

Join the Army; Travel to Exotic, Distant Lands; and Radicalise

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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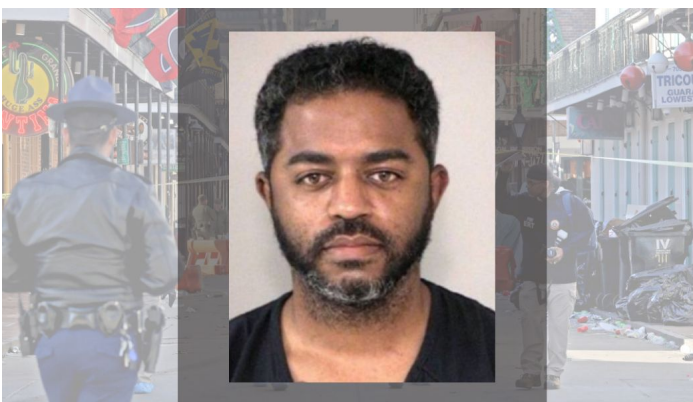
It has been popular to see political and religious radicalisation as something oddly separable from institutions of state.

State institutions are meant to cope and cure the condition, not foster it. Like some errant form, it takes place because of popular trends, messages floating in the detritus of the internet and the disrupting buzz and slurry of social media. It catches in conversation like a cold, inspiring the estranged, confused and lonely to take action.

Of late, the righteous types in the military have been confronted by the prospect that their citadel of honourable service and upstanding behaviour could be a foundry for extremism and mental mutilation. Is there any more extremist act than killing someone, often nameless to the killer, and being lauded for it? Anything more horrific than enlisting thousands to fight and die in a war inexplicable, incomprehensible, or even illegal?

Anyone who goes to war is normalised for the task of killing and rendered abnormal for the tragic aftermath of living. The conclusion of hostilities for the combatant becomes a cruel suspension of one reality and its replacement by another. Having engaged in legalised murder and maiming in battle, the recruits who fight for a country return to a state that repudiates their experiences as situationally quaint while demanding their smooth assimilation. Killing is no longer excusable or legal. A life of domestic, suburban decay before numbing screens and dulling consumption is.

Image: Shamsud-Din Jabbar (Getty Images/FBI photo)



The recent events of death and mayhem in New Orleans and Las Vegas, both taking place on New Year's Day, involved US military personnel, former and current. Shamsud-Din Jabbar, from Houston, killed 14 people and injured 35 others in New Orleans after driving a pickup truck into a crowd on Bourbon Street. He was subsequently killed by police. Between 2007 and 2020, he [had stints](#)

in the US Army as a human resource specialist and information technology specialist, a period which also included deployment to Afghanistan between February 2009 to January 2010.

Master Sgt Matthew Alan Livelsberger was serving as a soldier in US Army Special Operations, using his time for approved leave to detonate a Tesla Cybertruck at the Trump hotel in Las Vegas. He [left a note](#) expressing a need to “cleanse” his mind of the lost lives he had known and “the burden of the lives I took.”

These incidents have supplied the usual candy floss to seekers of the consultancy fee and the Oedipal school of mother-father-son confusion, scarring family collapse and economic stress. This is the clipboard [assessment](#) of Jabbar from Heidi Beirich of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism: “the collapse of his family background, his multiple divorces, financial problems” are given a thick underlining. She authoritatively states that “mass attackers” tend to have sundered family lives. “And then there’s the issue of him being a veteran and if that might have played a role.”

Whenever the military is mentioned, cautionary notes are appended. Clinical and forensic psychologist Joel A. Dvoskin warns against pointing an accusing finger against the glorious institution that is the US Army. “The Army is a vast organization with all kinds of different people and all kinds of different training experiences,” he [observes](#). Dvoskin adopts an intellectually curious approach: If a link between military service and mass casualty attacks could be found, it should only be used constructively.

The material on military experience stimulating radicalisation is becoming a merry pile. Academics seek tenure for work on this subject. Think tanks are gibbering for grants and scratching for influence in this field. All are wondering about the links between the uniformed experience and the socially calamitous meltdown that results in suicide, homicide or both. Much of this jolting fascination [can be put down](#) to the background of those with military blooding who were arrested for participating in the January 6, 2021 storming of the US Capitol.

The Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) has also become a source of interest, being a [dataset](#) of over 3,500 violent and non-violent extremists of various persuasions in the US, from the far left to the far right, Islamist beliefs, or single burning issues between 1948-2022. Those working for the national consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), [note](#) in a research brief from June 2023 that 170 individuals with US military service records plotted 144 mass casualty terrorist attacks on US soil, representing a quarter of all those who plotted mass casualty extremist attacks between 1990 and 2022.

The researchers argue that a military service record is a more reliable way of classifying mass casualty offenders identified in the PIRUS dataset than other more common considerations such as mental health issues, lone or small group offending, and having a criminal history prior to radicalisation. Those with US military records were “2.41 times more likely to be classified as mass casualty offenders than individuals who did not serve in the armed forces.” Those with such records were also abundantly linked to far-right domestic extremist groups and movements (73.5%), while 15%, or 24 offenders, “were inspired by or connected to foreign Islamist extremist groups” such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Rich Groen, Jabbar’s former commander, has not twigged to the vicissitudes his own sacred line of work entails. He [reflected](#) on Jabbar being “a great soldier, someone who showed discipline and dedication”, a point made as if to preclude the possibility that violence in civilian life might ever be out of order. “To think that the same individual who once embodied quiet professionalism could harbor so much hate, leading to such unspeakable atrocities, is incomprehensible and heartbreaking.” Heartbreaking, yes; incomprehensible, hardly.

The unfashionable and unpopular lesson here would be to cut back on that most extremist of phenomena: the business of war and the military racket that feeds it. Don’t needlessly place personnel in conditions that will torment their being and deprive them of a moral compass. Could there be any better prevention to this than peace itself?

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Featured image: Master Sgt Matthew Alan Livelsberger ([Source](#))

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