

# ***Military Might, Protest Power***

President Trump held a military parade the same day that hundreds of protests took place, in what amounted to a split-screen show of force.

David E. Sanger, ~~The New York Times~~ National Edition, June 15, 2025, A1.

President Trump presided over a show of American military might in the nation's capital on Saturday evening, a celebration of the 250th anniversary of the United States Army that became a test of wills and competing imagery, with [demonstrators around the country](#) decrying his expansion of executive power.

Mr. Trump sat in a reviewing stand on Constitution Avenue as armored vehicles dating from two World Wars and overflights of 80-year old bombers and modern helicopters shook downtown Washington. The city was locked down, divided by a wall of tall, black crowd-control fences designed to assure that the parade, the first of its kind since American troops returned from the Gulf War in 1991, was an uninterrupted demonstration of history and American power.

It went off without a hitch, but also without even a nod to the current moment. When Mr. Trump left his seat between his wife, Melania Trump, and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, it was to swear in new soldiers — “Have a great life,” he told them after the brief ceremony — and then, at sundown, to recall the Army's greatest moments.

He invoked George Washington and recalled Gettysburg. Yet he spoke more to the Army's power than to its purpose. “Time and again, America's enemies have learned that you threaten the American people, soldiers are coming for you. Your defeat will be certain, your demise will be final, and your downfall will be total and complete.”

Hours before he left the White House, the day had already encapsulated the sharpness of America's divide over immigration, free speech and Mr. Trump's determination to reshape the government, universities and cultural institutions to adopt his worldview.

By design, military parades are part national celebration and part international intimidation, and Mr. Trump has wanted one in Washington since he attended a Bastille Day parade in Paris in 2017. Formally, the parade celebrates the decision by the Second Continental Congress on June 14, 1775, to raise a unified, lightly armed force of colonialists after the shock of the battles with British forces at Lexington and Concord. That army, which George Washington took command of a month later, ultimately expelled the far larger, better armed colonial force.

But no celebration of history takes place in a political vacuum. And protesters in large cities and small towns from Seattle to Key West showed up in overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrations against how Mr. Trump was making use of the modern force. His decisions over the past week to federalize the National Guard and call the Marines into the streets of Los Angeles, in support of his immigration roundups, has supercharged a debate about whether he is abusing the powers of the commander in chief.



Demonstrators at a “No Kings” protest on Saturday in Atlanta, one of hundreds such protests planned across the country. Credit...Dustin Chambers for The New York Times

It was a split-screen show of force. Roughly 2,000 protests, under the slogan “No Kings,” pushed back against what the crowds decried as authoritarian overreach. While the big-city rallies attracted the attention and the cameras, smaller events were organized in rural areas, including three dozen in Indiana, a state Mr. Trump won last November by 19 points.

In Dallas, another stronghold of Mr. Trump’s support, crowds of protesters stretched across a wide street for at least five blocks. The Houston protest looked more like a block party, with dances to Mexican music and cool-offs in a fountain.

But in Los Angeles, which has seen a week of demonstrations, car-burnings and episodic violence, a large crowd gathered downtown, spreading over several city blocks. As the evening wore on and an 8 p.m. curfew approached, tensions rose, with the police using chemical irritants in an attempt to disperse some protesters from a complex of federal buildings and officers on horseback charging toward groups of others and swinging their batons to break them up.

Back in Washington, the organizers of the America250 events, for which this is the first big production, sold a “dedicated V.I.P. experience” to large donors, and red MAGA hats to the president’s supporters. It is also Mr. Trump’s 79th birthday, though he has insisted the celebration is about the army, not him. Organizers expected veterans of the Korea and Vietnam conflicts to turn out along with those who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, two wars that Mr. Trump — and many Democrats — have declared were wastes of lives and money.

Mr. Trump has defended the spending of [as much as \\$45 million](#) — including the cost of repairing Washington’s streets from the damage expected from rolling 60-ton tanks down Constitution Avenue — as a small price to pay to stoke national pride and to remind the world of America’s hard power. He told an interviewer on NBC last month that the price tag was “peanuts compared to the value of doing it.”

