“EVERYONE WANTS THEIR BIFRÖST”: ANALYZING HEATHEN PRACTICE AND RADICALIZATION RISKS FOR THE U.S. MILITARY

by

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ABSTRACT

RILEY KONZEN. “Everyone Wants Their Bifröst”: Analyzing Heathen Practice and Radicalization Risks for the U. S. Military. (Under the direction of DR. SHANNON REID)

The Capitol riot of January 6, 2021 functioned as a national watershed moment, generating far-reaching aftershocks across American society. While hypotheses abound proposing various catalysts, it has spurred a robust conversation regarding domestic terror driven by narratives of racism, hate, and antigovernment sentiment. Particular concern has been directed towards the existence of ‘extremist’ elements within the United States military as a potential breeding ground for the next generation of homegrown terrorists. This thesis conducts an initial inquiry into a foundational American institution: the Armed Forces of the United States, with particular emphasis on understanding phenomena of Old Norse religious practice as simultaneously moderating upon its military adherents while possibly aggravating the ideological ‘pull’ of far-right hate and terror organizations. Findings from qualitative interviews and online forum data suggest a general differentiation in motivations between two samples, however risk may yet exist in areas of thematic overlap where topics discussed appeared most similar between groups. While there may be no algorithmic answer to one’s radicalization trajectory or human nature more broadly, the existence of online groups co-opting Old Norse faith and iconography suggests such a phenomenon exists and further research is needed. Significance and policy implications are offered, and this thesis closes with a discussion of limitations before providing recommendations for future study.

DEDICATION

To my parents, Dr. Kevin and Lisa Konzen (MA, BSN, RN, CCRN-E): for the foundation, love, and unceasing support you have given all my life. Nothing I do begins without inspiration from you. Your shoes are enormous, and I relish the journeys I take to fill them.

To my partner, Gabrielle Bayot: for your patience, love, and all things big or little you have done to keep me moving through the most demanding three years of my life. I cannot wait to see what comes next, as individuals and as a team.

To the Marines of Recruiting Station Charlotte: for your camaraderie, trust, and dedication as the most determined men and women I have ever met. I am humbled by your service, and your example. Never stop advancing; “Jungite aut Perite”, and Semper Fidelis.

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LEGAL DISCLAIMER

The work herein represents the research and conclusions of the author in their capacity as a graduate candidate at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. These views are not representative or necessarily held by the author's branch of military service (the United States Marine Corps), the Department of Defense, or the Government of the United States of America.

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1: INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed growing concern regarding the 'far-right' and its influence in the mainstream politics of the United States, particularly following the 2016 presidential election (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016; Crockford, 2018; Bélanger, 2019; Reid & Valasik, 2020). This issue reached an apex during the U.S. Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, stoking fears of the far-right, domestic extremism, and vulnerability of the American political system to undue influence from its more radical citizenry. These fears did not erupt suddenly from a vacuum or within a single presidential term; January 6th (J6) functioned rather as a pivotal moment for the United States, a far-right 'boiling point', and perhaps the most significant political event since September 11, 2001 (FBI, 2021; Doxsee et al., 2022).

1.1. Far-Right Extremism, Reactionism, and Precedents

Rather than a sudden eruption without warning, we consider J6 instead an acceleration of far-right activity spanning the breadth of U.S. history (Burris et al., 2000; Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; Simi & Futrell, 2006; Belew, 2018). Rarely if ever does targeted violence spontaneously appear, and review of the existing literature outlines a substantial body of study into the development of a modern American extremist milieu (Borum et al., 1999; Congress, 2006; Freilich et al., 2009; Bagavathi et al, 2019; Petersen & Densley, 2021). Most troubling might be the scope and degree to which these organizations and actors have recently reached 'into' mainstream sociopolitical discourse from the 'fringe'; that which was once 'extreme' has been granted light and room to grow, with little reason to believe these ideologies are easily pushed back into the Pandora's box from which they originated.

Similar concerns focus on the specter of extremism within the Armed Forces in particular, traditionally among the most trusted government institutions. An alarming number of veterans and active service members were present for J6; 12% of those later arrested claimed military experience, and at least two national guardsmen present were subsequently investigated prior to release from service for "anti-government sentiments" (Department of Defense, 2021; Helmus et al., 2021; Posard et al., 2021). Recent studies outline an increase in targeted violence aimed at the military and other government organizations,

raising fears that radicalized military members present a serious gap in force protection while offering increased technical, tactical, and intelligence resourcing to groups who successfully 'pull' service members and veterans into their ranks (FBI, 2008; Department of Defense, 2021; Doxsee, 2022).

The specter of 'militarized extremism' and subsequent public outcry over the existence of radicalized elements within the Armed Forces has driven an energetic response within the Department of Defense (DOD) to identify and preempt these individuals or organized groups within each service branch (DOD, 2021; Posard et al., 2021). Guided by Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) Lloyd J. Austin III, several "Lines of Effort" have been enacted expanding upon policy guidance set forth in DOD Instructions (DODI), and creating the Countering Extremism Working Group to refine and recommend follow-on actions across the Department (Miller, 2020; DOD, 2021; DODI 1325.06, 2021). These programs seek to extend judicial options within the Uniform Code of Military Justice, enhance screening for entry into the military or granting security clearances, and expand education regarding extremism for those serving at all levels (DOD, 2021).

This reaction largely overlooks the foundational history of militarized extremism and the far-right; this phenomenon is neither new nor without context and exists as the latest iteration in a history of domestic terror reaching back decades both within service communities and across American society. The United States has long struggled with a history of racialist and ethno-nationalist hate- and terror-based organizations, traceable to the Civil War's *antebellum* period before developing in parallel to society (Burris et al., 2000; Anahita, 2006; Simi & Futrell, 2006; Johnson, 2012; Caspi, 2013; Daniels & Lalone, 2013; Pollard, 2016; Miller-Idriss, 2020). Belew (2018) outlines stages bracketing the more recent development of "paramilitary America", driven in part by real and self-described veterans of U.S. conflicts since the Vietnam War; these men and women serve as ideological forebears to today's 'lone wolves' who embody the far-right mantra of "leaderless resistance" (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; Belew, 2018; Miller-Idriss, 2020). Rather than the massive popularity of the 1930s Klan, modern America contends with individual extremists and localized cells which often radicalize online in the 'echo

chamber' of their preference (Anahita, 2006; Daniels, 2009; Borum et al., 2015; Kruglanski et al., 2015; Simi et al., 2016).

A subgenre of these organizations has often co-opted Old Norse mythology, religion, and culture for sociopolitical ends (Flacks & Wiskoff, 1998; Asprem, 2011; von Schnurbein, 2016; Strømmen, 2018; Boucher, 2021). Leveraging the motif of the Viking as exemplifying the 'pure' Aryan warrior race, individuals, extremist organizations, and even European political parties have variously adopted Old Norse iconography or leveraged faith to add historical 'context' in support of their respective goals (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; Pollard, 2016; Teitelbaum, 2017; Kølvraa, 2019). The most recent examples mirror a concurrent societal interest in the Old Norse pantheon: the mythological Thor casts a beloved character in the 'Marvelverse', while *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* TV series run on Amazon as we play video games titled *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* or *God of War: Ragnarok* (Daniels & Lalone, 2013; Lavin, 2020; Peyton, 2020). 'Which came first' remains a matter of conjecture.

1.2. Religion and Symbolism in Military Organizations

As a representation of the society from which an all-volunteer force is drawn, it seems inevitable that some service members would reflect and adhere to the motif of the Viking or facets of Old Norse religion and culture as their civilian peers do (Hathaway, 2006; Kane, 2017). Living within an organization espousing a 'warrior mindset', both media and online content offer easy parallels upon which a predominantly youthful force may project themselves onto the images of *Þórr* (Thor), *Týr*, and *Óðinn* (Odin)[1]. While the predomination of Christianity as another reflection of American society ensures this phenomenon remains unlikely to reach a plurality, its existence is etched into the skin of service members bearing *Mjölnir*[2] tattoos and on social media where veterans memorialize deceased comrades with dedications of "Til Valhalla[3]" (Crawford, 2015, 2017).

[1] The original Old Norse *Þórr* and *Óðinn*, henceforth Thor/Odin in the modern English versions.
[2] The hammer wielded by Thor in Old Norse mythology, often worn around the neck as a pendant.
[3] *Valhǫll*: a mythical home of the Old Norse gods; a version of immortality reserved for slain warriors.

Initial research into this military microcosm of the 'Viking phenomenon' suggests that spiritual adherence to Odinism/Åsatrú or broader heathenry[4] exists generally at the individual or small group level and is defined differentially by each person or gathering; the small population of followers in service makes widespread recognition difficult and less organized than larger, Christian faith groups (Hathaway, 2006). By extension, service members who follow Old Norse ('Heathen') faith or cultural practices are more likely to have arrived at their newfound ethic independently as interpreted by them, rather than being raised or taught within a 'church' as in the predominance of Christian groups represented. We examine one's level of religious belief or "salience"[5] along a spectrum of adherence, with active practitioners alongside others bearing iconography instead as a physical representation of their 'warrior ethos' without following the faith itself (Burdette et al., 2009; White et al., 2018). It remains yet unknown the degree to which or if any service members are by definition racist or inclined to extremist ideologies driven largely by Odinist/Åsatrú or heathen[6] ideology.

Irrespective of religious or utilitarian motives, a substantial body of research exists regarding religiosity/spirituality (R/S) and its efficacy as a coping mechanism for service members (Hathaway, 2006; Burdette et al., 2009; Eberle & Rubel, 2012; Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015; Hassner, 2016; Sharma et al., 2017; White et al., 2018; Fletcher et al., 2020). Tasked with defending the nation and conducting its conflicts, service members risk a higher likelihood of violent trauma and other unique stressors existing more frequently within military contexts such as sustained combat exposure, severe injury, and mass-casualty events (Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015; White et al, 2018). Evidence supports the moderating effect of R/S 'buffering' active members and veterans against stressors tied to military service, and research offers linkages between religious salience, mental health outcomes, and stronger

[4] Åsatrú and Odinism in this context are used for inclusion of Germanic Wotanism, genealogically adjacent in development to Scandinavian, Old Norse Odinism and also co-opted by racialist organizations. Interviewees generally agreed upon the more global moniker of 'heathenry'.
[5] Defined here as the strength/quality/prominence of one's religiosity or spirituality, regardless of organizational ties to any singular faith system or group; the depth and importance of one's faith system.
[6] We here use 'heathen' as an umbrella term for the adjacent European faith systems, where Odin/Wodin/Wotan function similarly to the linkage between the Greco-Roman names for Zeus/Jupiter.

social ties (Hathaway, 2006; Elberle & Rubel, 2012; Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015; Sharma et al., 2017; White et al., 2018).

The Viking as a cultural motif may offer similar moderation of stressors to service members by leveraging Old Norse/Germanic R/S, however virtually no academic research exists within the established literature outside a single, clinical contextual mention (Hathaway, 2006). We might reasonably expect similar 'buffering' exists for heathen adherents in active service and the veteran community, however this mechanism remains untested. While one challenge remains the smaller number of military and veteran heathen practitioners, another concern may be perceptions of heathenry as 'extreme' amid potential linkages to militarized, radical elements of the far-right milieu (Hathaway, 2006; FBI, 2008; DOD, 2021). Absent of context, there exists a risk that practitioners of heathenry in service may be broadly viewed as synonymous with racism and violent extremism in the ranks. These fears are not without some foundational validity or historical background.

1.3. Motivating Militarized Extremism

One of the most viral images of the J6 riot is the 'QAnon Shaman', born Jacob Anthony Angeli Chansley ("Jake Angeli"). Standing shirtless upon the steps of the Capitol, photos of the headdress-wearing Angeli sporting tattoos of *Mjölnir*, *Yggradsill*[7], and a *valknut*[8] (as traditional symbols within Old Norse mythology) startled American society. More concerning to the public was the 'shaman's' military history; media quickly discovered post-J6 that Angeli was a Navy veteran, having been administratively separated from service after refusing the anthrax vaccine over a decade before the riot[9]. One of many veterans present, Angeli's image linked facets of far-right radicalism, the military, and Old Norse mythology together in the minds of many horrified by the events of J6.

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[7] The sacred tree of Old Norse mythology, linking the nine worlds of the faith's cosmology.
[8] Traditionally considered the heart of the *jötnar* Hrungnir, killed by Thor in *The Prose Edda* sagas.
[9] While the Department of the Navy declined to share Angeli's service characterization, he was administratively separated after two years and therefore failed to fulfill the terms of his first contract (generally at least four years).

The ‘QAnon Shaman’ is neither unique nor the first of his kind; review of the American far-right yields several examples of current or prior military members engaged in domestic extremism (Flacks & Wiskoff, 1998; Congress, 2006; Miller-Idriss, 2020). Belew (2018) notes the notoriety of Vietnam veteran Louis Beam who inspired the far-right tactic of “leaderless resistance”, the saga of Ruby Ridge’s failed Special Forces soldier Randy Weaver, and Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh who perpetrated the single deadliest act of domestic terrorism in American history. More broadly, the DOD (2021) admits its own long struggle against radicalization beginning in 1968 with the first SECDEF prohibition on gang and extremist membership, following altercations between serving Klansmen and Black Panthers within the Marine Corps (Congress, 2006; Belew; 2018; Miller, 2020).

We consider Angeli et al. as having been ‘pulled’ or ‘pushed’ into organized expressions of hate and terror, radicalizing individually along various pathways (Elbogen et al., 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2018; Mobbs & Bonnano, 2018; RTI 2018; Markowitz et al., 2020). Far-right organizations frequently ‘pull’ and recruit individuals with current or prior military experience, hoping to leverage their specialized skillsets and connections to equipment or intelligence not publicly available (FBI, 2008; Belew, 2018; Posard et al., 2021). Additionally, widespread use of the Internet and social media offers myriad opportunities for service members or veterans to radicalize individually, ‘pushed’ by a variety of factors and facilitated by the ‘echo chamber’ of rhetoric online (Simi & Futrell, 2006; Schils & Pauwels, 2016; Peyton, 2020; Reid & Valasik, 2020).

The scope of vectors supporting radicalization are numerous and fluid, ranging from social media sites (TikTok, Gab, Discord) to online novels, subgenres of music, and Internet forums dedicated to the discussion of ‘extreme’ topics where there exists a continuum of participants from the idly curious to hardcore adherents searching for their preferred social *network* and *narrative* (Anahita, 2006; Conway et al., 2017; Teitelbaum, 2017; Bagavathi et al., 2019). Myriad hypotheses have proposed various mechanisms by which one radicalizes; given our focus on military members, we offer two dynamics which appear relevant: longstanding theory regarding *strain* and *anomie*, and the more recent 3N model of a “significance quest” driving individuals towards violent extremism (Hillbert & Wright, 1979;

Agnew, 1985, 1992, 2001; Featherstone & Deflem, 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018; Bélanger et al., 2019). Leveraging these as a theoretical baseline, this study seeks greater clarity regarding any relationship between heathenry and a service member or veteran's susceptibility for extremism.

1.4. Filling Theoretical Gaps

A vast corpus of literature traces the development of General Strain Theory into its modern iteration. Initially proposed by Merton (1938, 1968) as the constructs of *anomie* and *strain*, the system was later refined by Agnew (1985, 1992, 2001) into a General Strain Theory (GST) proposing to summarize micro-level explanation for *all* deviance and crime. Given the increased variety and intensity of stressors experienced by many service members or veterans, GST offers one theoretical foundation for the present study.

Developing across the past century, *anomie* may be broadly defined as a sense of societal friction felt when the means to common definitions of 'success' remain beyond the capabilities of most citizens (Merton, 1968; Hillbert & Wright, 1979; Featherstone & Deflem, 2003). This dissonance encourages a delegitimization of societal norms and traditional means to 'succeed', implicitly permitting alternative routes to achieving those goals from which the majority appears blocked. This withdrawal from societal norms takes various forms; of most interest to this study is *retreat*, by which one withdrawing replaces existing social structures with an alternative set of values and goals, and *rebellion*, where one actively works to change the societal paradigm which they perceive to have caused a sense of *anomie* (Messner, 1988; Spohn, 2012; Akers & Jennings, 2020). Defined as such, *rebellion* in this context appears the more 'radical' of the two responses.

One may also be 'pushed' to action by personal perceptions of *strain*, which Agnew (2001) posits occurs through 'unjust' restrictions of various magnitude, and when provided opportunities to ameliorate *strain* through delinquent or criminal actions (Akers & Jennings, 2020). Buffering against the individual's combined sources of *strain* are a variety of mediating factors such as internal or external controls, social ties, and general 'stake' in one's society such as financial success or the possibility of severe penalty if the system is abrogated (Agnew, 2001; Spohn, 2012). Taken together, we consider that a service member

or veteran's sense of *anomie* against their system and/or individual *strains* may catalyze a *retreat* from societal Christian norms in favor of heathen practice as moderator, or drive one to outright *rebellion* and radicalization in exaggerated cases (Elbogen et al., 2012; MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014; Markowitz et al., 2020). The casual effect of Old Norse/Germanic faith practices upon either outcome remains unknown.

