

Fourth of July 2019: Militarism and the specter of dictatorship

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The means of defense against foreign danger have been always the instruments of tyranny at home. Among the Romans it was a standing maxim to excite a war, whenever a revolt was apprehended. Throughout all Europe, the armies kept up under the pretext of defending have enslaved the people. (James Madison, June 1787)

The official celebration of the Fourth of July holiday in Washington today will be marked by an unprecedented presence of the military as the backdrop for a speech by Trump directed to an audience of politically connected VIPs, including major campaign contributors.

At Trump's orders, two M1-A1 Abrams tanks and two Bradley Fighting Vehicles (armored cars) were dispatched from Ft. Stewart, Georgia for the event. The movement of these massive implements of war by railroad car and flatbed truck, coming into Washington in the dead of night to avoid blocking traffic, has dominated American television news for several days.

The vehicles have taken up stationary positions near the Lincoln Memorial because they are too heavy to drive down Constitution Avenue or any other street. Their presence serves an important political purpose: to give the Fourth of July celebration in Washington a militaristic and repressive character. The same vehicles that smashed their way into Baghdad in 2003 have been rolled out in support of Trump's political efforts to build a fascistic movement based on anti-immigrant repression and violence.

Trump will have air cover for his speech as well. Warplanes are being flown in from all over the country, according to Pentagon sources who spoke with CNN. These include Navy F-35Cs from Naval Air Station Lemoore in California; Apache helicopter gunships from Ft. Campbell, Kentucky; a B-2 stealth bomber from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri; and the "Blue Angels" F/A-18 unit from the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida. Other warplanes, including F-22

Raptors, VC-25s, Osprey tilt-rotor planes and more F/A-18s, will come from nearer bases in Virginia and Maryland.

The "Salute to America" is scheduled for the early evening, two hours before the fireworks. Trump will deliver his remarks to a carefully selected audience consisting of VIPs seated close to the podium—with tickets distributed through the Republican National Committee and the Trump reelection campaign—and thousands of military personnel. Event organizers provided 5,000 tickets to the Pentagon.

To reinforce the militaristic character of the event, Trump will be joined on the platform by an array of military leaders. While four of the five members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have absented themselves—reportedly to avoid being displayed as Trump's acolytes—their deputies and many other military and civilian Pentagon officials will serve as the cheering section for Trump's address.

The Fourth of July 2019 does not take place in a political vacuum. Trump is asserting his role as commander-in-chief after dispatching the military to the US-Mexico border, where he is using both the soldiers and the Border Patrol to set up concentration camps for immigrant detainees. He has declared a "national emergency" to use Pentagon funds to build his border wall, in defiance of Congress. And he has just launched his re-election campaign with a fascistic rally steeped in anti-immigrant racism and appeals to violence against his political opponents.

Trump's political agenda is deeply unpopular. He faces new stirrings of militancy in the working class, expressed in strikes by teachers and industrial workers. There is widespread popular opposition to his moves towards war against Iran. There is broad sympathy for asylum seekers and refugees and outrage over their sadistic treatment.

That is why the administration increasingly seeks to

base its political survival not on conventional electoral politics, but on the police-military apparatus.

In one of his latest tweets, Trump declared that the purpose of the display of tanks and warplanes was “showing to the American people... the strongest and most advanced Military anywhere in the World.” This is an unintentionally revealing statement: the target audience for this display of weaponry is not a potential foreign adversary, but rather the American population. To put it plainly: Trump is staging a show of force aimed at intimidating potential domestic opposition, particularly from the working class.

Neither the Democratic Party nor the liberal media outlets aligned with it are capable of genuine opposition to the ultra-right trajectory of the Trump administration. The Democrats have primarily attacked Trump from the right, with bogus allegations of Russian intervention into the 2016 elections and claims that Trump is a Moscow stooge. They make no attempt to alert the American people to the threat to democratic rights emanating from the White House.

The Democrats fear a movement from below far more than they fear Trump, because that would threaten the profits and wealth of the ruling elite that both corporate-controlled parties represent and defend.

The Democratic Party has confined its opposition to the Fourth of July travesty to complaining about the cost, a theme also taken up in the media. Setting the tone for the media response is the *New York Times*, which published an “Editorial Observer” column Wednesday written by Alex Kingsbury, a member of its editorial board, under the headline, “Let Trump Have His Birthday Party for America.”

The editorial comment combines reactionary politics with complacency, cowardice and unseriousness. Kingsbury admits the unprecedented character of Trump’s Fourth of July event, but dismisses it with a series of sarcastic jokes, as though Trump were a figure of ridicule rather than an immense threat to democratic rights.

Kingsbury urges his readers to ignore the Trump event and let “the show, complete with flyovers and armored vehicles, buckle under the weight of its own absurdities and contradictions.” He concludes, “The rest of us have the hard-won freedom to change the channel if we wish.”

Behind the complacency, the *Times* shares Trump’s adulation of the military, which Kingsbury describes as “one of the nation’s most trusted nonpartisan institutions.” He criticizes a former CIA and Pentagon

official for warning that “the Fourth of July should be reserved to celebrate the software of our democratic ideals and freedoms, not the hardware of the world’s finest military,” responding, “Maybe. But America has the capacity for both.”

The *Times* and the Democratic Party, like Trump, speak for an American ruling class that increasingly looks to the military as the last bulwark against a sea of troubles, both domestic and foreign. There is not a trace, in any section of the US ruling elite, of the genuine commitment to democracy and opposition to authoritarianism that animated the founders of the American republic.

Who within the media or state could recite the words of James Madison, quoted above, as anything more than a self-condemnation?

The Fourth of July marks one of the great liberating events in human history: the issuance of the Declaration of Independence as the opening shot of the American bourgeois democratic revolution. The Declaration written by Thomas Jefferson is an imperishable text, with words that have inspired those fighting against tyranny and oppression for more than two centuries.

It asserts, for the first time in recorded history, the right of popular revolution: “That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

Who can read these words today without seeing in them, changing what needs to be changed, a condemnation of the present state of American society? In the end, Trump’s militarist celebration is an expression not of strength, but of weakness and fear. Behind all the bombast is the awareness on the part of the ruling class that it confronts challenges to its domination throughout the world, and above all within the United States itself.



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