The Militarization of Fashion: "Camo," "Khakis," and Beyond

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Takeaways

- From camouflage and combat boots to bomber jackets and sailor shirts, military clothing, styles, and aesthetics are a pervasive presence in the fashion world from mass market clothing brands and retailers to the most expensive designer collections.
- Militarized fashion consciously and unconsciously glorifies war, the military, and military values as hip and cool, presenting a sanitized, bloodless image of the military and warfare.
- Military-style fashion is part of a broader process of societal militarization that encourages the adoption of unquestioning support for US wars and warmaking generally, while also shaping gender norms such as a particular version of masculinity tied to the idea of *the soldier* as the height of what it means to be a man.
- Popular fashion can play a role in militarizing the thoughts and ideas of girls and women as much as a person of any gender identification.
- The size of the market for camouflage ($5.3 billion, 2022) shows how militarized fashion has been profitable for the fashion industry, both reflecting and shaping attraction to all things military.

Shouldn't we be curious about why "camo" is seemingly everywhere in the lives of people *not* in the military? On the streets, in the malls, on the clothing racks, on social media, in music videos, sports, art, and especially in fashion, military-style camouflage

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designs are remarkably common. What does it say about our society that, "Half the people on the street are dressed to kill," as *New York Times* critic Troy Patterson has said of similarly common army green clothing?[2]

The question should be asked more broadly because camo isn't unique. If you look carefully, it's hard not to see the military in virtually every corner of the fashion world: bomber jackets, combat boots, aviator sunglasses, khakis, cargo pants, field jackets, navy pea coats, sailor shirts, army green jackets, sailor hats and army caps, "tactical" and "warrior"-style backpacks and accessories, trench coats, clothing adorned with brass buttons, gold braid, and shoulder epaulets – even hairstyles like the currently trendy slicked-back military bun and the military (or G.I.) crew cut.[3] From mass marketed apparel brands to the most expensive designer collections, from baby gear to athletic wear, from Trump-branded clothing to leftist protest fashion, the military is seemingly everywhere. Unsurprisingly, the world's largest weapons maker, Lockheed Martin, has entered the market by licensing its brand to a Korean fashion company that sells streetwear featuring the company's name, logo, slogans, and F-35 fighter jet.[4]

For around a century, civilian apparel brands have produced clothing that mimics many styles of military attire. Most ordinary men and women in the United States don military fashion not as a hostile act but instead to be cool and stylish or because it's what's available on clothing racks. Others purchase clothes with the words "army" or "soldier" on it as a gesture of patriotism. Some anti-imperialist activists have attended protests wearing clothes similar to those worn by armed insurgents.

All of this spurs us to ask more questions: When – and why – do some civilians start wearing military-style clothing? What impact does it have on the wearer and those who see such clothing? What's the relation between such military fashion and the endless wars that actual US military and allied personnel have fought since 2001? Are wearers paying tribute to the troops, "playing" soldier, or doing something else? Why do some women and men choose not to wear military clothing?

There is a lot going on here. It has a history – a gendered history.

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[2] Troy Patterson, "How the Army Jacket Became a Staple of Civilian Garb," *New York Times,* March 5, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/magazine/how-the-army-jacket-became-a-staple-of-civilian-garb.html.

[3] The popular fashion and pop culture podcast *Articles of Interest* notes that "Almost all classic men's wear is based on 20th century militaria." *Articles of Interest,* season 7, "Gear," Radiotopia, 2025. Men's fashion is, however, just the start of the military's influence on the entire fashion industry.

[4] Lockheed Martin Apparel, website, accessed August 20, 2025, https://lockheedmartinapparel.co.kr/. See also, Jessica Roy, "Lockheed Martin, but Make It Fashion," *New York Times,* September 8, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/style/lockheed-martin-fashion.html.

