

Amid “No Kings” protests, the Trump administration flexes military muscle to intimidate opposition

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On Saturday, as millions across the United States joined the “No Kings” demonstrations, the Trump administration staged a chilling display of militarism and intimidation at Camp Pendleton in Southern California.

Under the pretext of commemorating the 250th anniversary of the United States Marine Corps, Trump’s political enforcers organized an immense warlike spectacle involving live-fire artillery, amphibious landings and low-flying aircraft.

The deliberate timing of this display, coinciding with the eruption of nationwide anti-authoritarian protests, exposes its real purpose. It was a political demonstration of force, staged to threaten the population.

The exercise, which temporarily shut down a 17-mile stretch of Interstate 5 between San Diego and Los Angeles, brought one of the nation’s most vital transportation corridors to a standstill. Under orders from California Governor Gavin Newsom, the state closed the freeway citing “safety grounds” as Marines fired 155-millimeter howitzers over the road. Thousands of civilians were stranded for hours, and commercial traffic was paralyzed. The use of live ordnance so close to a public highway underscored the recklessness—and the unmistakable political character—of the event.

Vice President JD Vance presided over the Camp Pendleton event, delivering a political address disguised as patriotic celebration. He glorified the “warrior spirit” of the Marines, denounced “partisan politics” and “diversity quotas” in the armed forces and blamed congressional Democrats for threatening soldiers’ pay by stalling government funding.

Vance’s critique of “partisan politics” was in fact a call for unquestioning obedience: any dissent, any acknowledgment of civilian oversight or any insistence that the military remain under democratic control was

implicitly condemned, subordinating the armed forces to the ambitions of a would-be dictator.

Secretary of War Pete Hegseth’s remarks removed any pretense that the event was a holiday commemoration. His language was nakedly militaristic, saturated with the ethos of violence and domination that characterizes the Trump administration’s drive toward dictatorship.

“Your strength is in your unity of purpose,” he declared. “It’s in your shared mission. It’s in your oath to the Constitution,” the same Constitution the Trump administration is trampling. “You see, you are set apart. You’re not civilians. You’re devil dogs, leathernecks, United States Marines.”

In language indistinguishable from fascist propaganda, Hegseth glorified killing and destruction: “You are set apart for a distinct purpose. You kill bad guys and break things for a living. ... You close with and destroy the enemy for a living.”

The Marine Corps’ public relations department described the event as a “routine training exercise,” though its scale—1,300 Marines, 4,000 sailors and the use of amphibious craft, howitzers and aircraft—was anything but routine. The location was “Red Beach,” the site of training for amphibious landings since World War II. According to state officials, California authorities were informed of the overflight of live munitions near Interstate 5 less than 48 hours before the event.

The Pentagon claim that this exercise was safe was quickly exposed as a lie. Shrapnel from one of the live rounds reportedly struck a California Highway Patrol (CHP) vehicle in Vance’s motorcade, narrowly avoiding a disaster that could have killed or injured civilians, exposing both the recklessness of the operation and the utter contempt of the ruling elite for public safety.

Governor Newsom’s criticisms, widely covered by the

media, were not to the militarization itself but to what he called “a lack of coordination” between federal and state authorities. “Anything we can do to celebrate our vets, to celebrate our heroes, I’m all for,” Newsom stated. “Let’s just do it in coordination and collaboration with state and local leaders. That continues to be a struggle with this administration.”

He further elaborated in a message posted to X on Sunday after the CHP report on the incident was released: “We love our Marines and owe a debt of gratitude to Camp Pendleton, but next time, the Vice President and the White House shouldn’t be so reckless with people’s lives for their vanity projects.”

Behind this attempt to downplay the significance of the event, there is an ominous subtext. Trump, Vance and Hegseth regard the state of California as enemy territory, no different, from their perspective, than Venezuela or Cuba. The assertion of federal power over the largest US state contains more than a whiff of civil war.

The timing and location were deliberate. Closing Interstate 5, a key artery between two major West Coast metropolitan regions, symbolized the militarization of everyday life and the subordination of civil society to the armed forces. Thousands of commuters became an unintended audience to the administration’s message: Roads, skies and public spaces are instruments of military power.

The nationwide “No Kings” demonstrations, occurring in hundreds of cities simultaneously, expressed mass opposition to Trump’s authoritarian trajectory, including attacks on immigrants, democratic rights and social programs, like Medicare, Medicaid and WIC, as well as efforts to dismantle scientific and health institutions. That the protests coincided with an unprecedented military pageant underscores the ruling class’s preparation to confront growing social opposition with force.

Trump’s politicized use of military spectacle has many precedents: from the July 4, 2019 “Salute to America” in Washington D.C., to 2020 orders deploying troops against anti-police violence protests. Since summer, he has mobilized forces in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago and Memphis, signaling a broader domestic militarization. Just as violent operations targeted Chicago residents, the invocation of the Marine Corps’ “amphibious legacy” during civil unrest conveys a clear message: The armed forces are being positioned not against foreign adversaries but against the American people themselves.

Viewed in the broader social context, the spectacle assumes an even graver significance. Across the United

States, cities are being transformed into armed camps. National Guard units patrol neighborhoods under the pretext of “maintaining order,” while social programs are gutted, education and healthcare starved of funds and billions funneled into the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security. The ruling elite is not preparing for external defense but for class war against the population itself.

The complicity of both capitalist parties in this process is unmistakable. Both defend the same class interests: the preservation of capitalist profit, the suppression of working class resistance and the projection of US military power abroad.

Behind the patriotic pomp and martial ceremony, the ruling class is gripped by fear. Rising inequality, collapsing public services and deteriorating living standards have created explosive conditions. The “No Kings” demonstrations were an initial expression of this opposition, and the elite’s response is repression, not reform.

The Camp Pendleton event was not a commemoration but a rehearsal: a live exercise in domestic military coordination involving the vice president, active-duty troops, police and state agencies.

The militarization of American life marks a decisive turn. The fusion of military and civilian authority—the use of armed forces as an instrument of internal control—has defined every modern authoritarian regime, from the German Freikorps to the Chilean junta. The same process is now underway in the United States.

The working class must draw the necessary conclusions. Defense of democratic rights cannot rely on Democrats, state officials or the military hierarchy. It requires independent, organized mobilization, uniting workers of all races and regions against capitalism and war. The Camp Pendleton display is a warning: The same forces that wage endless wars abroad are being turned inward. Only a conscious, socialist working class movement can halt the descent into dictatorship and end the system that breeds militarism and oppression.



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