"DIGITAL SOLDIERS"

QAnon Extremists Exploit U.S. Military, Threaten Democracy

Human Rights First

December 2022

Table of Contents:

ABSTRACT

This report examines how the QAnon movement exploits the U.S. military's credibility in society to further its aim of undermining American democracy. It shows how 25 U.S. military veterans – all of whom have been engaged in the QAnon movement since the failed insurrection on January 6, 2021 – spread disinformation and build support for the movement. Analysis of their social media, along with a broader review of QAnon content, reveals how Q influencers portray the U.S. military as a heroic protagonist in their conspiratorial propaganda, and how they exploit military veterans to legitimate such claims and even recruit. It concludes with policy recommendations that focus on protecting members of the armed services, those who have served and their families, and communities the movement targets with its conspiracies.

Key Findings

The mainstreaming of the QAnon extremist movement presents a growing threat to the American system of government. QAnon's effort to create the perception that they are allied with the U.S. military has particularly alarming implications for our democracy:

- It strengthens the QAnon movement by facilitating recruitment from both military and civilian communities and encourages active participation among adherents;

- It lends legitimacy to discriminatory and anti-democratic conspiracies that are integrated into the Q movement, such as antisemitism and election denial;

- It distorts the public's understanding of the primary responsibilities of the military, and, importantly, the legal boundaries of domestic military intervention;

- It undermines public faith in democratic institutions by regularly encouraging the acceptance of authoritarian actions; and

- It threatens the communities the movement targets with its conspiracies and maligns the reputation of U.S. servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

Executive Summary

QAnon or "Q" is a conspiratorial extremist movement that originally focused on the belief that former President Trump and the U.S. military are secretly planning a war against an elite cabal of satanic pedophiles who have corrupted every level of government and that only the U.S. military can save the country.

Today, the Q movement is much larger than those who adhere to these initial claims. However, Adherents still share a conspiratorial and extreme interpretation of government corruption and false elections, and often the centrality of the U.S. military to fighting this imagined threat.

Q-associated influencers strategically center the U.S. military in their narratives. This appearance of an alliance with the military enhances their credibility and attracts followers, including veterans. The suggestion of an alliance also creates a cadre of committed adherents.

- They co-opt military language and symbolism, and use veteran adherents as validators, to portray the U.S. military as the protagonist in their conspiracy theories.

- While veterans and active-duty service members are a minority of influencers, they are over-represented compared to their presence in the general population and play an influential role in the network by validating conspiracy theories related to the military and democratic institutions. Among the 16 Q-associated influencer veterans we identified who were active around the 2022 midterms, 14 spread election-related misinformation.

- QAnon's self-described "digital soldiers" are driven by a sense of duty and are highly engaged in the movement, typically by actively spreading disinformation and supporting political causes inspired by QAnon.

As the QAnon movement coalesces with other extremist movements, it buttresses these separate movementsand normalizes extremism. This is especially obvious around two issues: antisemitism and election denial.

The founding conspiracies of the QAnon are drawn directly from antisemitic conspiracy theories that have been the sources of violent antisemitism for centuries. Separately, Q and Q-adjacent influencers are major players in the election denial movement.

An alarming hallmark of the QAnon movement is that its adherents encourage public acceptance of authoritarian actions. Some QAnon adherents have repeatedly called for a military coup as a solution to claims of voter fraud, including in the recent midterm elections. By calling for military intervention in domestic politics, they erode public faith in democratic norms and institutions and blur public understanding of the legal boundaries of the military's role in domestic spaces.

