 110, at ¶¶ 6–7.

116. NAT'L DRUG CT. INST., TRANSITIONING TO A FAMILY CENTERED APPROACH: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THREE ADULT DRUG COURTS 7 (2017).

117. *Id.* at 4.

mentor, tokens of significance are given to the veteran defendant, such as challenge coins and certificates, and there is often a small act of celebration, such as pictures of the veteran defendant and their family with the judge. Sometimes there is even cake! While not of great monetary value, these acts are highly significant to the graduating veteran defendant and serve to, in words from Kruglanski et al., reinforce the significance gain experienced by the veteran defendant so it carries into their return to society.

B. VTCs Therapeutic Use of Legal Incentives

A cutting-edge discussion within the justice-involved veteran policy community centers around the legal incentives provided to the participants, such as the ability to avoid a record of conviction or incarceration. To enter a VTC, Defendants waive their constitutional rights to challenge the case by entering an admission of guilt and agreeing to abide by the strict requirements of the VTC, so significant incentives are necessary to induce their participation and keep them compliant until graduation. This is embodied most recently in the work of the Veterans Justice Commission (VJC), a national body within the Council on Criminal Justice chaired by former US Defense Secretary and US Senator Charles Hagel.¹¹⁸ The VJC made as a key recommendation a model policy framework that directs courts to allow a veteran the opportunity to avoid a record of conviction if they successfully complete the required course of treatment and other probationary requirements.¹¹⁹ That model policy framework was then adopted by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) as the Veterans Justice Act in 2023.¹²⁰ In April 2024, the Nebraska legislature voted to adopt the Veterans Justice Act into its state's criminal code.¹²¹ If the reader is interested in this topic, the rationale for this model is discussed at length on the Veterans Justice Commission webpage entitled "Alternatives to Prosecution and Incarceration for Justice Involved Veterans: A Model Policy Framework."¹²²

118. *Veterans Justice Commission*, COUNCIL ON CRIM. JUST., <https://counciloncj.org/veterans-justice-commission/> [https://perma.cc/YYD4-45DT] (last visited Dec. 29, 2024).

119. *Alternatives to Prosecution and Incarceration for Justice-Involved Veterans: A Model Policy Framework*, *Veterans Just. Comm'n*, COUNCIL ON CRIM. JUST., <https://counciloncj.foleon.com/veterans-commission/model-policy-framework/> [https://perma.cc/J9ZU-NYSF] (last visited Sept. 23, 2024).

120. *Veterans Justice Act*, ALEC, <https://alec.org/model-policy/veterans-justice-act/> [https://perma.cc/ZJP6-8BVQ] (last visited Sept. 23, 2024).

121. Legis. B. 253, 180th Leg. 2d Sess. (Neb. 2024); Zach Wendling, *Nebraska Leads with New Veteran Justice Program, Aiming to Steer Veterans Back to 'Hero Status'*, NEBRASKA EXAM'R (May 24, 2024, 5:45 AM), <https://nebraskaexaminer.com/2024/05/24/nebraska-leads-with-new-veteran-justice-program-aiming-to-steer-veterans-back-to-hero-status/#:~:text=Nebraska%20state%20lawmakers%20voted%2044,%2C%20beginning%20July%201%2C%202025> [https://perma.cc/X5XN-GYJG].

122. *Alternatives to Prosecution and Incarceration for Justice Involved Veterans: A Model Policy Framework*, COUNCIL ON CRIM. JUST., <https://counciloncj.foleon.com/veterans-commission/vjc-reports/model-policy-framework> [https://perma.cc/C6KS-HSQA] (last visited Dec. 4, 2024).

This discussion is important because it better allows VTCs and some standard courts to provide the veteran defendant with the very serious legal incentive of avoiding a record of conviction or, in more serious cases, prison. The veteran defendants with the most serious service-related conditions, such as severe-PTSD or co-occurring substance use disorders, often pose the greatest public safety risk. However, those conditions require very difficult trauma treatment that involves prolonged exposure therapies that require the veteran defendant to relive the worst moments of their life repeatedly until they no longer influence their behavior. This is, of course, extremely unpleasant and these treatments have a high dropout rate, so the legal incentive, along with the support of the VTC team, help convince the veteran defendant to continue through the treatment to reach the program's therapeutic goals.

