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A Show of Force

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What Trump was trying to demonstrate in Los Angeles is that he can project his armed power into every American community at any time.



Caylo Seals/Sipa USA/AP Images

A man protesting against raids conducted by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement while National Guard troops stand outside the Metropolitan Detention Center, Los Angeles, June 8, 2025

Donald Trump's desire to militarize American politics and politicize the American military is unfinished business. Militarizing American politics means defining all those who do not conform to his version of normality as mortal enemies to be confronted as though they were hostile foreign nations. Politicizing the military means dismantling its self-image as an institution that transcends partisan divisions, is broadly representative of the US population, and owes its primary loyalty not to the president but to the Constitution. These aims are intertwined, but the first cannot be consummated until the second has been accomplished. Trump failed to do this in his first term, but he is determined not to be thwarted again.

In late May 2020, as hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of American cities to protest the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis, Trump held a meeting of his advisers in the Oval Office. According to Bob Woodward and Robert Costa in their book *Peril* (2021), Stephen Miller, the architect of Trump's most extreme anti-immigrant policies, advised: "Mr. President, they are burning America down. Antifa, Black Lives Matter, they're burning it down. You have an insurrection on your hands. Barbarians are at the gate." The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, responded, "Shut the fuck up, Steve."

Citing the daily Domestic Unrest National Overview produced for him by his staff, Milley told the commander-in-chief, "They used spray paint, Mr. President. That's not insurrection." He pointed to a portrait of Abraham Lincoln: "That guy up there, Lincoln, had an insurrection." Milley insisted that the BLM protests were "not an issue for the United States military to deploy forces on the streets of America, Mr. President." Along with other real soldiers, Milley was able to resist Trump's demand that the 82nd Airborne Division be sent to Washington. But that was then. Now there is no one in the Oval Office to tell Miller to shut the fuck up or to explain to Trump what an insurrection is.

On June 6 federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents targeted what US district judge Charles Breyer cited as "several locations in downtown LA and its immediate surroundings" that were "known to have significant migrant populations and labor-intensive industries." They arrested forty-four working people, including some day laborers gathered outside two Home Depot stores, and employees of an Ambiance Apparel warehouse in the Fashion District.

On June 7, by which time only around a dozen arrests had been made at protests against these roundups, Trump issued a memorandum to the secretary of defense, attorney general, and secretary of homeland security declaring that these demonstrations "constitute a form of rebellion against the authority of the Government of the United States." He authorized his secretary of defense, Pete Hegseth, to take federal control of the California National Guard and to "employ any other members of the regular Armed Forces as necessary." By June 9 around 1,700 National Guard soldiers and seven hundred US Marines had been deployed to Los Angeles, even though both the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department had made clear that they did not require additional resources to manage the protests or suppress the outbreaks of looting and vandalism that occurred on their margins. As Breyer emphasized in his ruling that Trump's federalization of the National Guard was "dangerous" and illegal, "There can be no debate that most protesters demonstrated peacefully."

Trump's deployment of troops in Los Angeles thus had no military purpose. It can best be thought of as a counterdemonstration. For Trump, those who protest against him are "paid troublemakers, agitators, and insurrectionists." He cannot imagine large-scale dissent as anything other than a professionally organized conspiracy. The US Army, by this logic, is his own professionally organized crowd. It must be seen on the streets to demonstrate his personal power. That military presence in turn redefines peaceful protesters as enemies of the United States. They cease to be citizens exercising constitutionally protected rights to free speech and assembly and become outlaws and aliens.

Moreover, Trump's lawyers pleaded in court that protesters need not engage in rebellion to be rebels. Breyer noted in his ruling (which was overturned on appeal) that "in a short paragraph, Defendants suggest that even if there was no rebellion that would justify federalizing the National Guard, there was still a 'danger of a rebellion.'" The intent could hardly be clearer. So long as Trump has political opponents, their dissent alone makes the danger of rebellion timeless and ubiquitous. What Trump was trying to demonstrate in Los Angeles is that he can project his armed power into every American community at any time. This is a form of wish fulfillment that has deep roots in his psyche.

Everything in Trumpworld happens twice—the first time as performance and the second as reality. In *The Art of the Deal* (1987), the best seller that formed his personal creation myth, Trump, who dodged the draft for the Vietnam War because of "bone spurs," included three photographs of himself in military uniform. The attire is that of a dashing officer in some Ruritanian operetta rather than of a soldier in the US Army. In the first two pictures, taken in 1964 to mark his high school graduation from the New York Military Academy, he is the Student Prince. We see him gloriously arrayed in a tall parade hat with a feather plume and a chin strap, a waist-length jacket with rows of brass buttons crossed by a white shoulder belt and adorned with elaborate epaulets and decals, white gloves, and a ceremonial saber. He is a toy soldier in a make-believe army.

But in the third photo he is leading a detachment of armed and uniformed young men on the streets of an American city. Trump is at the head of his prep school's contingent, marching up Fifth Avenue in New York's Columbus Day Parade of 1963, a year in which there were already over 16,000 US troops in Vietnam. (Remarkably, his bone spurs do not seem to have inhibited his ability to march in step.) His own caption for the photo is bizarre: "This was my first real glimpse of prime Fifth Avenue property." He seems at once to be occupying New York and eyeing opportunities in the conquered territory.