The QAnon extremist movement presents a growing and direct threat to the military community, communities frequently targeted by extremists, democratic institutions and processes, and ultimately American democracy. Addressing this threat must be an urgent priority for both government and civil society. We must:

🚩 **Support Department of Defense efforts to address extremism in the military;**

🚩 **Increase veterans' awareness of QAnon's recruitment tactics and narratives;**

🚩 **Increase public awareness of QAnon disinformation strategies and improve digital literacy;**

🚩 **Demand that elected leaders denounce extremist and antisemitic conspiracies; and**

🚩 **Support targeted communities and hold perpetrators accountable.**

SECTION I

Conspiracy Theorists Launch a Movement Targeting Democracy, Center U.S. Military

Five days after the 2022 midterm elections, approximately 100 demonstrators gathered at the Maricopa County, Arizona, elections office to protest what they claimed were fraudulent results. One demonstrator told reporters, "we the people are requesting that the military step in and redo our election." This call for military intervention in U.S. domestic politics was not an isolated occurrence. It is a single but dangerous recent example of how anti-democratic ideology from the QAnon extremist movement has entered mainstream political dialogue.

QAnon or "Q" is a conspiratorial extremist movement originating around the belief that former President Trump and the U.S. military are secretly planning a war against an elite cabal of satanic pedophiles who have corrupted every level of government. Today, the Q movement is much larger than those who adhere to these initial, fantastical claims. It includes a broad network of conspiracy theorists who may even reject the Q label but share an extreme interpretation of government corruption and false elections, and often the centrality of the U.S. military to saving democracy. Q conspiracies offer supporters a buffet of narratives, leading to its widescale appeal, ability to infiltrate public discourse, and ultimately threaten democracy.

For example, since the 2020 presidential elections, QAnon adherents have been calling for the military to intervene to protect U.S. elections from alleged voter fraud. Those driving the movement's narratives, so-called "Q influencers," have directed QAnon supporters to do their part to "wake up" the rest of society and convince them that a corrupt cabal dominates the government and falsifies elections. The most dedicated adherents portray themselves as direct allies with the U.S. military, claiming to be a "digital army" focused on spreading "information," while the real army prepares for intervention behind the scenes.

Quantitative analysis on the movement finds that QAnon is popular among those with military backgrounds. According to our research, among the 53 adminstrators of the most influential QAnon account on Telegram, six (11 percent) were or claimed to be veterans. Another study showed that among the 96 QAnon-affiliated actors who were arrested for their roles in the failed insurrection at the Capitol, 18 were veterans. Given that veterans are approximately seven percent of the population, they appear to be over-represented in the Q movement.

Our narrative analysis showed that QAnon's focus on the U.S. military is central to its ideology and one way it stands apart from other extremist movements and conspiracy theories. By mimicking military rhetoric and falsely claiming an alliance with the U.S. military, QAnon builds a high-level of participation by dedicated adherents and leverages public respect for service members and veterans to grow the movement's size and influence in mainstream culture. Q's fictitious narratives of service to country starkly contrast with its disinformation campaigns that promote bigotry and threaten American institutions and democratic norms.

Background: An Online Conspiracy Theory Becomes A Real-Life Extremist Movement

QAnon began in 2017 with a few anonymous posts on a fringe website, and within a few years, transformed into a sprawling extremist movement that now drives and inspires the most dangerous anti-democratic activities, groups, and related movements across the country.

In late 2017, the anonymous "Q", who claimed to represent a cohort of military intelligence officials with "Q-level" clearance, began posting messages on a fringe website. According to Q, then-President Trump was working with military intelligence to fight a corrupt cabal of government elites. Q adherents believe that military intelligence launched the Q account with the explicit goal of reaching select "patriots" who would spread the idea that all democratic institutions have become irredeemably corrupt, so military intervention in U.S. politics is necessary.

The Q posts eventually went viral, moving onto mainstream social media platforms where dedicated Q groups formed with, collectively, millions of followers. These became central sites for propagating Q and other conspiracy theories. These online groups provided space for likeminded individuals — from fans of alternative medicine, to concerned parents, to veterans — to convene and voice shared frustrations. Here, QAnon adherents found answers in conspiracy theories that blamed local and federal governments for their problems.