C. How VTCs Inherently and Already Address the Three Ns of Their Participants

Of course, VTCs currently are focused on reducing general criminality by addressing the veteran defendant's underlying mental health or other condition and meeting their other practical needs. Part of why this has been so successful is likely that, with no modification to their current structure, VTCs are already doing much of what Kruglanski et al. identify as central to a successful deradicalization program. Just as those programs targeted the underlying Three Ns of radicalization, the VTCs are targeting the needs of the veteran defendant through benefits and services, the narrative of their trauma from military service through counseling, and the network that enabled their criminal behavior. This system may already be reducing veteran extremism by targeting the underlying trauma. For example, RAND Corporation studies found that three-quarters of the veteran extremists they interviewed had some form of military trauma and more than half directly identify such experiences as pushing them toward extremism.¹²³ By identifying how VTCs currently address the Three Ns of their participants, we can better see how those processes can be refined to specifically address violent extremism when it is identified as a problem for a particular veteran defendant.

1. How VTCs Currently Address Participants' "Need"

Returning to the first section, by "Need" we mean the individual's need for significance gain following a significance loss. Veterans often experience a significance loss during their service through some sort of

123. RYAN ANDREW BROWN, TODD C. HELMUS & RAJEEV RAMCHAND, VETERAN NARRATIVES OF SUPPORT FOR EXTREMIST GROUPS AND BELIEFS: RESULTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH MEMBERS OF A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SURVEY OF THE U.S. VETERAN COMMUNITY, at v (2024).

trauma or moral injury that causes them to question their value. Veterans also experience significance loss when they leave the service and go from the “family” and purpose of the military to the lonely feeling identified by Goldsmith.¹²⁴ Additionally, veterans also feel the significance loss in their inability to provide for themselves and their families as they go from the full employment and services of the military to the new financial realities of civilian life. Finally, when it comes to veteran defendants in VTCs, they have now descended from heroic servicemember to criminal in jail, which is yet another significance loss. It is easy to see how this significance loss can lead to all sorts of maladapted ways of seeking a new form of significance, either with an extremist or criminal organization, or through the escapism of substance abuse or other harmful escapes.

VTCs address four general types of needs for significance. First, and most obvious, the need for the veteran to be healthy mentally and physically. This is what first comes to mind for most in VTCs, them helping the veteran defendant address the military trauma related mental health condition that is causing the criminal behavior.

Secondly, the VTCs often offer the veteran defendant the opportunity to return to the community of law-abiding citizens they once fought to protect through the legal incentives discussed above. The veteran-to-criminal dissention is a great significance loss, of course, so the most direct way to address that is to give them the opportunity to earn their way out of the “criminal” label by rewarding their successful rehabilitation with a dismissal of the record of conviction.

Third, the VTCs address the practical needs of the veteran defendant, such as income and housing, through services of the VA and VSOs. In terms of the quest for significance, as we saw in the deradicalization programs, providing viable, legal ways for the participant to care for their family is essential to gaining their full investment in rehabilitation and preventing them from backsliding.

Finally, the VTCs are providing for the participants’ need for significance gain directly through acts and rituals meant to celebrate the significance of each participant. The significance of their service and sacrifice for the country is celebrated just by bringing the veteran defendant into a court specifically designed to help veterans and provide them a legal incentive commensurate with their rehabilitative work. As Brockton Hunter, co-founder of the Veterans Defense Project, co-author of *The Attorney’s Guide to Defending Veterans in Criminal Court*, and advisor to the Veterans Justice Commission, has said in presentations, “it is as if we are brokering peace treaties with the veteran community one veteran at a time.”¹²⁵ Just as

124. See AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, *supra* note 1.

125. Cf. Brockton D. Hunter, *Echoes of War: The Combat Veteran in Criminal Court*, https://cms1files.revize.com/mncounties/document_center/Committees/Echoes%20of%20War%20-%20

in international treaties, compliance is rewarded, and ideally full reintegration becomes a reality. This is accomplished with VTC participants when their offense is removed from their record as a reward for their full compliance and they are reintegrated as law-abiding members of their community.

