

The Militarization of U.S. Sports

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This paper is part of [Consuming War](#), a cultural analysis series.

Takeaways

- Sports and the U.S. military are deeply intertwined, from military aircraft flyovers before American football games to camouflage uniforms. Celebrations of the military have become a normalized part of watching sports.
- For sports leagues and other companies, praising the U.S. military is good for business. For its part, the U.S. military cultivates the emotional impact of combining the national anthem, military aircraft flying over a stadium, and a blockbuster game.
- The role of the military in sports often contributes to the glorification of war, while obscuring its deadly realities. This prevents critical reflection about the choices behind the use of the military, the treatment of military personnel, and the effects of U.S. wars.

For even the most casual of viewers of the National Football League (NFL), it is difficult to miss the annual “Salute to Service” campaign, an initiative focused on creating “a positive impact for our nation’s heroes.” “Heroes” are defined as military personnel, veterans, and their families. Across three weeks of games in November 2024, players, coaches, and staff wore military-style camo uniforms and other matching gear. On November 7, a televised public service announcement reminded viewers that the initiative has raised more than \$73 million since 2011 to support members of the military and their families.² Fans were offered the chance to contribute to this initiative. As part of a special sale at the NFL team online shop, fans could pay \$194.99 for a limited edition “arctic camo” jersey of their favorite player, \$789.99 for a “Salute to Service Speed Flex Authentic

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² NFL. (2024, November 7). NFL Celebrates U.S. Military Through Salute to Service. *NFL.com*. <https://operations.nfl.com/updates/football-ops/nfl-celebrates-us-military-through-salute-to-service/>

Helmet” of their favorite team, or \$2,799 for a “Salute to Service” helmet signed by legendary quarterback Tom Brady.

Rallying support for war is a central nexus between the U.S. military, sporting organizations, and U.S. companies. It’s not just that sports fans are asked to donate to initiatives that support service members. Associating a league, team, or brand with the military is clearly good for business: televised NFL games are interspersed with prevalent beer and insurance commercials that promote and celebrate the U.S. military. USAA, an insurance company that offers exclusive services to military members and their families, released one commercial with former NFL player Rob Gronkowski that was, according to one study, “915% more likely to engage viewers than the average insurance commercial during the NFL season.”³ The NFL itself also profits immensely from this collaboration. Not only is it customary for fans to purchase camo hoodies, hats, and jerseys with their favorite team’s logo, it is also easy to find trading cards with camo borders, themes, and pro-military inscriptions.⁴

Corporate sponsors make the military rituals, parades, and celebrations possible. Corporations engaging in this kind of strategic sponsorship include three military defense contractors – Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and General Dynamics, three of the top five weapons makers that, together, earn billions annually in profits from contracts with the Pentagon.⁵ Lockheed Martin serves as the chief sponsor of the Armed Forces Bowl, a special military-themed college football game held during the postseason. General Dynamics is an official sponsor of the Big East conference, a Division I college athletic conference featuring teams like the University of Connecticut. Raytheon sponsored the 2022 U.S. Paralympics Cycling Open, which featured around 30 military veterans in competition.⁶

The NFL merits special attention due to its enormous viewership (especially during the Super Bowl) – 61,629 people attended the 2024 Super Bowl and an additional 123.4

³ Pittman Law Firm, P.L. (2024, September 16). Why Insurance Commercials Dominate NFL Football Games. <https://www.dontgethittwice.com/blog/2024/september/why-insurance-commercials-dominate-nfl-football/>

⁴ Olds, C. (2014, November 11). Top 12 Military-Themed Sports Card Sets. *Beckett*. <https://www.beckett.com/news/dirty-dozen-military-themed-sports-card-sets-to-own/>

⁵ Hartung, B. & Semler, S. (2025, July 8). Profits of War: Top Beneficiaries of Pentagon Spending, 2020-2024. *Costs of War*, Watson School, Brown University.

⁶ Sajjadiankhah, S. (2023, December 15). How U.S. businesses profit from war worldwide. *The Reynolds Center*. <https://businessjournalism.org/2023/12/war-profit/>; Raytheon. (2022, April 28). Scenes from the 2022 U.S. Paralympics Cycling Open. *RTX.com*. <https://www.rtx.com/raytheon/news/2022/04/28/2022-paralympics>; The BIG EAST Conference. (2025, March 7). *BIG EAST Conference Announces 2025 Basketball Tournament Partners*. <https://www.bigeast.com/news/2025/3/8/general-big-east-conference-announces-2025-basketball-tournament-partners.aspx>

million watched at home.⁷ However, other sporting leagues also have mutually-beneficial partnerships with the military – whether they be youth or college, amateur or professional, in-person or esports, male or, to a lesser extent, female, sports. From the National Basketball Association (NBA)’s “Hoops for Troops” initiative to the National Hockey League’s Navy-sponsored “Veterans Appreciation Nights,” most sporting leagues celebrate and profit from associations with the military in some way.⁸ Companies marketing a wide range of goods promote and profit from this nexus as well – for example, the sportswear company Under Armour holds “Department of Defense Warrior Games.”