By 2019, much of the dialogue centered on vaccines and government responses to the pandemic. By 2020 supporters spread disinformation around the upcoming elections and began to organize licit and illicit activities in response to election results. Ninety-six of the rioters arrested for their participation in the January 6th 2021 attack on the Capital were QAnon adherents. To date, an additional 50 individuals associated with QAnon have been arrested for ideologically-motivated illegal activity.

In the aftermath of January 6, as Q adherents were deplatformed from mainstream sites and moved to fringe ones, the movement became more diffuse. However, as Q extremist and conspiratorial ideas mainstreamed, the Q network has become layered, now including conspiracy theorists who do not directly endorse "Q," but share the belief that a ruling cabal has corrupted elections and other democratic infrastructure.

Q adherents remain a politically active and engaged constituency and are pursued by politicians. Notably, in Fall 2022, former President Trump signaled his warmth for the movement, suggesting he may call on their loyalty in the future.

SECTION 2

QAnon Hijacks the Military's Credibility to Augment Its Own

Q influencers leverage widespread public respect for and trust in the military to attract followers, including servicemembers and veterans, and lend credibility to their narratives. They accomplish this by positioning the U.S. military as the heroic protagonist in their conspiracy theories, co-opting military language and symbolism, and using veteran adherents as validators.

QAnon Conspiracies Feature the U.S. Military as Warriors Against the Deep State

Q influencers argue that a ruling cabal of pedophiles and their apologists has infiltrated the government to form a "Deep State," and only the U.S. military can save the country. While early Q conspiracies portrayed the military as heroic liberators of child sex trafficking camps, after Trump's departure from the presidency, narratives featuring the military shifted towards a focus on the state directly. Increasingly, they claim a preemptive military coup will need to occur, and often concoct elaborate and baseless theories justifying military intervention in domestic politics.

🚩 *The "Deep State" Military Exception:*

> The QAnon movement's growing fusion with the election denial movement increases adherents' distrust of government and reinforces their conviction that the military will be the savior of U.S. democracy. As Congress, state governments, courts, and the FBI rejected voter fraud claims, Q adherents' embrace of military exceptionalism increased.
>
> For example, after a Georgia judge dismissed a lawsuit claiming election fraud in Fulton County, prolific Q influencer and veteran David H. decried a failure of the "rule of law." He claimed that the dismissal was evidence that democratic institutions would never right the wrongs of the Deep State and concluded that military intervention was the only remaining route, posting: "It was always going to come down to the military."

🚩 *A Preemptive Military Coup:*

> Q influencers advocate for and socialize the idea of a preemptive military coup as a response to their claims of voter fraud. Our research found that some influencers argued that the scale of voter fraud was so egregious that the public could not peacefully support the government as it is, and that a military coup is the only way to avoid an otherwise inevitable civil war. In their scenario, the military would reinstall Donald Trump as the true winner of the 2020 election, exposing the cabal and avoiding a civil war launched by so-called patriots. They claim this is legal and therefore does not contradict their stated respect for rule of law.

> "The US Military is the one and only branch of government that isn't corrupt. Trump didn't wake up one morning and say f*** it, i'm gonna run for president and drain the swamp.
>
> He was hand selected by top military generals to be placed in this position. The chosen one.
>
> Every big move Trump executed over the last 4 years was either influenced or guided by military intelligence...
>
> *The military has been running the show for a lot longer than people think."*
>
> - Excerpt from a Telegram post forwarded by Q influencer John S.

This narrative emerged immediately after votes were counted in November 2020, as Q adherents struggled to reconcile their expectations of a Trump presidency with the reality of a Biden presidency. At the time, Q influencers told their followers that martial law had been declared and encouraged them to welcome a military coup. For example, on the day of inauguration, Q influencer John S. posted on Telegram nearly 100 times, telling thousands of followers that the inaugural events were staged and meant to hide covert military activity.