Beyond their status as veterans, VTCs provide significance gains by celebrating the successes of each participant. For example, these programs regularly applaud the number of days a veteran defendant has been sober, and they culminate in a graduation ritual. This is reinforced with tokens of significance, such as being given a challenge coin from the judge or simply recognition in front of the other participants for a milestone achievement. This writer has regularly seen veteran defendants bring their families to VTC hearings at critical moments to witness their accomplishments, making clear how important these rituals of regaining significance are in the eyes of the participants. It is not uncommon for the veterans, their family members, or even the VTC staff members to become emotional to the point of tears during these recognition events.

The lasting effectiveness of these significance gains are evident in the clients this writer represents. It is not uncommon to see a VTC graduate attend VTC hearings just to be around the participants and the atmosphere well after they have graduated and their attendance is not required. It is also common for graduates to become VTC mentors or otherwise dedicate themselves to helping other veteran defendants follow their path to a healthier life. One such client, who was suicidal at the beginning of our representation, got an education as a social worker while in the VTC, then became a suicide prevention officer at the VA. He is now a model that many other veteran defendants follow in their rehabilitation. One tactic the Veterans Defense Project uses is to post videos of these success stories online to show what is possible through VTCs and this writer has had multiple clients cite those videos as inspiration for their rehabilitative efforts.

2. How VTCs Currently Reframe Participants' "Narrative"

Just as the deradicalization programs that Kruglanski et al. studied used counseling and education to undermine the extremist ideological narrative, VTCs use counseling and education to undermine the mental health narrative that drove the veteran defendant to commit the offense. This attack on a harmful internal narrative comes in many forms:

- Trauma therapy that undermines the narrative of hopelessness, hypervigilance, and moral injury.
- Anger management that undermines the narrative that the veteran defendant is simply an explosive person.

- Domestic violence counseling that undermines the narrative that the veteran defendant can simultaneously hold themselves up as a “warrior” when they intentionally harm the physically weaker people most dependent on them.
- Substance abuse treatment that undermines the narrative that the only way the veteran defendant can cope with their trauma or loss is through uncontrolled self-medication.
- Educational or vocational opportunities that undermine the narrative that the only thing the veteran defendant would ever be good or useful at is behind them in their past military service.

Even though they use different verbiage based in the norms of therapy and rehabilitation, VTC teams are already working to identify these narratives and provide veteran defendants with the opportunities that will best address particular narratives.

3. *How VTCs Change Participants’ “Network” to Deter Recidivism*

Specialty or problem-solving courts, generally, have already become very good at undermining the network that supports criminal behavior and replacing it with a healthier network. The most obvious is in the case of drug court, where the participant is encouraged or coerced into no longer associating with the people they used with. This community is then replaced by a sober community through Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and other sober activities that build a network of sober people around the participant.

Given the common cultural background of veterans and the proliferation of veterans’ social organizations like Wounded Warrior Project or the VFW,¹²⁶ the replacement network can be even more powerful. VTCs leverage the shared culture in many ways, starting with the veteran defendant’s mentor who is also a veteran that is not experiencing the same problems as they are. This often shows the veteran defendant that, despite the common set of experiences, there is an alternative to the lifestyle that got that veteran defendant into trouble. This writer has seen many occasions where this mentor relationship lasts long after the veteran defendant leaves the VTC, a visible example of the VTC replacing the veteran defendant’s old network.