A Short History of Military-Style Clothing

Before there was camo, there was khaki. Before there was khaki, there were the bright red coats of the British army that contributed to its defeat in the Revolutionary War. Male soldiers in Britain's 18th and 19th century imperial army were known colloquially as "red coats." Crimson uniforms apparently were intended by military strategists to stand out, to project male soldiers' authority and, by their association with the Crown, their dominance over local civilians. But crimson also made British soldiers easy targets.

In the wake of repeated defeats in America and beyond, British imperialists rethought their battlefield military fashion strategy. In 1848, they chose camouflage over manly authority for battlefield uniforms: out with red coats, in with khaki uniforms. "Khaki" is the Urdu word for a dusty tan, the color of the dry hills of northern India and Afghanistan. Thereafter, British soldiers waging colonial wars in that landscape more easily hid from armed local opponents. Other military strategists followed suit. By the 1940s, scores of militaries were issuing khaki uniforms to their land-based soldiers.[5]

Khaki apparel didn't become civilian fashion, though, until after World War II. In the 1970s and 1980s, the US clothing retailer The Gap (established in 1964) began marketing khaki-colored trousers to civilian men as an alternative to both informal blue jeans and formal business attire.

A political puzzle for all of us to untangle is this: Today, when few know this history, have "khakis" become so normalized in US culture that they have been drained of any military – or imperial – meaning? Alternatively, is the current normalization of khakis (and a broader "Banana Republic" colonial aesthetic of the white "explorer" in the tropics or on the savannah) in civilian fashion proof of how deeply rooted militarization has become in the United States?

"Camo" has a similarly complicated history, entering civilian fashion decades after military camouflage was invented. The first camouflage in its distinctive brown and green swirling patterns was developed in 1914, during World War I, by a French designer, intended to be worn by French male soldiers. For camouflage to move into a wider civilian market it seemed to take an historic sequence of events: Following World War II, excess military clothing and the proliferation of low-cost military surplus stores coupled with the arrival of large numbers of veterans on college campuses helped fuel the popularity of military styles in civilian life. In the 1960s and 1970s hippies and anti-war protestors,

[5] See, e.g., Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarisation of Women's Lives* (Pandora Press, 1988).

including discontented mostly male Vietnam War veterans brandishing their veteran status to make their point, reclaimed camouflage and army green field jackets for political ends.

"The turbulence of the 1960s would help recast military surplus clothing as rebellious rather than utilitarian," writes military fashion historian Charles McFarlane. "Along with love beads, sandals, and denim, military surplus came to represent a wide array of countercultures on American campuses and beyond."[6]

A generation later, in the 1980s and 1990s, rappers, skaters, and the grunge movement, among others, adopted the look as a sign of independence, rebellion, and militancy; some wore military fashion with a sense of irony, although that intent was surely missed by many observers.[7] In the 1990s, camouflage went mainstream. Following the strategic post-Vietnam rehabilitation of the military's image in the 1980s and the widely televised 1991 US-led Persian Gulf war against Iraq, a critical mass of US apparel brand executives began to market camouflage to suburban and city consumers, detaching it from rural markets and hunting.

So that their camouflaged fashion wouldn't depend on consumers favoring the military, marketing strategists called it "camo." Young male consumers were retailers' first target: Young men donning camo might not want to be seen as favoring any particular war but consciously or unconsciously may choose camo cargo pants to enhance their image as manly and tough. Within a decade, young women also were treated by popular brands as potential camo buyers.

For years, most major US-based brands and retailers, such as The Gap, Wrangler, The Children's Place, Costco, Target, and Walmart, have offered "camo" patterned clothes and fashion items including backpacks, glasses, and other accessories for adults and children alike. After producing clothing and consulting for the US military during World War II, the US outdoor clothing company L.L. Bean was one that began marketing camouflage to civilian (mainly white) men both for recreational hunting and casual wear.[8]

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[6] Charles McFarlane, "The Influence of Military Surplus Clothing on the Casual American Collegiate Style 1945-1972," February 24, 2023, https://standardandstrange.com/blogs/standard-strange-stories/the-influence-of-military-surplus-clothing-on-the-casual-american-collegiate-style-1945-1972

[7] See, e.g., Louisa Rogers, "The Symbolism of Colour and Camouflage in Contemporary Fashion," March 25, 2023, Louisarogers.net blog, https://www.louisarogers.net/blog/2023/3/24/the-symbolism-of-colour-and-camouflage-in-contemporary-fashion.