A shirt for sale on a QAnon website marked "Operation Q: Military Precision at Its Finest" mimics military aesthetics.

Q Co-opts Military Language and Symbolism to Attract Civilians

Q-associated influencers use common military language and symbolism that appeals to civilians who hold great respect for the U.S. military, even if they have not served, to successfully organize an "army" of civilians. For example, Q merchandise strategically uses military-style fonts, symbols, and terms, avoiding obscure references to which only seasoned servicemembers might relate.

The QAnon movement applies their phony military parallels to their online practices. Q-associated influencers have dubbed their followers who share memes and messages their "Digital Army." The Q account and associated influencers repeatedly instruct its digital army to use "meme warfare" to spread disinformation online, even creating a central Telegram channel with such images from which "soldiers" can draw. One Q-adjacent influencer, Seth K., called his propaganda "ammunition," as though he was engaged in a real militarized battle.

Veteran Validators Legitimize Q Conspiracies & Aid Recruitment

Our review of Q-affiliated accounts reveals that those with military experience often leverage their credibility as veterans to falsely claim that their belief in a Q narrative is based on knowledge gained during their service. Some of the movement's most influential Q actors are, in fact, veterans.
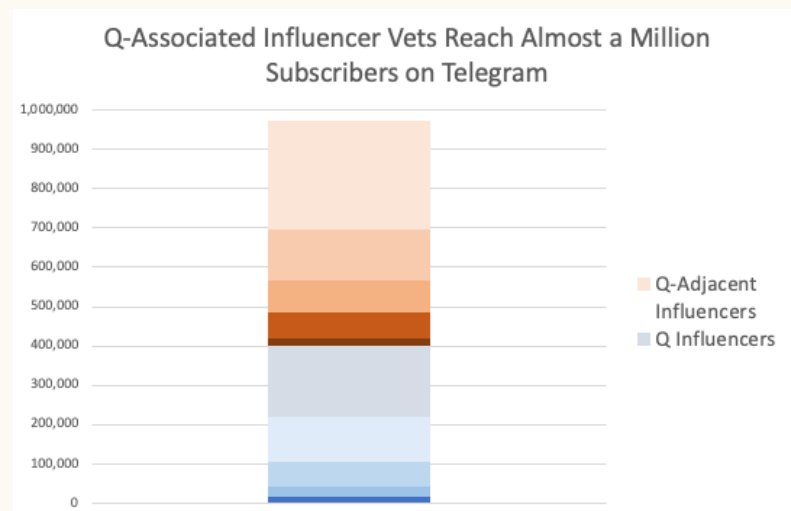
General Michael Flynn, former National Security Advisor under the Trump administration and former Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, lends his credibility to the movement's conspiratorial claims. As Q influencer John S. posted in a forwarded messsage after a mainstream media exposé on the Q movement threatened to undermine adherents' confidence: "Do you honestly believe that a decorated 3 star Lieutenant General, with a Military intelligence background…would fall for an internet hoax…?"[1]

It's not just Flynn. The most popular online Q influencer, David H., who had a combined following of over 750,000 on Facebook and Twitter before moving to Telegram, is also a veteran. Kevin B., the leader of the QAnon "church," and Seth K., who serves as one of the election denial movement's top alleged data analysts and makes frequent appearances on QAnon forums, are both veterans.

⚑ *Veterans Further False Perception of Military Alliance:*

> Nearly all of the 25 Q-associated veterans identified for this report (see Appendix, p. 18) list their military service on their public social media profiles. Whenever they spread or endorse a Q narrative, they add to the perception of an alliance between veterans and Q. They have substantial reach: the 16 Q and Q-adjacent veteran influencers identified have almost a million combined Telegram subscribers (although there is substantial overlap).

