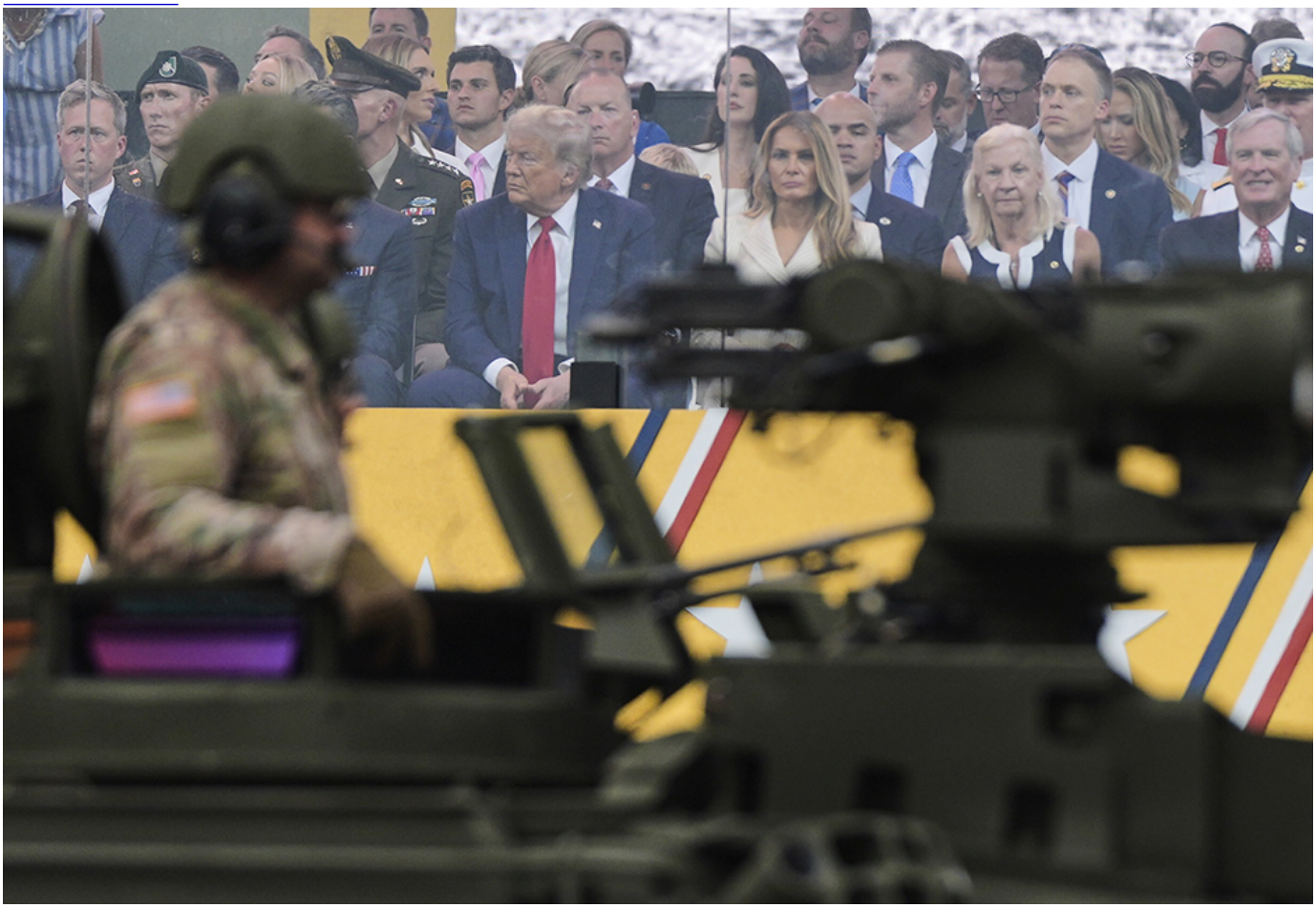
Opinion

NCR Voices



President Donald Trump attends a military parade commemorating the Army's 250th anniversary, coinciding with his 79th birthday, on June 14, 2025, in Washington. (AP Photo/Julia Demaree Nikhinson)



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On both coasts, President Donald Trump is misusing the U.S. military in ways that are deeply disturbing. In California, the Marines and the National Guard are deployed in Los Angeles. In Washington, D.C., the military is a prop for the president's birthday celebration. In a sad twist of fate, the 250th anniversary of the birth of the U.S. Army coincided with Trump's birthday.

