

ANALYSIS & RECOMMENDATIONS

THE PERILS OF POLITICIZING THE U.S. MILITARY

How recent departures from the longstanding apolitical standard of the American armed forces could weaken our national security

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary	2
Introduction: A Sacred American Tradition	4
Understanding the Apolitical Standard	6
Domestic Deployments: From Exceptional to Routine	11
Institutional and Symbolic Politicization of the Armed Forces	21
The Consequences of Politicization	24
Recommendations for Preserving an Apolitical Force	26
Conclusion: Upholding an Apolitical Military	27

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than two centuries, the United States has sustained a defining democratic norm: a military that is apolitical, professional, and subordinate to civilian authority. This has been a source of enduring national strength, assuring Americans that the armed forces serve the Constitution rather than any political faction, maintaining bipartisan support in Congress, and demonstrating to allies and adversaries alike that U.S. power reflects national interests.

The longstanding American tradition of an apolitical military is under strain.

In recent years, the U.S. Armed Forces have been drawn into politically charged domestic deployments, senior officers and legal advisors have been removed or reassigned without clear justification, and military events have been used in partisan contexts.

Public trust in the military is not guaranteed: even the perception of politicization undermines confidence, weakens recruitment, and erodes bipartisan support. Frequent domestic deployments also strain readiness and state–federal relations.

This paper examines the laws and norms that safeguard the military’s apolitical character, recent developments that blur those boundaries, and ways to preserve political neutrality.

Politicization occurs when the military is used — or appears to be used — for partisan purposes rather than for national defense.

It differs from legitimate civilian control: elected leaders rightly set policy, but they must not use the armed forces to serve partisan agendas, reward loyalty, or project political strength.

Laws and norms guiding civil-military relations are being tested.

The *Posse Comitatus Act* and *Insurrection Act* set limits on domestic military use, but broad interpretations have blurred the line between defense and law enforcement. DoD Directive 1344.10, the Hatch Act, and professional norms uphold constitutional loyalty and the integrity of military advice. When that advice is distorted or ignored for political reasons, decision-making suffers and civilian control weakens. Once these guardrails erode, restoring trust is difficult.

Domestic deployments, once extraordinary, have become increasingly routine.

National Guard and active-duty troops have been used for missions ranging from immigration enforcement to urban “crime suppression,” sometimes over state and local objections. This risks normalizing military involvement in civilian life and eroding the principle that public safety belongs under accountable civilian control.

Removals of senior military leaders and politicized use of military symbols are undermining confidence in military neutrality.

Recent dismissals of senior officers and legal advisors have raised concerns about the stability of the chain of command and the independence of professional military advice. The replacement of Judge Advocates General — who safeguard adherence to U.S. and international

law — has suggested that loyalty may be valued over candor, discouraging open advice and weakening the foundation of civilian control. At the same time, the use of troops, bases, and ceremonies in partisan settings has blurred the line between military service and political messaging, eroding morale and public trust in the military’s apolitical character.

We must preserve an apolitical military to maintain its professionalism and public trust.

Policymakers and the public can ensure the armed forces remain nonpartisan. Preserving this principle requires reaffirming professional military advice, transparency in deployments and personnel decisions, and adherence to the rule of law that shields the military from political pressure. The U.S. military’s credibility and legitimacy depend on its apolitical nature — and once that trust is lost, it is difficult to restore.

RECOMMENDATIONS

★
Strengthen oversight and transparency

★
Reaffirm the value of professional military advice

★
Protect legal and advisory independence

★
Clarify deployment laws and set standing guidance

★
Educate the public about the military’s role

INTRODUCTION: A SACRED AMERICAN TRADITION

For more than two centuries, the U.S. Armed Forces have remained above partisan politics. At the heart of our civil-military system lies a simple but enduring principle: the military serves the nation alone, not any party, faction, or individual leader. This principle is embedded in the Constitution, which established civilian control over the military by making the president the commander in chief and dividing responsibility for the armed forces between the executive and legislative branches. The Framers' intent was to ensure that no single branch could wield military power for illegitimate ends.

That framework depends on mutual restraint between civilian and military leaders. Civilian leaders must avoid politicizing the military or using it as a tool for partisan or personal gain, while military leaders must remain apolitical, offering candid, professional advice and executing lawful orders without regard to party or politics. When either side fails to uphold these norms, the balance that sustains civilian control — and public confidence in it — erodes.

AN APOLITICAL MILITARY IS A CORNERSTONE OF
THE REPUBLIC, ESSENTIAL TO THE EFFECTIVENESS
AND LEGITIMACY OF THE ARMED SERVICES AND TO
THE HEALTH OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY ITSELF.

Adherence to these principles has long earned the military bipartisan support in Congress and the respect of the American people. It has been a strategic advantage at home and abroad — reassuring Americans that their military is accountable to elected civilian leaders, politically neutral, and governed by law, and signaling to allies and adversaries alike that the use of American military power reflects national interests rather than partisan agendas. Most importantly, it has ensured peaceful transfers of power: each incoming president can trust that the armed forces' loyalty is to the Constitution, not to a particular leader or party.

In recent years, commitment to these principles has begun to erode. Large-scale domestic deployments, the firing or early reassignment of senior military leaders without explanation, and the use of military settings for partisan events have raised alarm among policymakers,

veterans, and the public that a foundational tenet of our democracy is being undermined. Even the perception of politicization threatens the legitimacy and effectiveness of the force.

We write as former secretaries of the U.S. Armed Forces and retired four-star admirals and generals who have served under administrations of both parties.¹ This paper examines the impact of the growing perception and reality of politicization within the U.S. Armed Forces—a trend that risks weakening national security decision-making, eroding civil–military trust, and undermining democratic norms. This is not a partisan issue but a constitutional and institutional one.

In the pages that follow, we define “politicization” of the military, examine the legal and normative guardrails designed to prevent it, draw lessons from history, review recent trends of politicization, and offer concrete steps to keep the force politically neutral, professional, and trusted. Our purpose is to reaffirm first principles: an apolitical military is a cornerstone of the Republic, essential to the effectiveness and legitimacy of the armed services and to the health of American democracy itself.

¹ “Count Every Hero – Protecting Military Voting Rights & Defending American Democracy,” accessed October 17, 2025, <https://counteveryhero.org/>.

UNDERSTANDING THE APOLITICAL STANDARD

Defining Politicization of the Military

Clarity is critical in any discussion of national security. “Politicization of the military” refers to the actual or perceived use of military personnel, authority, or resources to advance partisan² political goals or narratives rather than to defend the nation or uphold constitutional principles. It can take many forms: when elected officials use military symbols or personnel to promote partisan agendas; when political leaders advance or sideline officers based on loyalty above merit; when military leaders tailor their advice to suit political preferences; or when active-duty officers engage in overt partisan activity.