Regarding the GST concept of *rebellion* and concerning violent extremism, we link the 3N "Significance Quest" theory as complementary to the dynamics of *anomie* and *strain* whereby one's desire for 'value' drives radicalization. Kruglanski et al. (2015, 2018) offer the 3N model as a generalizable framework of *need*, *narrative*, and *network* motivating individual or between-group targeted violence, applied here as the *retreat* from Christian norms in favor of heathenry in service or a more drastic *rebellion* against military and societal structures altogether (Bélanger et al., 2019). This study considers GST and 3N as mutually inclusive, with *anomie* and *strain* as universal motivators while the 3N model more specifically describes the 'worst case' scenario by which heathenry fails to moderate the stressors of a service member or veteran, instead aggravating negative affect and providing the *network* and *narrative* to justify racism, extremism, and targeted violence.

This thesis proceeds in the following parts, highlighting a gap in the academic literature and seeking clarity on the motivations/efficacy of Old Norse/Germanic faith practices in military and veteran communities. First, a literature review is conducted canvassing the body of research into far-right extremism, religion/spirituality in service, and the theoretical bases for this thesis; we note a literary gap regarding the specific phenomenon of heathen practice or iconography in service compared to the vast corpus on the faith's co-option by extremist organizations. Second, we offer a conceptualization of thematic sampling drawn from both communities, stating the central research question, and suggesting hypotheses in an overview of methodology. Third, results are outlined to include demographics, a comparison of thematic elements between samples, and a resultant typology of both groups. Finally, we offer a discussion of meaningful findings before closing with policy implications and opportunities for future research.

2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Informing this study into the effects of heathen religion within military-affiliated communities, three topics offer insight. First, a significant body of research exists concerning the far-right, particularly 'subgenres' analyzing its perversion of Old Norse/Germanic faith and the infiltration of extremist elements into military service. A second branch considers the effect of individual religiosity/spirituality (R/S) on stress mitigation in service and veteran communities; these glance off the existence of heathen practitioners and the faith systems appear only once (Hathaway, 2006). Finally, we review General Strain Theory (GST) and its strengths or weaknesses as complimented by the 3N model, discussing how the frameworks may be used in conjunction for the purpose of this thesis.

2.1. The Corpus of Far-Right Extremism

Research conducted into variations of the far-right movement and its connection to racialist Odinist/Åsatrú systems encompasses an extensive body of literature; over thirty works included here are best classified as the study of 'far-right', 'alt-right', or 'alt-lite' groups, with a significant subgenre concerning heathen affectation (Miller-Idriss, 2020; Reid & Valasik, 2020)[10]. A significant hurdle to summarization exists in the sheer variety across the far-right; J6 demonstrators alone constituted a milieu of right-wing militias, 'QAnon shamans', and 'alt-right' gangs as a mutation of the "skinhead scene" evolving from previous decades (Reid & Valasik, 2020). Notably, many studies favor ethnography over randomized experimentation while other publications offer more qualitative investigation than quantitative methodology. This may be driven by necessity, given relatively small sample sizes (individual 'lone wolf' offenders) or the secretive social circles of explicitly far-right groups (Teitelbaum, 2017). Through analysis, some overarching commonalities appear: dualistic worldviews, identity-driven ideology, and a predilection for violent solutions serve to tie the multiplicity of the far-right together in spirit if not in substance.

[10] The variations of 'far-right', 'alt-right', and 'alt-lite' are summarized here as 'far-right' for brevity.

These books and publications stratify into five subsets under the umbrella of far-right typology: individual 'lone wolves' as a more recent phenomenon, followed by broader white supremacy, Odinist/Åsatrú-adjacent, skinhead, and neo-Nazi organizations in order of appearance within the canvassed literature. The predominance of study into individual, targeted violence may be interpreted as a reflection of the current societal discourse where the preceding twenty years have witnessed a steady increase in 'lone wolf' attacks motivated frequently by far-right radicalization (Belew, 2018; FBI, 2021; Petersen & Densley, 2021). While 'white supremacy' functions as a consistent linkage across all subgroups, we include here the overtly racialist or ethno-nationalist organizations who differentiate themselves distinctly as such in the literature, with frequent allusions to Odinist affectation throughout. We note a certain degree of fluidity exists for individuals as members move between far-right ideologies and organizations intermingle, somewhat confounding strict identification beneath the group level (Miller-Idriss, 2020; Reid & Valasik, 2020). Finally, we consider the body of literature concerned with far-right extremism in service, outlining the activity which first inspired the present study (Flacks & Wiskoff, 1998; Congress, 2006; FBI, 2008; DOD, 2021; DODI 1325.06, 2021; Helmus et al., 2021; Posard et al., 2021).

2.1.1. 'Lone Wolves'

The recent explosion of research into individual, radicalized attackers parallel a concurrent increase in 'lone wolf', targeted violence which has accelerated across the previous two decades (Johnson, 2012; FBI, 2016, 2021; Petersen & Densley, 2021). Easily the most recognized form of modern violent extremism, this 'subgenre' also appears the most fragmented and generalized given the virtually limitless range of reasons one may radicalize within their perceived *need*, *narrative*, and *network* (Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018; RTI, 2018). Excepting Petersen & Densley (2021), the majority of these works offer more generic reports and broad proposals regarding risk assessment, suffering from the paucity of available samples and forced into an 'ecological fallacy' by default when researching such idiographic examples.

Petersen and Densley (2021) offer perhaps the most comprehensive and stark analysis of 'lone wolf' actors in *The Violence Project*, specifically concerned with the accelerating trend of mass shootings in America and offering proposals to preempt future attacks informed by qualitative analysis. Constructing a robust dataset canvassing $n = 172$ mass shooters between 1966 – 2021, the authors' qualitative collection offers perhaps the most thorough analysis of this 'extreme' micro-category to date. Notably, they succeed where many adjacent works admit a critical limitation of studies into the 'lone wolf' phenomenon, successfully conducting interviews with several incarcerated mass shooters to understand motivation, *need*, and *narrative* by which these individuals were first galvanized to violent action (Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018; RTI, 2018; FBI, 2021). Whether implicitly or by design, they laudably generate solid qualitative data which supports many risk assessment models proposed in similar literature concerning individual propensity for violence (Borum et al., 1999, 2015; Simi et al., 2016; RTI, 2018).

Though carefully protecting the anonymity of those involved, some interviewees admit to motivations informed by dualistic worldviews driven in part by a 'them or me/us' paradigm similar to many interracial mass shooter and domestic hate or terror groups. This *narrative* combined with traumas particular to each individual breaks down social boundaries against interpersonal violence as a solution to perceived stressors, 'legitimizing' or even 'necessitating' aggression in response. Notably, the authors highlight the longitudinal nature of shifts in a shooter's affect; at least 40% or more exhibited *strain* characteristics of someone in crisis over a year prior to their attack, ostensibly time enough to notice and preempt these 'lone wolves' before any targeted violence could occur (Petersen & Densley, 2021).

Despite the laudable rigor by which the authors conduct qualitative analysis, *The Violence Project* nevertheless risks a measure of reductionism in interviewing specific 'lone wolf' actors (Asprem, 2011; FBI, 2016). While Petersen and Densely (2021) undoubtedly create the most comprehensive dataset on individualized violence to-date, it remains functionally impossible to generalize the phenomenon of violence perpetrated by one radicalized 'lone wolf' onto all such attacks; motivation, *need*, and *narrative*

exist uniquely to each person, and no publication could conceivably cover the breadth of ‘pushes’ by which one might be driven to act.

Adjacent to *The Violence Project* run various reports and risk assessment tools which dominate the literature on ‘lone wolf’ domestic extremists. Despite clear indications that this strain of targeted violence has accelerated over the previous two decades, many studies ignore or only tangentially admit the opposite risk of an ‘ecological fallacy’ in such research, where generalized hypotheses summarizing all incidents do not by definition explain the singular example of any one person (Borum et al., 1999, 2015; Freilich et al., 2009; Schils & Pauwels, 2016; Simi et al., 2016; Crockford, 2018; RTI, 2018; FBI, 2021; Doxsee et al., 2022). Many acknowledge the difficulty inherent in offering prescriptive tools by which governments may seek to preempt ‘lone wolf’ attacks, noting that the trajectory of any potential radical remains fluid with many possible outcomes and means by which one might support targeted violence (Borum et al., 1999, 2015; Freilich et al., 2009; RTI, 2018). Summarizing, we offer that any tool attempting to offer statistical prediction of individualized violence ostensibly suffers from a relatively miniscule yet broadly diverse sample size, casting doubt upon the precision of any global results (RTI, 2018).

This does not imply that little value exists within the body of work regarding ‘lone wolves’, and many of these publications generally mirror each other in prescriptive suggestions. There exists a general emphasis on prevention through preemption, understanding the unique context by which each potential attacker is driven and constructing a suitable ‘offramp’ after identification (Borum et al., 1999, 2015; RTI, 2018). Many studies echo the strengths of *The Violence Project* in emphasizing community action and tailoring mediation through understanding of *need*, *narrative*, and *network* in spirit if not explicitly drawing upon the framework of the 3N model (Borum et al., 1999, 2015; Freilich et al., 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018; FBI, 2016; Schils & Pauwels, 2016; Simi et al., 2016; RTI, 2018; Bélanger et al, 2019; Petersen & Densley, 2021).

2.1.2. White Supremacy and Heathen Affectation

The body of research canvassing self-proclaimed white supremacist or ethno-nationalist organizations again cleaves closer to ethnographies or qualitative study, often necessitated by higher levels of within-group entitativity; these units are frequently more cohesive, setting clearer delineations on those 'within' and 'without' the group itself (Teitelbaum, 2017; Reid & Valasik, 2020). Unlike most 'lone wolves'[11] these organizations often leverage heathenry for historical 'context', however we consider the two typologies of study to exhibit similar strengths and limitations (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; von Schnurbein, 2016; Strømmen, 2018; Kølvraa, 2019; Boucher, 2021). Driven by long-term sociopolitical goals, these groups project more overtly across the Internet and physical spaces, enabling a virtual research method leveraged by many studies while granting a means of access otherwise difficult to attain through in-person observation (Burris et al., 2000; Anahita, 2006; Simi & Futrell, 2006; Daniels, 2009; Daniels & Lalone, 2013; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2016; Conway et al., 2017; Bagavathi et al., 2019).

Several publications note the quick adoption of online media by white supremacist groups appreciative of its utility for "leaderless resistance" first championed by Louis Beam (Belew, 2018; Miller-Idriss, 2020; Reid & Valasik, 2020). Burris et al. (2000) offer early qualitative analysis of this activity, later imitated by a wide variety of studies researching online radicalization (Anahita, 2006; Simi & Futrell, 2006; Daniels, 2009; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2016; Conway et al., 2017; Bagavathi et al., 2019). Conducting an early "social network analysis", the authors outline possible trajectories of clickstream[12] data enabling an individual's trajectory 'down the rabbit hole', wherein one encounters messaging and dialogue increasingly supportive of white supremacist *narratives* (Burris et al., 2000; Miller-Idriss, 2020; Lavin, 2020).

Canvassing $n = 80$ sites via a purposive, snowball sampling strategy, Burris et al. (2000) note how far-right messaging and recruitment progress incrementally online, 'pulling' an individual in specific

[11] A notable exception exists in Anders Behring Breivik, who referenced his desire for a Christian church more permissive of 'native cultures' and his "Odinist heritage" in particular (Asprem, 2011).
[12] Analysis of one's search history; tracing clicks between sites to outline online browsing trajectory.

directions. Discovering 693 links within the 'network' constructed, the authors outline linkages between approximately 11% of sites included, echoing later research conducted by Caspi (2013) which supports the influence of a few 'centralized' organizations to which a higher density of connections terminate (Burris et al., 2000). Further research by Simi and Futrell (2006) expands upon this phenomenon, detailing the importance of these "nodes" in facilitating *networks* and *narratives* for those who are anonymously enticed before overt recruitment into white supremacist organizations (Anahita, 2006; Daniels, 2009; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2016).

Simi and Futrell (2006) add qualitative interview data to the research initiated by Burris et al. (2000), canvassing an impressive $n = 63$ white power activists over 107 sessions in a similar purposive, snowball sampling method while concurrently observing $n = 451$ online forum posts in a blended research strategy partially inspiring this thesis. Interviews generally support the findings of Burris et al. (2000), proposing that online extremist *networks* impart a sense that likeminded others "are out there", encouraging social ties which reinforce an individual's *narrative* and ideology (Simi & Futrell, 2006; Reid & Valasik, 2020). While maintaining initial anonymity, the authors note these connections often developed into 'real world' meetings and a slow expansion of ties progressing *narratives* supportive of a specific organization's goals (Burris et al., 2000; Anahita, 2006; Simi & Futrell, 2006; Daniels, 2009; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2016; Conway et al., 2017).

These *narratives* within online discourse frequently blend fact and fiction, driving a hypermasculine version of pseudoscience supporting imagined racial disparities and subtly adjusting the range of 'acceptable' topics over time for those active on anonymous forums (Anahita, 2006; Simi & Futrell, 2006; Daniels, 2009; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2016; Conway et al., 2017; Bagavathi et al., 2019). These online chats encompass a white supremacist milieu; while the totality of topics may not appeal to an 'uninitiated' individual, the wide array of 'proof' and sheer number of participants increases opportunities for one to identify with various *networks* or specific *narratives* of choice (Daniels, 2009; Bagavathi, 2019). Vysotsky & McCarthy (2016) note the importance of topics defending "pride in heritage" as a popular theme, echoing the co-option of Old Norse/Germanic culture for historical

'support' by many groups preaching doctrines of white supremacy based partially in a corrupted form of nostalgia (von Schnurbein, 2016; Strømmen, 2018; Kølvraa, 2019).

This inclusion of traditional heathen iconography and leveraging of the 'Viking motif' by white supremacist organizations parallels the temporal development of "paramilitary America" as outlined by Belew (2018), however this phenomenon exists across both North America and Europe in addition to the Internet (von Schnurbein, 2016; Strømmen, 2018; Kølvraa, 2019). Similar to online forums, use of the Viking as exemplifying a 'pure' Aryan ideal or the co-option of heathen practice implicitly supports a hypermasculinity constructed of fiction over fact, functioning as Kølvraa's (2019) "empty signifier" devoid of any true religious or cultural conviction. The author argues that overuse of the motif weakens its symbolic value, pushing "a metaphor for 'the good'" rather than holding any meaning in practice for groups which abuse the Viking in the name of racial supremacy (von Schnurbein, 2016; Kølvraa, 2019).

Strømmen (2018) expands upon the work of von Schnurbein (2016) preceding Kølvraa's concept of the "empty signifier", noting the rise of Åsatrú groups and their abuse of "symbols as concepts" and "imagery for specific intent" (Kølvraa, 2019). While various organizations wield similar motifs for adjacent ideologies across far-right discourse, the general effect becomes one of dualistic "othering" masked as a celebration of Norse heritage (Strømmen, 2018; Kølvraa, 2019; Boucher, 2021). Concurrent with this "othering" come ideological arguments offering implicit approval for violence against groups considered antithetical to the hypermasculine motif, similar in nature to the motivations and *narratives* of many 'lone wolf' actors canvassed by Petersen and Densley (2021) among others (Strømmen, 2018; Kølvraa, 2019; Boucher, 2021).

While the body of literature bisecting white supremacy and heathen co-option offers compelling insights for our study, we do not imply a lack of limitations. The predominance of research into white supremacist groups occurs 'at a distance', and virtually all are qualitative or ethnographic in nature. Observation into this subgenre remains extremely limited in sampling scope, with notable outliers able to analyze substantial datasets (Conway et al., 2017; Bagavathi et al., 2019). Provided limited access to members in most studies, the overall generalizability of online sampling to the entire population remains

dubious and potentially impossible given the virtual fluidity and anonymity embraced by many white supremacist groups (Burris et al., 2000; Simi & Futrell, 2006; Vysotsky & McCarthy, 2016; Conway et al., 2017; Crockford, 2018; Peyton, 2020; Reid & Valasik, 2020). Finally, while Simi and Futrell (2006) offer support for the "intertwining" of real and virtual spaces for white supremacist recruitment, Burris et al. (2000) note the virtual impossibility of proving this linkage beyond the specific sampling for any singular study (Teitelbaum, 2017). Quasi-observation and data scraping remain limited, and highly dependent on the trained eye of the human analyst (Conway et al., 2017; RTI, 2018).

2.1.3. Skinheads and Neo-Nazis

The aforementioned limitations of far-right research exist for perhaps all subgroups canvassed, including literature on 'skinhead' and neo-Nazi organizations as the smallest subcategories included. While this may stem from the limited range of applicable works found upon review, we note the recurrent 'permeability' of motifs and themes across typologies which support similar dualistic views, ideologies providing *narrative* for action, and general support of violence as solution (Anahita, 2006; Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; Pollard, 2016; Kølvraa, 2019; Reid & Valasik, 2020; Boucher, 2021). Provided similar within-group entitativity, the same limitations likely exist within studies on the 'smallest' set of literature reviewed here (Teitelbaum, 2017; Miller-Idriss, 2020; Reid & Valasik, 2020).

