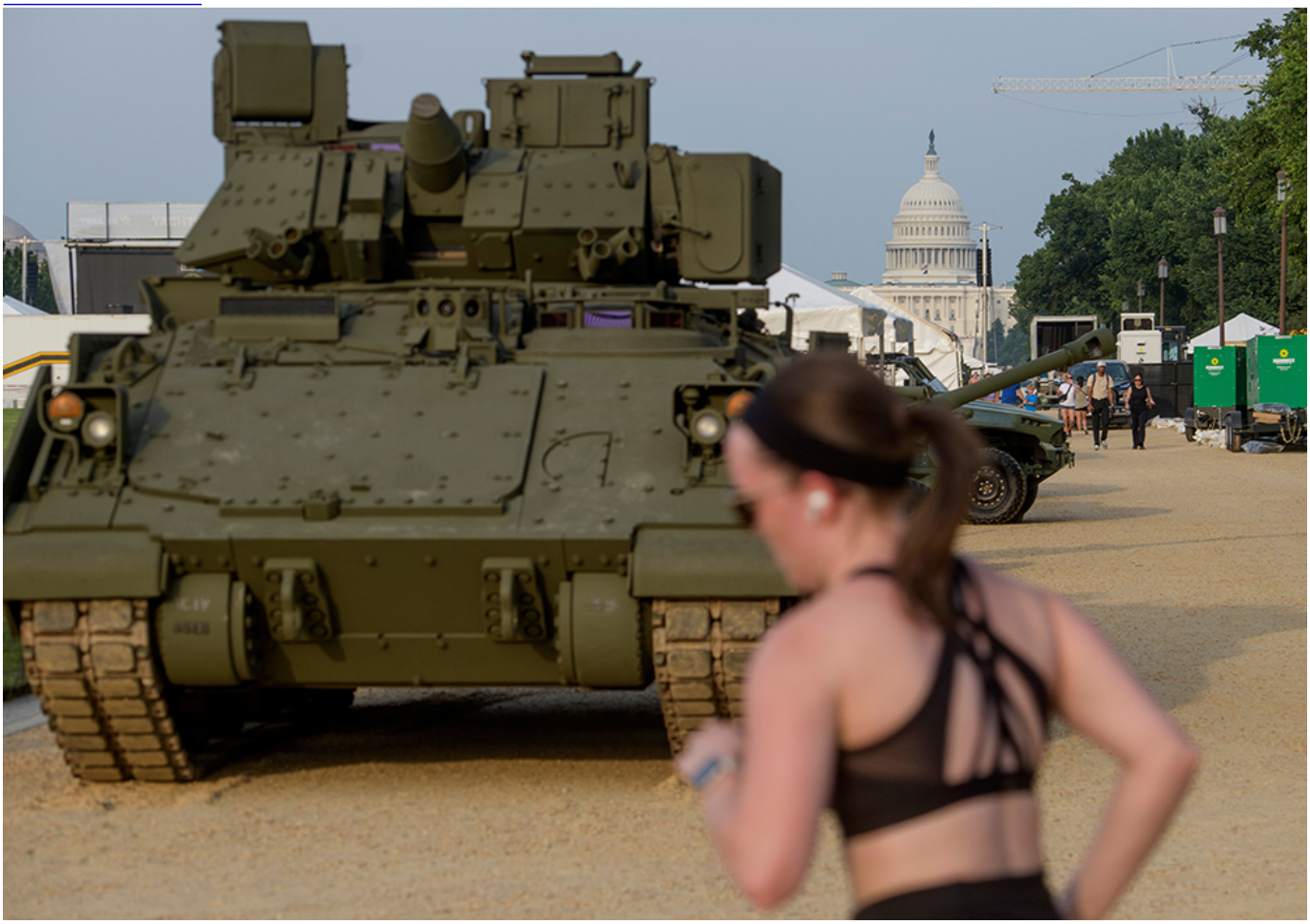
Opinion
Guest Voices



People pass by a tank, parked on the National Mall, during preparations for an upcoming military parade commemorating the Army's 250th anniversary and coinciding with President Donald Trump's 79th birthday June 12 in Washington. (AP/Rod Lamkey Jr.)

