

# Clinton and Trump bow to the military

Patrick Martin  
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The nationally televised “Commander-in-Chief Forum,” held before an audience of soldiers and ex-soldiers in New York City, was a demonstration of the militarization of American society and the prostration of official politics to the military-intelligence apparatus.

The two major-party presidential candidates, Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump, were accorded half an hour each to take questions from interviewer Matt Lauer and from veterans selected from the audience.

The militaristic framework was established in the forum’s location—the Sea, Air & Space Museum on board the dry-docked former aircraft carrier *Intrepid*—and reinforced in the opening video prepared by NBC, the event’s broadcaster, which was a montage of American presidents ordering troops into battle, from John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

There was no suggestion that any of the wars conducted by these presidents, from Vietnam to Libya and Syria, was in any way questionable. There was no mention of the mass opposition to the war in Vietnam, or the millions who protested Bush’s decision to invade Iraq.

Matt Lauer underscored the identification of the presidency and war making in his introduction, declaring, “Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are vying not only to become president of the United States, but one of them will become the leader of the most potent military force the world has ever seen.”

The forum was the first back-to-back appearance of the two leading presidential candidates, and its unstated premise was that those in the military or who have been in the military should have the first right to screen the candidates seeking to exercise the powers of the commander-in-chief.

This conception stands in direct opposition to the longstanding constitutional principle of civilian control

over the military. The president is designated “commander-in-chief” in the US Constitution, not to elevate the role of the military, but just the reverse, to assert the subordination of the military to the highest elected civilian authority.

Even within the Pentagon itself, the highest official is a civilian appointed by the president as Secretary of Defense, and the top military officer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is chosen by the president for a two-year term to serve as his military adviser, with no command of any military unit.

The active-duty military is barred by law and policy from participating in politics. Soldiers may not run for office, speak at partisan rallies, or conduct a wide range of other political activity. The political restrictions on soldiers while in uniform are even greater.

These institutional arrangements were established in the period when the US ruling elite still felt compelled to observe democratic norms, and when the bulk of military personnel were recruited through conscription, meaning that the vast majority of soldiers were in uniform for a relatively brief term before returning to civilian life.

After the debacle of Vietnam forced an end to the draft, the armed services were transformed into an all-volunteer force, creating a large-scale professional military for the first time in US history. Today, after more than 25 years of continual American war making around the world, this military force has emerged as a definite social caste, increasingly asserting its independent role in political life.

In the last two decades, it has become commonplace to see an array of retired generals and admirals on the dais of Democratic and Republican national conventions—a once unheard-of spectacle. This year, retired officers gave major speeches in prime time. General Michael Flynn, the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, spoke at the Republican

convention in support of Trump, while General John Allen, the former US commander in Afghanistan, addressed the Democratic convention on behalf of Clinton.

Trump and Clinton have vied to assemble the longest list of supporters among retired military officers. After the Trump campaign released a list of 88 generals and admirals Tuesday, the Clinton campaign countered with a list of 95. Clinton noted that Trump's support fell well below the hundreds of military endorsements of previous Republican nominees, boasting, "I'm doing better than any Democrat" in collecting such support.

Given their acceptance of the principle that their main task as commander-in-chief is to satisfy the military brass and take its "advice," the differences between Clinton and Trump on foreign policy shrink to complete insignificance. This was evident in Wednesday night's forum, where both candidates did little more than repeat campaign talking points and trade insults.

A few of the questions from the audience of veterans, many of whom have suffered the impact of warmongering by Democratic and Republican presidents alike, exposed this bipartisan agreement.

One ex-soldier asked Clinton if she could respond to those who were concerned about "your hawkish foreign policy" that led to "wasteful war campaigns in which our peers, servicewomen and men, continue to be killed and wounded." Clinton responded to this criticism of her 2002 vote to authorize the war in Iraq and her leading role in the US-NATO attack on Libya in 2011, by pointing to Trump's also supporting both wars.

Clinton combined such evasions with outright lies, as when she pledged never to return US ground troops to Iraq or deploy them to Syria—perhaps the first promise she would break upon entering the White House next January.

Trump delivered his usual bombast, including the claim to have a secret plan to defeat ISIS, while reiterating his lament that previous US administrations had bungled the war in Iraq by failing to seize the country's oil fields. "We should have taken the oil," he declared.

In a speech earlier in the day, Trump made a bogus appeal to antiwar sentiment, denouncing Clinton as "trigger-happy" in her approach to wars in the Middle East, while reassuring the Pentagon brass that a Trump

administration would pour trillions into expansion of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines.

What the "Commander-in-Chief Forum" made clear is that whether Clinton or Trump becomes the next US president, the US financial aristocracy and its military-intelligence apparatus will remain the ultimate decision-makers, dictating a policy of escalating imperialist aggression and violence against the population of the world.



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