> For example, throughout his 2022 campaign, Ohio congressional candidate J.R. Majewski emphasized his veteran status in his speeches and social media, indirectly associating his service with his known Q affiliations. On the far-right social media platform GAB, where he also highlighted his veteran status, he tagged a well-known Q influencer Zak P. 32 times. In fact, Majewski repeatedly exaggerated the extent of his service, and that likely contributed to his losing the election.

Q-Associated Influencer Vets Reach Almost a Million Subscribers on Telegram

---

[1] While Flynn has never explicitly claimed the authenticity of the Q account, and has sometimes even attempted to distance himself from the movement, his embrace of the QAnon has been more consistent than his rejection. For example, he endorsed a website selling Q-branded merchandise, he has for years and continues to forward Q-associated accounts on social media, and he took the QAnon-associated oath online. For these reasons, he is widely embraced as a central leader of the Q movement by adherents.

⌖ Veterans Attempt to Influence Recruitment of other Veterans:

Some Q-associated veterans target others in the military community for recruitment, implicitly and explicitly. One Q-adjacent influencer threatened that if servicemembers do not ally with Q they will face retribution in the future. Claiming that President Biden was an agent of the Chinese Communist Party, this influencer suggested that all federal employees and U.S. service members needed to register as foreign agents, or face investigation in the future.

"…CCP Ambassador [to] the US Joe Xi-den is and has been captured for the better part of a decade and maybe for almost 50 years. Until States decertify their elections from 2020 to remedy this CCP takeover, all federal employees and servicemembers need to submit their FARA. Those that do not will need to be investigated for their loyalty when patriots take over."

- Excerpt from a Telegram post by Q-adjacent influencer Ivan R. suggesting that all federal employees and servicemembers must register as foreign agents because the federal government has been taken over by the Chinese Communist Party.

SECTION 3
_____

QAnon Digital Army Threatens Democracy & Democratic Values

The QAnon movement's implied association with the U.S. military undermines the stability of American democracy. This recruitment tactic targets military, veterans, and civilian communities, creating a "digital army" of dedicated activists who mainstream hateful propaganda and support political efforts to undercut public faith in government.

This association is an attempt to lend legitimacy to discriminatory and anti-democratic extremist conspiracies, such as antisemitism and election denial, that are integrated into the Q movement. It normalizes authoritarianism by distorting the public's understanding of the role of the military in U.S. society, misrepresenting the legal boundaries for military intervention in politics, elections, and governance. Finally, it associates the military with fantastical and sometimes violent and illegal responses to perceived political losses or social grievances.

It is dangerous. Most obviously, it threatens the communities the movement targets with its conspiracies. A number of recent perpetrators of attacks on Black, Brown, Jewish, and other people have cited QAnon-adjacent arguments for their actions. It also maligns the reputation of U.S. servicemembers, veterans, and their families, whose dedication to their country QAnon distorts.

"Digital Army": QAnon Mobilizes a Parallel "Army" to Undermine Democracy

Q-associated influencers have created a self-described army of digital soldiers -- highly engaged movement adherents who are driven by a distorted sense of duty. This engagement is what has transformed this network of conspiracy theorists into a political movement.

Soldiers in this "digital army" actively spread disinformation and support political causes inspired by QAnon's conspiratorial narratives. Similar to their role in recruitment, veterans and active-duty service members, while fewer in number, have outsized influence in encouraging and amplifying adherent engagement, particularly related to undermining democratic institutions.

🔻 *Undermining Democracy Through Information Warfare:*

The Q account and associated influencers repeatedly instruct their digital army to actively promote the movement, not just passively consume conspiratorial and bigoted content. For example, in one day in early December 2022, the most popular QAnon Telegram channel encouraged its hundreds of thousands of subscribers to "spread the word" to support a candidate who had questioned 2020 election results and to keep alive a false "story" portraying a major fashion line as involved in pedophilia.