Despite the countercultural roots of the 'skinhead scene' in the previous century, Pollard (2016) notes a gradual rightward shift and similar appropriation of Old Norse symbology supporting a 'pure' white identity merging into the motif of a modern, street-fighting "berserker" for many twenty-first century skinhead "groupuscules". The author echoes religious co-option as "a case of belonging rather than believing", encouraging dualistic worldviews similar in substance to Nordic far-right organizations described by Strømmen (2018) and Kølvraa (2019) among others (Teitelbaum, 2017; Crockford, 2018; Miller-Idriss, 2020). A certain irony exists in the co-option of this iconography for identification and organization in a group so vehemently 'anti-establishment'.

Opposite the 'anti-authoritarian' skinheads, Boucher (2021) delves most deeply into the intersection of new-age National Socialism[13] and expressions of 'religion' integrated into a notably rigid organizational hierarchy, otherwise given only general overview in most studies included (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; FBI, 2008; von Schnurbein, 2016; Strømmen, 2018; Kølvraa, 2019). The author parallels Pollard (2016), Strømmen (2018), and Kølvraa (2019) in discussing the predominance of religious practicality over true belief, particularly in Odinist literary works promoting Scandinavian heritage as the antithesis of "effeminate liberal values" embodied by fictional characters as dualistic archetypes (Boucher, 2021). Alternatively, we note the omission of online discourse almost entirely in this work, and that Boucher (2021) offers a more general ethnography of neo-Nazi literature rather than quantitative or qualitative analysis.

Perhaps necessitated once again by the high entitativity and closed nature of skinhead and neo-Nazi organizations, ethnographic summary offers the same risks as previous 'subgenres' of far-right research. Boucher (2021) and Pollard (2016) attempt to project broad generalizations upon the totality of such groups and risk an 'ecological fallacy', likely missing key motivations behind each organization's *need*, *narrative*, and *network*. We must therefore accept the limitations of generalizability inherent to any study seeking to better understand specific phenomena such as heathen practice in military service and the far-right, instead offering more granular insights where access may be gained.

2.1.4. Extremism in Military Service Communities

The preponderance of literature investigating extremism in service follows the aforementioned trend of far-right study, predominantly offering qualitative analyses and summary reports rather than quantitative research. We again note a parallel temporal trajectory, with earlier works canvassing gangs and radical organizations before shifting more recently towards individual actors into the twenty-first century (Flacks & Wiskoff, 1998; Belew, 2018; DOD, 2021). Conceptually, we consider the study of

[13] Generally referred to as 'neo-Nazi'; a National Socialist organization structured similarly to the Nazi party of the German Third Reich, often mimicking its organizational structure and holding a certain reverence for Adolf Hitler.

radicalization within service as perhaps the most difficult population to approach given the sensitive nature of national security affairs and the secretive existence of extremists within an organization where each knows they are legally unwelcome (Flacks & Wiskoff, 1998; DODI 1325.06, 2021). Perhaps due to this difficulty, none of the articles canvassed include any appreciable sampling and remain largely speculative upon the basis of idiographic examples (Flacks & Wiskoff, 1998; Posard et al., 2021).

Despite institutional barriers to extremism in service, a longitudinal history of military radicalization yet exists, constrained by similar limitations this study seeks to overcome (Belew, 2018). Flacks and Wiskoff (1998) predate Belew (2018) in summarizing the phenomenon of gang and extremist infiltration into the Armed Forces, referencing the domestic terror attack of Army veteran Timothy McVeigh in 1995. The authors make particular note of white supremacist intrusion including McVeigh's ties to various religious and militia organizations, the cross-section of ethno-nationalist groups preaching Odinism, and specific skinhead gangs known to send "ghost skins" into military training (Flacks & Wiskoff, 1998; Belew, 2018). Notably, Flacks and Wiskoff (1998) make first mention of online media use by racist service members, protecting their anonymity and military identity while finding reinforcement for their *network* and *narrative* (Burris et al., 2000).

The authors make an early foray into the intersection of military service and online radicalization, while breaking new ground outlining the importance of virtual connections in reinforcing the motivations of individual or localized extremism within the military (Flacks & Wiskoff, 1998). However, the authors' work remains largely theoretical; little support is offered beyond specific idiographic examples, and there remains a relative lack of qualitative or quantitative rigor to substantiate their hypotheses. Additionally, the work remains generally cross-sectional in nature and does not investigate the temporal causality of radicalization within service to any great detail beyond acknowledging the possibility of this mechanism (Flacks & Wiskoff, 1998).

Helmus et al. (2021) instead consider a more longitudinal frame, proposing options for counter-extremist programs aimed at service members identified as early-, middle-, or late-phase radicals and supporting the DODI's emphasis on the duty of commanders to act preemptively where extremism is

suspected (DODI 1325.06, 2021). The authors note the existence of several programs which might be leveraged for this purpose, however they again offer speculative hypotheses rather than any data adding scientific backing (Helmus et al., 2021). This focus on reporting and prescription absent of substantiation broadly defines post-J6 literature regarding extremism in service, and generally restricts the strength of suggestion absent supporting analysis (DOD, 2021; DODI 1325.06, 2021; Helmus et al., 2021; Posard et al., 2021).

The same limitation cuts a foundational flaw across the majority of post-J6 study regarding military radicalization; the existence of such individuals appears assumed, without thought given to proof whereby the majority of research functions more as a prescriptive 'knee-jerk' rather than scientific study (DOD, 2021; DODI 1325.06, 2021; Helmus et al., 2021; Posard et al., 2021). While the phenomenon of 'militarized extremism' demonstrates a long history and exists as a certainty, very little data is available to better inform solutions which are preemptively given absent of clarity or context. This thesis seeks to add qualitative research in support of an important, ongoing discussion progressing with little direction.

2.2. Religion and Service

A second relevant body of research considers the importance of religiosity/spirituality (R/S) in military and veteran communities, held apart from any linkages to the far-right. Broad support exists for the moderating effect of R/S upon various stressors unique to military service, however the majority of works reviewed entirely omit faith groups outside Christianity as the predominant system (Burdette et al., 2009; Eberle & Rubel, 2012; Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015; Sharma et al., 2017; White et al., 2018; Fletcher et al., 2020). While this may be understood as a reflection of the religious landscape across America itself, we find similar limitations to generalizability beyond Christian adherents and the efficacy of heathen R/S remains unknown.

2.2.1. Service Strains

Two decades of conflict have created approximately twenty-three million veterans of the Global War on Terror, with another million actively serving at time of writing (Kane, 2017). While only a subset of this population has engaged in combat and encountered its unique stressors, several studies support the

existence of various military-related *strains* common to all; each member experiences both sudden shifts into or out of military structure, and the unique dynamics of a life strictly controlled within the service environment (Burdette et al., 2009; Eberle & Rubel, 2012; Hassner, 2016; Sharma et al., 2017). While the study of R/S moderation appears evenly split between active members and veterans, literature researching military-related stressors appears to generally focus on the veteran community when not linked to religious salience (Elbogen et al., 2012; MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014; Mobbs & Bonnano, 2018; Markowitz et al., 2020).

Research into uniquely military *strains* predominantly studies the transition *out* of service, often focusing on veterans with significant combat experience and resultant trauma. Similar to limitations on far-right research, the veteran community is generally easier to access than those currently in service, with many studies conducted to support the efforts of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical care (Elbogen et al., 2012; Mobbs & Bonnano, 2018). While combat and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) function as 'popular' concerns, other *strains* related to abrupt, post-service transitions remain relevant in adjacent literature (Mobbs & Bonnano, 2018; Markowitz et al., 2020).

Investigating casual mechanisms between service-related trauma and criminal activity for veterans, Elbogen et al. (2012) notably include Angew's General Strain Theory for its support on the influence of traumatic exposure and generalized "negative affect" on propensity for crime (Agnew, 2001). Conceptualizing this linkage, the authors note the negligible significance of combat for later criminality, emphasizing instead the resultant stressors of trauma and later substance abuse as more indicative, intermediate variables (Elbogen et al., 2012). Mobbs and Bonnano (2018) extend beyond these linkages, offering that transition from service itself may exacerbate these intervening causal mechanisms; *strains* experienced during separation such as grief, loss of positive unit cohesion, and detachment from one's military identity remove several mediators 'buffering' traumatic experiences, therefore necessitating replacement with alternative and potentially negative coping mechanisms.

The importance of a successful transition for *strain* mitigation is supported by MacLean and Kleykamp (2014), offering that prosocial veterans in America generally hold a form of "symbolic capital"

after successfully reintegrating back into society. Acknowledging the risk of stigma for those experiencing PTSD, the authors predate later arguments by Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) in considering the replacement of military connections with positive community ties upon separation (MacLean and Kleykamp, 2014). Markowtiz et al. (2020) suggest these ties also function to enhance a veteran's sense of life satisfaction and self-efficacy, ensuring the individual of their worth and casting past service in a positive frame.

Emphasizing the importance of a successful transition beyond military service, the articles included offer insight into the veteran community as a second population of interest. These do not exist without limitation, however. The majority of research canvassed employs cross-sectional methodology, and in at least one instance the hypothesized causality of combat is rendered insignificant in multivariate analysis (Elbogen et al., 2012; Markowitz et al., 2020). We generalize then that mediating military stressors is more important than the instance of *strain* itself on positive outcomes long-term, and note these works neglect the relevance of religious adherence within samples for moderation and social support (MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014; Mobbs & Bonnano, 2018).

2.2.2. Military Religiosity and Spirituality

The importance of these mediating variables becomes central to literature studying the effects of religiosity and spirituality (R/S) upon service member and veteran communities (Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015; Sharma et al., 2017; White et al., 2018). This 'buffering' generally functions in three distinct ways, directly related to the 'salience' or strength of one's faith. First, R/S may offer an ideological *narrative* supportive of military service, providing justification and social approbation in certain faith *networks* (Burdette et al., 2009; Hassner, 2016). Second, frequent involvement within one's faith group provides a "dose-response" mechanism upon which to draw, offering intermittent moderation and encouraging a greater sense of personal value (Sharma et al., 2017). Finally, high degrees of R/S provide a significant coping mechanism against *strain* experienced in military settings, particularly combat exposure and related negative health outcomes (Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015; White et al., 2018). Alternatively, we consider several articles arguing *against* the efficacy of R/S in service, where

one's faith begets significant moral *strain* and religious beliefs become inconsistent with military experiences (Hathaway, 2006; Fletcher et al., 2020).

Discussing religious support and justification for service, Burdette et al. (2009) create one of the few longitudinal studies included in this literature review. Leveraging data drawn from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the authors categorize n = 6,328 young men based on religious characteristics into "highly religious evangelical", "highly religious non-evangelical", and "nonreligious" categories, constructing a truly quantitative methodology (Burdette et al., 2009). Observed across three waves into late adolescence, higher enlistment rates are found within "highly religious" groups, concurrent with a greater measure of R/S *network* ties which may serve to reinforce their decision (Burdette et al., 2009; Hassner, 2016).

Hassner (2016) offers additional support for this phenomenon, positing that a parallel exists between the sociopolitical conservativism of both highly religious groups and the American military writ large. When considering enlistment into service, this symmetry increases the chance one expects to find likeminded individuals within service while also receiving social support and approval from their faith group at home. Ultimately, the relative strength of one's religious convictions may incentivize military enlistment in specific faith groups (Burdette et al., 2009).

Echoing the importance of strong R/S on positive service experiences, Sharma et al. (2017) outline the frequency of faith practices as a protective "dose-response" moderation. Using data drawn from the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study, the authors assess dimensions of organizational/non-organizational religious activity and general religiosity to determine that a correlation generally exists between high R/S values and positive mental health outcomes, resilience, and sense of 'purpose' in life related to service or veteran experiences (Sharma et al., 2017). They consider clear mechanisms for this phenomenon, arguing that strong R/S may engender more poignant feelings of self-efficacy and incentivize acts of altruism, echoing Burdette et al. (2009) in making connections to R/S driving intrinsic value drawn from military service (Sharma et al., 2017).

Compounding generally positive conclusions, additional studies support the effects of R/S-based coping against specific, negative service *strains* including combat deployment and mass casualty exposure (Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015; White et al., 2018). Surveying $n = 279$ deployed personnel, Sterner and Jackson-Cherry (2015) offer that higher levels of R/S inversely impact combat-related depression and encourage later post-traumatic growth. Acknowledging the range of potential religiosity and inclusive of more "spiritual" practices, the authors consider a continuum of R/S efficacy with a direct relationship between various forms of practice and improved coping with stressors innate to combat deployment such as long-term separation, high-intensity operational tempo, and the existential threat of harm or death (Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015).

White et al. (2018) build upon these findings, arguing that phenomena of increased sleep disturbance in personnel currently or recently deployed may be offset by higher religious 'grounding'. Pulling data from the Health-Related Behaviors Survey of Active-Duty Military, the authors find particular significance for "salience" beyond rates of involvement in religious activity; more important for moderation appears R/S strength rather than attendance, opening the question as to whether expressions of faith practice or "salience" itself proves more significant (White et al., 2018). This question remains relatively unanswered across these works and becomes one of several potential limitations common to all.

Despite significant findings supporting R/S moderating the *strains* of military service, the predominance of studies reviewed are generalizable only to Christian faith practices; all datasets reviewed focus almost entirely on Christianity and little attention is given to other faith groups (Burdette et al., 2009; Sharma et al., 2017). While the findings appear significant, we cannot with confidence conclude these would extend to faith systems such as various forms of heathenry, alternative sets of moral ethics, or generally unaffiliated religious "salience" as spirituality. Interviews supporting this thesis demonstrate a consistent parallel drawn between heathenry and military service as culturally aligned in support of 'righteous conflict', and this may offer a more substantial R/S 'grounding' not experienced by larger Christian groups.

Alternatively, adjacent research into Christian R/S and military service considers potential friction between both systems; several articles argue an innate measure of incompatibility exists when interpreting negative service experiences and where R/S moderation demonstrably fails (Hathaway, 2006; Eberle & Rubel, 2012; Fletcher, 2020). Eberle & Rubel (2012) note examples where Christian morality interferes with sound tactical decision-making, arguing that a delineation must exist where commanders are encouraged to make decisions informed (but not decided) by one's religious beliefs. At the individual level, Fletcher et al. (2020) study a large population of veterans referred to the VA for specific R/S struggles; while religious 'grounding' may moderate against some military *strains*, it can also exacerbate the negative aftereffects of extreme experiences, spurring crises of faith and doubt in the 'righteousness' of decisions made in the heat of combat. While Hathaway (2006) offers the only mention of Odinism in service, this idiographic example details a negative experience where the service member's faith begets friction rather than 'buffers' the junior solider against any stressors they otherwise felt.

We summarize the body of literature concerning R/S efficacy in service as generally supportive of positive moderation, with faith practice and religious "salience" improving one's sense of purpose, fostering enhanced social ties, and encouraging constructive coping skills leading to growth despite *strain* (Burdette et al., 2009; Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015; Sharma et al., 2017; White et al., 2018). However, we acknowledge the intensely personal nature of R/S interpretation and consider that friction may also result where military and veteran experiences conflict with one's faith system (Eberle & Rubel, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2020). These dynamics remain virtually unexplored in the context of heathen faith experiences, and any differentiation of effects remains unknown.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

Accompanying the various stressors encountered by both military and veteran communities are perceived sources of *strain* or *anomie* as understood within General Strain Theory (GST) and its antecedents; these same 'pushes' or 'pulls' may drive both 'religious moderation' and violent, radical action supplemented by one's *need*, *narrative*, and *network* as understood through the 3N "Significance Quest" model along either trajectory (Hillbert & Wright, 1979; Agnew, 1985, 1992, 2001; Featherstone &

Deflem, 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018; Bélanger et al., 2019). Despite the temporal distance between GST and 3N (early twentieth and twenty-first centuries, respectively), the broad foundation of Strain Theory provides a starting point from which we consider the '3N's' of particular significance for evaluating possible linkages between faith and violence. We consider these theories mutually inclusive where *network* and *narrative* influence *need* or *strain* and may be applied to religious adherence and/or targeted violence as potential outcomes of interest.

2.3.1. Anomie and Strain

The foundational concepts of *anomie* and *strain* are traditionally attributed to Merton (1938, 1968) within the study of criminology, himself drawing upon the sociological work of Émile Durkheim in the nineteenth century (Akers & Jennings, 2020). While *anomie* likely exists within service and veteran communities as a general sense of dissociation from military or civilian social systems, we offer that specific *strains* may prove more significant to interviewees for two reasons. First, we understand *anomie* as a general, cognitive dissociation from 'The System' at large; it remains unknown whether heathen adherence relates to complete *retreat* from 'common' values or rather personal stressors unique to each person. Second, we note again the intensely individual experience of R/S adherence and offer that motivations towards Old Norse/Germanic faith systems may not function in ways typically understood as *retreat* or *rebellion* in the traditional sense of Strain Theory.

Considering society at the macro-level, we generalize *anomie* as a social state in which the means to those goals signifying 'success' (wealth, status, influence, etc.) become unattainable for the majority who are aware of their 'glass ceiling' (Akers & Jennings, 2020). This dissonance begets a delegitimization of social norms, incentivizing individuals experiencing intense *anomie* to disregard the system they perceive as stifling their opportunities and blocking 'success'. While this may take several forms, we consider *retreat* and *rebellion* as responses most relevant to this study.

Retreat may be summarized as one's partial or complete withdrawal from the system they perceive as '*anomic*', and likely proceeds differentially for each individual (Merton, 1938). At times, *retreat* from the system develops into a replacement of norms whereby one redefines their vision of

'success' or their values system, deviating from the society creating one's *anomie* and dissonance (Merton, 1968; Featherstone & Deflem, 2003). Merton (1938, 1968) anticipates relative increases in crime concurrent with this withdrawal via the delegitimization of traditional norms, however this too occurs uniquely to each person.