Politicization is not only about actions, but also about perception and culture. Even the appearance that military decisions or leaders are being influenced by partisan interests can erode public trust and damage the military’s legitimacy. Preserving an apolitical force requires restraint and mutual responsibility: civilian leaders must refrain from using the military as a political instrument, and military leaders must avoid conduct that could suggest partisan alignment.

This distinction separates legitimate civilian oversight from actions that undermine the apolitical foundation of the armed forces. Partisan political goals are those that serve primarily to uncritically advance the interests of a political party or officeholder rather than a national interest capable of commanding broad bipartisan support.

Civilian control of the military is a cornerstone of American governance. The Constitution grants the president authority as commander in chief³ while vesting Congress with power to declare war and to raise, regulate, and fund the armed forces.⁴ This division ensures accountability to the people, guards against military dominance over civil and political life, and creates checks and balances that prevent any single actor from using the military for partisan or authoritarian purposes. The Framers — reacting to British abuses of standing armies — deliberately designed this system to keep military power subordinate to elected civilian authority.

An apolitical military serves the Constitution, not a party or a person. Service members are prohibited by law from campaigning or appearing at political events in uniform, and senior leaders are expected to maintain neutrality in public statements. These norms protect both

² *Partisan* is defined as “strongly supporting a person, principle, or political party, often without considering or judging the matter very carefully.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. “partisan (adjective),” accessed October 21, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/partisan>.

³ U.S. Const. art. II, § 2, cl. 1.

⁴ U.S. Const. art. I, § 8, cls. 12–14.

the public and the force itself, which depends on broad public confidence and the willingness of citizens across the political spectrum to serve.

That trust — what General George C. Marshall called a “sacred trust” — is one of the military’s greatest strategic assets.⁵ Built over nearly 250 years, it can be lost quickly if the armed forces are seen as an arm of political power rather than a national institution.

Civil-Military Relations: Legal, Regulatory, and Normative Guardrails

The U.S. system of civil–military relations rests on a combination of legal limits, formal regulations, and professional norms designed to keep military power out of partisan politics and domestic affairs unrelated to national security, including that the military not be used to police American cities. These guardrails define not only what the military may do, but how civilian and military leaders interact — grounded in candor, restraint, and mutual respect. Upholding them is essential to maintaining public trust and to preserving the integrity of professional military advice.

Legal Guardrails: Posse Comitatus Act and Insurrection Act

The Posse Comitatus Act (PCA) of 1878 is the cornerstone of these safeguards. It prohibits federal armed forces from performing domestic law enforcement functions unless expressly authorized by the Constitution or Congress.⁶ The Act applies to the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Space Force.⁷ National Guard units are an exception: when operating under state authority (Title 32 or State Active Duty), they are not bound by the PCA; once federalized (Title 10), they are.

The PCA draws a bright line between civilian law enforcement and military power. By barring the domestic use of federal troops except in narrowly defined circumstances, it ensures the full might of the U.S. military is not turned inward against Americans without explicit congressional authorization. This principle reflects a deep tradition, rooted in English common law’s *posse comitatus* concept and reinforced at the nation’s founding, that a standing army should defend the country from foreign threats — not patrol its own streets. Because the National Guard can operate in either state or federal status, clarity, restraint, and transparency in any domestic deployment are especially important.

⁵ Victoria Mayo, “Preserving a Nonpartisan Military,” edited by Natalia Angel, *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/preserving-nonpartisan-military>.

⁶ See 18 U.S.C. § 1385 - Use of Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force as posse comitatus. The relevant text states: “Whoever, except in cases and under circumstances expressly authorized by the Constitution or Act of Congress, willfully uses any part of the Army or the Air Force as a posse comitatus or otherwise to execute the laws shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than two years, or both.”

⁷ The Coast Guard, though part of the federal military, is exempt from the Posse Comitatus Act by virtue of having been granted broad law enforcement authority by Congress. See 14 U.S.C. §§ 2, 89, 91; 19 U.S.C. §§ 1401(i), 1709(b).

There are a few narrow exceptions to the PCA, most notably the Insurrection Act of 1807, which allows limited domestic use of the military to suppress rebellion, enforce federal law when states cannot or will not, or protect civil rights.^{8,9} By requiring clear statutory authorization and limiting conditions for use, the Act safeguards against political misuse of military power. Historically, presidents have invoked the Insurrection Act as an exception to the PCA only as a last resort. The most recent invocation of the Insurrection Act was in 1992, when President George H. W. Bush, at the request of California’s governor, deployed federal forces to Los Angeles to help quell riots following the Rodney King verdict — an appropriate, short-term, limited use under law.¹⁰

A STANDING ARMY SHOULD DEFEND THE COUNTRY FROM FOREIGN THREATS—NOT PATROL ITS OWN STREETS.

Regulatory Guardrails: DoD 1344.10, Service Policies, and the Hatch Act

Beyond statutory law, Department of Defense (DoD) regulations and service-level policies reinforce the military’s nonpartisan ethos. DoD Directive 1344.10¹¹ and each service’s political-activity rules^{12,13,14} prohibit active-duty personnel from participating in partisan events in uniform, using government property for campaign purposes, or endorsing candidates in an official capacity. The Hatch Act, a federal law, extends similar restrictions to

⁸ 10 U.S.C. §§ 251–255 (2018 ed. & supp.).

<https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title10/subtitleA/part1/chapter13&edition=prelim>.

⁹ The Insurrection Act predates the Posse Comitatus Act (PCA) by nearly a century, and the two are closely linked. The Insurrection Act affirms the president’s authority to use military force domestically in cases of rebellion or obstruction of federal law, a power lawfully exercised by President Lincoln during the Civil War to preserve the Union. After Reconstruction, the continued stationing of federal troops in the South became politically contentious, leading Congress to enact the PCA to limit domestic military use except as authorized by the Insurrection Act. Although the PCA arose from post-Reconstruction politics, it has since come to embody the principle that military force should be reserved for extraordinary circumstances of genuine rebellion, not routine law enforcement. This history remains instructive today, as much turns on how courts interpret terms like “rebellion” and other ambiguous language in the Insurrection Act. The Civil War experience suggests that “rebellion” refers to open, armed resistance and that even in such cases, domestic military use after hostilities should be limited and temporary.

¹⁰ Governor Wilson’s request was clear and limited in scope: federal forces were to assist local law enforcement only until order was restored. This approach reflected a narrow and time-bound use of Insurrection Act authorities. By contrast, open-ended deployments in response to public protests or other situations short of rebellion, particularly without state or local support, can create the perception of inappropriate use of these authorities and risk involving the military in domestic political matters.

¹¹ Department of Defense, *DoD Directive 1344.10: Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces*, February 19, 2008, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/134410p.pdf>.

