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On this Memorial Day, Trump's reckless use of the U.S. military is on full display

By **John Keker**, Contributor

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Gift Article



President Donald Trump speaks at the White House on June 21, 2025, after a U.S. military strike on Iran with, from left, Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

Carlos Barria/Associated Press

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Every Memorial Day, I wear a T-shirt with the names of more than 1,000 members of the 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marines who were killed in combat during the Vietnam War.

I fought alongside some of these fallen Marines as an infantry platoon commander. I was wounded in combat and medically retired in 1967. It has been my honor and duty to remember my battalion's war dead ever since. This year, putting on that shirt feels different.

It is not easy being a veteran watching President Donald Trump's reckless misuse of the military. As the Trump administration slashes Department of Veterans Affairs services and fires principled military leaders, we are seeing it commit the same mistakes and incompetence that got us deployed in forever wars going back to Vietnam.

Trump, who famously avoided military service in Vietnam thanks to five deferments, has started a war in Iran without input from Congress or serious public discussion, and it's clear he didn't plan for the inevitable backlash. It is a war of choice with no clear objective, no carefully mapped-out strategy, and an ever-shifting exit plan. As almost every veteran knows, war should always be the last resort, not the first.

The president also did not seem to comprehend the likelihood of the Strait of Hormuz being shut down until after the bombing campaign had killed thousands of people, including in a horrific attack on a girls' school. This makes little sense

given that Trump's initial justification for launching the war was to help the people of Iran.

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Unfortunately, the war in Iran is part of a larger pattern. Since early last year, Trump has expanded military operations abroad without meaningful congressional oversight or public debate. He has approved bombings in Somalia,

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calls "the enemy within." He told a gathering of high-ranking officers at the Quantico Marine Corps Base "we should use some of these dangerous cities" — specifically Democratic-run ones — "as training grounds for our military."

From Trump starting a war against Iran, when his own intelligence team determined no imminent threat to the United States, to claiming false emergencies to send troops to our cities, to telling commanders to train their troops for war in American cities, the president has put himself above the law.

So, what can we do to resist?

I have faith in the will of the American people to push back against autocrats. The resistance in Minneapolis to Trump's deployment of immigration agents is a good

example. We should all insist that Congress reclaim its power over the use of force domestically and in war abroad, support state and local leaders who stand up to Trump and urge the military to stay loyal to the Constitution by refusing illegal orders.

The Trump administration's shameful attempts to punish Sen. Mark Kelly of Arizona, a former Navy pilot, over his participation in a video that asked members of the military to resist unlawful orders should be roundly condemned. Fortunately, a federal judge ruled that Pentagon officials had violated Kelly's First Amendment rights and "threatened the constitutional liberties of millions of military retirees."

Trump now wants Congress to approve $200 billion for the war in Iran, and he continues to send more troops to the Middle East despite saying the conflict is already over. The Trump administration has also obscured the damage to U.S. military sites from Iranian counterattacks and downplayed the number of injuries to American service members.

Veterans who risked their lives in combat have a lifelong commitment to protect our community and our country. We know better than anyone the tremendous human and financial cost of war, and we must call out and oppose the misuse of the military. We need to lead the resistance.

When I was in the Marines, there was no black, white or brown. We were all green, the color of our uniforms. In a firefight it did not matter what color your fellow Marine was or what his politics or religion were. We had each other's backs. We need that kind of solidarity now more than ever.

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This Memorial Day, I wear my shirt honoring the fallen Marines, even as Trump — who reportedly called slain Marines "suckers" and "losers" on a visit to World War II sites in France — recklessly uses our armed forces.

No matter how you feel about the Vietnam War or the other wars since then, the Americans who gave their life in the line of duty were not "suckers" or "losers." They were the very opposite, patriots fighting for their country and its security. Honor them by defending the Constitution they served, and by insisting that America use military power lawfully, cautiously and only as a last resort.

John Keker is a trial lawyer and San Francisco civic leader who has spent his career defending constitutional principles and the rule of law. A decorated Marine, he led an infantry platoon in Vietnam, where he was wounded in combat and medically retired.

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