VTCs also promote new networks through the prosocial activities they encourage, and sometimes order, the veteran defendant to participate in. Veteran defendants are given the opportunity to attend sporting events or concerts in groups of VTC participants, making the VTC network expand outside the courtroom. They are encouraged to attend workshops held by VSOs, such as equine therapy or creative writing classes, where they meet other veteran defendants committed to a healthier lifestyle. If underemployed, they

126. See *Wounded Warrior Project*, WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT, <https://www.wounded-warriorproject.org> [<https://www.vfw.org>] (last visited Dec. 29, 2024); *VFW*, VFW, <https://www.vfw.org> [<https://perma.cc/4JCU-CLKM>] (last visited Dec. 29, 2024).

are connected to veteran job fairs, where they often get jobs with like-minded veteran employers or those committed to helping veterans.

At each of these new relationships, the VTC is accomplishing the same goal as the deradicalization programs: To create lasting positive change by insulating the participant in relationships that will monitor their progress and hold them accountable long after they leave the program. And just like the deradicalization programs found it of primary importance to integrate the family into the deradicalized network, VTCs also involve the families in the veteran defendant's rehabilitation. Family involvement in VTCs is, of course, on a spectrum depending on the individual veteran defendant's situation, but where family is a potential positive influence, VTCs involve them. Sometimes this is passive involvement, such as including them in graduation or activities outside the court like sporting events. Other times, this is much more direct involvement, such as couples counseling or assisting the family member in accessing veterans benefits for their own educational or other needs.

This invests the people closest to the veteran defendant in the mission of ensuring their rehabilitation and preventing their recidivism by monitoring the veteran defendant's behavior and giving them the tools or connections necessary to act when they see backsliding. This is no different from how the deradicalization programs studied by Kruglanski et al. addressed their participants' extremist networks.

D. How VTCs can be Reshaped to Specifically Address the Three Ns of Radicalized Veterans

Even though VTCs share many elements with deradicalization programs, they will need to be modified in some ways to specifically target veterans involved in violent extremism. They must become deradicalization programs themselves, or at least have skillsets within the VTC team specific to deradicalization. Alternatively, deradicalization-specific problem-solving courts could be created that are independent of VTCs, but that would add to the administrative difficulties in getting such programming out quickly.

The first, and perhaps the most difficult and important step, is to develop a system to reliably identify which veteran defendants are involved in violent extremism or are under the influence of violent extremist ideology. In some cases, this will be obvious because the crime that brings them into the criminal justice system will be an act of violent extremism. When the offense is assault on a police officer while gaining entrance to the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, no guessing is needed to identify that the veteran defendant needs deradicalization programming through the courts. Hate crimes or crimes such as weapons offenses that support the extremist organization are also obvious indicators.

But to be most effective, the VTCs must develop means to identify cases that are less obvious, before their extremist involvement amounts to serious crimes. Since the RAND Corporation's study indicates that most veterans in extremist groups are suffering some form of military trauma related condition,¹²⁷ it is logical to assume that this population has significant overlap with the VTC population. It should be seen as an intervention opportunity when they commit minor offenses, such as simple assaults or DWIs, before they graduate to more serious offenses specific to extremism. Early intervention is already a key component of VTCs:

Early identification of veterans entering the criminal justice system is an integral part of the process of placement in the Veterans Treatment Court program. Arrest can be a traumatic event in a person's life. It creates an immediate crisis and can compel recognition of inappropriate behavior into the open, making denial by the veteran for the need for treatment difficult.¹²⁸

VTCs simply need to add radicalism to the identification and continuum of rehabilitative targets to their existing process to identify the veteran defendants in need of deradicalization programs.

Once veteran defendants involved in violent extremism are identified, deradicalization programming must be added to the toolkit of the VTC team to address the Three Ns of radicalization. This is a new frontier. The areas discussed below that VTCs are not currently equipped to address will require development of entire new systems as there is little in the way of existing US domestic deradicalization programs.

Fortunately, the fact that the VTCs are already addressing the Three Ns of all their participants should mean that, other than counseling designed specifically to address extremist ideological narrative, the VTCs will not need full reworking. In fact, having the radicalized veteran defendant participate in the regular VTC with non-radicalized veteran defendants should be supportive of their shift to a new sense of significance and network inconsistent with violent extremism. Of course, attention will have to be paid to ensuring the radicalized veteran defendants do not radicalize the non-radicalized veteran defendants, but that is no different than ensuring a veteran defendant that is using drugs does not pull sober veteran defendants back into using.