¹² U.S. Navy, *ALNAV 24061/24: Guidance on Political Activities of Department of the Navy Personnel (Corrected Copy)*, July 17, 2024, https://www.mynavyhr.navy.mil/Portals/55/Messages/ALNAV/ALN2024/ALN24061.txt?ver=Gshur1JAR0_ynNu6T3Qwsg%3D%3D.

¹³ U.S. Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 086/24: Guidance on Political Campaigns and Activity*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.marines.mil/News/Messages/Messages-Display/Article/3685658/guidance-on-political-campaigns-and-activity/>.

¹⁴ Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, “Political Activity Dos and Don’ts for Airmen, Guardians, DoD Employees”, April 15, 2024, <https://www.spaceforce.mil/news/article-display/article/3741523/political-activity-dos-and-donts-for-airmen-guardians-dod-employees/>.

civilian DoD employees.¹⁵ Together, these measures ensure that military symbols, installations, and personnel remain distinct from partisan politics and that the military's credibility is not used for electoral advantage.

Senior leaders are also expected to maintain strict neutrality in public statements and to offer candid, apolitical advice to civilian authorities. These regulations ensure that military symbols, installations, and personnel remain distinct from partisan politics and that the military's credibility is not used for electoral advantage.

Normative Guardrails: Oath, Culture, and Professional Ethics

Equally vital are the norms and professional ethics that sustain the military's apolitical culture. The oath of office, codified in 5 U.S.C. § 3331, requires all service members to swear allegiance to the Constitution rather than to any individual or officeholder.¹⁶ Its historical purpose has been to establish and reinforce norms and to remind oath takers that their duty is to the Constitution rather than to a particular department or person. This principle underpins broader traditions such as keeping military installations and uniformed personnel out of partisan political theater.¹⁷ These norms are taught in training, reinforced by senior leaders, and sustained through professional culture and peer expectations. Together with legal and regulatory frameworks, they ensure military power remains subordinate to democratic control and that service members are protected from political manipulation and retaliation for professional military advice that may run counter to or be inconvenient to partisan aims.

When these guardrails are weakened — by politicized deployments, partisan appointments, or retaliation for professional advice — the risk grows that the military will be treated as a political instrument. Once eroded, these norms are difficult to restore.

The Core of Professional Military Advice

Central to the military's apolitical character is the principle of professional military advice. The duty of military leaders is to provide civilian leaders with frank, nonpartisan assessments of the military implications of proposed actions — the likelihood of success, the risks to troops and civilians, and the long-term effects on readiness and strategy. Military leaders provide their advice privately to civilian leaders and do not speak about their views publicly, in keeping with the principle of civilian control. Civilian leaders then weigh this advice alongside other considerations and issue lawful orders, which the military executes faithfully and without regard to party or politics.

¹⁵ 5 U.S.C. §§ 7321–7326 (2010).

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2010-title5/html/USCODE-2010-title5-partIII-subpartF-chap73-subchapIII.htm>.

¹⁶ U.S. Army, "Oath of Commissioned Officers," *The United States Army*, accessed October 17, 2025, <https://www.army.mil/values/officers.html>.

¹⁷ Donna Miles, "Rules Restrict Political Activity by DOD Personnel," *U.S. Department of Defense*, January 6, 2012, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/511702/rules-restrict-political-activity-dod-personnel>.

Traditionally, national security decisions are made through a rapid but thorough interagency process that draws on the expertise of political leaders, career military officers, civilian defense officials, intelligence professionals, diplomats, and legal advisers. Together, they evaluate a range of options to achieve the president's objectives — assessing the required resources, potential effects on allies and partners, and broader geopolitical risks and benefits. These options are then presented to the president and senior advisors for consideration before final decisions are made and plans executed. Consultation and candor are essential to this process, ensuring that all relevant factors are fully examined and that the chosen course of action is sound and sustainable.

WHEN PROFESSIONAL ADVICE IS DISTORTED OR SUPPRESSED FOR POLITICAL REASONS, DECISION-MAKING SUFFERS.

When professional advice is distorted or suppressed for political reasons, decision-making suffers. Orders issued on the basis of loyalty, without consultation or due regard for risk or legality, erode the value of professional military, intelligence, and diplomatic counsel. Politically driven narratives and constrained timelines can override candid analysis, prolong conflicts, and increase costs. In the worst cases, such dynamics can lead to strategic failure.

Senior officers must know they can confidentially offer their candid advice regarding the matters being discussed without fear of retaliation. High turnover or the removal of senior officers for following the directives of a previous commander in chief — or for providing unwelcome assessments — signals to the force that honesty carries risk. This perception undermines the principle of civilian control supported by professional military advice and erodes trust throughout the chain of command.

Healthy civil–military relations depend on a foundation of candor, respect, and accountability: civilian leaders must protect the space for honest advice, and military leaders must provide it without political calculation.

DOMESTIC DEPLOYMENTS: FROM EXCEPTIONAL TO ROUTINE

Historical Deployments as Political Flashpoints

Since the nation's founding, the U.S. military has been governed by a longstanding norm of political neutrality. Civilian leaders set policy, and military professionals carry it out under the law — an arrangement designed to keep the armed forces separate from partisan struggles and domestic politics. While this tradition has not been perfectly observed, departures have been rare and typically met with sharp public and congressional backlash, reinforcing the expectation of an apolitical force. Importantly, these episodes have occurred under presidents of both parties, underscoring that politicization is not a partisan problem but a recurring institutional risk whenever civilian leaders test the boundaries of military neutrality.

Notable episodes of controversial military use are outlined below. These incidents are the exceptions that prove the rule: across two and a half centuries and under leaders of both parties, deployments of U.S. Armed Forces for domestic law enforcement purposes have been rare, controversial, and widely criticized as inconsistent with the military's tradition of political neutrality. They provide a backdrop for understanding the current concerns, described in the next section, which differ not simply in scale but in their potential to normalize the use of military forces in domestic or politically sensitive contexts once considered extraordinary.

1794

The Whiskey Rebellion

President George Washington personally led federalized militia forces to suppress violent tax resistance in western Pennsylvania, setting an early precedent for federal military intervention in civilian unrest.



1865–1877

Reconstruction

After the Civil War, federal troops in the South enforced Reconstruction and protected freedmen's rights. The politically contentious deployment sparked debate over the military's roles in civil governance and led to passage of the Posse Comitatus Act.

1932

The Bonus Army Incident

Army units forcibly dispersed thousands of World War I veterans protesting in Washington, D.C., for promised benefits. The event shocked the public and became a defining example of the dangers of using military force against civilians.



2018–2025

Southern Border Deployments

Presidents of both parties deployed thousands of National Guard and active-duty troops to the U.S.-Mexico border to support civilian law enforcement. Though framed as security or logistical missions, these highly visible deployments blurred the line between defense operations and domestic policing.