More extreme a reaction to *anomie* is *rebellion*, whereby one seeks to change the system perceived as 'unfair' or *anomic* into a format more amenable to their goals (Merton, 1968; Akers, 2020). Beyond 'garden-variety' crime, researchers might consider more violent, radical actors to be individuals or groups generally in *rebellion* against a system they perceive as irredeemably unjust, spurred towards domestic terror and targeted violence in pursuit of a more extensive 'system reboot' rather than a personalized replacement of norms via *retreat*. Regardless of response, either *retreat* or *rebellion* within an *anomic* system may function as a mechanism by which one overcomes unique sources of *strain*.

The concept of *strain* has received far more attention across literature, developing well beyond its criminological foundations with Merton (1938, 1968) into Angew's (2001) General Strain Theory offering a root cause for *all* deviance and crime. We may generally understand *strain* as specific restrictions or stressors an individual perceives as blocking 'success' which cannot otherwise be addressed through legitimate means (Agnew, 1985). While one may labor under variously significant *strains* for some time provided sufficient mediation (social bonds, high self-control, social capital) as intervening variables, Agnew (1992) posits that low self-control, lack of prosocial ties, and/or pain avoidance incentivize criminal behavior when *strain* becomes too great (Spohn, 2012).

The modern iteration of Agnew's GST suggests that combined sources of *strain* are most likely to 'push' one towards crime when stressors are perceived as particularly unjust or unwarranted, are high in magnitude (severe, frequent, or central to one's identity), and where alternative opportunities exist for criminal resolution (Agnew, 2001). Conducting qualitative interviews of service members and veterans, this thesis primarily outlines *subjective strains* directly experienced by individuals rather than universal, *objective strains* which affects the majority (Agnew, 2001). While those experiencing combat certainly interact with a particularly severe *objective strain*, we posit that combat experience may be variously

interpreted and the perception of a heathen in service might differ towards combat exposure than their Christian peers (Agnew, 1985, 2001; Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015; White et al., 2018; Sharma et al., 2017).

A primary limitation of GST and its previous iterations are definitional ambiguities concerning the core concepts of *anomie* and *strain*. Featherstone & Deflem (2003) note the influence of Merton's "Social Structure and Anomie" (1938) as a 'seminal' foundation for the longitudinal development of Strain Theory, however they highlight numerous instances where Merton himself offers varying definitions for both structures in this and later work (Merton, 1968). The outsized influence of Merton (1938) hinders consistent definition across subsequent research, confusing conceptualization, and potentially harming operationalization towards significant outcomes.

Hillbert & Wright (1979) critique *anomie* more directly, offering that Merton's (1938) interchangeable usage of *anomie* and *strain* confuses the theory enough that following studies emphasize the notion of *strain* as more "accessible", ignoring *anomie* which suffers from unclear definitions hindering its utility. Agnew (2001) accepts this critique as a legitimate concern for GST as an evolutionary extension, acknowledging that the sheer breadth of GST's scope poses similar definitional issues when one attempts to highlight specific causes of *strain*. We believe this study may sufficiently narrow the scope of broader Strain Theory by incorporating the 3N model and its more specific *need*, *narrative*, and *network* mechanisms (Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018; Bélanger et al., 2019).

2.3.2. The Significance Quest

Attempting to outline a generalizable set of drivers towards radicalization agnostic of ideology, Kruglanski et al., (2015, 2018) and Bélanger et al. (2019) construct the 3N Significance Quest Theory primarily concerning extremism. The authors trace gradual pathways towards targeted violence as functions of *need, narrative*, and *network* along which an individual may find motivators whereby they are 'pushed' or 'pulled' into terrorist action (Kruglanski et al., 2015; Bélanger et al., 2019). We offer these same concepts are neither mutually exclusive from earlier concepts of *anomie* or *strain*, nor do they necessitate a continuous 'slide' towards violent extremism as the only possible outcome. Rather, we offer

that *need*, *narrative*, and *network* may function bi-directionally, alternatively incentivizing positive outcomes whereby a service member or veteran may find a new faith system or cultural ethic to interpret personal stressors understood within the broader framework of GST (Agnew, 2001; Kruglanksi et al., 2015).

Echoing the intentions of far-right risk assessment tools previously discussed, Kruglanski et al. (2015) construct Significance Quest Theory (SQT) as a means of analyzing trajectories towards violent extremism through the lens of a universal "quest for motivation" and the innately human desire "to be someone" of value, worth, and importance. The authors generally consider SQT as stemming from one of three "activations": loss of perceived value (significance deprivation), threats to significance of oneself or one's group, and a perceived opportunity to gain significance either tangible or intangible (Kruglanski et al., 2015). When motivations become sufficiently potent and/or create a form of self-reinforcing 'group ethic', violence gradually becomes a more desirable solution to regain, protect, and enhance significance (Kruglanski et al., 2015).

These universal motivations are defined by the authors as *need*, *narrative*, and *network* where radicalization incentivizes violence as the particular outcome of interest (Kruglanski et al., 2018). Understanding *need* as any of the three "activating" motivations, Kruglanski et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of a reinforcing *narrative* offering ideological justification for the utility and viability of violence to realize perceived *needs*. These motivations 'push' or 'pull' one into a *network* providing further *narrative* reinforcement and even material support for violent terrorist action (Kruglanski et al., 2018).

Bélanger et al. (2019) provide a noteworthy test of the 3N model across several countries, beginning with $n = 470$ participants in Canada before recreating the study in Pakistan and Spain to test reproducibility of findings. Measuring social alienation and support for political violence by scale, the authors find significance for high degrees of social alienation (*need*) correlating with higher levels of support for political violence (*narrative*) and greater openness towards joining 'fringe' radical groups (*network*). While Bélanger et al. (2019) admit their findings offer limited causation as a cross-sectional

design, we note their conception of *network* as a person's motivation to seek 'others' who share their perceptions; this desire may be understood variously as one's proclivity for violent extremism or alternatively the adoption of heathen faith or culture as a more positive extension of 3N outcomes.

3: METHODS

Drawing upon a blended theoretical framework of General Strain Theory and the 3N 'Significance Quest', this thesis considers various outcomes relating to the interpretation of *strains* experienced by service member and veteran communities through nonstandard faith practices. While one's *network* of adjacent heathen practitioners may provide a different schema of religious, ethical, or social buffers against uniquely military stressors, we investigate the possibility that these same motivations might alternatively lead to more negative associations and extreme peer groups. Whether encountered online or in person, such *networks* and their more radical *narratives* may instead weaponize religiosity/spirituality in a service member or veteran, driving them towards radicalization pathways as outlined by Kruglanski (2018) and Bélanger et al. (2019).

These considerations and theoretical framework inform the following research questions, sampling strategy, and analytic plan. We construct our case with a series of between- and within-sample comparisons, leveraging data collected from qualitative interviews and an online forum known for far-right extremist activity. Qualitative coding conducted by a current service member permits a level of reflexive coding where experience enhances insight and consolidates transcript data via analytic memoing; codes are created as patterns emerge, thereby informing subsequent, repeat analyses into each transcript until a high level of saturation has been reached and all key themes are considered. Coding 151 pages of transcripts, we highlight key themes found within both sets of data before these thematic elements are examined to glean insight into key similarities or differences and the potentiality of radicalization among heathen practitioners where thematic *narratives* overlap.

3.1. Research Question and Hypotheses

Fundamentally, this thesis seeks to answer the following research question: "*What common motivations encourage military-affiliated individuals to identify with heathen faith or values, and do these vectors present a risk for radicalization through thematic parallels with adjacent, far-right entities?"* The phenomenon of heathen practice and icon adoption exists in both active military and veteran groups,

however little research outlines specific motivations, interpretations, and perhaps risks for adherents despite frequent connections made between the far-right and heathen affectation. Three hypotheses encompass our primary lines of inquiry:

1) Common *narrative* themes link heathen adherents and far-right military members, demonstrable through textual analyses of interviews and scraped forum data.
2) The practice of and research into heathenry by military members and veterans has brought some participants into contact with extremist individuals espousing the same faith, increasing the risk of radicalization through adjacent *narratives* and *networks*.
3) The unique motivators for each interviewee include *needs* or *strains* addressed through heathen practice.

We suggest that the adoption of Old Norse/Germanic faith in service or veteran communities may function as a form of *retreat* from individual *strains*, addressing unique *needs* for each interviewee (Agnew, 2001; Kruglanski et al., 2018). Further, we believe their response to these *needs* or *strains* may be compared against military-affiliated individuals engaged on a known far-right forum, informing this study on the possible risks of radicalization and *rebellion* over time or more an immediate "dose-response" moderation of *strains* which need not imply a direct threat for latent extremist propensities (Sharma et al., 2017).

3.2. Conceptualization

This thesis seeks to refine upon several limitations highlighted across our literature review. First, we intend to provide robust qualitative data to address our research question and hypotheses. We follow Petersen and Densley (2021) as one of the few works supplementing hypotheses with substantial qualitative data in a study we consider far-right adjacent, given their significant representation within the lists of modern mass shooters. Second, we expand the literature concerning effects of religiosity/spirituality (R/S) in the military by interviewing explicitly heathen practitioners or 'Viking' adopters which appears virtually nonexistent to-date (Hathway, 2006). Finally, we conceptualize a

bridging theoretical framework where the effects of General Strain Theory (GST) and the 3N Significance Quest Theory (SQT) appear complementary, narrowing the definitional issues of GST while allowing for bi-directional outcomes within SQT beyond its primary concern with radicalization (Agnew, 2001; Featherstone & Deflem, 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2018; Bélanger et al., 2019).

Research into intersectionality between the military/veterans and the far-right has traditionally suffered from a paucity of data informing arguments, generally concerned with prescriptive measures rather than proof of existence; while the relationship certainly exists, a post-J6 'knee jerk' has generally assumed this correlation rather than offering data supporting such assumptions (DOD, 2021; DODI 1325.06, 2021; Helmus et al., 2021; Posard et al., 2021). This thesis attempts a more time- and asset-limited imitation of the corpus built by Petersen and Densley (2021) into *The Violence Project*, significant not only for the dataset's size but also the longitudinal interviews between the authors and incarcerated mass shooters. Similarly, we note the difficulty of accessing relevant populations in both military-affiliated and extremist communities, however online data 'scraped' from far-right forums may be analyzed for specific instances of military members engaging virtually in far-right rhetoric. This sample provides a comparison group against which we may analyze the motivations of interviewed service members and veterans to determine where themes overlap.

We define 'service member' and 'veteran' communities as individuals currently serving or who have separated, regardless of their service characterization (honorable, other than honorable, dishonorable, etc.). Concurrently, this study concerns itself with Old Norse/Germanic faith systems within broader 'heathenry' as an umbrella term for various faith practices. Where an interviewee identifies as specifically Odinist or following one of the paths of Åsatrú, we include these terms explicitly for accuracy. While religious practice is preferred for inclusion, non-practicing individuals who demonstrate some form of 'Viking' affectation (tattoos, phrases, dress, etc.) into their daily life were also eligible for inclusion.

Concerning the 'far-right', we leverage text data for comparison to qualitative interviews; those service members identified online demonstrably exist somewhere along the spectrum of far-right

ideologies and offer a second sample to inform thematic analysis against coded interview transcripts. We acknowledge that some of these online extremists may not consider themselves explicitly heathen or make specific reference therein, however we offer that their value as a baseline for thematic analysis justifies inclusion where military affiliation may be proven based on keyword usage. Leveraging an active-duty service member leading this research, we consider the utility of reflexive coding where common words, phrases, or slang indicate military affiliation in online conversation.

There exists a general lack of study into the specific phenomenon of heathen practice within service and veteran communities, despite a sweeping body of literature investigating the effects of religiosity/spirituality (R/S) in military-affiliated settings (Hathaway, 2006; Eberle & Rubel, 2012; Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015; Sharma et al., 2017; White et al., 2018). Excluding a clinical session referenced by Hathaway (2006), virtually all literature reviewed draws samples from the major religions found within the United States in particular and the military by extension (predominantly Christian). This work therefore broadens the boundaries of research into military R/S by leveraging its conceptual framework for a study aimed directly at heathen service members, or those otherwise affecting aspects of the culture or faith system for management of stressors, *retreat* from a system they may consider *anomic*, or other motivation not yet considered.

We finally interpret data for each sample through the blended prism of GST/SQT, where transcription and text analysis offer insight into respective *needs* or *strains* which alternatively 'pull' or 'push' an individual towards heathenry or beyond into a form of radicalization facilitated through adjacent *narratives* and *networks*. These connections and potentiality for radicalization may be sought out or accidentally encountered, and comparison between interview and online groups may yield parallels or differences in the thematic definitions of each group. We argue each theory ameliorates partially the weaknesses of the other, where SQT narrows GST's 'universal' scope into pathways guided by *need*, *network*, and *narrative* and we broaden these to permit mediation of *strains* beyond the potentiality for radicalization for which SQT was initially conceived.

3.3. Sampling Strategy

Datasets informing this thesis were constructed via two methods. The military-affiliated sample of interviewees was collected through a purposive, snowball sampling of $n_H = 9$ service members and veterans, with follow-on interviews refining common themes identified between individuals; in one additional case, a two-person interview was held where the participants had served together and conducted as an open-ended discussion format between them. A second set of online data 'scraped' from the fascist forum Iron March populated our far-right sample for comparison, after limiting the dataset to $n_I = 19$ members using uniquely military keywords within 113 messages across 12 threads. The respective sampling strategies differed due to various accessibility issues previously limiting much of the research concerning active military and the American far-right.

The nature of military force protection and information security imposes natural restrictions on broad sampling of any specific population within the Armed Forces. These issues may occur for various reasons: individuals change duty station, are deployed with variable notice, or become inaccessible for security reasons without advance warning. Adding difficulty is the relatively small sampling frame of practicing heathens within military service, and we broadened our aperture to veterans and demonstrations of cultural affectation (tattoos, etc.) as a result. Given these constraints we opted for purposive, snowball sampling methods where interviews were conducted before leveraging the participant's network to identify additional leads. At least 5 additional participants have been identified for future study, however these were not interviewed given research time constraints.

The inclusion of far-right sampling for thematic comparison poses similar accessibility issues outlined in our literature review; these populations are often highly self-contained and difficult to observe for those outside of the organization. Given the standing DOD policy against involvement in extremist or gang-related activity for service members, we consider this dual-population of radicalized military members even more difficult to access as they must hide where they are legally unwelcome. Identification of these individuals required language and keywords implying present, past, or future military affiliation,

and we included these as the most accessible, similar group to address a common limitation highlighted across research into the far-right (Teitelbaum, 2017; Reid & Valasik, 2020).

The creation of two text-based datasets drawn from various sources enabled simultaneous, qualitative analysis via coding and ultimately allowed comparison between samples. Highlighting overarching themes common to both datasets, we sought significance in both the difference and similarity between thematic definitions within the respective groups. From dissimilar motivations, a baseline was established for the potential majority of each group who may not themselves be both heathen and radicalized (interviewees), nor fascist and heathen (Iron March users); importantly, both included a service history as part of their identity. Additional value could be gained where motivations and themes intersect, demonstrating an overlap where common ground as military and a *narrative* for SQT radicalization might exist in the correct environment or circumstances of the individual.

3.4. Data

Purposive, snowball sampling for interviews began through first-person connections with the author; these individuals served with this researcher previously and identified further leads to additional service members and veterans for inclusion after their interview sessions. Overall, far greater access was gained from person-to-person networking and 'word of mouth' rather than attempted outreach to established heathen groups or personalities found via social media. Only one gathering of significant size (20+ practicing service members) accepted our invitation to interview, however training and deployment schedules precluded agreed-upon focus groups at time of thesis submission. Successful connections generally followed positive introductions from other heathen service members or veterans after interviews, far more effectively than 'cold calls' to social media groups without prior introduction. Eventually, at least 5 additional leads were referred spontaneously by previous interviewees, indicating some 'buy-in' momentum to the referral process and a positive indicator for future work.

While schedule restrictions forced the omission of 5 referred leads, at time of submission this effort amassed and included the combined transcripts of $n_H = 9$ service members and veterans who variously adopted some form of practice or study of Old Norse/Germanic faith and/or cultural values.

These individuals were coded anonymously, labelled Interview 1 through 10 in order of their participation; we included only $n_H = 9$ after Interviewee 4 requested to be redacted from further work. Identities of these participants were known only to the lead researcher and kept separate from all transcripts, which bear only their ID number. Holding apart Interview 4, we consolidated 10 separate interview sessions for analysis, totaling nearly 11 hours of recordings and 121 transcript pages (~15.1 pages per interview).

Functioning as a far-right, fascist chat forum between 2011-2017, Iron March gained widespread notoriety after its exposure as a networking and recruitment aid for various organizations dedicated to hate- or terror-related activities including Atomwaffen Division, National Action, and Nordic Resistance Movement. The complete Iron March data scrape was open-sourced the Internet and accessed via torrent, with the link used here available as a footnote[14]. While many users were exposed or 'doxxed' by various other research and activist efforts, only user ID and thread ID numbers were retained for organizational purposes; usernames, emails, and Internet Protocol addresses were omitted for the spirit of anonymity if not in fact and excluded from our dataset.