1. Need: Few New Tools Required

As shown above, relative to the Three Ns, VTCs are most complete in addressing the need for significance gain of their participants, so less work will be needed to tailor a VTC-based deradicalization program. Also, in

127. BROWN ET AL., *supra* note 123, at v.

128. JUSTICE FOR VETS, *supra* note 110, at ¶ 3.

the deradicalization programs studied by Kruglanski et al., the efforts to address need were not specific to extremism like the attacks on ideological narrative and extremist networks were. Rather, the deradicalization programs addressed need much the way VTCs currently do. Both provide the participants with opportunities to provide for their family in a law-abiding way through education, vocation, or direct income, and to find new ways to personal significance through work in their communities, hobbies, sports, spiritual practices, or other activities.

2. *Narrative: The Area Most in Need of Deradicalization-Specific Tools*

Developing a counseling program to specifically counter extremist ideology will be the greatest challenge in using the criminal justice system as a deradicalization program. This is because there is very little existing research on the topic and almost no existing domestic deradicalization programs. To exist within the criminal justice context, it would make sense to build off of existing programs that address recidivism, referred to as “desistance,” defined as “the process of abstaining from crime by those with a previous pattern of offending.”¹²⁹ However, as recent as 2022, researchers for the International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology found that there is a dearth of knowledge base when it comes to the intersection of desistance and deradicalization:

[T]he fundamental premise that while violent extremism is a particular and perhaps egregious form of crime, it is a form of crime nonetheless, meaning that violent extremist offenders are not beyond the remits of the desistance framework. As of yet, however, there have been few attempts to connect these two research domains in a systematic way.¹³⁰

This study further recommends that programs be developed by studying the degree of overlap between desistance and deradicalization research.¹³¹

Following the violent extremism spikes in 2020 and 2021, the American Psychological Association acknowledged that domestic deradicalization therapies are in their infancy, but that work has begun on their development.¹³² They recommend looking to the psychology-informed programs developed as part of the GWOT, like those studied by Kruglanski et al., but also have doubts about how directly transferrable those lessons will be:

129. *Desistance—General Practice Principles*, HM INSPECTORATE OF PROB. (Dec. 18, 2020), <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/research/the-evidence-base-probation/models-and-principles/desistance/> [https://perma.cc/HKG2-U8KS].

130. Sigrid Raets, *Desistance, Disengagement, and Deradicalization: A Cross-Field Comparison*, 68 INT’L J. OFFENDER THERAPY & COMPAR. CRIMINOLOGY 389, 389 (2022).

131. *Id.*

132. Zara Abrams, *Deradicalizing Domestic Extremists*, MONITOR ON PSYCH., Jul.–Aug. 2021, at 44, 46.

[E]xperts warn that these interventions may not translate to U.S.-based groups. “Behavior is very situationally dependent, and it’s hard to transfer a method from one context to another,” said Martha Crenshaw, PhD, a professor emerita at Stanford University and former president of the International Society of Political Psychology.¹³³

However, the fact that VTCs’ and problems-solving courts’ existing programs designed for desistance so neatly align with the framework set forth by Kruglanski et al. is encouraging that, at least from a strategic view, such programming can be adapted to deradicalization.