by Kat Armas

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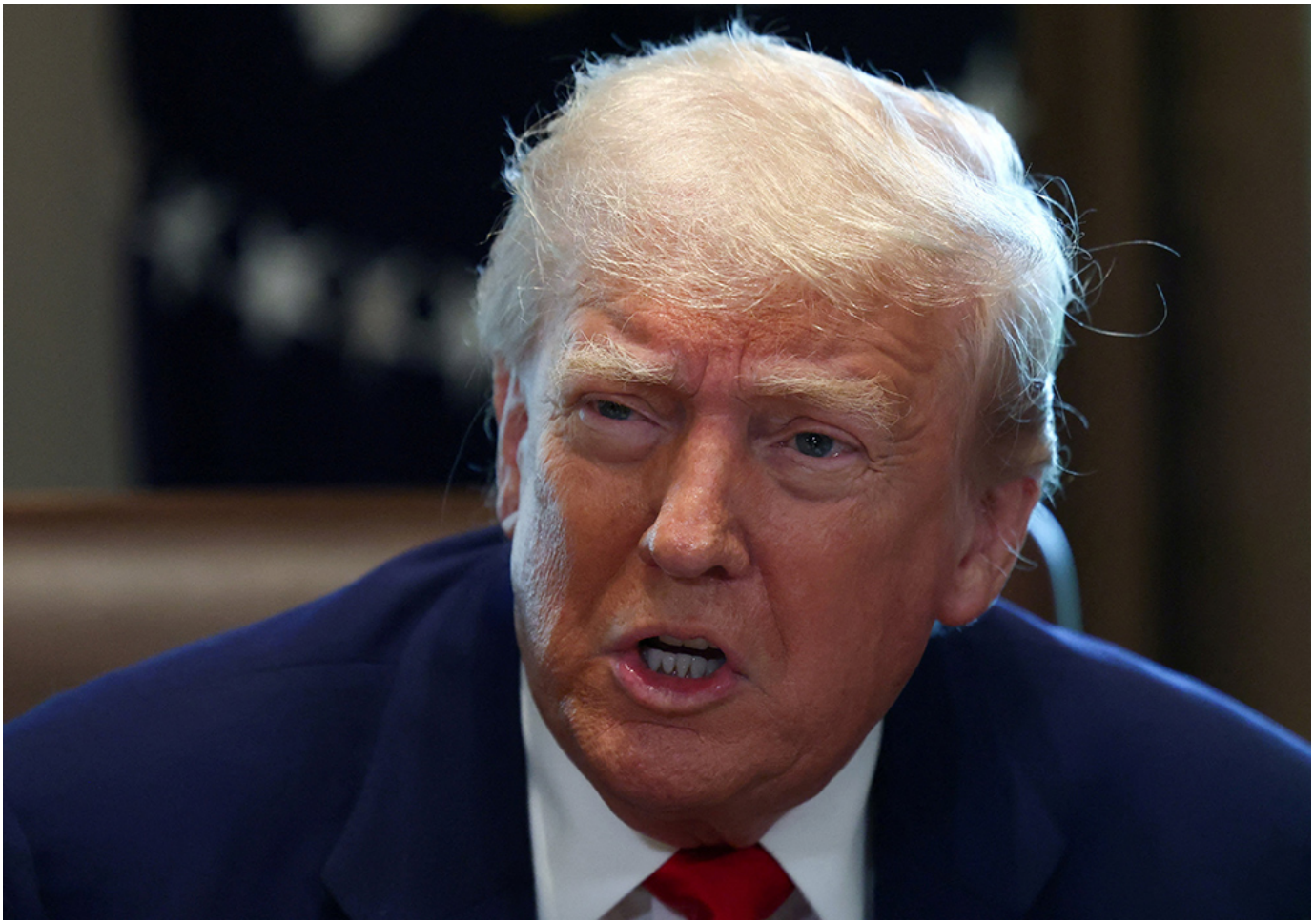
Today, the U.S. Army will celebrate its 250th anniversary with a grand parade in Washington, D.C. — complete with tanks, vintage warplanes and soldiers marching in formation, weapons in hand. The estimated $25 million to $45 million price tag for this spectacle comes just months after the Trump administration slashed funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs, along with other essential government services. June 14 also happens to be Donald Trump's birthday, a man whose presidency has glorified military might, nationalism and religious symbolism, all under the banner of "greatness."

This isn't just a parade. It's political theater. It's the gospel of empire made visible: power dressed in patriotism, dominance masquerading as peace.

And for those who dare to dissent — who plan to protest this display, as is their First Amendment right — the warning is clear. They will be met with "very heavy force," Trump declared while speaking to reporters. His threat came soon after National Guard troops and hundreds of marines were deployed to Los Angeles, where demonstrators have gathered in response to a wave of ICE raids terrorizing immigrant communities.



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a cabinet meeting at the White House in Washington, on April 30, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)

It all feels eerily familiar.

If anyone knew the pageantry of power, it was the Roman Empire. The *triumphus* — its grand military parade — was a staged spectacle where victorious generals were honored, riding through the city draped in robes of glory, while captives were dragged behind them in chains. The spoils of war — gold, weapons, even enslaved people — were displayed like trophies. It was designed to dazzle, to remind the crowds who ruled the world. In Rome, power didn't just win battles, it marched through the streets, demanding awe and allegiance.

Spectacle isn't an accessory to empire; it is its language.