Canvassing 109 files totaling 979.45 megabytes as a complete scrape, the final, cleaned .csv file pulled from over 1,653 usernames and over 150,000 messages; $n_I = 19$ users identifiable by text analysis as military-affiliates contributed 113 posts to 12 threads. The majority of selected threads consisted of 2-3 users, with at least one including a site administrator and several recurring users. Despite double the sample size, the brief nature of these online chats yielded only 30 pages of transcripts with an average of 2.5 pages per conversation. The combined sum of all interviews and chat threads therefore provided 151 transcript pages available for coding and thematic analysis.

3.5. Operationalization and Analytic Plan

Including coding, our methodology operated as a three-part analysis. Prior to coding all qualitative data, interview transcription via Otter.ai software and re-typed by hand ensured the accuracy of interview

[14] https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/how-tos/2019/11/06/massive-white-supremacist-message-board-leak-how-to-access-and-interpret-the-data/

data while capturing the unique vocabulary of Old Norse/Germanic faith systems and adapted cosmology. After transcription, we leveraged the author's military experience via 'reflexive coding' offering personal insight into interviewee responses and Iron March forum posts. Collating codes across files, recurrent themes were highlighted through a method of 'analytic memoing', combining relevant codes as common themes during analysis before returning to previous transcripts seeking connective references to these new codes until a level of acceptable saturation was reached.

Interviews for this study were uniformly conducted with informed consent of participants, who were provided advance copies to review and refuse questions preapproved by the Institutional Review Board on a three-year approval for this research beginning in Fall 2021 under IRBIS-21-0300. While in-person interviews were preferred where possible, the geographic dispersion of the Armed Forces and veteran communities sometimes necessitated virtual interviews through Zoom, Signal, or telephone as dictated by living conditions or the needs of operational military deployment overseas.

Interviews in all cases were saved only via EVISTR voice recorder and handwritten notes, with a database of interviews and transcripts maintained solely by the lead researcher privy to the identities of all participants. Transcription of all interviews was conducted via Otter.ai online software and reviewed for accuracy prior to hand-typed transition onto Microsoft Word documents maintained by the author for privacy, ensuring accuracy regarding the unique terminology of heathen faith systems. Upon completion of all transcription, interviews and text data from Iron March were uploaded and analyzed via NVivo 1.7.1 software available online for students via the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Analysis in NVivo involved coding of recurrent themes, keywords, and the stressors and *needs* of heathen interviewees for comparison against military-affiliated individuals identified from the far-right Iron March scrape. We consider this study an improvement upon past efforts with the inclusion of a military member on the research team itself, enabling deeper understanding and more immediate connections between relevant data via a form of 'reflexive coding' only possible where research leverages prior, personal experience in the topic of interest (Sterner & Jackson-Cherry, 2015). Additionally, inclusion of a service member on the research team offered increased access and perceived legitimacy to

participants through a measure of mirrored ‘social capital’ where military and veteran communities recognized a peer during interviews and when pursuing further leads (MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014).

Leveraging the background knowledge of a service member provided implicit, experiential comprehension during text analysis enabling a form of ‘analytic memoing’, where research was aided by greater native comprehension thereby streamlining friction caused by definitional confusion or dialectical misunderstandings. As coding progressed, individual NVivo ‘references’ as highlighted quotes were gradually collected into intermediate themes which appeared across both datasets to varying degrees. Where new sub-themes were identified we returned to previous transcripts and recoded specifically for these new intermediate elements, finally gleaning over 1,400 individual references and 25 intermediate codes/themes after at least three reviews of each transcript. Three significant, overarching themes inform our results section for comparison across both samples, demonstrating differential definitions between groups regarding both central motivations or *needs* and their respective positions on group cohesion or ‘entitativity’, while a measure of overlap was identified where themes of masculine identity intersected.

4: RESULTS

"Lots of guys in the military become red pilled. Seeing first hand how little the government actually takes care of its fighting force… is more than enough for many. And if that's not enough, killing some sand n------ does the rest… I'm with 3/23[15]." – ***Iron March Thread 5127***

"I worry that killing this- at least one woman… might preclude me from something. Like, it might- it has somehow irreparably damaged my spirit… I guess I'm gonna say it was worth it. But you know- at what price? You know what I mean? At what price to myself?" – ***Interviewee 9***

Consolidation of coding and analysis of all transcripts outlined 25 'intermediate' themes drawn from 1,405 individual NVivo 'references', or unique highlights taken from each transcript. Analytic memoing throughout this process ultimately refined codes into three overarching, thematic elements shared across samples, highlighting two topics differentially understood between groups yet exposing potential risk in a third where definitions of masculine ideals overlapped, and common ground for potential dialogue presented a risk vector. We expand upon these shared themes and consider them in context of between- and within-group differences before evaluating potential risk factors in our Discussion section.

Demographic analysis revealed relevant similarities in group composition between samples; interviewees were uniformly individuals of Caucasian European descent and in all but one case male, very similar to the modern far-right milieu (Miller-Idriss, 2020; Reid & Valasik, 2020). Besides demographic makeup, we noted the importance of service identity as a shared denominator between groups, offering 'common ground' for possible interactions beyond labels such as 'heathen' or 'fascist' which were interpreted differently by participants and between each sample. Despite apparent differences, certain thematic elements were shared based on service or veteran identities. We focus our Results on major themes which were defined based on intermediate coding of sub-themes and individual references, before highlighting thematic interpretations and categorization both within- and between-samples.

4.1. Demographics

[15] 3/23 denotes a unit designator within the Marine Corps by battalion/regiment. Here, the post references 3rd Battalion, 23rd Regiment; the Regiment number informs the reader that this individual is in a reserve unit.

"*Combat units… are overwhelmingly White. While the Army itself might be 70-75% White, combat units – especially Infantry – tend to be upwards of 85-95% White, depending on where you classify Caucasoid Hispanics." –* ***Iron March Thread 1760***

"This [Old Norse adaptation] is a white thing- you're not seeing diverse groups doing this. Whites lack a strong culture in America, and they grab onto what they can. It can be innocent but harmful at the same time. It's the white kid from down the street who lacks identity- finds people to identify with, and has a weak mind, so they latch on." – ***Interviewee 2***

Given the primacy of race in the pantheon of far-right motivations, we considered the demographic composition of interviewees included regarding their prospective 'desirability' for recruitment into modern far-right extremist organizations. Conducted as a purposive snowball sampling to populate our dataset, the majority of initial interviews drew from the United States Marine Corps as the lead researcher's 'parent' branch of service. Table 1 outlines basic demographics for those participants who elected to remain within the sample after interviewing; generally, we argue that each 'fits' the profile of a military member or veteran at risk of being approached and 'pulled' along a radicalization pathway.

Table 1: Interviewee Demographics

ID	AGE	RACE	SEX	SERVICE	MOS[16]	STATUS
1	50	W	M	USMC	0202	Retired
2	27	W	F	USMC	6672	Veteran
3	29	W	M	USMC	6672	Active
4	**REDACTED UPON REQUEST**					
5	27	W	M	USMC	8411	Active
6	28	W	M	USMC	8411	Active
7	29	W	M	USMC	8001	Active
8	28	W	M	USMC	3531	Reserve
9	32	W	M	USMC	0311	Veteran
10	32	W	M	USN	ABH	Reserve

[16] MOS: Miliary Occupational Specialty, or one's specific role within their service branch. We note the difference between Marine and Navy branches where the MOS is numeric for Marines and alphabetical for Navy sailors.

All canvassed interviewees identified as Caucasian and of primarily European descent; in only one instance was a participant female or in another branch of service than the United States Marine Corps (United States Navy Reserve). While the dominant subset of Marines naturally extended from snowball sampling methodology, interview transcripts supported the preponderance of males engaged in some form of heathen practice or icon adoption. Only two subjects directly knew a female practitioner (Interviewees 8 and 10), and only in the context of group worship; Interviewee 8 recalled the gradual progression of his wife into instances of heathen practice concurrent with her social inclusion into his six-person faith group, while Interviewee 10 actively worshipped with a gathering of approximately twenty participants including women without familial relation to himself. While six other subjects were also in heterosexual marriages, their spouses did not share their faith system and offered varying degrees of support or acceptance at minimum; these and all other participants uniformly practiced alone or had otherwise adopted specific, personalized facets of Old Norse culture and cosmology informed by their unique *needs*.

Regarding the social dynamics of our interview sample, we noted that only one subject recalled being raised in a 'heathen household' of any kind. Eight of the nine members grew up in a nuclear family of Christian denomination (four Catholic, two Baptist, one Lutheran, and one Latter-Day Saint), with varying degrees of adherence or rigidity in their household practice. Interviewee 9 alone 'began' life as a member of a half-pagan household, relaying that his mother was an actively practicing Wiccan during his youth (since deceased by suicide) while his father was nominally Catholic without a strong sense of religiosity. Almost none of the canvassed subjects were 'born' into heathenry; the faith practice or cultural adoption rather occurred as a personal choice at various points in late adolescence or early adulthood. While families were largely accepting of their choice, they generally did not participate.

Excepting Interviewee 1, average age centered squarely in the middle of the 'Millennial' cohort at 29.25 before inclusion of this individual, raising the mean slightly to 31.56 years of age. Despite the omission of military rank from Table I for additional anonymity, all interviewees served or had served as Noncommissioned Officers (E-4/E-5), Senior Noncommissioned Officers (E-6 only), or Officers (rank

omitted); all subjects fell generally into the ‘correct’ rank range for their age and reported no significant negative missteps along their career trajectory. We therefore considered all participants to be or have been in good standing with their service and fitting the ‘correct’ demographic of white, male military members at risk of recruitment by far-right actors as holding such various levels of authority and access to make them desirable targets for contact and attempted radicalization along traditional SQT lines (FBI, 2008).

While we cannot state with similar certainty the demographics of the $n_I = 19$ Iron March users included, we assert they likely reflected a parallel tableau of Caucasian males based on previous research into similar far-right phenomena (Simi & Futrell, 2006; Daniels, 2009; Miller-Idriss, 2020; Reid & Valasik, 2020). Separate analyses of the original data scrape previously ‘doxxed’ a significant majority of young, male users ranging from late adolescence into early adulthood at time of membership, however we consider that the forum itself was increasingly active between 2011 and 2017 before dispersing shortly after the breach occurred (Hayden, 2019). Accounting for the five years separating this shutdown and interviews conducted for this study, we posit that the upper age range of users likely bracketed the mean age of our sampled service member and veteran participants.

We noted a unique difference in the composition of sampled Iron March users related to military membership, where 7 of 19 users initiated threads specifically soliciting advice as recently sworn-in recruits awaiting basic training. The other 12 users professed current or prior military experience similar to the interview sample, however similar demographics to Table 1 were not available. Regardless of service characterization, analytic memoing of all transcripts demonstrated a number of consistent themes for consideration shared between samples, however they appeared either differentially or similarly defined.

4.2. Major Themes

Consolidating 1,405 individual references across files into 25 intermediate codes, connections appeared during the process of analytic memoing which necessitated a return to previously coded transcripts; in total, each interview or Iron March file was reviewed at least three times as additional linkages emerged. Conceptualizing these 25 codes as sub-themes comprised of individual references,

several differences appeared between samples in Table 2, depicted below. Organized in reference order, this summarized the number of times an intermediate code appeared across all transcripts, the number of files from which the code was drawn, and finally the distribution of each between samples as a ratio metric of its centrality to the *needs* and *narratives* of each sample. Review of Table 2 highlighted three shared thematic elements which functioned as primary drivers for *needs* or *narratives* central to both.

Table 2: Distribution of Codes

CODE	REFERENCES	FILES	INTERVIEWS	IRON MARCH
Military Dynamics	**119**	**13**	**97**	**22**
Religious Motivations	**102**	**6**	**102**	**0**
Religious Practices	**99**	**7**	**99**	**0**
Religious Friction	**99**	**8**	**97**	**2**
Personality Traits	**87**	**9**	**85**	**2**
Cultural Disillusion	**74**	**12**	**63**	**11**
Politics	**65**	**17**	**25**	**40**
Cultural Dynamics	**64**	**11**	**61**	**3**
Masculine Ideals	**64**	**16**	**34**	**30**
Religious Identity	**64**	**8**	**63**	**1**
Family Dynamics	**60**	**9**	**56**	**4**
Viking-Military Motifs	**58**	**9**	**57**	**1**
Social Network	**57**	**12**	**41**	**16**
Viking-Society Motifs	**55**	**8**	**55**	**0**
Race/Ethnicity	**51**	**14**	**21**	**30**
Old Norse Ethics	**47**	**6**	**47**	**0**
Demographics	**43**	**9**	**41**	**2**
Military Specialty	**43**	**15**	**21**	**22**
Military Disillusion	**29**	**11**	**23**	**6**
Greco/Spartan Culture	**29**	**4**	**29**	**0**
Nostalgia	**27**	**8**	**21**	**6**
Activism/Engagement	**22**	**9**	**1**	**21**
Extremism	**20**	**8**	**14**	**6**
Misogyny	**17**	**7**	**3**	**14**
Targeted Literature	**14**	**3**	**0**	**14**

Provided far greater access to interviewees than military-affiliated members of the Iron March forum, this study anticipated a greater number of references drawn from longer interview transcripts; we

therefore interpreted the relative distribution of each intermediate code between samples for qualitative significance. Generally, a skew appeared at the top and bottom of Table 2 where interviewees placed far greater weight upon their military/religious experiences (often using one in reference to the other), while Iron March users more exclusively discussed forms of activism or propaganda and made variously misogynistic statements regarding the fetishization of women. The highlighted elements outline intermediate codes informing three themes of shared significance: key motivations as *need*/*narrative* frames for identity, implicit perceptions of group entitativity, and finally apparent overlap around similar definitions of masculine identity.

Differentiation appeared between samples regarding key motivations as foundational *needs* or *narratives* within blended frameworks of GST and SQT. Interviewing heathen practitioners and military-affiliated adopters of Old Norse iconography, far greater emphasis was placed upon personal motivations driving religious *need* as heathen adherents; these practicing service members and veterans most often tied their faith to past *strains*, experienced during service or within their private lives. While not all 'pivot points' were traumatic events, three of four active practitioners directly tied their faith journey to personal struggles regarding combat-related *strain* or familial stressors.

Those interviewees who instead adopted Old Norse ethics or icons derived from personal preference and research pointed specifically to feelings of *anomic* cultural disillusion and many referenced a perceived 'warrior ethos' interpreted as a *narrative* more readily accessible to them, self-identifying as warriors grown from a society without a demonstrable warrior culture. Across segments of the interview sample, participants referenced motifs scattered across the social landscape as societal reflections of this sentiment; where their civilian peers watched shows and played video games implicitly idolizing the culture of their faith system or interest, they instead leveraged these dynamics more directly to offer a guiding paradigm for their lives and military profession which several outlined in close parallel to the 'Viking motif' (Strømmen, 2018; Kølvraa, 2019).

Rather than individualized *needs* and *narratives*, the users within each Iron March thread instead preferred to leverage group perceptions of cultural disillusion supporting a form of online political

extremism, fed by *narratives* of fascism into a *network* of far-right hate closely tracing a purer example of SQT radicalization trajectories (Kruglanski et al., 2015; Bélanger et al., 2019). Members across the sample generally considered their 'warrior ethos' as a foil supporting violence towards society against which they pit themselves in *rebellion* rather than *retreat*, railing against "woke" culture, "liberal" values, and the "decline" of the 'Viking motif' as an envisioned purity of white, masculine spirit (Teitelbaum, 2017; Strømmen, 2018; Kølvraa, 2019). Rather than addressing individual *needs* for interviewees, these motivations provided justification for extreme sociopolitical change at home after honing skillsets through military service and training.

These differences in motivation supported separate levels of entitativity between groups as a second shared theme, more implicitly referenced than overtly acknowledged. Given the individual, personalized nature of each interviewee's arrival at heathen practice or adoption, far more references were made towards the importance of religious practices and their identity as heathen or military; each subject leveraged their faith or icons projecting their 'warrior ethos' in ways unique to them. True heathens within this group preferred privacy regarding their worship, generally concerned for social stigma and misunderstandings informed by world events such as the 'QAnon Shaman' made famous during J6. Others who instead adopted facets of Old Norse ethics and iconography such as pendants or tattoos variously shared this preference for privacy, however neither subgroup defined their beliefs as closed nor hostile to others who showed genuine interest in their practice.

By contrast, Iron March users demonstrated far higher degrees of group entitativity as an exclusively white, male *network* openly hostile to minorities and aggressively deprecating towards women. Beyond *retreat* into their adopted culture as within our interview sample, posts focused on means of violent *rebellion* which constituted stark, implicit barriers to entry for all who did not fit specific genetic and gender demographics (Anahita, 2006; Daniels, 2009). Tirades against fellow service members of different race or gender were common, strained through a sieve of identity politics driving calls for violent action and clear 'us vs. them' *narratives* which constructed an online echo chamber completely exclusive to those 'within' the *network* and absent opposition or debate (Crockford, 2018).