Until a full deradicalization program is developed, the best strategy may be to inoculate existing VTC participants from becoming radicalized:

Research on interventions for domestic extremism is still nascent, but some early efforts aim to use inoculative messaging to prevent radicalization in the first place. In one study, participants who saw a warning about extremist messaging before exposure to left- or right-wing propaganda showed more psychological reactance, which is motivated resistance to a perceived threat to their autonomy.¹³⁴

The RAND findings that most veterans drawn into extremism experienced the same kind of military trauma that often bring veterans into VTCs is encouraging that such an inoculation strategy may be effective:

[R]espondents described having difficulties with the transition from military to civilian life, including missing the pace and camaraderie of military life, having no resources; not knowing where to turn for help or support; struggling with posttraumatic stress disorder or depression; experiencing homelessness; and becoming imprisoned.¹³⁵

By reducing the psychological impact of service-related conditions, such as PTSD, and reducing experiences such as homelessness and incarceration, the VTCs are already reducing the conditions on which extremist ideological narratives are apparently preying. As more therapeutic programming tailored directly to deradicalization is developed, it can be woven into this existing structure. Efforts should be made to support the creation of such programming as quickly as possible.

3. *Network: Insulating the Veteran from Extremism*

The RAND Corporation findings also show that the network principal studied by Kruglanski et al. impacts domestic veteran extremism:

133. *Id.* at 50.

134. *Id.*

135. BROWN ET AL., *supra* note 123, at v.

Twelve of our interviewees explained how they were socialized into radical viewpoints through friends or family and/or how their social circles provide support and encouragement for radical beliefs and support of radical groups. Seventeen respondents mentioned specific media sources, social media platforms, and podcasters or political influencers that helped shape their viewpoints, ranging from CNN and Fox News to Russia Today and Newsmax, from Facebook to specific Reddit or Telegram channels, and from podcaster Joe Rogan to television host George Stephanopoulos.¹³⁶

Fortunately, as shown above, VTCs are already doing a lot to address their participants networks, so there is a lot to build from.

Just as past VTC graduates become mentors that aid in the participants building sober, law-abiding networks, VTCs should identify veteran defendants that successfully escaped extremism to work as mentors to help the radicalized participant follow in their path:

Evidence also points to the power of former group members, or “formers,” in helping people leave extremist groups. Formers provide social support and can reflect on the challenges and fears associated with leaving. Such efforts, used in programs such as ExitUSA, also support individuals in extricating their identity from membership in the group.¹³⁷

ExitUSA is a deradicalization program within the nonprofit organization Life After Hate, which was founded by a former white supremacist.¹³⁸ A study of ExitUSA participants funded by the DOJ’s Office of Justice Programs found that the criminal justice system is missing a lot of obvious opportunities for intervention due to a lack of knowledge about the problem within law enforcement and the courts:

Formers revealed that, despite wearing clothes and exposed tattoos that are associated with white supremacy, criminal justice stakeholders did not address their potential affiliation with extremist groups. These interactions are missed opportunities to understand where individuals are at along their extremist career (e.g., are they questioning their beliefs). Increasing knowledge among criminal justice practitioners has the potential to make routine interactions with extremists more effective.¹³⁹

136. BROWN ET AL., *supra* note 123, at v.

137. Abrams, *supra* note 132, at 50 (internal citation omitted).

138. MATTHEW DEMICHELE, PETER SIMI & KATHLEEN BLEE, RESEARCH AND EVALUATION ON DOMESTIC RADICALIZATION TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM: RESEARCH TO SUPPORT EXIT USA 3–4 (2021).

139. *Id.* at 12.

This is familiar to this practitioner, as we have had clients that exhibited these same obvious signs, but we never considered trying to intervene in their extremist ideological narrative or network. In such situations, most of the criminal justice system is grateful for the successes more fundamental to recidivism like getting the defendant sober after more than a decade of daily use.

Taking aim at deradicalization likely seems overly ambitious for most judges, probation agents, and attorneys. It is encouraging, however, that simply educating criminal justice practitioners on how to identify extremism, then using existing criminal justice interventions, can effectively address such a dangerous problem. It should be remembered that VTCs have only existed since being founded by a single judge in Buffalo, New York in 2008,¹⁴⁰ and it took nearly a decade for them to proliferate to the point that they were widely accepted as effective. There is no doubt that they were initially met with skeptical assumptions that VTCs goals were overly ambitious. Yet, they overcame that skepticism and we should not be deterred from being similarly bold in attacking extremism.