The movement also encourages followers to engage in-person. Q followers take their claims of vaccine harms and voter fraud to county board meetings, state protests, and the nation's capital, and some seek office themselves. Q adherents have run for school boards, including one candidate who claimed that mask mandates facilitated human trafficking. Before running for Congress, J.R. Majewski (see above), tagged a QAnon account in an online post looking for someone to carpool to the capital on January 6th.

🔻 *Undermining Democratic Institutions:*

Among the 53 adminstrators of the most influential QAnon account on Telegram, we found that 6 were or claimed to be veterans, making up 11 percent of the group. Among the 96 QAnon-affiliated actors who were arrested for their role in the failed insurrection, 18 were veterans. Given that veterans are approximately seven percent of the population, they appear to be over-represented in the Q movement.

Our analysis of the Q-associated veteran content showed that building credibility by underscoring their military service is particularly important to influencers when they promote conspiracy theories about the Department of Defense. For example, when Q podcaster Zak P. hosted Q influencer Jacob C. on his show – an episode which garnered nearly 40,000 views -- Zak began by asking Jacob about his military experience. Jacob cited his military credentials before repeating Russian Ministry of Defense disinformation about the U.S. military.

Digital Soldiers Augment Related Anti-Democratic Extremist Movements

As the QAnon movement coalesces with, and even drives, other extremist movements around specific conspiracy theories, these separate movements benefit from Q's energy, size, and credibility in certain circles, and at times adopt its military language. This is especially obvious on two issues: antisemitism and election denial.

➤ *QAnon Spreads and Normalizes Antisemitism:*

The movement's founding conspiracies are drawn directly from antisemitic conspiracy theories that have been the sources of violent antisemitism for centuries. The claim that a cabal of pedophiles is harvesting children for their blood is a direct manifestation of the antisemitic "blood libel" trope. The essential Q belief that the world is controlled by a small cabal of "globalist" bankers intent on enslaving the rest of the population is an updated version of antisemitic *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Q influencers also mainstream antisemitism through implicit tropes specifically about the Rothschild family and George Soros.

After QAnon influencers decamped to fringe social media platforms with little oversight (largely after January 6th), a number quickly revealed their overt antisemitism, advancing Holocaust denial and pointing at Jews as the source of evil they claim to be fighting. Further, recent polling showed that nearly half of the people who support QAnon also believe in the antisemitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion.*

➤ *QAnon Embraces Election Denial:*

Q and Q-adjacent influencers are major players in the election denial movement. While two of the nine Q-amplifying 2022 candidates who are veterans expressed support for election-related disinformation in the days immediately before and after the midterm election, 14 of the 16 QAnon-associated influencer veterans who were publicly active in November 2022 we followed did. Some posted misleading content suggesting that minor problems with voting operations were part of a sinister plot to steal votes, others made repeated and unfounded claims of victory for candidates who had lost.

Some influencers directly leverage their veteran status. For example, on Veterans' Day, former Army Intelligence officer Ivan R. implied that veterans had been "disenfranchised" and called for former servicemembers to protest supposed election fraud in Arizona.

QAnon Embraces Authoritarianism, Threatens Democratic Norms and Institutions

A hallmark of the QAnon movement is that its adherents regularly encourage public acceptance of authoritarian actions. This erodes public faith in democratic norms and institutions, and blurs civilian understanding of the legal boundaries regarding the military's role in domestic spaces.

While the U.S. military has proven to be a bulwark against illegally intervening in domestic affairs, QAnon stokes the idea of such intervention in moments of social and political instability, including contested elections. While Q influencers will engage in electoral politics, suggesting their acceptance of democratic processes, our research shows adherents still emphasize military intervention.

⚑ *Socializing Domestic Military Intervention to the Masses:*

While military intervention to overturn U.S electoral results is highly unlikely, contention over the possibility of the misuse of military forces in domestic politics has caused social strife and harmed public faith in democratic institutions. For example, Q influencers agreed with former President Trump's remarks criticizing the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Milley, in part for rejecting the use of the U.S. military to quell protests in response to the murder of George Floyd.