Yet Trump came to believe that this playacting made him a real soldier. Michael D'Antonio, in his biography *Never Enough: Donald Trump and the Pursuit of Success* (2015), reported that Trump

insisted that he had actually known military life. In a separate conversation he said, "I always thought I was in the military." He said that in prep school he received more military training than most actual soldiers did, and he had been required to live under the command of men...who had been real officers and soldiers. "I felt like I was in the military in a true sense."

Here we may perhaps discern the origins of Trump's extraordinary ability to eliminate the difference between performance and reality. The archetypal twentieth-century dictators—Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Francisco Franco, Augusto Pinochet—had been or remained soldiers. Trump was a soldier "in a true sense," by which he means presumably that a simulacrum of military masculinity is purer than the dirty reality of combat—war without tears.

Until, that is, the spectacle becomes the reality. Trump's jokes become deadly serious, his provocative rhetoric becomes violent provocation—and his Ruritanian fantasy becomes America's nightmare. This is what happened on January 6, 2021. Trump's speech to his supporters before the invasion of the Capitol was that of a general firing his troops up for battle: "And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore." But Trump did not then actually lead his storm troopers anywhere, and according to his apologists, "fight like hell" was not supposed to be taken literally. Trump's fascistic militarism retained its performative quality and remained suspended between the playacting war games of his youth and the actual violence he frequently threatens, as commander-in-chief of the world's most potent army, to unleash. It is thus entirely apt that his big moves toward military dictatorship in recent weeks have been a compound of show business and terror.

Trump's grand triumphal-march-cum-birthday-party in Washington on June 14 was as much a pageant as a parade: a thousand of the participating troops were dressed in costumes rented from the Motion Picture Costume Company, which describes itself as "a leading supplier of civilian, military, and police wardrobe to the motion picture industry." The versions of history being played out by the troops depended on the availability of suitable outfits. According to *USA Today*, "The Army eliminated the War of 1812 and Spanish-American War from the parade after running into trouble with the costuming process."

The Washington jamboree was thus a show of force in which the show was at least as salient as the force. But the phrase had a parallel and much darker meaning on the streets of Los Angeles. That was a very different kind of costume drama: the dressing up of peaceful protest

and some vandalism as a war so that, in Trump's words, his soldiers could "liberate Los Angeles from the Migrant Invasion." This too was make-believe, and it too was a performance. As California's governor, Gavin Newsom, put it, "The federal government is taking over the California National Guard and deploying 2,000 soldiers in Los Angeles—not because there is a shortage of law enforcement, but because they want a spectacle." This spectacle, though, was not meant to entertain. It was a war movie with real guns.

Trump's militarism remains at the meta stage, which is to say it is still primarily about language and form. The word game he is playing is one in which "rebellion" and "insurrection" are stripped of all their past meanings so that they can be forced into any garb he chooses. This is a further aspect of the drive toward absolute power. As Humpty Dumpty replies when Alice objects to his claim that a word means "just what I choose it to mean," "The question is, which is to be master—that's all." Milley's rebuke of May 2020—pointing out that Lincoln was the president who faced a real insurrection—was a challenge to Trump's position as master of meanings. In the second term, there is no place for such insolence.

On June 10, just after he sent the troops into Los Angeles, Trump boasted of rehabilitating the official memory of leaders of that insurrection. Addressing what was in effect a political rally at Fort Bragg, he told uniformed soldiers not only that he had given the base back its original name (it once honored the Confederate general Braxton Bragg, then was renamed Fort Liberty, and under the new dispensation is named after the World War II paratrooper Roland Bragg) but that "we are also going to be restoring the names to Fort Pickett, Fort Hood, Fort Gordon, Fort Rucker, Fort Polk, Fort A.P. Hill, and Fort Robert E. Lee." It is another word game: officially the military heroes being honored with the latest renamings just happen to have the same surnames as famous Confederate insurrectionists. The refurbished titles of these bases are thus elaborate puns. In this linguistic burlesque it is not only names that mean whatever Trump wants them to mean. It is also the actual history of rebellion against the United States. He has dropped it into a never-never land where it is both remembered as heroic and forgotten as unspeakable—much, of course, like January 6.

Meanwhile, restoring these Confederate designations obliterates the names that replaced them in 2023, the names of women and people of color: Charity Adams, Mary Edwards Walker, Richard Cavazos, William Henry Johnson. This too has purpose. For now at least, the primary goal of Trump's deployment of troops on the streets of Los Angeles is not the violent suppression of dissent. It is the remaking of the army itself. Trump is instructing the troops on how they must think of themselves and of the nature of the country they are pledged to defend.

