

Trump's Fort Bragg speech was a serious step toward ending democracy

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June 11, 2025, 9:02 AM CDT

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While Donald Trump has challenged many norms both as a presidential candidate and as president, he has made a special effort to [violate the standards that have long kept the U.S. military out of partisan politics](#). To be clear, the U.S. armed forces have always engaged in politics, seeking to avoid getting involved in some conflicts, seeking to escalate in others. But they have not been a Democratic military or a Republican military since the Civil War. Generations of civilian and military leaders did much to keep party and military separate. [Trump's speech at Fort Bragg](#) on June 10 may undo all that work.

In his first term, Trump did much to undermine the norms of American civil-military relations. Rather than appoint a civilian as secretary of defense, a tradition reflecting civilian control of the military, he appointed a recently retired general, James Mattis. He constantly referred to the [senior military leaders as "my generals."](#) He [blamed the military](#) when soldiers were killed, rather than accept that the buck stops with the commander in chief. And [according to his own secretary of defense at the time, Mark Esper](#), Trump asked whether soldiers could shoot peaceful protestors in their legs during demonstrations after the death of George Floyd in 2020.

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Less than five months into his second term, Trump has gone much further to challenge the traditional separation of the military from partisan politics. This time, he [chose an unqualified Fox News host](#) to be defense secretary to ensure he would not face the resistance he met from Mattis and Esper. Then he fired multiple senior leaders of the military for being, well, Black or female. Just in the past few days, Trump [deployed the Marines to Los Angeles](#) in response to anti-ICE protests, even though there was no need for that escalation.

Then on Tuesday, Trump [gave a virulently partisan speech at Fort Bragg](#), during which he egged on the troops to boo the Democrats serving as mayor of Los Angeles and governor of California. This speech, by itself, is incredibly damaging, as it projects the image of the military siding with the president against his political foes.

When scholars like myself talk about politicization of the military, we mean one of two things: either the military is jumping into partisan politics or politicians are pulling the military there. In this case, Trump is dragging the U.S. military into the partisan fray, attempting to turn the American military into a Republican or Trumpian army.

Why is this bad? First, it will simply ruin the effectiveness of the American armed forces. Officers will be promoted on the basis of loyalty to the president and not due to merit. Politics will be injected into the barracks of soldiers, sailors, aviators and Marines, creating conflict and dividing each platoon, ship and squadron. Second, the use of the U.S. armed forces in crushing protests by the opponents of Trump's policies will reduce respect for the military among millions of Americans. This will hurt efforts to recruit and retain troops.

Third, and, most importantly, impartial militaries are a key ingredient for stable democracy, while Trump's actions are those of an autocrat. Turning the U.S. military into an ally of one politician against his opponents is more than just another instance of democratic backsliding. It is a serious step toward ending American democracy.

Deploying the military against peaceful protests and encouraging the troops to boo members of the opposition are two decisions that get us much closer to truly catastrophic outcomes. That all of this is unnecessary makes it all the more tragic. The military does not really want to get involved in partisan politics, but once involved, it will be very hard to remove it. Should the armed forces split between pro- and anti-Trump factions, that is the way to civil war. It has happened once in American history. It can happen again.