But behind the pageantry lies a deeper narrative — Rome's version of peace, the *Pax Romana*. It was a so-called golden age built not on justice or mutuality, but on domination. Roman historians celebrated it as a time of stability and prosperity. But

we must ask: Peace for whom? Is it really peace if it must be stolen? What does it mean when peace is built on the backs of the conquered, the silenced, the enslaved?

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They say the U.S. Army was born on a summer day in June, in the thick air of revolution and the promise of something new. It was 1775, and the men gathered in Philadelphia could feel the weight of empire pressing in. The British crown, with its red coats and muskets, loomed like a shadow over their hope for self-rule. So they did what threatened people often do — raised an army and called it a fight for liberty.

And perhaps, in the beginning, it was. A resistance against domination, a plea for dignity. Men took up arms not to conquer, they said, but to be free. And for a moment, you might almost believe it — that this army marked the birth of a different kind of world.

But freedom, in the shadow of empire, is selective.

Almost as soon as it was formed, this army turned its gaze not just upward toward the crown, but outward toward the land held by Indigenous nations who had not asked to be governed, ruled or civilized. The rifles once aimed at British soldiers were soon turned against the people who had lived on this land long before the word "America" was ever spoken.

The birth of this army was not only a rupture from existing empire, but also the rise of a new one. One that would march westward through treaties broken and villages burned. One that would bind Black bodies in service while denying them the very freedom they fought for. One that would call itself a liberator even as it built its legacy on conquest and control. I wonder if they ever stopped to question the contradiction.

It is indeed possible to fight empire and still become it. The U.S. Army may have been born in revolution, but it was raised with the ancient logic of empire, rooted in the belief that peace can only be secured through violence, that safety requires

domination and order demands force. It's the heartbeat of militarism.

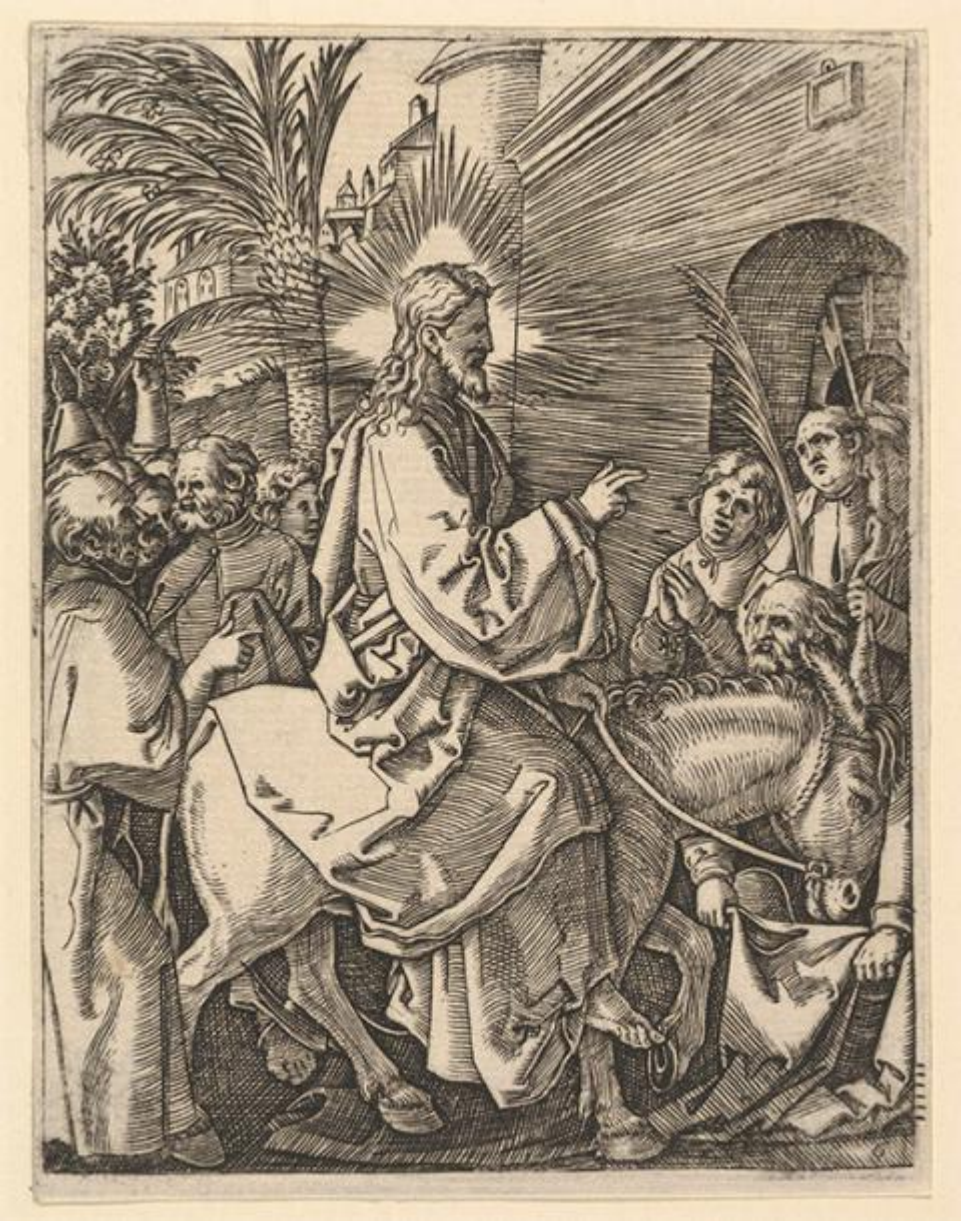
This is how the Roman Empire was built. The British Empire spread the ideas across continents, cloaked in the language of civilization. And the United States has inherited this creed, clutching it like a birthright, defending it like a gospel.