The relationship between the military and the presidency has always been a complicated one. George Washington was commissioned to lead the Continental Army stationed outside Boston in 1775, a year before Thomas Jefferson set quill to scroll and declared the reasons for American independence. Washington led the Constitutional Convention and became our first president. Thankfully, he was committed to civilian control of the military.

He was followed in the presidency by three statesmen with no significant military experience: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Our nation's fifth president, James Monroe, had served in the army with valor during the American Revolution and was wounded in the Battle of Trenton. He was succeeded by John Quincy Adams, who had no military background. In turn, Adams was succeeded by Gen. Andrew Jackson.

The antebellum period was similar: William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor were both celebrated military leaders before becoming president, but the others were not. Abraham Lincoln never served in the military and had to face off with Gen. George McClellan for the presidency in 1864. The Civil War produced five veterans who went on to become president: Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley.

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Similarly, in the 20th century, heroic military service was a key part of the biographies of Theodore Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and George H.W. Bush, but not the others. The 21st century was ushered in with the first known draft dodger in the White House, Bill Clinton. As I noted on Memorial Day, members of the nation's elite are no longer expected to serve in our nation's armed forces, a loss in solidarity that will be a part of the historical tale about how our nation lost its way.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom challenged Trump's decision to federalize the National Guard in court. On June 12, a judge sided with Newsom and ordered control of the National Guard returned to the governor, but within hours, an appeals court placed a stay on that order, giving the Trump administration time to appeal.

Federalizing the National Guard to quell political protests has happened before. Eisenhower federalized the National Guard in Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce the desegregation order at Central High School, a key moment in the Civil Rights struggle. Kennedy did the same when George Wallace refused to desegregate the University of Alabama.

Sending the Marines onto the streets of an American city is a different, and more sinister, thing. "They are trained to use their weapons, to actually have their weapons to do their personal protection. This is crowd control," said Major Gen. Scott Sherman. "This is stuff that we do not do usually." They are not being sent because they are needed on the ground. They are being used by the president to provoke. The video of Marines detaining a civilian was truly chilling.

In my many years living in Washington, D.C., I came to know several officers in our armed forces. To a person, they understood that the military has no role in politics. Yes, there are some generals who work in Democratic administrations and some in Republican. Gen. Wesley Clark ran for president in 2004 and I worked on his campaign.

But they know, and take deep pride in the knowledge, that the military represents the country and its Constitution, not any political agenda or person. Without subpoena power, the Democrats cannot force the Marines to testify about the distress with which they received this order to be deployed on domestic soil.



Vintage military vehicles line up during a military parade to commemorate the U.S. Army's 250th Birthday in Washington on June 14, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Nathan Howard)

As for Saturday's parade, including the military in presidential inaugural parades and funerals is the norm. Look back at the funeral procession of Franklin Roosevelt: Military accompanied the body and marched en masse after the cortege. The same occurred when the nation buried Kennedy.

The military plays less of a role in the funerals of presidents who do not die in office, but they are still prominent, as we saw at Jimmy Carter's funeral last year.

Why does Trump's military parade and his deployment of the National Guard seem different? Because of him. If you don't like the president, these things are evidence of his yearning for dictatorial powers. If you do like him, they seem harmless and, in the case of the National Guard deployment, necessary.

Sending in the Marines is different. Democrats and others should focus on that.

Meanwhile, Catholic leaders need to lead. Bishops where Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids are taking place should lead peaceful protests. San Diego's bishop-designate, Michael Pham, announced plans for Catholics to accompany immigrants when they make their mandated court appearances on June 20. ICE shows up at these courtrooms, nabs people who are there to comply with the law, and deports them. Other Catholic leaders should follow Pham's lead.

Don't send in the Marines. Send in the clergy!

Related: Trump's big, beautiful birthday parade puts US militarism on display
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