Alarmingly, QAnon adherents have worked to popularize the idea of a military coup to resolve claims of voter fraud. They reacted positively when Q-adjacent influencer Ret. Gen Michael Flynn in December 2020 retweeted a post calling for then President Trump to declare martial law and have the military "rerun" elections; Flynn later met with Trump to discuss the possibility. In the volatile period between the failed insurrection on January 6 and the presidential inauguration on January 20, 2021, Q influencers regularly claimed a military coup was underway. For example, John S. highlighted a post claiming that the Insurrection Act had been declared, saying: "Do not to be scared of what's coming as it is for the safety of our nation for this to unfold."

"*Coming to a Maricopa Near You?*"

Q-adjacent influencer Ivan R. encouraged protesters in Maricopa County, Arizona, to replicate large protests at military headquarters in Brazil, calling for a military intervention, based on false claims of voter fraud.

Their calls for a coup continue today. Q-associated influencers called for a coup in the U.S. after one occurred in 2021 in Myanmar, and when false claims of voter fraud surfaced after the 2022 midterm elections, inspired by similar calls in Brazil. In December 2022, former President Trump advocated for the "termination" of the U.S. Constitution, which one top Q influencer suggested was a call for military intervention.

⚑ Combining Political Participation with Anticipated Military Action

Even some Q adherents who engage in electoral politics encourage military intervention in domestic politics. Ret. General Flynn has now twice publicly endorsed military intervention in U.S. elections, but is leading a campaign to encourage Q adherents to participate in local politics. He himself has joined his local Republican Party precinct. Long-time Q influencer Wayne Willott co-founded the America First Secretary of State Coalition to promote election-denying candidates for Secretary of State office nationwide. Despite this deep engagement in state elections, our investigation revealed that Willott admitted on a Q influencer Ethan L.'s podcast that he had little faith in the democratic process and was ultimately expecting military intervention.

SECTION 4

Challenging QAnon: Protecting Targeted Communities and Democracy

The QAnon extremist movement presents a growing and direct threat to the military community, communities frequently targeted by extremists, and our democratic institutions and processes.

Addressing this threat needs to be an urgent priority for both government and civil society. The Department of Defense is well-positioned to augment their current efforts against extremism, in part by including additional training to raise awareness among active-duty military and veterans about QAnon's disinformation efforts and deliberate attempts to hijack the military's credibility.

Civil society must also educate the public about the movement's efforts to target specific communities, undermine our democracy, hijack the well-deserved reputation of the U.S. military, and misrepresent the role of the military in domestic affairs.

We must:

1. *Support Department of Defense Efforts to Address Extremism in the Military*

   ▪ Congress must support DoD efforts to address extremism and antisemitism in the ranks, as recommended by the Countering Extremist Activity Working Group commissioned by Secretary Austin in 2021, including updating the end-of-service transition curriculum to include training on potential recruitment by extremists groups.

   ▪ DoD counter-extremism policies and awareness programs must emphasize disinformation and conspiracy theories by QAnon and adjacent movements, and expose the undercurrent of antisemitism at the foundation of many of these narratives.

   ▪ DoD must increase investment in civic education and digital literacy in the ranks.

2. *Increase Veteran Awareness of QAnon's Recruitment Tactics and Narratives*

   ▪ The Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) must increase veterans' resilience towards extremist disinformation and recruitment.

   ▪ The VA must invest in partnerships with digital literacy organizations, voter mobilization and education campaigns, and other entities working to engage veterans in civic life.

   ▪ Civil society organizations that support veterans, such as congressionally chartered Veteran Service Organizations and post-9/11 veteran groups, must be included in these efforts.

3. *Increase Public Awareness of QAnon Disinformation and Improve Digital Literacy*

   ▪ To challenge QAnon's efforts to spread extremist propaganda, propagate conspiracies, and socialize the idea of military intervention, we must teach the public to recognize disinformation.