The stark differentiation between samples regarding these shared themes does not imply a complete thematic divide between the two; potential risk for co-option via ‘common ground’ appeared to exist in the context of a third shared *narrative* element: mutual definitions of ‘acceptable’ masculine frameworks. A potential connection between groups remained in their identity as military members, veterans, or future service personnel particular to our Iron March users. This identity appeared central to the definitional paradigms of both groups, creating overlap between *need*, *narrative*, and perhaps someday *network* through which individuals from either sample may mirror and ‘pull’ the other.

Interviewees and Iron March users echoed sentiments where military service formed a foundational part of masculine identities, excepting Interview 2 as the only known female included. Both samples viewed service as a form of responsibility, implicitly informing their respective definitions of masculinity. A shared sentiment of service as a ‘man’s imperative’ pervaded both samples, however these interacted differently with the previous two themes as understood by either group.

Interviewed service members and veterans generally interpreted their service as a ‘duty,’ both in context of their societal role as able-bodied males and in support of personal paradigms influenced by heathen faith and/or adopted Old Norse values. Emphasis was placed on one’s ability to protect ‘others’ in their families or society, a sentiment bolstered by adopted ethics as heathens or ‘modern day Vikings’ for some depending on level of adherence or adoption. These adaptations of faith and ethos echoed previous studies conducted primarily on Christian denominations and the ‘buffering’ effect gained through religiosity/spirituality against unique stressors inherent to the miliary profession (Burdette et al., 2009; Hassner, 2016; Sharma et al., 2017).

Iron March members placed similar value on military service, mirroring sentiments of implicit masculinity while focusing more intently on combat arms roles than their interviewed counterparts. Rather than drawing parallels between service and faith or ethics, posts instead extolled the value of service in furtherance of political goals upon discharge from the military or even within service where they sought to cultivate and attract likeminded peers. Deeper focus on combat roles paralleled facets of their higher group entitativity, decrying the presence of minorities in combat units alongside sentiments of

misogyny where many viewed the presence of women among their ranks as unwelcome extensions of "woke" culture broadly harmful to their mission as 'warfighters'.

Summarizing shared elements across sub-themes demonstrated key divisions between the overall identities of each sample, yet these might be bridged at the individual level if 'common ground' is found where masculine frameworks overlap. Interviewees broadly appeared to define themselves as either heathens serving in the military or military members adopting facets of Old Norse culture; we further divided this sample along similar lines and constructed a general categorization for each subgroup. Iron March users by contrast fundamentally followed their group identity, driven by far-right political association first and thereby viewing military service as supporting *network* goals. Regardless, we consider the common linkage of military service and its effect upon definitions of masculine frameworks a potential risk factor requiring investigation as a primary vector by which individuals might be co-opted or 'pulled' into the orbit of an adjacent *network* and the more negative *narratives* found across Iron March commentary.

4.3. Interview Findings

"I wear my Mjölnir every day I work in uniform- obviously under the uniform… I also have tattoos. I've had people looking at my Mjölnir and think that it's an upside-down cross. That's not exactly a fun way to start a conversation." – ***Interviewee 10***

"It was always just a joke… we were up on the mountain, and I was like 'We need to make a sacrifice to Thor because the rain's about to come'. I don't know if you really believed it, but for me personally I was always like 'Yeah, this is working'." – ***Interviewee 9***

The relative minority of truly heathen practitioners in military service presented a research challenge for significant sampling. For this reason, we broadened our sample to a wider subset of service members and veterans who adopted various facets of Old Norse iconography or ethics relevant to their military experiences as a more common expression of this phenomenon. During interviews, subsets of adherence became evident demonstrating within-group differentiation regarding thematic interpretations found in qualitative analysis. Interviewees were broadly placed into three categories based on their individual level of practice or adoption, labelled simply as I, II, and III in descending order of adherence.

Category I we outlined as practicing, religious adherents of Old Norse/Germanic faith systems who also identified themselves as such; these individuals variously practiced within an organized setting or alone, leveraging a range of literary and online resources for assistance. Category II individuals did not define themselves as practitioners of any heathen religion yet had conducted personal study into the faith and cultural system before choosing to live in accordance with principles drawn from their research. Category III adherents we defined as interviewees who neither practiced nor adopted the cultural morality of Old Norse/Germanic systems yet retained a fascination with their parallels of the 'Viking motif', projecting themselves onto its image via tattoos and ornaments informed alternatively by personal research or exposure to the image of 'Viking culture' in media throughout society.

4.3.1. Categorizing 'Heathen' Identity

"I started reading more into heathenry, and I found myself really aligning a lot with the fundamentals, the core beliefs behind it. What I kind of found refreshing… there's the existence of several gods… you have it feels like a more personal relationship to the specific problem you're having." – ***Interviewee 10***

The largest subgroup within interview sampling, Category I's four members professed heathen identity as active practitioners; 3 were still in service, while the last had separated after two tours in the Marine infantry. Defined primarily by their faith, we considered this category 'heathens in service' rather than having simply adopted the values or icons of Old Norse culture as extensions of their 'warrior ethos' and service identity. This subtle difference in personal label became evident during interviews and subsequent reviews of all transcripts.

Category I practitioners discovered heathenry prior to military service in all but once instance; Interviewee 3 rather ascribed his faith to service experiences while deployed to Norway as a Marine in support of multinational training exercises. All members recalled growing up in reasonably permissive, Christian households, and in several cases experienced support or acceptance at minimum from family and friends to whom they disclosed their faith. Group practice was evenly split, with two participants engaged in small faith groups between six and twenty while the other two practiced alone or online via social media. All reported engagement with the broader heathen community on social media, either

through forums, applications dedicated to heathen worship, or following a form of live 'sermon' hosted on sites such as YouTube.

These individuals desired the most privacy regarding their practice, however they described this as an effort to prevent misunderstandings and negative interactions which might affect their relationships or career; two explicitly refrained from sharing their faith with specific family members they did not believe would appreciate or accept their chosen religion. While not all recalled stories of friction related to their faith, those who did not still retained a desire to practice separately from their profession and acknowledged the perceptual stigma ascribed to heathen culture in parts of society. They were uniformly aware of the faith's co-option by far-right actors, and generally preferred to exit online debates rather than risk protracted arguments via social media. Opinions were split on whether they believed they would be afforded time off from military duties in observation of heathen 'holy days' such as Ostara, or twelve days to celebrate Yule.

"I was able to connect and identify with a lot of what I read into for Norse culture and pagan religion. So, while it might not be practicing… It's just like- I see something that makes me feel like I can be a better person, and I try to use that to my benefit." – ***Interviewee 7***

Some interviewees neither met the religious criteria for Category I nor considered themselves practicing heathens; Category II therefore bridged the distance between Category I adherents and Category III adoptees of the 'Viking motif'. The three participants of this subset stood out as the only subgroup possessing bachelor's degrees at minimum, with two pursuing advanced education after service. Perhaps as a result, these individuals exhibited a greater degree of knowledge into the cosmology and culture underpinning the 'Viking motif' than Category III, choosing to incorporate facets of its ethical paradigm drawn from texts such as the *Sagas* and *Havamal* as guidelines for life rather than a pantheon for prayer (Crawford, 2015, 2017).

This adaptation of ethical norms functioned uniquely for each person, following the personalized *needs* of each interviewee across the sample. Generally, Category II members viewed the Old Norse paradigm as adjacent to the Christian teachings of their youth, however only one practiced any form of

faith at time of interview. Notably, these individuals uniformly recalled stricter upbringings than other categories; such restrictions directly influenced the decision of the two non-practitioners away from institutionalized faith practice, preferring to describe themselves as "spiritual" rather than fully atheist regarding religiosity/spirituality. While they again uniformly acknowledged the co-option of heathen faith by radicalized actors, they reported restricting research to literary or online resources and had not interacted socially with either community to any appreciable degree.

"Runic tattoos in the military- a lot of them don't even know what it says. Don't really care enough to call it out. People who identify with Viking culture are missing something. If someone wants to adapt it, I don't have a personal issue with it, but do wish they would do it right." – ***Interviewee 2***

At least one member of Category II professed a somewhat derisive view of the last interview subset, labelled Category III and encompassing those whose adoption of the 'Viking motif' was more limited to iconography and most closely mirrored adaptations of Old Norse culture in broader society. While only two interviewees fell within this subgroup, further sampling beyond thesis work has identified at least 5 more individuals who appear similarly inclined based on initial conversations. Further research into this phenomenon appears likely to prove Category III's functionality as the most expansive subset beyond the sampling of this thesis.

Category III interviewees were both enlisted personnel who had not yet completed a full course of study in pursuit of their bachelor's degree, although each continued their education in service beyond attainment of their high school diploma. Both bore some form of Old Norse iconography on their person; one wore a *Mjölnir* pendant under their uniform, while the other recently completed a full sleeve tattoo of Viking imagery including depictions of Odin, Valkyries[17], and a Viking warrior. Importantly, both linked these adaptations of the 'Viking motif' to visible expressions of their profession, purpose, and 'warrior ethos' as Marines in an amphibious military service.

[17] Female warriors of the Old Norse cosmology, who bore slain warriors to Valhalla after death in battle.

This sentiment variously extended to all categories of our interview sample and was separately echoed by Iron March users online. We consider this linkage between a 'warrior ethos' inherent to the military profession and the 'Viking motif' a significant dynamic mirrored between samples, however its functionality as a central motivator or *need* to Category III individuals took special significance. Where other subgroups within our sample derived *narratives* of religiosity/spirituality and ethical guidance from their adoption of Old Norse cosmology, simpler icon adoption appeared less 'grounding'; the different interpretations within Category III may leave its members more open to co-option than their peers, driven by an implicit *need* for identity which may be provided elsewhere. Risk vectors remain especially open if these service members seek for thematic *narratives* or a *network* of support in the wrong places, particularly online in the course of their research.

4.3.2. Thematic Interpretations

Regarding definitions of overarching themes, analysis demonstrated nuanced divisions across identified subcategories. Different categorizations of interviewees offered various interpretations of key thematic elements shared between both these subgroups and the adjacent Iron March sample; Category I, II, and III participants in particular approached themes somewhat differently depending on level of adherence or adoption. Generally, practicing heathens hinged most strongly on religious identity as motivation, demonstrating greater entitativity then other categories (yet far less than the Iron March contingent). Category II focused motivations more centrally on ethical or values-based paradigms agnostic of faith practice, reflecting more upon the culture's inspiration towards a life well-lived along basic principles. Category III reflected the least upon religious aspects of adopted Old Norse icons, preferring parallels to an identity far more rooted in military service than religious adherence; they also referenced most clearly the masculine aspects of the 'Viking Motif' as adjuncts to their military ethos.

"A lot of the old gods… are connecting with people in all kinds of different ways… it does have more of an individualism. To have something to connect directly back to- their heritage, their ancestors. It's a little piece of something that they can connect directly back to." – ***Interviewee 3***

Unsurprisingly, the four true heathens included within sampling focused heavily on religious interpretations for their respective *needs* or as *narratives* for significant events in their lives. Analysis of Table 2 from NVivo demonstrated their dominance of the four sub-themes encompassing references to religious motivations, practices, friction points, and identity; these four individuals provided 92% of references to religious motivations (94), 82% of practices (81), 78% of friction points (77), and 80% of identity (51) compared to all other transcripts across samples combined. Significantly, three of the four heathens canvassed directly tied their faith to support gained against traumatic *strains* in their lives, echoing the 'buffering' effect demonstrated in previous works focused on Christian denominations within military service (Burdette et al., 2009; Sharma et al., 2017).

Extending from this focus on religious identity, Category I heathens recalled the greatest amount of interpersonal friction encountered in and out of service related to their practice, presumably driving their higher degree of entitativity relative to interviewed peers as they generally considered themselves 'heathens in service' rather than military members first. Two of the four had experienced direct harassment from higher-ranking service members in their units, while another recalled no unique examples yet withdrew his religious preference from personnel databases out of concern for possible scrutiny after J6 and the resultant DOD safety stand down. Despite these moments, this subgroup's entitativity did not appear to foment sentiments of animosity towards 'others' as within the Iron March sample; these participants rather uniformly expressed desires for privacy in their faith practice yet remained open to the possibility of genuine newcomers regardless of any demographic differences. Notably, one service member even volunteered as a 'heathen representative' on deployment to assist the Christian chaplain assigned to their base, serving as a liaison between this faith leader and service members to whom they must minister regardless of denomination.

"I apply my 'honor and glory' to what's around me. I protect my family. I honor lives that I take… what I'VE done to make myself better makes everything around me better." – ***Interviewee 7***

Eschewing religious practice, Category II's research into and adoption of Old Norse values or cultural mores figured most prominently into sub-themes of Old Norse values, senses of nostalgia, and reflection upon cultural dynamics or disillusionment with modern society. Regarding these five intermediate codes, significant response rates for these individuals appeared highest within *needs* or *narratives* based on cultural disillusion (61%, 45), culture dynamics (68%, 44), Old Norse values (60%, 28), military disillusion (52%, 15), and nostalgic sentiments (56%, 15). Despite these high relative values of general disillusionment, responses highlighted *retreat* and personal growth rather than a more negative *rebellion* against social or military systems evident within the Iron March scrape.

This replacement of 'modern' societal values with older systems drawn from research appeared to function somewhat similarly to the 'buffering' effect provided by true religiosity, however only one of three subjects classified Category II actively practiced any form of faith at all (a Christian denomination). Two preferred to label themselves as "spiritual" yet focused more on *narratives* of connectedness to nature and those around them providing motivation from *need* regarding their life's value. We consider this response to disillusionment with modern society far more positive a response than the violent rhetoric and high entitativity demonstrated across the adjacent Iron March sample.

No appreciable sense of entitativity was demonstrated by Category II respondents despite this greater focus on *retreat* relative to their peers within our interviewed sampling. Instead, these individuals appeared generally private by preference rather than concern for stigma based on their adaptation of Old Norse values. Friction points were based instead on a form of generalized discontent with either cultural or military systems they found wanting, driving desires for a 'life well lived' and in concert with the ethical paradigms they variously held as a personalized guide for life.

"When I was in, one of the instructors told me 'It takes a lot of money to train a young man or young woman… to be willing to kill another human being'. And I think the big intersect comes from the idea of 'This is a culture that is okay with killing someone else, as long as you do it honorably'. – ***Interviewee 9***

Most notable regarding Category III participants was the absence of a majority in any sub-theme analyzed within NVivo; while their focus on the adaptation of Old Norse iconography in support of the

'warrior ethos' was discussed at length, the two service members failed to reach significance even accounting for their smaller representation within sampling. Despite this apparent lack of thematic significance for Category III, we derive potential value from this absence. While their sampled peers demonstrated significant 'buffering' or grounding from demonstrably concrete *needs* and *narratives,* we refined conceptualization to instead view these participants as partially 'adrift', searching for anchors to personal *needs* and at greater risk of finding the wrong *narratives* or *networks* in social spaces.

Demographically, we noted the relative youth of both Category III service members and their lower level of educational attainment relative to peers in either adjacent subgroup. Despite being the only element comprised exclusively of senior enlisted Marines, it remains possible that less education and younger relative age may correlate with less concreteness of 'practice' compared to peers; however, we note that one subject recalled a long-term interest in the 'Viking motif' and could not be considered new to the topic itself. While both were married, this subgroup notably remained the only category without children and lacked many other environmental or social restraints commonly cited within the literature on GST, beyond the 'buffering' mechanism provided by heathen faith practice or ethical values adoption (Agnew (1985, 1992, 2001).

4.4. Iron March Forum Scrape

"Yes, there are lots of fascists in the military. But only in some parts and almost always in secret… When my company commander mentions that 'this country needs a beer hall putsch and some brownshirts', I know this is something he would not say in front of his superiors..." – ***Iron March Thread 1760***

"Most of the guys I've listened to on podcasts and such that are former or currently in the military are Marines. One is even a Major. In my unit, there's another guy who could've easily been a grand wizard Inn the local Klan. He's very fascist, way before I even considered it." – ***Iron March Thread 5127***

Lacking direct access to Iron March members, analysis of $n_I = 19$ users across twelve threads by necessity relied on scraped qualitative data rather than knowledge of demographic composition. Assuming the forum mirrored the modern trend of far-right organizations, we proceeded with the backing of significant prior research supporting our assertion that an overwhelming majority of this sample was comprised of white males between late adolescence and early adulthood (Simi & Futrell, 2006; Daniels, 2009; Miller-Idriss, 2020; Reid & Valasik, 2020). We therefore considered both samples to be reasonably

similar in demographics; each were military-affiliated groups of predominantly white males either currently serving, veterans, or in the Iron March sample a subsection of young men who had recently sworn into the military.

Despite presumed demographic similarities, two of three shared themes appeared largely divisive between samples and only definitions of the 'masculine identity' shared common traits. Rather than subcategorize members pulled from Iron March data, thematic interpretations were compared across the entire sample before outlining the separate identity assumed by this group relative to our more nuanced Category I, II, and III members in the adjacent sample. While the military-affiliated Iron March *network* only contained one mention of heathen affectation, evidence existed for the faith's co-option by other users and supported further research beyond this thesis.

