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## Neo-Nazis, gangs and criminals in the US military

Escalating militarisation of the US police force to deal with "military-trained thugs" will not bode well for civilians.

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Six worshippers were killed in a mass shooting at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin on August 7

Investigative reporter Nir Rosen once aptly **remarked** on the tendency in mainstream Western journalism to downplay unfavourable trends occurring in the context of US military operations abroad: "The big scandals like Abu Ghraib, or the "Kill Team" in Afghanistan, eventually make their way into the media where they can be dismissed as bad apples and exceptions, and the general oppression of the occupations can be ignored".

A similar sort of argument can perhaps be made with regard to incidents such as the August 7 Sikh temple massacre in Wisconsin, perpetrated by Wade Michael Page, a decorated former

Army psychological operations specialist and a neo-Nazi. Although any Pentagon-sanctioned explanation of the event would undoubtedly rest on the bad apple assumption, it has occurred to media outlets such as the *Christian Science Monitor* to question whether the intersection of military training and racist extremism in Page's case is not in fact indicative of a larger pattern.

Noting that civil rights organisations like the **Southern Poverty Law Centre** "have warned that hate groups encourage their members to join [the military] for training and experience that they can later use to perpetrate crimes in the United States", CSM's Anna Mulrine writes:

*"The Army's Criminal Investigation Division conducts a threat assessment of extremist and gang activity among Army personnel. 'Every year, they come back with "minimal activity", which is inaccurate,' Scott Barfield, a former gang investigator for the Department of Defence, told the Southern Poverty Law Centre in its 2006 report 'A Few Bad Men'. 'It's not epidemic, but there's plenty of evidence we're talking numbers well into the thousands, just in the Army'."*

### **Irregular Army**

Wade Michael Page's military service terminated prior to the inauguration of America's 21st century wars, when - as journalist Matt Kennard documents in his forthcoming book ***Irregular Army: How the US Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gangs, and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror*** - insufficient enlistment levels led to an abandonment of certain recruiting standards and an increased influx of unsavory elements into the nation's armed forces.

According to a 2005 **report** sponsored by the US Department of Defence itself, "the military has a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy pertaining to extremism". However, Kennard's investigations suggest that even blatant "telling" often fails to incur meaningful repercussions. For starters, he reports telephoning five different Army recruitment centres, posing as an aspiring soldier curious as to whether his tattoo of Nazi SS lightning bolts will impede his soldiering aspirations. The upshot: "Despite being outlined in Army regulations as a tattoo to look out for, none of the recruiters reacted negatively and, when pressed directly about the tattoo, not one of them said it would be an outright problem".

Even more revealing are Kennard's interactions with Forrest Fogarty, an Iraq war veteran and "white supremacist of the serious Hitler-worshipping type", whom Kennard meets in Tampa and accompanies on an excursion to the zoo with Fogarty's two children.

Prior to departing for his tour in Iraq, Fogarty signed up with the Hammerskin Nation, "described by the Anti-Defamation League as the 'the most violent and best-organised neo-Nazi skinhead group in the United States'". Although his girlfriend attempted to thwart his deployment by submitting - to his military superiors - photographs of Fogarty at neo-Nazi rallies and performances of his Nazi rock band, he quickly persevered in front of the military committee assigned to scrutinise the circumstances: "I just denied it and said my girlfriend was a spiteful bitch, which is true".

### **Domestic wars**

Leaders of the white supremacist movement view enlistment as a means of preparation for a domestic race war. Aside from general combat training, job perks include access to a laboratory of Iraqis and others susceptible to dehumanising brutalisation as well as opportunities to **mail AK-47s** and related items to the US.

As Kennard demonstrates, the race war is not the only domestic conflict to which decaying military recruitment standards are contributing. According to a 2007 FBI **report**, "members of nearly every major street gang have been identified on both domestic and international military installations". The report's authors warn: "Both current and former gang-affiliated soldiers transfer their acquired military training and knowledge back to the community and employ them against law enforcement officers, who are typically not trained to engage gangster with military expertise."

Kennard meanwhile cites statistics obtained by the Michael D Palm Centre via the Freedom of Information Act, revealing the proliferation in military ranks of felons and similarly qualified individuals. The Palm Centre, an official research unit of University of California at Santa Barbara, **summarised** its findings as follows:

*"The data indicate that from 2003 through 2006, the military allowed 4,230 convicted felons to enlist under the 'moral waivers' programme... In addition, 43,977 individuals convicted of serious misdemeanors such as assault were permitted to enlist under the moral waivers programme during that period, as were 58,561 illegal drug abusers. In the Army, allowable offenses include making terrorist threats, murder, and kidnapping."*

According to Kennard, two of the morally waived terrorist threats involved domestic bomb attacks.

As for mental health waivers, the Army's foremost mental health expert Col Elspeth Ritchie **justified** the funnelling into combat of troops diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome on the grounds that "recruiting has been a challenge. And so we have to weigh the needs of the Army, the needs of the mission, with the soldiers' personal needs".

## **What to look forward to**

**Irregular Army** opens with a fifth-century quote on the decline of the Roman Empire from military observer Flavius Vegetius Renatus: "An Army raised without proper regard to the choice of its recruits was never yet made good by length of time; and we are now convinced by fatal experience that this is the source of all our misfortunes."

Although US imperial decline is certainly nothing to mourn, the military establishment should perhaps consider the fallout of decisions to deploy and redeploy neo-Nazis, gang members, criminals and the mentally ill with the ostensible goal of sustaining empire.

In addition to a likely increase in incidents such as the Sikh temple massacre, not to mention skyrocketing cases of **suicide** resulting from military service, an escalating militarisation of the US police force in order to deal with military-trained thugs with destructive domestic agendas

clearly **would not bode well** for the civilian population.

Kennard notes that city officials in Salinas, California have already explored a military approach to the gang problem, partnering "with combat veterans and lecturers at the Naval Postgraduate School to devise a counterinsurgency operation likened by the veterans to those fought against insurgents on the streets of Mogadishu or Fallujah". Given that counterinsurgency is often synonymous with collective punishment, non-insurgents in such situations may fail to grasp the benefits.

As for other groups on the receiving end of police metamorphosis, the *New York Times* **mused** in December 2011: "[L]ately images from Occupy protests streamed on the internet - often in real time - show just how readily police officers can adopt military-style tactics and equipment, and come off more like soldiers as they face down citizens."

The absorption of tactics intended for use against foreign enemies into the repertoires of not only racist extremists and gang members but also law enforcement personnel dealing with citizens exercising their civil rights will make for irregular times indeed.