From its founding, the U.S. has envisioned itself as a "new Rome" — a global power tasked with spreading liberty and democracy by force, if necessary. And like Rome, American culture is steeped in militarism. Our collective imagination has been shaped by conquest, defense and the mythology of national exceptionalism. This modern "*Pax Americana*" is upheld by hundreds of military bases across the globe, by economic policies that preserve U.S. dominance and by a media machine that exports American ideals as global truth.

But militarism isn't just about foreign policy — it's a cultural identity. War is framed as the ultimate display of strength. In the U.S., guns hold an almost sacred status, and the consequences are devastating. There are more guns than people in this country. More than 120 lives are lost each day to gun-related injuries, according to an analysis of CDC data by Pew Research Center earlier this year. In a grim and heartbreaking statistic, guns have become the leading cause of death for our children. These aren't just talking points; they're names, faces and futures we've lost to a nation addicted to the myth of armed peace.

Roman peace was an illusion, too. While the empire's center enjoyed its comforts, life on the margins was marked by poverty, fear and violence. The poor were crushed by heavy taxes. The rebellious were enslaved or destroyed. *Pax Romana* promised peace, but only through total submission. Tacitus, a Roman senator and historian, saw through the illusion. "They make a desert and call it peace," he wrote, pulling back the curtain on the so-called *Pax Romana* to reveal the violence beneath.

This is a pattern as old as empire itself. The prophet Jeremiah once cried out against a similar illusion: "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 8:11).



"The Entry into Jerusalem; Christ riding on a donkey towards an arched city gate; an elderly man spreads out his cloak on the road," from "The Passion of Christ", after Albrecht Dürer, circa 1500–34, by Marcantonio Raimondi (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Empire has always had its gatekeepers — its preachers and pundits — willing to look the other way, willing to serve comfort over truth, to maintain order rather than pursue justice. But true peace cannot come from pretending all is well while the oppressed suffer beneath the burden of exploitation. True peace cannot come from spectacle or tanks or weapons disguised as salvation.

I think of the wound of the people, still open, still aching under the weight of false promises. And yet, into the heart of that wound, into this world — scarred by power and propped up by illusion — something unexpected arrived.

Just days before his crucifixion, Jesus entered Jerusalem in a procession unlike any other. It was a different kind of parade that didn't wind through capital streets with banners flying or generals saluting. There were no displays of dominance, no weapons polished for show. Instead, it arrived quietly, dust rising not from the wheels of chariots, but from the slow, steady hooves of a donkey.

On what we now call Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem in a striking act of defiance. The crowd gathered with palm branches, hailing him as king and savior — a scene that echoed the imperial processions they'd seen before. But this one turned everything upside down. No warhorse, no armor, no pomp. Just a carpenter from Nazareth, unarmed, unthreatening, riding straight into the heart of empire. It wasn't just a spiritual moment — it was a political act of protest, a declaration that the kingdom of God would be different than the kingdoms of this world.

> So while today will be marked by a parade for the U.S. Army's (and President Trump's) birthday — of tanks and uniforms and a gospel wrapped in the flag — the parade with real purpose happened long ago, on a dusty road, led by a man on a donkey.

Where Rome exalted dominance, Jesus revealed vulnerability. Where Rome celebrated conquest, Jesus embodied peace. His message was unmistakable: God's kingdom is nothing like Caesar's. God's power doesn't dominate, it descends. It serves. It heals.

So while today will be marked by a parade for the U.S. Army's (and President Trump's) birthday — of tanks and uniforms and a gospel wrapped in the flag — the parade with real purpose happened long ago, on a dusty road, led by a man on a donkey. No weapons. No spectacle. Just love.

And the real army of the revolution? It's the peacemakers, the truth-tellers, the justice-bearers — those who dare to believe that love is stronger than fear, and that another world is not only possible, but already breaking in.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.