4.4.1. Thematic Interpretation

"I always thought that were a true Fascist Movement to take form in the U.S. it would be born out of the Veterans of our Military." – ***Iron March Thread 1760***

"Myself and a network of individuals have been working for the last few years to try and realize this idea, we've been quite successful so far. All our guys have combat experience…" – ***Iron March Thread 4961***

The Iron March scrape remained constrained to qualitative analysis given the anonymity of its users, which we chose to maintain where possible by omitting most Personally Identifiable Information from tidied data for privacy. Therefore, thematic analysis of this sample remained at the group level without the same categorization enabled by direct access to heathen participants. The between-group differentiation regarding our first theme of *need*/*narrative* motivations occurred across the entire sample, driven in part by the far higher degree of entitativity (our second theme) encompassing all Iron March users as professed, military-affiliated fascists. Most significant appeared the overlap between samples concerning definitions of the masculine identity, centering on shared *narratives* of military service.

"On most bases you can see the occasional right-wing symbol. Sun wheel there, 88 here… a Templar cross tattoo… But only in some parts and almost always in secret." – ***Iron March Thread 1760***

Rather than the personalized *needs* and *narratives* variously derived from our subcategories of interviewees, the nineteen Iron March users appeared driven almost exclusively by their far-right political identity; any heathen or other form of icon adoption was leveraged in service of political ends and propaganda, instead of personal faith or unique *strain* experiences. No individualized *narratives* appeared across forum threads, and analysis instead demonstrated a comprehensive *network* identity to which each user ascribed as a virtual prerequisite for admission to the group online. Pursuit of military experience seemed to serve organizational goals rather than personal senses of duty, evident across threads replete with *anomic* sentiments or calls for violent action at home after deployment abroad and *rebellion* against "woke" government entities. Duty was subordinated to realize *network* goals and desired ends, tracing a clear trajectory of radicalization in-line with traditional facets of GST and modern SQT (Agnew, 2001; Anahita, 2006; Bélanger et al., 2019).

"I used to consider myself an American Imperialist, in the Theodore Roosevelt sense of it… Though I realized it was useless when the values of today's empire conflicted wildly with my own, and were all about globalism, capitalism, and liberalism… Even our military conquests… generally end up in being liberal-democracy clusterf---s fraught with corporate contracting scandals." **– *Iron March Thread 1626***

Concurrent with myopic focus on political identity and *network narratives* ran a clear dividing line of stark entitativity between Iron March users and vast swathes of gendered, racial, and political 'others' against which members railed in *rebellion*, almost as the 'price of admission' to the online forum. Rather than general desires for privacy variously held by interviewees, forum membership instead constituted a form of virtual exclusivity underlined by racialist, gendered, and political identity driven by a consistent 'us v. them' *narrative*, where any nonwhite male or "liberal" was blatantly denied any hope of entry. The difference between samples regarding these first two themes appeared vastly starker than within-sample variation; while three categories of interviewed participants demonstrated minor disagreement on *needs*/*narratives* and varied entitativity, significant difference existed between samples where Iron March users and their rhetoric implicitly denied access to even those military-affiliated subjects they might otherwise 'pull'.

"You'll probably find the most anti establishment and hard right guyside in the Marines. In my experience anyways… Also what unit are you with? I know Lt Col. ------ in 2nd LAR based in Lejeune. That guy gave me a lot of advice before I joined." – ***Iron March Thread 5127***

"I've said some f---ed up s---, you know? I've been sitting over someone, and I've been like 'Yeah, this hadji-bob's gonna f---ing die. The interpreter is gonna f---ing die." – ***Interviewee 9***

Despite this divide, thematic overlap appeared to emerge within definitions of masculine frameworks, or the *narrative* by which various subjects interpreted their male identity. While the interviewed sample generally outlined more positive interpretations of 'masculine' definitions, we found noteworthy similarities in rhetoric employed by the only participant who experienced combat and more broadly where subjects correlated adoption of the 'Viking motif' as a parallel to military service and its inherent 'warrior ethos'. Members across categorizations frequently linked the amphibious, forward-deployed nature of the Marine Corps and it mission to classical visions of Old Norse *vikingr*[18] culture, mirroring the medieval raids for which they are made famous today.

Iron March threads placed a similar emphasis deployment and a greater focus on specialties within the combat arms of 'parent' military branches, honing in on the value of training and practical combat experience to their calls for *rebellion* and violence at home in the United States. Similar to some interviewees, users discussed how specific icon adoption might help them identify others who shared their political beliefs, explicitly referring to the "sun wheel" in one instance as a common symbol shared between Old Norse/Germanic cultures before gaining infamy through Nazi co-option. We explored this thematic overlap as a vector of greatest risk related to interpretations of masculine frameworks, providing potential common ground for discussion and 'pulling' of unassuming parties into far-right *narratives*.

4.4.2. Secondary Identities

"The people who have co-opted it, they've adopted things- I mean, it goes back in time, you know? The easiest example is obviously the Nazis- this idea of the Aryan Brotherhood. And I think it's easy for them to… co-opt certain aspects of a religion, you know? Martial pride- great, that's an excellent thing for anyone, any nation. Martial pride is awesome, but they FOCUS on it." – ***Interviewee 7***

[18] To "go a-*viking*", or a *vikingr* as one in Old Norse culture whose income came from pirate raiding.

While common ground via military affiliation demonstrated a linkage between samples, analysis identified only two instances of heathen icon adoption (as propaganda) within the twelve threads populating our tidied Iron March dataset, and there were no examples of users leveraging specific Old Norse/Germanic faith systems across posts. Despite this, we intentionally selected for military connectedness between samples as a foundational similarity, before testing for qualitative significance within additional forms of heathen adaptation. It generally appeared that the nineteen users selected for military identifiers did not overtly leverage Old Norse faith systems as hypothesized, but rather identified primarily as fascists before including the 'connecting file' of miliary service between samples.

This between-group differentiation reinforced foundational identities distinct to each, overlapping within shared service experiences. While nuanced subcategories of interviewed participants variously considered themselves 'heathens in service' or service members drawing upon Old Norse culture and imagery, all Iron March users uniformly identified first as far-right political actors before assuming military contexts. This more global identity across the sample correlated with far higher degrees of entitativity, and we view any mixed significance in Iron March heathen co-option a precondition determined by our sampling strategy before analysis.

This does not imply a 'dead end' for the present line of inquiry. While the included sample did not broadly profess heathen faith or affectation, Table 3 below highlights additional subjects of interest for future research where clear evidence exists for Iron March users who have co-opted Old Norse cosmology or culture inspiring their 'handles' on the forum. These individuals may later be added to the Iron March dataset used here to expand sampling, permit greater comparison between groups, and perhaps demonstrate significant findings supporting co-option of heathen identity in service to far-right *narratives*. Given their proximity to our Iron March sample, we anticipate close parallels between subgroups where thematic *narratives* overlap while perhaps expanding closer in content to definitions held more often by miliary-affiliated, heathen interview participants.

Table 3: Iron March 'Heathen Handles'

Iron March Username	Muh Mideaval Iceland	**Thor's Hammer**	Nekromantic Nord	Division Wiking565
Sax0n	Brynhelde	Danneborger	**Sword of Tyr**	Raven
RagnarRedbeard	Blood Eagle	RagnarAk	**einherjar**	**jotunn**
One Eye	**SonOfOdin**	**Sawilagaz**	NordBernd9588	**Thurisaz**
Tiwaz7	**Hagalaz**	**Vidar**	**Valhallan**	**Tiwaz**
Jormvngandr	Sigurd79	Black Sun	**Siff**	**HeilFreyja14**
Sonnenrad	sjelborg	**Odin**	**fenrir**	**Vicky Valkyrie**

5: DISCUSSION

"Even as an Odinist, in the military it's the one true place where it can not only be practiced in principle, but-… it doesn't feel like any other place in the world… It's a brotherhood as a warrior culture… And there's no other place- like, the academics, the academia, the people who read the books on it, and learn about it and… stuff… they're not fulfilling it. They're not- they're not LIVING it." – ***Interviewee 3***

"I suppose I'd make a better Squadrista than a statesman, in that sense. Like the famous commie-killer Chesty Puller said, 'I want to go where the guns are." – ***Iron March Thread 1626***

While qualitative analysis of all transcripts demonstrated greater differentiation than thematic similarity between samples, at least one significant 'common ground' vector emerged from military identity beyond its varying level of influence between or within samples. This connection offers a starting point upon which future research may build, adding additional participants and users including those within Table 3 for greater sampling and academic rigor beyond the present effort. Expansion of this thesis offers valuable avenues for new research opportunities, beyond the mixed findings discussed here.

Summarizing results, we noted the importance of *narratives* connected to respective identities between groups as primary paradigms through which *needs* were addressed differentially between samples. Difference existed not only between each, but within interviewed subcategories as a more personal, individualized effort than the rigid *network* within Iron March. Entitativity became evident to varying degrees both between and within samples, generalized as a preference for 'inclusive privacy' across interviewees against a dualistic 'othering' of groups outside the exclusivity of Iron March forum users (Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018). Potential risk emerged where a third theme outlined overlapping definitions regarding masculine identities, particularly in the context of military service as a shared experience and mediating paradigm influencing both groups.

This point of thematic overlap exposes risk for interviewed participants, particularly those who appeared less grounded in faith or cultural ethics and therefore lacked any 'buffering' mechanism these appeared to provide their Category I and II peers. We highlight this vector as a potential means for prevention 'left of bang', where existing DOD programs might assist with awareness and deradicalization for at-risk service members or veterans demonstrating definitional 'drift' towards our first two thematic

elements as they were understood within the Iron March sample. We therefore offer that such observation of 'drift' into extreme *narratives* and aggressive entitativity exhibited by the Iron March forum may serve as early warning for those made aware of these key themes held by the far-right.

5.1. Primary Findings

Regarding hypotheses, we acknowledge mixed results where Hypotheses 1 and 2 outlined potential interaction between heathen faith or icon adopters and far-right forum participants as two military-affiliated samples. Hypothesis 1 received partial support where common themes discussed across transcripts did appear in common, however overlap existed only where subjects considered definitions of masculine identities informed by military service. Little support was found for Hypothesis 2, as all interviewed participants generally professed awareness of the far-right phenomenon of co-option yet reported no appreciable degree of interaction and preferred to leave online conversations when friction appeared. Significance was definitively achieved for Hypothesis 3, where interviewees outlined highly personal, individualized journeys into Old Norse faith, values, or icon adoption in response to *needs* or *strains* they had experienced in or out of service.

Generally, analysis through NVivo demonstrated strong between-group differentiation across samples where *needs*/*narratives* as foundational motivations differed without substantial overlap between groups; interviewed service members held uniquely personal *needs* and *narratives* for their faith or adopted system, while Iron March users almost exclusively defined themselves through far-right identity politics. While these forum members formed a virtually uniform bloc of fascist ideology, the personalized *narratives* of each interviewee and the variation in Old Norse adaptations necessitated a more nuanced categorization where research summarized within-group differences. Perhaps drawing from these dynamics, each sample demonstrated varying degrees of entitativity as a holistic *network*.

Entitativity as a measure of within-group cohesion appeared generally low across the interviewed sample, likely due to the highly individualized nature of each participant's journey into Old Norse faith or cultural adoption. The contrasting Iron March sample demonstrated far higher entitativity as a *network* founded upon far-right *narratives*, aggressively 'othering' minority, gendered, and 'leftward' political

groups in a self-sustaining feedback loop where racial and political identities functioned as key to entry. We define these dynamics as an 'inclusive privacy' desired by the interviewed sample, pit against the stark, dualistic 'othering' previously ascribed to the Iron March scrape and understood through SQT.

Most significant for policy implications and future research appeared the role of parallel masculine ideals providing thematic bridging between groups, although we offer that greatest risk may exist for Category III individuals as a growing subset for future research. These masculine frameworks appeared most similar through shared military experience as common 'connective tissue' between samples, and qualitative analysis highlighted examples where similar sentiments offered enough 'mirroring' for potential interaction in online spaces where one's far-right politics may not immediately be apparent to newcoming Old Norse adopters. Those service members or veterans who fall within Category III generally lacked the 'buffering' effect of heathen faith or Old Norse values system as protective mechanisms against *strains* or *anomie* felt by interviewees, and they may remain more open to *networks* sharing their interest in frameworks co-opting the 'Viking motif'.

Category III individuals notably failed to reach a significant majority for any of 25 intermediate codes, even accounting for their relatively smaller representation within the dataset. We interpret this lack of thematic focus as indicative of the ongoing search for *strain* moderation which these individuals do not appear to have found as their Category I and II peers did. Lacking the same 'buffering' effect, these subjects are more likely to remain adrift and seek a more concrete *narrative* which may yet be provided by far-right entities online who appear to answer their *needs* or views through a more subversive paradigm influencing a measure of radicalization over time. We consider this threat to be of primary concern, particularly where all five future leads have initially been labelled as additional Category III individuals; if this subcategory becomes the largest across the sample, the risk of even a small number of participants being radicalized increases dramatically. Provided this dynamic proves significant, a far greater number of risk vectors for far-right intrusion into service may exist beyond the sampling here.

5.1.1. Between-Group Differentiation

Greatest difference appeared between motivations drawn from either sample along widely separate schemas of *need* and *narrative* as our first shared thematic element; various subgroups of interviewed participants outlined uniquely spiritual, ethical, or identity-driven journeys depending on selection into Category I, II, or III, generally opposite the comprehensive *network* of Iron March identity politics. Interviewed participants recalled unique *strains* experienced in their personal or professional lives, citing these instances as motivating their search for meaning or value before finding heathen faith, cultural adaptation, or motif adoption in response. No similar *strains* appeared among individual Iron March users within canvassed posts, and the entire sample implicitly linked their far-right political identity to broadly held senses of *anomie* as defined by Merton (1938, 1968), bridging into calls for radical *rebellion* outlined by GST and later SQT (Agnew, 2001; Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018).

The nuanced experiences of each military-affiliated interviewee ranged from familial hardship (divorce, suicide, restrictive households) to uniquely military *strains* (death in combat, wrongful death, survivor's guilt), demonstrating significance for Hypothesis 3 where motivations appeared highly personalized to each service member or veteran. Heathen faith or cultural adoption in this sample proved unique to each, and no participants professed any appreciable degree of interaction with extreme far-right elements co-opting these for organizational ends; we therefore acknowledge no significant findings for Hypothesis 2 where little interaction existed, despite awareness of the far-right phenomenon by all interviewees. Where interaction existed on social media or online spaces, those subjects who recalled experiences with far-right 'heathen' elements uniformly reported exiting such discussions as fruitless debate or dangerous to their professional trajectories if they were proximally linked.

Interpreting these findings within the frameworks of General Strain Theory and Significance Quest Theory, we argue the 'buffering' mechanism evidenced within Category I and II interviews offset both personal and uniquely military *strains* far more effectively than the looser 'Viking motif' or co-option leveraged by Category III and Iron March subjects (Agnew, 2001). Despite operating partially as a form of *retreat* from a culture many participants implicitly described as *anomic*, these members uniformly tied their faith or ethical adaptations to addressing senses of *strain* or trauma in ways previously held

religious systems or values did not (Merton, 1938, 1968). Alternatively, Category III participants appeared still 'in search' of similar grounding not fully provided by simpler icon adoption of the 'Viking motif' paralleling the 'warrior ethos' variously espoused by all interviewees. We argue therefore that similar *strains* experienced by these individuals have not been 'buffered' similarly to their peers, exposing them to increased senses of *strain*, *anomie*, and potential radicalization along traditional SQT pathways (Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018; Bélanger et al., 2019).

5.1.2. Within-Group Entitativity

Concerning radicalization risks and permeability of group barriers, analysis demonstrated highly varying degrees of entitativity both between and within each sample in partial support for Hypothesis 1. Lacking significant evidence supporting between-sample contact suggested for Hypothesis 2, feelings of entitativity were expressed by both groups and across subcategories in various forms, potentially erecting barriers to cross-sample interaction. While far greater *network* cohesion as a version of aggressive group entitativity became evident within Iron March sampling, social perceptions of heathen practice and Old Norse cultural adaptation appeared to place external controls on more expressive forms of faith worship or icon adoption for interviewed service members and veterans.

Alternatively exacerbating potential risks of exposure to radicalized *networks* for all service member and veteran subcategories, we consider that uniformly lower degrees of entitativity were exhibited by interviewed participants. Generally, all subgroups preferred what we term a form of 'inclusive privacy' for their personal, professional, and faith lives where applicable; each participant expressed desires to be permitted their various forms of heathen practice, cultural, or icon adoption without outside influence from social or service entities, which many considered potential risks to their career. Despite this desire for personal privacy, virtually no inclination towards similarly racist or negative attitudes were evident across the sample, and true heathen practitioners even welcomed the idea of genuine interest from newcomers seeking advice for their nascent religious practice. Absent a more coherent *network*, we retain concern for less 'grounded' members still searching for *narratives* answering their unique *needs*.

Where entitativity appeared to exist, interviewed subjects generally manifested these sentiments as desires to avoid social misunderstanding or stigma; we term this a measure of 'external entitativity' based on perceptions rather than negative experiences in all but a few instances from interview transcripts. These concerns were most often raised by Category I heathen practitioners, recalling either idiographic examples of negative interactions within service or wider concern for negative labelling in the wake of J6 and other examples of co-option by far-right or other extremist elements. Approximately half the category believed they would be permitted days off in observance of religious holidays, yet in no situation did any subject recall specifically requesting these liberty days during military service. We therefore summarize this 'inclusive privacy' as an externally driven form of entitativity rather than any dualistic, 'us vs. them' mentality or *narrative* within faith identity or definition.