1970

Kent State Shootings

Ohio National Guard troops opened fire on unarmed students during an anti-war protest, killing four and wounding nine — underscoring the dangers of military involvement in civilian demonstrations.



2020

Lafayette Square

The National Guard's forcible dispersal of protestors following the death of George Floyd raised concerns about military nonpartisanship in a politically charged context. Additional recent deployments are discussed in the following section.

Recent Deployment Trends and Politicization Risk

While past incidents were exceptional, recent years suggest a more sustained drift that risks normalizing what was once unthinkable. Domestic deployments of U.S. military forces — including both National Guard units and, at times, active-duty personnel — have grown markedly in frequency, scale, and scope.

By default, domestic deployments are not political; they are intended to address emergencies, protect public safety, or support civil authorities in times of crisis. However, when they occur outside traditional emergency contexts, without local consent, or are framed in language that echoes partisan narratives — such as “law and order,” “border security,” or “crime emergency” — they can take on a political character. That perception is heightened when deployments target jurisdictions led by officials of the opposing political party, suggesting the action may convey a political message rather than meet an operational need. In such cases, the purpose or perceived purpose of the deployment shifts from addressing a security requirement to signaling political strength or advancing a policy message. This is the essence of politicization: using military instruments to serve or amplify political objectives rather than national security objectives.

National Guard and active-duty troops have also been used for increasingly nontraditional missions — from immigration enforcement and crowd control to teaching in public schools¹⁸, patrolling subways¹⁹, or serving as temporary prison guards.²⁰ Some deployments have occurred with state support, as in Tennessee²¹ and New Mexico²², while others, such as those in Los Angeles and Portland, proceeded over local objections. These assignments stretch statutory intent, strain readiness, and place troops in politically charged environments far outside their training and core missions.

This trend extends to large-scale deployments along the U.S. southern border, where presidents of both parties have sent thousands of National Guard, and at times active-duty troops, to support civilian law enforcement. Though limited to surveillance, logistics, and administrative support, the visible presence of uniformed troops in politically charged

¹⁸ Amna Nawaz and Karina Cuevas, “States Call in the National Guard to Mitigate School Staffing Shortages,” *PBS NewsHour*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/states-call-in-the-national-guard-to-mitigate-school-staffing-shortages>

¹⁹ Christopher Maag, “Hochul Calls in the National Guard to Aid the NYC Subway,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/11/us/politics/hochul-national-guard-nyc-subway.html>.

²⁰ Erik Ortiz, “National Guard Sent to ‘Secure’ New York Prisons Where Staff is on Strike,” *NBC News*, February 19, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/national-guard-sent-secure-new-york-prisons-staff-strike-rcna192695>

²¹ “ICYMI: Gov. Lee, President Trump Meet in Oval Office to Discuss Strategic Mission to Address Crime in Memphis,” September 15, 2025, <https://www.tn.gov/governor/news/2025/9/15/icymi--gov--lee--president-trump-meet-in-oval-office-to-discuss-strategic-mission-to-address-crime-in-memphis.html>.

²² “Governor Authorizes National Guard to Support Albuquerque Police Department,” *Office of the Governor*, April 8, 2025, <https://www.governor.state.nm.us/2025/04/08/governor-authorizes-national-guard-to-support-albuquerque-police-department/>; <https://www.governor.state.nm.us/2025/04/08/governor-authorizes-national-guard-to-support-albuquerque-police-department/>.

contexts has blurred the line between defense operations and policing, raising questions about scope, duration, and oversight.^{23, 24, 25}

Over time, these expanding deployments risk making military involvement in local law enforcement appear routine rather than extraordinary. More concerning, when they coincide with political messaging or partisan conflict, they are perceived not merely as operational tools but as demonstrations of political will, further eroding the boundary between national defense and domestic policy. What was once an extraordinary measure for rare emergencies is increasingly treated as a routine policy tool, placing uniformed troops in politically sensitive settings and raising fundamental questions about the appropriate limits on the use of domestic military power.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES ON DEPLOYMENT OF THE NATIONAL GUARD

Mission Preparedness

The National Guard should only be deployed when units are fully trained, equipped, and supported, with a clearly defined mission, timeline, chain of command, and rules of engagement.

Deployments should support — not substitute — local first responders, and Guard members should operate in cohesive units to maintain effectiveness.

Overall Readiness

The Guard should be used only as a last resort, to preserve its capacity for true emergencies and avoid member burnout, recruitment challenges, and retention strain.

Whenever possible, domestic missions should align with the Guard's core competencies to reinforce operational readiness rather than divert from it.

Public Trust

The Guard must remain strictly apolitical. Deployments must not advance partisan goals or occur amid political controversy, especially near elections.

Guard deployments should not conflict with lawful authorities, should avoid escalation, and should never be funded by private entities to protect the Guard's integrity and credibility with the American public.

²³ "Fact Sheet: Operation Jump Start: Acting Now to Secure the Border," Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, August 3, 2006, accessed October 21, 2025, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/08/20060803-7.html>, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/Resources/Image-Gallery/Historical-Paintings/Heritage-Series/Jump-Start/>

²⁴ "Obama Administration Announces Aug. 1 National Guard Deployment to Support Federal Law Enforcement Along the Southwest Border" U.S. Department of Homeland Security, July 19, 2010, accessed October 21, 2025, <https://www.dhs.gov/archive/news/2010/07/19/obama-administration-announces-aug-1-national-guard-deployment-support-federal-law>.

²⁵ Alex Horton and Nick Miroff, "Biden Orders 1,500 More Troops to Mexico Border as U.S. Prepares to End Title 42," *The Texas Tribune*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/05/02/border-troops-biden-title-42/>.

The Count Every Hero Deployment Principles — developed in part by the authors of this paper — provide a clear benchmark for appropriate use.²⁶ They emphasize that National Guard or military forces should be used domestically only as a last resort, under clear statutory authority, transparent decision-making, and for missions consistent with their training. By these standards, deployments should be narrowly tailored, time-limited, and nonpartisan, designed to restore rather than erode public trust. Applying these principles highlights how far recent deployments have drifted from longstanding norms and underscores the need to reestablish a clear boundary between civilian law enforcement and military power.

Against this backdrop, the following case studies illustrate recent deployments that relied on novel or controversial legal authorities, lacked local consent, or otherwise raised new questions about the limits of domestic military power. While not exhaustive, they reflect a growing pattern that risks normalizing military involvement in civilian law enforcement — once understood as a last resort — into an increasingly routine policy tool.

Case Studies in Contemporary Domestic Deployments

Washington, D.C.

