



# Parading the American character

BY JEFFREY E. PHILLIPS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 02/07/18 04:30 PM EST  
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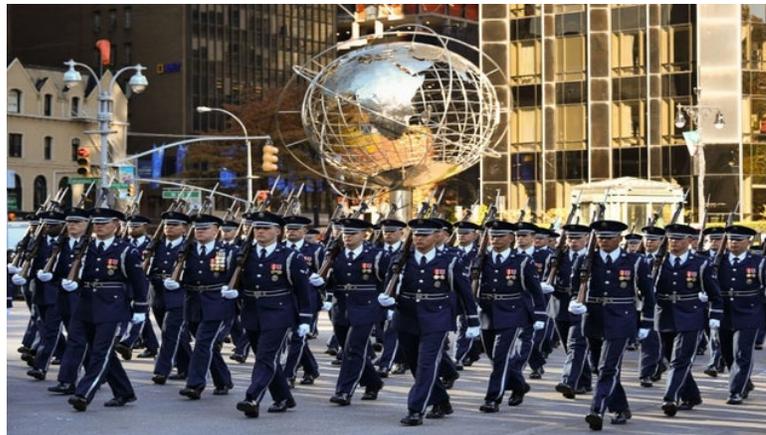
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The talk of Washington has turned from government shutdowns, now temporarily averted, to the prospect of a “grand military parade” championed by President Trump.

The best parades celebrate something distinguishing about a culture; in the elements of a good parade, the spectators see something of themselves, something to be celebrated in the participants marching by, rolling by, coursing by.

A good parade uplifts. A good parade communicates. A good parade symbolizes.

In some countries, their best parades feature tanks and soldiers, rank by rank, column by column. What countries are those? What is being communicated and symbolized by such brazen displays of sheer killing power?

It was at a French Bastille Day martial parade, seated next to President Macron (an unlikely martial figure, but where you sit often determines where on an issue you stand) that our president evidently got his idea. His words reveal that a big, muscular parade may have a lot to do with competition: “We’re going to have to try to top it.”

America is not a martial nation. It has vast military might and fights with resolve and ferocity when need be. But it is not a nation whose soul is in arms, such as is the heritage of Europe, with its centuries of often wasteful and inconclusive wars. (Does that sound disturbingly familiar to the contemporary American reader assured by generals and presidents that each day brings us closer to victory?)

The proposal is to cloak the show of martial might in the raiment of an Independence Day or — better yet — Veterans Day celebration. But neither of these holidays at their heart is about military might. They are about ideas — the idea of a vaulting vision of humanity, of courage, and of service and sacrifice in fidelity to a greater good.

Returning to the Bastille Day parade: July 14 is their version of our Fourth of July. The French are a marvelous, independent, good and courageous people with a rich and ancient culture. That culture was formed in the forge of imperial wars for survival and conquest.

How do Americans celebrate on Independence Day? When was the last time you saw a parade with rank upon rank of armored vehicles? Or did you pack up for a family picnic, a community parade, and then at dusk throng to the fireworks and American bonhomie?

How do Americans spend Veterans Day? With veneration of those who served in the nation's military, in peace and war. Often, we borrow the theme of Memorial Day, honoring as well on November 11 our war dead.

Any Veterans Day parade almost certainly includes a restored olive drab Jeep or a unit of the local National Guard proudly passing by, but these elements are the spice in the sauce. They are not the main course; they are not the theme. The passing-by of the local Veterans of Foreign Wars or American Legion post is the main course: the remembered cost of war, often borne by citizen-warriors such as the Reserve and National Guard units — and the resolve to stand firm again if need be. That is far different from row upon row of fearsome domination.

No, America is, at its heart, not a tank-parading nation.

And that is why America is the greatest of nations: we don't show off our might. We have it, we husband it, by tradition we use it in fidelity with our founding values. Yes, on occasion, we celebrate a military victory with a parade. But the relative absence of martial marches — when we know that we could, without trying, "top" a Bastille Day parade (or a North Korean charade, etc.) — symbolizes the best in us.

Unfitting symbolism aside, a grand military parade would be expensive. The [Washington Post](#) reported the cost of Trump's 2017 inaugural at about \$200 million, and a grand military parade would certainly be on such a scale. Our president does nothing halfway.

And the inaugural festivities did not entail the cost of tens of thousands of taxpayer-funded military personnel, equipment transport and operation, formations of aircraft, and so forth. That's money that could be spent, say, on veterans' health care or the processing of VA disability claims, or training for our Reserve and National Guard units, which are being used more than ever.

As one Reserve Officers Association member, a retired Air Force colonel, wrote me on Wednesday morning, "I'm aghast at the proposal of a military might parade the likes of a Soviet May Day parade. We're not a Fascist regime. ... Our military is proudly an all-volunteer force! And such a parade would be out of character. It is also a colossal waste of time, energy, and limited resources. ... Routine military exercises continue to be the best way to extend a warning to our adversaries."

"Out of character" perhaps best sums it up. President Trump has pledged to rebuild America's military strength and its ability to defend our nation in a time of great peril. He is acting on that pledge, and with a parade wishes to show America's appreciation of those who serve our nation, risking their lives every day to safeguard America. For that we thank him.

Yet, we owe the integrity of the American character better than the expense and message entailed in tanks rolling down Pennsylvania Avenue.

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