While the Iron March sample mirrored concerns for social stigma outside their *network* identity, analysis of thread posts demonstrated a vastly higher degree of internal entitativity based around far-right *narratives* necessitating an aggressive 'othering' towards vast swathes of society against which they called for violent *rebellion*. Elevating their racialist, gendered, and political identity over minority, female, and 'leftist' political ideologies, little to no room for adjacent *narratives* or *needs* was left for significant debate or inclusion outside a severely narrow paradigm; any feeling of 'external entitativity' appeared derived from the Iron March *network narrative* rather than specific experiences recalled by members. Despite such strict barriers to entry, analysis highlighted several examples of explicit recruitment into social subgroups within the forum, provided a newcomer professed the correct ideology and racial or demographic bona fides. This recruitment may ostensibly extend beyond far-right organizational boundaries where our third and final shared thematic element overlaps across samples.

5.1.3. Masculine Parallels

Bridging barriers of negative entitativity created within Iron March or other far-right *narratives*, thematic parallel existed most strongly where both samples outlined similar definitions of masculinity via a male identity significantly informed by the 'warrior ethos' espoused by many service members and veterans. Commonality between groups hinged upon military service for contextual definitions, providing

support for Hypothesis 1 beyond the greater differentiation between similar thematic elements of *need*/*narrative* motivations and perceptions of entitativity. Frequent masculine parallels notably appeared across all subcategories of interviewed participants and lacked the same level of within-group variance where differences in Old Norse adoption manifested as unique *narratives* or senses of 'inclusive privacy' held more often by true heathen practitioners.

Despite levels of misogyny within Iron March lacking any meaningful parallel across interviewed subjects, similar echoes of the male identity became evident with particular focus placed on 'masculine responsibilities' understood between samples. Interviewed members voiced appreciation for the Old Norse cultural emphasis placed on family, protective roles, and the occasional necessity of violence juxtaposed against a modern culture lacking similar paradigms; these sentiments were shared within Iron March, held concurrently with implicit visions of women as property requiring protection as progenitors for the white race. This form of hypermasculinity was echoed by some interviewees in spirit, however such definitions more generally focused on combat arms roles and their status within military contexts than the misogynistic paradigms of the Iron March *narrative*.

This parallel on combat focus defined elements of masculine identity in both samples, however we consider that less interviewed participants had experienced combat or held specialties in the traditional combat arms of their respective service branches. Generally lacking such experiences, all subcategories demonstrated similar definitions regarding the centrality of combat to military service which appeared almost ubiquitous across all Iron March members regardless of service, specialty, and even before some had attended basic training. We consider this thematic parallel most significant for Hypothesis 1 where shared masculine definitions appeared influential across all samples and subcategories, highlighting risk for *narrative* overlaps, and opening potential gaps for interaction, discussion, and co-option between interview participants and far-right organizations.

This risk appeared greatest for Category III members, where their relative lack of faith or values-based 'buffering' generally left subjects with less *narrative* support for the *needs* which drove their adoption of Old Norse iconography in support of a self-ascribed 'warrior ethos'. Leveraging icons drawn

from the 'Viking motif', we consider these *needs* unfulfilled to a greater extent than their Category I and II peers and argue this may drive further searching and exposure to online social *networks* which might not immediately present themselves as far-right co-opters of the same motifs for organizational ends (Strømmen, 2018; Kølvraa, 2019). Where *narratives* of masculine frameworks most closely overlap, risk remains for 'pull' by radicalized military and veteran elements into *networks* which could over time shift thematic interpretations of less-grounded military-affiliated persons still seeking answers to their unique *needs* (Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018; Bélanger et al., 2019).

5.2. Policy Implications

Despite stark differences between groups regarding our first two themes, overlap across samples regarding masculine definitions informed in part by military service may offer inroads along which an individual experiences 'pull' into malign *networks*. We view Category III interviewees as particularly vulnerable, where their relative lack of grounding in faith- or values-based Old Norse *narratives* may leave one more open to adjacent, far-right organizations which offer alternatives wherein the attentive observer notes a form of 'thematic shift' cleaving closer to thematic definitions as understood by these groups. While no flawless algorithm exists by which one's radicalization trajectory may be tracked and preempted, we offer that expanded thematic research offers a framework to inform military officials, academia, and public service professionals while enhancing existing programs at work within the DOD.

It remains functionally impossible to comprehensively screen service members for inclination towards any form of domestic extremism, either during or prior to service; this difficulty extends to veteran communities even further, released from the regulations and restrictions placed upon them during active duty (Flacks & Wiskoff, 1998). We consider three facets to this critical effort, which may be addressed through existing programs and expanded at reasonably minimal cost to the DOD. First, all military-affiliated individuals retain limited First Amendment rights towards freedoms of speech and expression, regardless of regulations which are left relatively open to interpretation by unit commanders primarily responsible for their enforcement despite little training in identifying methods of radical expression (DOD, 2021). Second, we acknowledge the highly fluid nature of radicalization pathways and

the myriad vectors by which support might be given to domestic hate and terror groups below the threshold of overt, active participation (Freilich, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2018; RTI, 2018). Finally, programs which exist within the DOD broadly emphasize awareness and preemption rather than de-escalation, however these remain broad and generally uninformed on current trends; units lacking updated guidance prefer to contain and out-process the radicalized service member rather than reverse and rehabilitate issues when they appear 'too far gone' (DOD, 2021).

These dynamics impose constraints upon unit leaders, who generally lack comprehensive awareness of radical *narratives* beyond broad generalizations and are not legally allowed to infringe upon rights to free speech where no risk to "good order and discipline" seems apparent. A service member's online usage is rarely monitored beyond on-base wireless services, and only where individuals are confined under the UMCJ may certain access rights be unilaterally curtailed. Most difficult, the fluidity of far-right *narratives* and myriad means of transmission make identification difficult when leaders at all levels remain largely unaware of what may constitute a 'thematic trigger' and indication of someone walking a descending trajectory into extremist circles. This forces the DOD into a reactive posture by default, driving similar 'knee-jerk' reactions demonstrated after J6 absent amplifying information.

While 'perfect preemption' lies beyond any singular system or algorithm, we argue for reinvestment into existing DOD programs providing a foundation for expansion if informed by qualitative analysis and research permitting more comprehensive, preventative, and de-escalatory strategies. Consistent research and analysis of emerging trends permit enhanced identification of negative *networks* as they develop and evolve, preempt such groups before reaching violent thresholds, and address those *narratives* 'pulling' at the *needs* of at-risk service members via ideological or thematic replacements. This need not require such a stark transition as a change of religion; Category II interviewees demonstrate significant grounding based upon refined and personalized ethical paradigms, echoed across the DOD in various 'warrior transition' programs, retreats, and workshops generally included in post-deployment cycles. Additionally, mechanisms such as command climate surveys and civilian experts aboard military installations exist across service branches, offering tools for self-evaluation where an informed force may

'police itself' aided by nonmilitary employees augmented with existing professionals or provided broader training to spot and address radicalization vectors in tandem with the units they support.

Helmus et al. (2021) offer support for this enhancement of existing programs, outlining three phases tracing similar trajectories to the radicalization pathways of Significance Quest Theory (Kruglanski et al., 2015, 2018; Bélanger et al. 2019). Emphasizing the need for "networks of systems", expertise, and domestic partnerships, the authors' phases and options presented at each offers a blueprint emphasizing de-escalation and rehabilitation of service members prior to summary court martial and expulsion, thereby foisting issues onto society rather than address concerns within service branches often unprepared for radicalizing service members. We argue that additional focus upon *narratives* developing closer towards identified extremist viewpoints offers such an 'offramp', provided that units and especially their commanders are trained and updated on emerging trends and watchful for 'triggers' prior to acting.

Upon identification of individuals exhibiting 'drift' or warning signs, each phase may be tailored to provide options for unit leaders both proportionate and targeted to the *narratives* influencing service members towards radicalization. We consider the value of adding the 'buffering' or "dose-response mechanism" of Sharma et al. (2017) to this framework, and that such 'offramps' may be offered along each phase simulating a similar moderating effect. This may not require a faith-based paradigm as held by Category I individuals, however we argue for the utility of existing ethics programs taught to service members at all levels and posit that these provide an existing framework to leverage similar mechanisms.

Identification of radicalization across service branches therefore must be considered a group effort of complimentary systems, necessitating increased training for unit leaders down to the most junior enlisted member. Minimal reinvestment in existing programs and ongoing coordination with adjacent academic and law enforcement agencies offers a low cost, efficient model of both preemption and prevention, while increasing access to expertise where de-escalation becomes necessary. The wheel need not be reinvented, and the spokes of support already exist; reinvestment and research are required to understand the mutating trajectories of online radicalization, and this knowledge must be passed to service members along formats preconceived for other training purposes.

5.3. Limitations

This thesis closes with acknowledging potential limitations inherent within the structure and conduct of this study, before suggesting opportunities for future research and extensions to the present inquiry. First, we acknowledge the position of the lead researcher as a currently serving military member amid potential concerns of selection bias or the necessary impartiality required to conduct research into one's own community. Second, there exists a perennial risk for definitional friction regarding the study of individual religious experience, irrespective of any fluid efforts at categorization. Finally, we admit the natural blind spots of qualitative interview data, and the currently cross-sectional nature of this study impacting our ability to offer causal linkages between phenomena described.

Given my status as an actively serving Captain in the United States Marine Corps, two specific concerns appear immediately relevant. Operationally, we must note the natural risk of selection bias when conducting a purposive, snowball sampling strategy; the social connections immediately available to begin sampling were predominantly members of the same service branch, and there remains the possibility that findings drawn from a predominantly Marine sample may not be generalizable to other service branches and their unique cultural contexts. While initial interviews have expanded to include Navy members serving in an adjacent capacity to Marines previously canvassed, future study should leverage Army, Air Force, Space Force, and Coast Guard members as leads become available.

Alternatively, the available Iron March sample offered quick access to qualitative data, however the forum's exposure and closure in 2017 kept any potential insights both anonymous and highly cross-sectional even beyond the relatively short timeline of this thesis. Future efforts must close this gap by canvassing users on currently active forums of a similar nature, while focusing more specifically on heathen faith adopters who are known to exist through adjacent research efforts (Anahita, 2006; FBI, 2008; Caspi, 2013; Crockford, 2018; Boucher, 2021). We seek to expand both samples while maintaining contact with interviewed participants on both sides, providing a more longitudinal effort where thematic overlaps evolve, and casual mechanisms become clearer.

Additionally, risk remains ever-present that personal experiences and preferences may cloud the judgement of the lead researcher and introduce unforeseen issues affecting perfect impartiality, here and across future research. This thesis derived primary inspiration from the actions of January 6th, 2021, and the lead researcher considers this study a natural extension of their commissioning Oath of Office. We argue that impartial research here remains consistent with their *need* to defend the Constitution of the United States "against all enemies, foreign and domestic", and all findings interpreted with appropriate, peer-reviewed rigor are offered as a natural extension of this intent.

Review of adjacent literature highlights various instances of definitional confusion within the milieu of the far-right and its subcultures, personalized expressions of religious adherence, and acknowledges confusion within GST itself regarding the concepts of *anomie* and *strain*. We cite the work of Belew (2018), Reid and Valasik (2020) in acknowledging the permeability of these more radical social institutions and accept that attempts at categorization may perform imperfectly during operationalization. As themes, motivations, and forms of practice continue to expand over subsequent research, future study may further refine categorizations to best classify the forms of practice identified within military and veteran adherents of Old Norse/Germanic systems and their far-right counterparts.

Finally, we acknowledge the natural 'blind spots' inherent to qualitative analysis and cross-sectional data as included here. Where subsequent interviews are conducted and themes are refined, it remains unlikely that anything beyond longitudinal study might more fully encompass the scope of religious or cultural understandings of heathenry unique to each interviewee. This study encourages research beyond our work, to increase sampling and drive qualitative rigor towards a more informed set of conclusions offering academic salience and public value to inform policymakers and at-risk individuals alike.

5.4. Future Opportunities

While limited sampling strategies and compressed timelines offered mixed significance for the present effort, we view the existence of broader heathen populations in service and adjacent Iron March users demonstrating blatant Old Norse co-option as promising opportunities to further refine the study

begun in this thesis. The research team maintains contact with the Kindred Gathering stationed at a nearby Army installation, and at least five additional leads have been identified from previous participants offering an expanded sample size of up to $n_H = 34$ total service members and veterans. Additionally, analysis of the Iron March scrape has identified another $n = 34$ users who had been active on the forum using 'handles' directly referencing heathen cosmological icons; inclusion of this subset offers both an expanded sample of $n_I = 53$ subjects and potential for more direct, online discussion of Old Norse affectation beyond the minimal amount analyzed in the current sample studied.

More broadly, we consider the utility of a truly longitudinal study extending beyond this effort, where contact is gained, nurtured, and maintained across time with both interviewed participants and any willing subjects drawn from current far-right forums after the deplatforming of Iron March as an active *network*. History demonstrates the fluidity and adaptability of online far-right groups, and it remains highly unlikely that over 1,600 users unilaterally ceased interaction with adjacent sites espousing similar *narratives*. While increased sampling offers a more refined dataset for thematic analysis, limitations acknowledge only longitudinal analysis provides clarity for casual mechanisms along radicalization pathways; extending this research across interview waves may then provide both refined insights informing client policy makers and highlight options for de-escalation where 'thematic shifts' as trigger mechanisms are outlined and understood.

Where significance becomes more apparent, we finally consider a more global opportunity for research into ideologically diverse subcultures of extremism beyond heathen affectation by the far-right. The methodology demonstrated here may be applied to a wide range of domestic hate- and terror-related organizations and should not be confined to any single *network* or polity for insight. American history appears replete with various *narratives* calling for dramatic social change, and we offer that the U.S. military as a reflection of society remains perennially at risk for intrusion by a myriad array of malign actors. We offer a scalable strategy for analysis wherever radicalization occurs, and hope that future research opportunities may provide utility as required for academia, law enforcement, and military policy makers should need arise.

6: CONCLUSION

During our first interview in pursuit of this research, a recent ‘Category II’ veteran discussed their ongoing doctoral study of Divinity after being referred to the research team by a coworker familiar with the thesis topic. This participant stood apart from the subsample as the only member still holding any form of faith practice, yet their own research had brought them into contact with heathen service members and icon adopters; we credit them in part for inspiration towards creating the categorizations offered here. Summarizing this search for meaning amidst cultural *retreat* and disillusion, Interviewee 1 offered perfect inspiration for the title of our work: “at the end of the day, *everyone wants their bifröst*”.

We consider that *strains* and *needs* function centrally to the search towards meaning for every human; the search for one’s ‘rainbow bridge’ takes many forms, even within military service. While this may only become heathen adoption for few, we remember that every person retains the right to religious or individual expression as *narratives* for life are adapted across time. This opportunity extends to those carrying particularly severe traumas even more so, especially those encountered in service to their country.

This thesis seeks to provide a foundation for understanding those subcultures viewed as niche, esoteric, or even extreme by social standards, seeking academic rigor to offer analysis and more importantly a voice from those who fear marginalization through misinterpretation. Alternatively, we acknowledge the risks these same *narratives* present when co-opted and twisted in the wrong hands, and hope to highlight vectors where they may exist for the newcomer in search of replacement values where theirs do not suffice. Despite a myriad range of pathways towards radicalization and hate, it need not seem as given that religious or cultural motivations might be manipulated for malign ends. The *biföst* appears uniquely for everyone, and they must maintain freedom to walk it to whatever good lies at its end.

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APPENDIX: Interview Questions

Prompt: As discussed in the consent tape, your participation in this study is voluntary. All questions will be asked by me (Riley Konzen, Capt, USMC / M.S. Criminal Justice Candidate, UNC-Charlotte) and not distributed to others. Your name is kept separate from any record of our interview for your privacy. I appreciate your participation in this study and please let me know if you have any questions.

Research Questions

1) If you feel comfortable, please tell me your age, rank, and branch of service current or prior.
2) How long have you been in the military?
3) Why were you interested in joining the military?

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4) Where did you first discover your belief system (Odinism/Asatru, Heathenism, Paganism, etc.)?

5) What drew you to the system? What practices, beliefs, etc. seemed to be the most inviting aspects?

6) What level of adherence would you say you have to the system? Do you actively practice?

7) Does your faith or group have a name?

8) Is there anything that separates your faith/group from other groups or faith systems? Tattoos? Language? Would you be able to identify another member of your faith or group?

9) Do you have family that also share your beliefs? If not, what are their opinions of your beliefs?

10) Do you find a lot of others around you in the military?

11) How do other service members react when they discover your beliefs?

12) Do you feel like your unit is accepting of your beliefs? Are you afforded the opportunity to practice on any significant (holy) days?

13) Do you think the military is a culture that provides fertile ground for others to discover and come to share your beliefs? Why or why not?

14) Have you encountered others of your belief system that also hold other views that might be considered "extreme" to others in or out of service?

15) Do you go online to connect and talk with others who believe as you do? If so, will you share where?

Thank you again for your time and openness- as before, this will stay as a confidential discussion without your express consent to include it in my research. I hope to better understand your belief system and want to ensure it is understood and perhaps more accepted by others who might lack the knowledge to do so otherwise.