DEPLOYMENT DATE

Summer 2020

ACTIVITIES

Crowd control and federal property security

NUMBER OF TROOPS

~5,000

AUTHORIZING STATUTE

32 U.S.C. § 502(f)

Following the murder of George Floyd, the Trump administration ordered the deployment of the D.C. National Guard to respond to racial-justice protests in Washington, D.C. Unlike state National Guards, which report to governors, the D.C. National Guard reports directly to the president. As a result, the D.C. mayor — though responsible for public safety — had no authority to approve or deny the deployment, even as such consultation is customary. The administration also invited governors from 15 states to send their own Guard units to the District under a novel interpretation of 32 U.S.C. § 502(f).²⁷ Eleven governors agreed, sending roughly 4,000 troops.²⁸ Although these forces were nominally under their governors’ control, they were effectively integrated into the D.C. Guard’s chain of command, placing them under the Secretary of the Army and ultimately the president. This unprecedented arrangement allowed thousands of Guard personnel to conduct crowd-control and security operations in

²⁶ Count Every Hero, “Statement of Principles on Domestic Deployment of the National Guard,” July 2024, <https://counteveryhero.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/CEH-Deployment-Principles.pdf>.

²⁷ William P. Barr to Muriel Bowser and Karl A. Racine (Washington, District of Columbia, June 9, 2020).

²⁸ Paul Sonne, Fenit Nirappil, and Josh Dawsey, “Pentagon Disarms Guardsmen in Washington, D.C.,” in *Signal of De-escalation*, *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/pentagon-disarms-guardsmen-in-washington-dc-in-signal-of-de-escalation/2020/06/05/324da91a-a733-11ea-8681-7d471bf20207_story.html.

the nation’s capital without invoking the Insurrection Act or other statutory exceptions to the Posse Comitatus Act.

A highly visible force of National Guard troops and federal law enforcement agents established perimeters around Lafayette Square and the White House during the demonstrations — an image interpreted by many as a show of force directed at a specific political movement rather than an impartial public-safety response. The unprecedented use of 32 U.S.C. § 502(f) blurred the line between state and federal authority and allowed the executive branch to deploy military personnel for politically sensitive law-enforcement functions without congressional authorization.

Los Angeles

DEPLOYMENT DATE	ACTIVITIES
June 2025	Federal personnel protection and federal property security²⁹
NUMBER OF TROOPS	AUTHORIZING STATUE
4,700	10 U.S.C. § 12406

In June 2025, the Trump Administration deployed approximately 4,000 National Guard soldiers and 700 U.S. Marines into Los Angeles over the objections of the governor and mayor to support federal immigration enforcement operations. Rather than invoking the Insurrection Act, the administration relied on 10 U.S.C. § 12406, a rarely used provision originally intended for insurrections or obstruction of federal law. As a federalized force, Guard troops were legally equivalent to active-duty forces and therefore bound by the Posse Comitatus Act’s (PCA) restrictions on domestic law enforcement.

Reports from MacArthur Park and other locations indicated that federalized troops were involved in activities that amounted to civilian law enforcement, such as securing perimeters alongside federal agents and supporting immigration-related operations.³⁰ These actions illustrate how deploying troops into politically contentious domestic contexts can create the appearance of military involvement in law enforcement, precisely what the PCA was designed to prevent.

In *Newsom v. Trump*, U.S. District Judge Charles Breyer ruled that the deployment violated the PCA and enjoined troops from performing direct law-enforcement activities — such as arrests, searches, crowd control, or evidence collection — unless expressly authorized by law.³¹ This ruling highlighted the importance of maintaining clear legal and normative boundaries

²⁹ U.S. Northern Command Public Affairs, “Update to DoD Federal Protection Mission – June 11, 2025,” June 11 2025, <https://www.northcom.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/4214356/update-to-dod-federal-protection-mission-june-11-2025/>.

³⁰ Luke Barr and Anne Flaherty, “US Troops on the Ground in LA Immigration Enforcement Operation, DOD Says,” *ABC News*, July 7, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-troops-ground-la-immigration-enforcement-operation-dod/story?id=123542308>.

³¹ Mikhail Zinshteyn, “Trump Broke the Law by Sending National Guard to L.A., Federal Judge Rules,” *CalMatters*, September 2, 2025, <https://calmatters.org/justice/2025/09/trump-national-guard-posse-comitatus/>.

between military operations and civilian law enforcement, especially in areas of significant political disagreement.

Washington, D.C.

DEPLOYMENT DATE**August 2025****ACTIVITIES****Monument and federal property security, safety patrols, beautification, and traffic control³²**

NUMBER OF TROOPS**2,200****AUTHORIZING STATUE****32 U.S.C. § 502(f)**

In August 2025, the administration deployed more than 2,200 National Guard troops from the District of Columbia and eight other states after declaring a “crime emergency.”³³ The deployment, federalized under 32 U.S.C. § 502(f) and directed by the Secretary of Defense without the request of D.C. officials, assigned troops to patrols, monument security, traffic control, and direct support for local law enforcement. Some out-of-state Guard members were authorized to carry rifles and, in certain cases, were deputized to enforce federal law despite lacking local consent and adequate training in civilian policing.

In addition to security tasks, Guard units performed “beautification” work, such as removing debris, painting curbs, trimming foliage, and installing new fencing near government buildings.³⁴ Framed as maintenance or public-safety measures, these assignments nevertheless reinforced the perception that the deployment was intended to serve a political narrative rather than meet an operational need. Such nontraditional roles highlight the impropriety of inserting uniformed troops into civic life, blurring the line between military presence and political messaging.

This deployment bypassed established guardrails for domestic military use by federalizing troops from multiple states without invoking the Insurrection Act or securing local consent. It risks normalizing a federal military presence in local law enforcement and eroding the norm that domestic security should remain the domain of civilian agencies except in extraordinary circumstances.

³² David Vergun, “Guard Assisting Law Enforcement in Making D.C. Safe,” U.S. Department of War, August 18, 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4277906/guard-assisting-law-enforcement-in-making-dc-safe/>.

³³ Donald J. Trump, Executive Order 14333, “Declaring a Crime Emergency in the District of Columbia,” August 11, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/08/declaring-a-crime-emergency-in-the-district-of-columbia/>.

³⁴ Cybele Mayes-Osterman, “National Guard Asks DC Leaders for ‘Beautification’ Projects as Trump Says Crime Is Gone,” *USA Today*, September 13, 2025, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2025/09/13/national-guard-deployment-beautification-dc-trump/86076365007/>.

Memphis

DEPLOYMENT DATE	ACTIVITIES
September 2025	Immigration enforcement and local police force support³⁵
NUMBER OF TROOPS	AUTHORIZING STATUE
Unknown	32 U.S.C. § 502(f)

In September 2025, the administration launched a multi-agency task force to “end street and violent crime in Memphis,” deploying National Guard units under 32 U.S.C. § 502(f) authority to support public-safety operations, including patrols, perimeter security, and joint missions with federal agencies.