“We have the greatest missiles in the world,” he continued. “We have the greatest submarines in the world. We have the greatest Army tanks in the world. We have the greatest weapons in the world. And we’re going to celebrate it.”

To some of Mr. Trump’s critics, it was conduct unbecoming a superpower. In the first Trump term, that view was shared by military leaders who dissuaded him from replicating the French show of force. They have since been ousted, replaced by true believers like Mr. Hegseth.

[Every minute was broadcast on Fox News](#) and other conservative networks and streaming services, while the legacy cable networks kept to their ordinary programming. One Fox broadcaster declared the parade showed that “America means business,” and another argued that the show of force rolling alongside the Mall would provide “succor to our allies” and “strike a little bit of fear and a little bit of deterrence” into American enemies.

But in the run-up to the parade, Mr. Trump’s critics argued that such a display could do just the opposite, making the country look as if it were yearning for past glories while ignoring the risks of treating allies as if they are a burden.

Mr. Trump’s political advisers bet that half the country or more would enjoy watching the display of Army history, from the World War I tanks to the twin-prop B-25 Mitchells that swept over neighborhoods in northwest Washington on their way to the flyover, as much as Mr. Trump’s ever-evolving definition of what “America First” means to his presidency. Parades are pure showmanship, and Mr. Trump is the master showman.

Yet a military parade is also an unvarnished celebration of America’s hard power, even if this one was dominated by huge equipment, like the M-1 Abrams tank, that seems antiquated in an age of drones and cyberweapons. (Of the 31 Abrams tanks given to Ukraine over the past two years, only a handful remain operational; most were taken out by the Russians or sidelined by breakdowns.)

And it comes at a moment the administration has been ridiculing as wasteful such efforts as providing global aid, battling H.I.V. or backing basic research at universities that Mr. Trump has gone to war against. The parade’s estimated cost will amount to about a fifth of the annual budget of the Voice of America, which had millions of listeners around the world until Mr. Trump took it off the air this spring.





A military vehicle positioned on the National Mall in preparation for the parade. The heavy machinery was expected to damage Washington's streets. Credit...Eric Lee for The New York Times

The protests, which organizers deliberately kept outside Washington to avoid focusing more attention on the military celebration, had been planned for many weeks, as opposition to the administration's [efforts to dismiss expert opinion](#), oust the “deep state” and silence critics has mounted.

Mr. Trump's decision to move 4,000 National Guard troops and 700 Marines into Los Angeles asserted a role for the military at home, which was exactly what had given the Continental Congress pause about creating a colonial army at all. That same concern, 250 years later, was expected to give the weekend protests mass and weight. They were further fueled by Mr. Trump's speech at Fort Bragg in North Carolina last week, when he lumped in peaceful protesters with “troublemakers, agitators, insurrectionists,” and later said anyone protesting in Washington would be met with “very big force.”

In the run-up to the parade, those differences broke out on Capitol Hill, when Mr. Hegseth defended the use of troops at home and suggested preparations were underway “if there are other riots, in places where law enforcement officers are threatened,” so that “we would have the capability to surge National Guard there.”

Senator Patty Murray, Democrat of Washington State, lashed out at him. “You are deploying the American military to police the American people; you are sending the National Guard into California without the governor's request, sending the Marines not after foreign threats, but after American protesters; and now President Trump is promising heavy force against peaceful protesters at his D.C. military parade.”

“Threatening to use our own troops on our own citizens at such scale is unprecedented, it is unconstitutional, and it is downright un-American,” she concluded.

The organizers of the protest marches ranged from the American Civil Liberties Union to abortion rights and gun violence groups, but also included the “Hands Off!” protesters who argue Mr. Trump has threatened Social Security, Medicaid and education budgets.

They folded together, though, under the “No Kings” group, which called for a “day of defiance” on Saturday. “We want to create contrast,” said Leah Greenberg, a co-founder of a group called Indivisible that is organizing the protest in Philadelphia, where the Continental Congress met to create that first army force. “Not conflict.”

**David E. Sanger covers the Trump administration and a range of national security issues. He has been a Times journalist for more than four decades and has written four books on foreign policy and national security challenges.**

**A version of this article appears in print on June 15, 2025, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Military Might, Protest Power.**