Recruiting Troops

In the absence of a national draft, sports play a pivotal role in helping the U.S. armed forces recruit new troops. One of the many recruiting initiatives by the Air Force Reserves, for instance, involves targeting athletes and fans of the mixed martial arts Professional Fighters League (PFL) (most of whom are male). According to the Air Force Recruiting Service website, “The PFL has more than 600 million fans worldwide and its competitions are broadcast and streamed to 140 countries with 25 international leading media partners.” The Air Force’s multi-year partnership with the PFL serves as a “strategic opportunity for the service to highlight the character traits it looks for in its recruits in front of a highly valued audience.”⁹ One initiative invites Air Force recruits to conduct their swearing-in ceremony inside the ring during a PFL event, in front of both live and TV audiences. Marketing officials for the Air Force Recruiting Service refers to PFL fans as its “target demographic” given the athletes’ physical and mental fitness, and because they “have to be completely dedicated.”

Similar Air Force partnerships involve the Air Force paying Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) to promote its brand on Pay-Per-View telecasts and live, at fights. Part of these promotional materials involved the Air Force, in 2021, allowing former UFC Light Heavyweight Champion Forrest Griffin to fly an F-16 valued between \$25 and \$30 million dollars.¹⁰

⁷ NFL.com. (2024, February 13). *Super Bowl LVIII is Most-Watched Telecast in History*.

<https://operations.nfl.com/updates/the-game/super-bowl-lviii-is-most-watched-telecast-in-history/>

⁸ NHL Public Relations. (2024, October 24). *NHL extends U.S. partnership with Navy Federal Credit Union as military appreciation partner*. <https://www.nhl.com/news/nhl-extends-us-partnership-with-navy-federal-credit-union-as-military-appreciation-partner>

⁹ Pilch, B. (2023, June 26). Reserve recruiting packs a punch at Mixed Martial Arts event. *Air Force Recruiting Service*. <https://www.aetc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3441126/reserve-recruiting-packs-a-punch-at-mixed-martial-arts-event/>

¹⁰ Pilch, B. (2023, June 26). Reserve recruiting packs a punch at Mixed Martial Arts event. Air Education and Training Command. <https://www.aetc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3441126/reserve-recruiting-packs-a-punch-at-mixed-martial-arts-event/>; Brown, L. (2022, July 8). UFC Joins Forces with the Air National

Though there are no comprehensive, up-to-date estimates of how much money the Pentagon spends on its sports recruitment initiatives, a Congressional investigation revealed the scale of what senators called “paid patriotism” between 2012-2015. During these years, the Pentagon spent \$53 million in U.S. taxpayer money to subsidize various sporting events and promotional campaigns.¹¹ In contracts with sports leagues ranging from football and baseball to hockey and soccer, the Pentagon paid directly for “patriotic tributes” such as military appreciation nights, welcome-home promotions for soldiers, and ceremonial first pitches. After receiving pressure from the Senate, the Pentagon agreed to ban this practice, but close ties between the military and sports leagues¹² continue.

The Navy reportedly spends 3-5% of its annual marketing funds¹³ (approximately \$4.3 million dollars from October 2022 – September 2023) on esports initiatives every year. Esports, or electronic sports, are sports organized around video games where professionals or amateurs compete against each other in blockbuster games like *Call of Duty*, *Madden NFL*, or *Fortnite*. The U.S. Navy pays 12 sailors to compete in esports on a full-time basis. For its part, the Army has 11 full-time esports soldiers. Although one investigative reporter found that the Pentagon “does not release data on how effective video game recruitment is,” anecdotally, many officers from within the U.S. military think esports may now be their most effective recruiting tool.¹⁴ In fact, the founder of the Air Force’s esports team (which has only part-time, rather than full-time, players) credited Air Force Gaming as the primary reason some people enlist in the Air Force, since it “made the overall Department of Defense more relatable to folks and put us in a better light.”¹⁵

Guard. *Air Force Recruiting Service*. <https://www.recruiting.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3087571/ufc-joins-forces-with-the-air-national-guard/>; Griffin, Forrest [forrestgriffin]. (2021, April 23). Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/COB0WovHMJg/>

¹¹ Quandt, K. R. (2015, November 6). This Chart Sums Up the Pentagon’s Paid Patriotism Program. *Slate*. https://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports_nut/2015/11/paid_patriotism_the_pentagon_gave_50_sports_teams_taxpayer_money_to_honor.html

¹² Norton, B. (2015, November 5). “Tackling paid patriotism”: Pentagon gave sports franchise millions of tax dollars to spread pro-military propaganda. *Salon*. https://www.salon.com/2015/11/05/tackling_paid_patriotism_pentagon_gave_sports_franchises_millions_of_tax_dollars_to_spread_pro_military_propaganda/; Huetteman, E. (2015, November 4). Senate Report Says Pentagon Paid Sports Leagues for Patriotic Events. *New York Times, First Draft Archive*. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/11/04/senate-report-says-pentagon-paid-sports-leagues-for-patriotic-events/>

¹³ Schwartzburg, R. (2024, February 14). The US military is embedded in the gaming world. Its target: teen recruits. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/14/us-military-recruiting-video-games-targeting-teenagers>

¹⁴ Scharzburg, R. (2024).; Grappe, M. & Nervest, N. (2020, September 9). How the US Army Uses Video Games to Attract Gen Z. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-army-esports-team-twitch-livestreams-recruitment-2020-9>

¹⁵ Scharzburg, R. (2024).