Unlike other deployments to Los Angeles and Chicago, this operation had the support of the state’s governor, Bill Lee, though not the city’s mayor, Paul Young.³⁶ Mayor Young publicly stated he had not requested the deployment, questioned its necessity, and criticized the manner in which it was announced.³⁷ His comments underscored a broader tension in domestic Guard operations — the balance of authority between state and local officials.

Under the Constitution and federal law, governors serve as the commanders in chief of their state National Guards when those forces are operating under state authority, and they may request federal support or federalize Guard units under 32 U.S.C. § 502(f) for missions within their borders. Municipal officials, by contrast, have no independent authority over the Guard or legal standing in such matters.³⁸ Nonetheless, when local officials object or are bypassed in Guard deployments, as occurred in Memphis, it raises legitimate concerns about transparency, local accountability, and the potential politicization of military involvement in civilian law enforcement.

Even with gubernatorial consent, the Memphis deployment drew scrutiny because of its scale and the Guard’s policing role. The operation underscores how even legally authorized Guard deployments can blur boundaries between military and civilian authority and risk treating the Guard as a standing domestic security force rather than an exceptional resource.

³⁵ Donald J. Trump, “Restoring Law and Order in Memphis,” September 15, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/restoring-law-and-order-in-memphis/>.

³⁶ Donald J. Trump, “Restoring Law and Order in Memphis,” September 15, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/restoring-law-and-order-in-memphis/>.

³⁷ Jonathan Mattise, “Memphis Mayor Learned of National Guard Anti-Crime Deployment from Trump’s TV Announcement,” *AP News*, September 13, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/memphis-national-guard-trump-29ffad97499a0995ea952f7a0e7b112c>.

³⁸ Washington, D.C. presents a unique case in the federal framework. Because the District is not a state, the President retains direct command of the D.C. National Guard through the Department of Defense. The Mayor of D.C., however, functions as the city’s chief executive and bears responsibility for public safety and emergency management. While the Mayor has no formal authority to activate or direct the Guard, longstanding practice recognizes that local consultation and coordination are essential. Excluding the Mayor from deployment decisions — especially those affecting public order — raises distinct civil-military and democratic accountability concerns given the absence of a state-level check.

Chicago

DEPLOYMENT DATE	ACTIVITIES
October 2025	Federal personnel protection and federal property security ³⁹
NUMBER OF TROOPS	AUTHORIZING STATUE
500 ⁴⁰	10 U.S.C. § 12406

In October 2025, the administration mobilized and sent approximately 200 Texas National Guard troops and 300 Illinois National Guard troops to the Chicago suburbs of Elwood and Broadview under 10 U.S.C. § 12406 authority, placing them on federal active-duty status.⁴¹ While this status subjects them to the Posse Comitatus Act and therefore restricts direct law-enforcement roles, it represents an unusual and problematic use of state-based forces for a distant domestic mission. By federalizing Texas Guard units for operations far outside their home state — and against the wishes of Illinois’s governor⁴² and Chicago’s mayor⁴³ — the deployment blurred traditional boundaries between state and federal responsibilities. It effectively repurposed troops focused on state defense and emergency response as federal assets in a politically charged domestic context, raising concerns about precedent, accountability, and normalization of military involvement in law enforcement.

Deployments by governors from states led by different political parties heighten the perception that such actions serve partisan purposes. This risks casting Guard members as political actors rather than neutral public servants and increases the potential for friction between states.

Threatened or Proposed Deployments in Other Cities

In recent months, senior officials have repeatedly signaled the possibility of expanding these kinds of deployments to other cities — including Baltimore⁴⁴, Philadelphia⁴⁵, New Orleans⁴⁶, and others — framed as crime-control or immigration-enforcement efforts. While not all have

³⁹ “Federal Protection Mission,” updated October 10, 2025, U.S. Northern Command, <https://www.northcom.mil/Missions/Homeland-Defense/Federal-Protection-Mission/>.

⁴⁰ As of the publication of this paper, an indefinite temporary restraining order has blocked the deployment of the Illinois National Guard and Texas National Guard to the city of Chicago. The troops are currently prepositioned in the Chicago suburbs of Elwood and Broadview.

⁴¹ Christal Hayes, “Trump Authorises Deployment of 300 National Guard Troops to Chicago,” *BBC*, October 6, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2dnk0ee6pyo>.

⁴² Illinois Governor’s Office, “Gov. Pritzker Convenes Retired Military Generals, Leaders and Veterans,” October 16 2025, *The State of Illinois Newsroom*, <https://gov-pritzker-newsroom.prezly.com/gov-pritzker-convenes-retired-military-generals-leaders-and-veterans>.

⁴³ Brandon Johnson, “Chicago’s Mayor: The National Guard Isn’t What We Need,” *The New York Times*, September 8, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/08/opinion/trump-chicago-national-guard.html?searchResultPosition=5>.

⁴⁴ Will Weissert and Sophia Tareen, “Trump Says He’s Set to Order Federal Intervention in Chicago and Baltimore, Despite Local Opposition,” *AP News*, September 2, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-chicago-baltimore-law-enforcement-6d7c80258f17c3d679358467531f7e9d>.

⁴⁵ Jessica MacAulay and Andrew Krietz, “Gov. Josh Shapiro Says Pennsylvania is Prepared Should Trump Decide to Send National Guard to Philadelphia,” *CBS Philadelphia*, September 2, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/josh-shapiro-philadelphia-trump/>.

⁴⁶ Paul Murphy, “Trump Administration Considers Deploying National Guard Troops to Louisiana Cities, Draws Mixed Reactions,” *WWLTV*, September 15, 2025, <https://www.wwltv.com/article/news/local/report-trump-administration-considers-deploying-1000-national-guard-troops-to-louisiana-cities-crime-trump-administration-politics-new-orleans/289-1bfbf634-f94a-40eb-acc7-f99866457c29>.

materialized, these threats position the use of military forces, particularly the National Guard, as a ready-made domestic security tool. As President Trump said when announcing the Los Angeles deployment, “This is the first, perhaps, of many.”⁴⁷ Such statements risk conditioning the public and local officials to view military presence in domestic law enforcement as standard practice rather than a constitutional exception.

THREATS OF FURTHER DEPLOYMENTS RISK
CONDITIONING THE PUBLIC AND LOCAL OFFICIALS
TO VIEW MILITARY PRESENCE IN DOMESTIC LAW
ENFORCEMENT AS STANDARD PRACTICE RATHER
THAN A CONSTITUTIONAL EXCEPTION.