Hegseth writes in his best seller *The War on Warriors* (2024) that he “didn’t want *this* Army anymore.” *This* army is the one that actually exists: of its 1.3 million active-duty troops, 230,000 are women, and more than 350,000 are Black. Trump appointed Hegseth to make many of these soldiers invisible. *The War on Warriors* is subtitled *Behind the Betrayal of the Men Who Keep Us Free*. It offers “to recover a true vision of the value of strong men.” These are “red-blooded American men,” men who “respect other strong, skilled, dedicated men” and not “men who are pretending to be women, or vice versa.” It follows that women and Black men who have risen up the ranks of the army are the good soldier’s nemesis: “A black or female soldier who gets promoted, primarily because of the color of their skin or the genitalia between their legs—gets people killed.”

While Hegseth pays lip service to racial equality in the army (“There is no black and white in our ranks. We are all green”), elsewhere in his book he falsely implies that Joe Biden’s appointment of the air force general Charles Q. Brown Jr. to succeed Milley as chairman of the Joint Chiefs was a diversity hire: “Was it because of his skin color? Or his skill? We’ll never know, but always doubt.” This hardly qualifies as racist dog-whistling—the pitch is too low and too brazenly loud. Trump duly fired Brown, an unmistakable overture to the much larger project.

The Trumpian reimagining of the US Army has nothing to do with fighting foreign wars. It is all about reasserting the innately white and male nature of America. According to Hegseth, the military’s “key constituency is normal men”: “Normal dudes have always fought, and won, our wars.” His vision, as he explains it, is to restore not just the value of strong men but also “the importance of normality.” The military is to be reborn as its true self: the embodiment of a nation of red-blooded American men. What that means for abnormal Americans of impure blood does not have to be spelled out.

In this regard, putting troops on the streets of Los Angeles is a training exercise for the army, a form of reorientation. Soldiers are being retrained for loyalty to the president rather than the Constitution. They are meanwhile becoming accustomed to confronting that deviant and anomalous America. In his Fort Bragg speech, Trump invited the troops to see protesters in Los Angeles as invaders: “We will not allow an American city to be invaded and conquered by a foreign enemy, and that’s what they are.” But what was happening in LA was, he claimed, even worse than an armed incursion:

Not only are these service members defending the honest citizens of California, they're also defending our republic itself, and they are heroes, they're in there, they're heroes. They're fighting for us, they're stopping an invasion just like you'd stop an invasion. The big difference is most of the time when you stop an invasion, they're wearing a uniform. In many ways, it's tougher when they're not wearing a uniform because you don't know exactly who they are.

If the army doesn't know exactly who "they" are, it has to be told. Trump reminded the troops that their purpose is to spread fear: "For our adversaries, there is no greater fear than the United States Army." Its job now is to spread that fear to an ununiformed and thus unknowable mass of internal enemies. Just as Trump transforms actual rebellion into the vague but omnipresent "danger of a rebellion," he makes the invading army invisible, amorphous, and fluid. Traditional military doctrine demands a clear understanding of the nature of the threat and the shape of the opposing forces. Contrariwise, in the Trump doctrine the threat must be as nebulous as possible, and the opposing forces must be formless. Thus only the commander-in-chief can say at any given time what they are. The enemy the army must learn to face is one that he, and he alone, can conjure.

In this Trump is offering soldiers what fascist leaders have always offered their followers: a peculiar amalgam of the thrill of transgression and the submissive surrender to absolute obedience. New lieutenants and sergeants are (for now at least) issued a document called *The Army: A Primer to Our Profession of Arms*. Its prohibition on any appearance of partisanship is emphatic:

The Army as an institution must be nonpartisan and appear so too. Being nonpartisan means not favoring any specific political party or group. Nonpartisanship assures the public that our Army will always serve the Constitution and our people loyally and responsively. When representing the Army or wearing the uniform, you must behave in a nonpartisan way too.

At Fort Bragg, Trump incited the uniformed soldiers arrayed behind him to boo the press and laugh at his political opponents, thus disobeying those prohibitions, while a pop-up shop on the base sold MAGA-branded clothing and jewelry and faux credit cards labeled "WHITE PRIVILEGE CARD: TRUMPS EVERYTHING." This organized insubordination had an obvious point: soldiers must transfer their obedience from the army and the Constitution to Trump himself.

The manual makes clear to soldiers that they should not obey illegal orders:

When you believe you are being given an illegal order, you should take further action—do your homework, seek counsel, and approach your leaders for clarification. If this fails or you *know* that what you are being asked to do is unlawful, then it becomes your duty to disobey and to follow the law, no matter how resolute your superiors' stance.

In this light, it actually suits Trump's purposes if his federalization of the National Guard is understood to be illegal. His deployment of troops in Los Angeles is intended to dissolve boundaries—between domestic disputes and foreign wars, between reality and performance, and above all between a law-bound democracy and arbitrary rule. Getting soldiers used to following illegal orders and to disregarding their “duty to disobey” is a big step toward autocracy.

As his dithering over whether to bomb Iran showed, Trump has a problem: fascism bends inexorably toward war, but much of his appeal lies in his promise to end America's foreign conflicts. Part of the solution is to mount one-off spectacles: B-2 stealth bombers dropping 30,000-pound bunker busters. The other part is to repatriate the idea of boots on the ground. Like iPhones and pharmaceuticals, that kind of war will no longer be made abroad. It will be manufactured all over America.

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