4. Use of Common Cultural Themes to Gain “Communicator Credibility”

In the end, the power of VTCs to stem the tides of veteran extremism lies in the same thing that has made VTCs powerful agents of change in their participants’ lives: the commitment of the veteran community to not leave any of our sisters and brothers behind. As part of that commitment, veterans who have made it through the criminal justice system successfully have, rather than just continuing in their newfound success, repeatedly returned to the battlefield to lead the way for their fellow veterans to find similar success. These veterans have what Kruglanski et al. called “communicator credibility” with the VTC participants because, not only have they risen to similar heights as they served in capacities similar to the participant’s military service, but they had fallen to similar lows and found their way back to their feet, usually with the help of yet another veteran in the chain.

This is why we chose a kneeling warrior in full battle equipment as the logo for the Veterans Defense Project; warfare is an incredibly challenging crucible and history has taught us that almost all warriors have to take a knee from being battle weary. Often, the weight of what we have been through is too much to stand on our own and we look to other warriors to pull us back to our feet. Since we have all had to take a knee, there is no shame in doing so, and there is no hesitation to return the favor of a helping hand.

140. See generally JUSTICE FOR VETS, *supra* note 110 (describing the “essential tenements” of the Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court adopted in 2008).

VTCs are simply a systemic hand pulling battle weary veterans up after they suffered a significance loss that brought them to their knees when they were charged with their criminal offense. If we see extremism as the result of this significance loss, as is supported by the research cited throughout, there is no reason why we should not build a new system to stand radicalized veterans back up to the community of law-abiding citizens. As we do, there can be no doubt that, once again, veterans will lead their sisters and brothers back home.

IV. CONCLUSION

Veterans are targeted by extremist organizations because of the violent skillset and organizational leadership they developed in the military, but also because they lend a cache of legitimacy to the extremist organization.¹⁴¹ Even though veterans are no more likely to radicalize than nonveterans,¹⁴² targeting radicalized veterans for deradicalization will therefore have a disproportionate impact on the extremist organizations' ability to operate effectively and violently. By tailoring VTCs current methods of addressing the Three Ns to deradicalization, VTCs can be used as a nearly readymade deradicalization program, with the biggest challenge being the creation of extremism-specific therapeutic counseling modalities. Within Kruglanski et al.'s framework, each deradicalized veteran is then a credible communicator to pull others out of the extremist organization.

This is consistent with the current desistance purposes of the VTCs because violent extremism is just one more type of crime that requires a specific response. There is no reason to think this is any less possible with the veterans who fall into violent extremism than it is with the veterans who fall into alcoholism and domestic violence. Just as not all veterans who go into a VTC need domestic abuse programming, not all VTC participants will require deradicalization. Identifying those veterans in need of such intervention is the first and most easily implemented step to using VTCs as deradicalization programs.

As someone who has been active within the VTC movement for over a decade, I have seen the incredible agents of positive change these courts have grown into. I have had the wife of a multi-tour combat-wounded infantryman thank me because she "has her husband back" after years of him suffering untreated PTSD because of its stigma and self-medicating with alcohol. I have watched another multi-tour veteran who became an enforcer for an outlaw motorcycle club reside in peace on his hobby farm with a large family he learned to parent responsibly, playfully interacting with young children in a way I imagined impossible when I met him five years earlier. I have seen countless veterans support each other as they

141. AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, *supra* note 1.

142. TODD C. HELMUS ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 1.

overcome addiction or attend painful weekly prolonged exposure therapy appointments, gently holding each other accountable as the leaders every one of them are.

Every time I see such success, I know our country is vastly improved because these veterans, now that they are lifted back to their feet, will be leaders and contributors in their civilian communities just like they were on our battlefields. Radicalized veterans are living their lives on a battlefield constructed in their minds, as dangerous as the one they fought on our behalf, except now the danger is to the American public they once swore to protect. Rather than being the talent pool that makes these extremist groups more effective than they should be, these veterans should be pulled back to serving the communities of law-abiding citizens on whose behalf they once fought. We owe them the effort to bring them the rest of the way home.