These recent and threatened deployments reflect a profound shift in how military power is conceived for domestic purposes. The United States has never had a uniformed national police force, nor has it routinely used the military for civilian law enforcement. Beyond lacking appropriate training for such missions, these deployments may infringe on states’ reserved powers under the Tenth Amendment and undermine the principle that public safety should remain under the control of locally accountable officials. A national military presence can easily be perceived as an “occupying force” — a perception deeply damaging to the military’s credibility and public trust. Deployments opposed by state or local authorities should immediately raise red flags that they risk being viewed as politicized and are inconsistent with the armed forces’ longstanding commitment to political neutrality.

⁴⁷ Coral Murphy Marcos, “US Judge Hears if Trump Team Broke Law During LA ICE Protests,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/aug/11/trump-la-ice-protests-immigration>.

INSTITUTIONAL AND SYMBOLIC POLITICIZATION OF THE ARMED FORCES

Sweeping Leadership Removals

The pattern of deploying troops for domestic missions has been accompanied by an equally controversial change affecting the military's senior leadership ranks. Within eight months in 2025, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff⁴⁸, three of the five service chiefs⁴⁹, and the directors of the National Security Agency⁵⁰ and the Defense Intelligence Agency⁵¹ were reassigned or dismissed. While leadership changes are expected over time, the breadth and timing of these removals signal a more systematic purge. President Trump has said that his administration will fire officials "...that we don't like or people that we don't think can do the job or people that may have loyalties to somebody else."⁵²

TRADITIONALLY, PRESIDENTS 'CHANGE POLICY,
NOT PERSONNEL,' UNDERSTANDING THAT
PROFESSIONAL MILITARY LEADERS' LOYALTY
IS TO THE CONSTITUTION.

The officers removed from these posts had been nominated and confirmed through the regular, nonpartisan process, selected for their merit and service, and often appointed to fixed terms meant to shield them from political influence. Traditionally, presidents "change policy,

⁴⁸ Jason Breslow, "Trump Fires Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr.," NPR, February 21, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/21/nx-s1-5305288/trump-fires-chairman-joint-chiefs-of-staff-charles-brown-pentagon>.

⁴⁹ Konstantin Toropin and Thomas Novelty, "Fired: Joint Chiefs Chairman, Top Navy Leader, Air Force Vice Chief, Service Judge Advocates General," *Military.com*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/02/21/fired-joint-chiefs-chairman-top-navy-leader-air-force-vice-chief-service-judge-advocates-general.html>.

⁵⁰ Sean Lyngaas, Katie Bo Lillis, and Alayna Treene, "Trump Administration Fires Director of National Security Agency," *CNN Politics*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/03/politics/trump-administration-fires-director-national-security-agency>.

⁵¹ Warren P. Strobel, Noah Robertson, and Dan Lamothe, "Hegseth Fires Head of Defense Intelligence Agency, Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Kruse," *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/08/22/defense-intelligence-agency-kruse-fired-hegseth/>.

⁵² Matthew Lee, Aamer Madhani, and Zeke Miller, "Trump Fires Several National Security Council Officials Over Loyalty Concerns," *Military Times*, April 4, 2025, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2025/04/03/trump-moves-to-fire-several-ns-c-officials-over-loyalty-concerns/>.

not personnel,” understanding that professional military leaders’ loyalty is to the Constitution and to the office of the commander in chief, not to any individual or political movement. Removing senior leaders without cause, or because they were appointed by a previous administration, undermines this professional ethos, destabilizes the chain of command, and weakens institutional memory. Such an environment discourages frank assessments, undermines the principle of civilian control supported by professional military advice, and increases the likelihood of flawed national security decision-making.

Erosion of Legal Guardrails

Perhaps even more consequential than other senior leadership changes was the removal or replacement of the top Judge Advocates General (JAGs) across multiple services in early 2025. The Army and Air Force JAGs were abruptly dismissed, while the Navy’s JAG position was left uncertain following the incumbent’s early retirement and the appointment of an acting successor.⁵³ When asked about the firings, Secretary of Defense Hegseth said the dismissed officers had been “roadblocks” to implementing the President’s directives.⁵⁴ He subsequently appointed his personal attorney, a former naval officer, to oversee the remaking of the JAG Corps with a focus on “retraining military lawyers...so that they provide more expansive legal advice to commanders to pursue more aggressive tactics and take a more lenient approach in charging soldiers with battlefield crimes.”⁵⁵

JAG officers are the institutional guardrails for the rule of law within the armed forces, advising commanders on operational legality, compliance with domestic and international law, and the conduct of military justice. As Geoffrey Corn warned in *The Cipher Brief*, “when military lawyers go silent – choosing not to contest questionable orders or stepping back from advising – it marks abandonment of the rule of law within the chain of command.”⁵⁶ Removing or sidelining these officers, without clear explanations, undermines confidence in the chain of command’s ability to self-regulate and comply with the law. Without trusted legal counsel, military operations are at greater risk of violating legal norms, eroding alliances, or inviting backlash. It also chills the willingness of remaining legal advisors to deliver unvarnished guidance, out of concern for their own careers.

⁵³ Thomas Novelty and Konstantin Toropin, “‘People Are Very Scared’: Trump Administration Purge of JAG Officers Raises Legal, Ethical Fears,” *Military.com*, February 24, 2025, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/02/24/people-are-very-scared-trump-administration-purge-of-jag-officers-raises-legal-ethical-fears.html>.

⁵⁴ Sarah Fortinsky, “Hegseth: Fired Military Lawyers were Potential ‘Roadblocks’ to Trump Orders,” *The Hill*, February, 24, 2025, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/5162069-pentagon-officers-fired/>.

⁵⁵ Hugo Lowell, “Pete Hegseth to Overhaul US Military Lawyers in Effort to Relax Rules of War,” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/13/pete-hegseth-pentagon-lawyers-rules-of-war>.

⁵⁶ Geoffrey Corn, “A Dangerous Precedent: What Happens If Military Lawyers Go Silent,” *The Cipher Brief*, September 8, 2025, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/a-dangerous-precedent-what-happens-when-military-lawyers-go-silent>.

Politicization of Military Symbols and Events

Across administrations, a series of incidents have tested the guardrails meant to keep the military separate from partisan politics. Presidents and senior officials have at times blurred the boundary between military service and political messaging. President Biden's use of uniformed Marines as a backdrop during a 2022 speech drew criticism for appearing to blur the line between military service and partisan politics.⁵⁷ Under the Trump administration, soldiers at Fort Bragg were reportedly screened for appearance and ideology before being placed behind the President at an event featuring overtly partisan rhetoric and campaign merchandise sold on base.⁵⁸ The President also wore a red campaign hat during a commencement address at West Point, delivering a politically charged speech to cadets required to attend in uniform.⁵⁹ In September 2025, President Trump and Secretary of Defense Hegseth delivered partisan addresses at Marine Corps Base Quantico before senior military leaders flown in from around the world. In his remarks, President Trump defended recent domestic deployments and described U.S. cities as "training grounds" for the military.⁶⁰

Such practices erode the longstanding separation between military service and partisan allegiance, exposing service members to public controversy without their consent and undermining the public's confidence in the military's neutrality. They can also degrade internal morale, as troops see their service tied to partisan agendas. Over time, the routine use of military symbols and personnel for political purposes weakens morale, discourages nonpartisan recruitment, and threatens one of the most fundamental democratic norms: that the U.S. Armed Forces serve the Constitution and the nation, not any political leader or movement.