   ▪ We must improve digital literacy resources, especially those aimed at helping older populations that are often the target of propaganda initiatives.

   ▪ We must educate federal, state, and local government officials and election administrators as to threats they face and the QAnon-associated conspiracy theories that drive them.

   ▪ We must equip these officials with tools to challenge disruptive and even violent actions by adherents.

4. Demand That Elected Leaders Denounce Extremist and Antisemitic Conspiracies

- We must urge elected officials and other leaders to be proactive and vocal in denouncing hate and extremism directed at minority communities as well as the extremism and disinformation that undermines democratic processes and institutions. This includes direct and implicit efforts to promote antisemitism and conspiracy theories.

5. Support Targeted Communities and Hold Perpetrators Accountable

- Federal, state, and local governments must increase protections for individuals and communities that are the targets of extremist movements' tactics and propaganda.

- Particularly at the state and local level, governments must address policies that disproportionately impact these communities and tacitly support the objectives of the antidemocratic far-right. For example, legislation is needed to support the voting rights of the LGBTQI community, a target of the QAnon movement.

Appendix A: Scope Note

This research analyzes the impact of QAnon's efforts to undermine U.S. democracy and democratic values by leveraging the credibility of the U.S. military. Human Rights First researchers collected and assessed implicit and explicit references to the U.S. military in the QAnon network, with an emphasis on content from confirmed veterans who were active in the QAnon movement after January 6th, 2021.

Researchers identified 25 influential U.S. military veterans who have engaged publicly in the QAnon movement, post-January 6, 2021. Veterans were identified via media coverage, investigative reports, and public-facing social media accounts. To find qualifying individuals, researchers reviewed accounts of top QAnon influencers, political candidates, and veterans with known affiliations with conspiracy theory networks.

To qualify as "influential," included individuals must have a social media following over 5,000, have spoken at a QAnon associated public event, or have run for political office. Using content including social media (especially Telegram, Truth Social, and Gab), podcast episodes, and individual blogs, researchers tracked narratives, recruitment strategies, and links to related movements. Researchers also examined content from non-veteran popular QAnon influencers, as well as existing research on the movement.

Appendix B: Types of QAnon Actors

ACTOR	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF VETERANS IDENTIFIED
Q-Influencers	Dedicated Q believers who openly reference the Q account and interpret Q account posts for adherents. Separately, many are deeply engaged in election denial and other extremist movements. For example, David H.	**6**
Q-Adjacent Influencers	Conspiracy theorists who have associated themselves with the QAnon movement, but have not explicitly embraced the claim that Q posts are a covert U.S. military operation. They typically engage with Q audiences opportunistically, appearing on podcasts or at speaking events to promote related conspiracy theories and/or their own content. For example, Seth K. is a Q-adjacent influencer.	**10**
Q-Amplifying Politicians and Candidates	Political candidates and elected officials who have affiliated themselves with the QAnon movement, presumably hoping to leverage the energy and engagement of Q adherents for their own political success. They rarely embrace the core tenets of QAnon, but they lend credence to the movement by speaking alongside Q influencers, and/or using Q symbols or references in public-facing content. For example, Nevada Congressional candidate Sam Peters qualifies as a Q-amplifying candidate.	**9**
Q-Associated Influencers	A collective term for all three categories of public-facing Q actors, including Q-Influencers, Q-Adjacent Influencers, and Q-Amplifying Politicians and Candidates.	
Q Adherents/ Supporters	Individuals in the broader Q network, who follow Q influencers and Q-adjacent influencers. Some are dedicated Q adherents who discuss the Q account, while others are focused more on those who talk in general terms about a conspiratorial and corrupt cabal. In this report, we use "Q Adherents" and "Q Supporters" interchangeably.	
Total Number of Veterans included in study		**25**

Acknowledgements

Mission Statement

Human Rights First works to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

This report is available online at humanrightsfirst.org