Sports Rituals, Emotion, and the Normalization of Militarism

Military aircraft “flyovers” – the ritual of military aircraft flying over stadiums before the start of games – are perhaps the most spectacular way the military and NFL generate positive attention for both institutions. In 2023, the reigning Super Bowl Champions, from Kansas City, kicked off their season with a flyover of a B-2 bomber, which costs over \$2 billion to manufacture, showing off the “most expensive plane” in the world.¹⁶ The first official flyover during a sporting event took place in Chicago’s Comiskey Park during the 1918 World Series.¹⁷ Flyovers were not a common practice for the many decades that followed, but they have become a much more regular phenomenon since the 9/11 attacks on the U.S.

Given that taxpayers pay for the aircraft, the fuel, the pilots, and other personnel required for these flyovers, it’s worth considering that the average flyover is estimated to cost \$60,000 per hour, which can amount to \$4 million total in the case of some flyovers. Military officials argue that this should not be seen as an *additional* expense because pilots are required to log a certain number of flight hours anyway.¹⁸ So, the argument goes, if it takes 18 hours to practice and execute a pre-game flyover, it is simply 18 hours the pilot would have been flying over an ocean or desert training area.

While the question of whether these flyovers cost or waste taxpayers’ money is an important one, the more important point is that while the military *could* train elsewhere, it chooses to train in front of sports audiences. The Pentagon strategically uses its resources at sporting spectacles to rally support for wars, recruit, and deepen societal reverence for the military. Just as sports leagues and companies know that praising, thanking, and promoting members of the U.S. military is “good for business,” the military cultivates the emotional impact created by combining the national anthem, a flyover, and a blockbuster game like the Super Bowl. One can assume this emotional rush generates investment in and attachment to the military (figuratively and at times literally) and heightens patriotic fervor among fans.

¹⁶ Taylor, R. (2023, September 8). Fans At Chiefs-Lions Season Opener Were Left In Awe By Pregame Flyover Featuring “World’s Most Expensive Plane” With Wingspan That’s Half A Football Field. *Total Pro Sports*. <https://www.totalprosports.com/nfl/b2-arrowhead-flyover-kansas-city-detroit/>

¹⁷ Major Summers Lowe, M. (2020, June). Praise from Above: The American Tradition of Military Flyover. *U.S. Naval Institute*. <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2020/june/praise-above-american-tradition-military-flyover>

¹⁸ Millward, E. (2020, May 6). Fact check: Military flyovers are expensive, but won’t cost taxpayers extra. *WCPO Cincinnati*. <https://www.wcpo.com/news/coronavirus/fact-check-military-flyovers-are-expensive-but-wont-cost-taxpayers-extra>

An important effect of these rituals, ceremonies, and partnerships is that they normalize militarism in everyday life. In other words, since it's increasingly rare to watch any high-profile (or even high school or college) sporting events without participating in some celebration of the U.S. military, such celebrations become a "normal" part of sport. When athletes such as Colin Kaepernick, Naomi Osaka, or LeBron James have spoken out against U.S. wars or other forms of state violence, they have faced intense criticism demanding they keep sports separate from politics. And the reason so many people can say this is because the military and militarism are seen as apolitical. In other words, the argument goes, no one is being political when they wear camo uniforms or a button that says "Support the Troops" or when a sports team signs a multimillion-dollar sponsorship deal with a bank, asset management firm, or any other heavy investor in weapons manufacturers. Supporting the military is not considered a "political stance" because it is presumed that *everyone* shares these values – or at least they should. This is how the normalization of U.S. militarism operates in popular culture. Given the level of emotional investment fans have in their favorite teams, militarized sports rituals shape habits, attitudes, and attachments over a long period of time.

Sports involves finding heroes to root for. The U.S. military capitalizes off this phenomenon by using sports to present soldiers as additional heroes to root for. When sports leagues and teams honor members of the military for their bravery and for "protecting our nation," they further reinforce myths about the positive role of the U.S. military in the world. There is no room to question this narrative or the wars the military has fought, who has really benefited from these wars, and who has suffered. They fight to *protect* us, we are told. As a result, despite the history of violence perpetrated globally by the armed forces, the U.S. military is never portrayed as the aggressor. It's always playing defense.