⁵⁷ "Biden's Team Defends Uniformed Marines in Background of Speech," *CNN*, September 4, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/04/politics/home-front-biden-marines-philadelphia-speech-reaction>

⁵⁸ Todd South, "Soldiers Screened for Appearance and Politics Ahead of Trump Visit," *Army Times*, June 12, 2025, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2025/06/12/soldiers-screened-for-appearance-and-politics-ahead-of-trump-visit/>.

⁵⁹ Paula Smolinski, "Trump Praises West Point Cadets, Takes Credit for U.S. Military Might in Commencement Address," *CBS News*, May 24, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-trump-west-point-military-commencement-address/>.

⁶⁰ Ben Finley, Konstantin Toropin, and Evan Vucci, "Trump Calls for Using U.S. Cities as a 'Training Ground' for the Military in Unusual Speech to Generals," *Associated Press*, September 30 2025, accessed October 28 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-hegseth-generals-meeting-military-pentagon-0ecdcb8877e24329cfa0fc1e851ebd2>.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF POLITICIZATION

Collectively, the patterns described above — large-scale domestic deployments, high turnover of senior leaders, and the use of military symbols and personnel as partisan backdrops — undermine readiness and pose a single, overarching risk: the erosion of the armed forces' apolitical character.

The most immediate consequence is the loss of public trust. The U.S. military has long been one of the country's most respected institutions precisely because it has stood apart from partisan struggles.⁶¹ As national security expert Kori Schake has noted, that trust is fragile.⁶² When service members, senior leaders, or military symbols are perceived as aligned with political agendas, the public begins to see the institution as partisan rather than national — and once eroded, that trust is difficult to rebuild. This loss of trust makes it harder to recruit across the political spectrum, harder to retain talent, and harder to reassure allies and deter adversaries abroad.

THESE DOMESTIC DEPLOYMENTS DISRUPT TRAINING CYCLES, DIMINISH OPERATIONAL ACCOUNTS, AND DEGRADE READINESS AT A TIME OF GLOBAL INSTABILITY.

Politicization also carries serious operational costs. Large-scale domestic deployments draw troops and resources away from operational responsibilities such as training for their assigned missions and state emergency response duties such as hurricane and wildfire operations. These domestic deployments disrupt training cycles, diminish operational accounts, and degrade readiness at a time of global instability. Assigning service members to missions for which they lack proper training — such as crowd control or immigration

⁶¹ Public trust in the U.S. military remains consistently high. A 2024 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 60 percent of Americans say the U.S. military has a “positive effect” on the country. Pew Research Center, “Americans’ Views of the U.S. Military,” February 1, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/02/01/the-u-s-military/>.

⁶² Kori Schake, “Can America’s Trust in its Military Survive the Present Moment? [Book excerpt],” *Breaking Defense*, September 8, 2025, <https://breakingdefense.com/2025/09/can-americas-trust-in-its-military-survive-the-present-moment-book-excerpt/>.

enforcement — undermines morale and exposes both troops and the government to legal and ethical risk.

Finally, repeated exposure to politically charged contexts risks normalizing practices that were once exceptional. When boundaries between civilian law enforcement and military power blur, they are difficult to restore. Each time uniforms or installations are used as props for partisan events, or advisors are reassigned for offering unwelcome counsel, the norm of an apolitical military weakens.

The cumulative effect of these trends is a direct threat to civil–military trust, institutional integrity, and combat readiness. The American model of an apolitical military — long a strategic advantage at home and abroad — can only endure if these boundaries are actively defended.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRESERVING AN APOLITICAL FORCE

✓ Strengthen oversight and transparency.

Congress should require clear justification and post-action review of significant domestic deployments and high-level personnel changes that affect legal and advisory functions.

✓ Reaffirm the value of professional military advice.

Civilian leaders should explicitly invite candid assessments and protect those who deliver them; military leaders should continue to present unvarnished analyses of risks, costs, and feasibility without advocating policy outcomes.

✓ Protect legal and advisory independence.

Codify safeguards for Judge Advocates General and other oversight positions to prevent punitive removals for professional advice. Strengthen whistleblower protections.

✓ Clarify deployment laws and set standing guidance.

Update statutory frameworks such as 10 U.S.C. § 12406 and the Insurrection Act to ensure they are neither overly broad nor easily stretched. Create an interagency process to develop standing rules of engagement for rare domestic missions. These guidelines, established outside moments of crisis, would clarify legal limits and ensure commanders operate within them when called upon to restore order.

✓ Educate the public about the military's role.

Partner with universities, think tanks, veterans' groups, and civic organizations to increase public understanding of the importance of apolitical civil-military relations, the Posse Comitatus Act, the Insurrection Act, and the concept of professional military advice in the context of mutual trust and respect for the distinct roles military and civilian leaders play in protecting our nation.

CONCLUSION: UPHOLDING AN APOLITICAL MILITARY

For more than 250 years, the U.S. military has stood as a nonpartisan defender of the Republic. That record is not self-sustaining — it depends on law, tradition, and the daily choices of leaders in and out of uniform. Professional military advice is essential to sound national security decisions. It must be candid, comprehensive, and shielded from retaliation. Domestic use of the armed forces must remain exceptional, legally justified, and transparent.

The stakes are high: once lost, public trust in the military's neutrality is difficult to rebuild. Preventing politicization is not the responsibility of the armed forces alone; it requires restraint by civilian leaders, vigilance by Congress, and civic understanding by the public. Reaffirming these shared responsibilities will ensure that the U.S. military remains anchored in its constitutional role — answerable to civilian authority but not to partisan will.

Ultimately, preserving an apolitical military is as much about culture as it is about law. Statutes and regulations can set boundaries, but they cannot substitute for the habits of professionalism, restraint, and trust built through generations of service. The health of civil-military relations depends not only on what leaders do in moments of crisis but on the everyday choices they make to uphold norms, model integrity, and resist politicization.

By reaffirming first principles, strengthening guardrails, and educating both policymakers and the public, the United States can preserve what has long been one of its greatest strengths: a nonpartisan instrument of national power, a professional force bound by the Constitution, and the enduring safeguard of American democracy.

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