[8] See, e.g., L.L. Bean, Fall catalogue, fall 2024, pp. 2, 5. Tucker Westbrook, "10 Things You Didn't Know About L.L.Bean," March 24, 2015, https://www.townandcountrymag.com/style/fashion-trends/news/a2851/10-things-you-didnt-know-about-ll-bean/. On the related use of "army duck" cloth, see, L.L. Bean, "From Field to Fashion: The 100-Year Journey of the L.L.Bean Field Coat," September 22, 2024, https://www.llbean.com/llb/shop/518788?page=inside-llbean-14.

In recent decades, most major male U.S. professional sports teams and many high school and college teams have worn camo uniforms. Many, like the San Diego Padres baseball team, which may have been the first to start the trend, have worn numerous camo uniforms through the years in colors ranging from traditional green to desert tan to navy blue. In sports and beyond, designers increasingly have paired camouflage designs with bright color schemes (yellows, reds, fluorescents) that are clearly meant to draw attention rather than to hide.[9]

For major sports teams, which tend to roll out new uniforms multiple times a year, each new one generally offers a new opportunity to sell camo to fans and thus to profit both from sales and from an association with the U.S. military.[10] The same is true for clothing brands embracing a seemingly endless number of camo designs, prints, and color schemes (thanks in great part to the speed and, often, exploitation of women working on assembly lines in the global fashion industry in places such as Cambodia, Guatemala, and Bangladesh).[11] As designers have understood for at least a century, camo and other military fashion are profitable. The current value of the global camouflage market is estimated to be worth $5.3 billion, with projections that it will nearly double in value by 2033.[12]

The Significance of Military Fashion

Beyond the profit to be made, military fashion has other effects. Military fashion – alongside other forces such as schooling, movies, TV, advertising, and the media – can subtly and often unconsciously militarize its wearers, shaping their ways of thinking, perceiving, and being in the world. These effects extend to people who may never wear militarized fashion, but who see others wearing it.

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[9] Game Bibs, "The Rise of Camouflage Uniforms in Sports," Gamebibs.com, May 24, 2024, https://gamebibs.com/blog/team-color-blogs/the-rise-of-camouflage-uniforms-in-sports/?srsltid=AfmBOormjfCQq5irk4Qwk9Ofxy9l9UNxIQhC-QZxgsN4nazw9I4oxOPb.

[10] Some, such as the National Football League (NFL), donate the proceeds of camo sales to veterans organizations. Even when this is the case, camo can generate other forms of profit by attracting additional advertising dollars and boosting name recognition, ticket sales, and general interest in a team or league. See, e.g., advertising on the NFL's "Salute to Service" campaign website, https://www.nfl.com/causes/salute/.

[11] See, e.g., Cynthia Enloe, Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014, pp. 250-304.

[12] Wemarket Research, "Camouflage Clothing Market Size - By Product (Camouflage Jackets, Camouflage Pants, Camouflage Shirts, Camouflage Hats, Camouflage Gloves, Camouflage Footwear, Camouflage Accessories (e.g., backpacks, belts)), Pattern, Material & End User: Global Regional Forecast By 2033," Wemarket Research Report, October 10, 2024, https://wemarketresearch.com/reports/camouflage-clothing-market/1311#:~:text=Camouflage%20clothing%20market%20was%20valued,6.9%25%20during%20the%20forecast%20period.

To fully understand how any form of fashion or any wearer of fashion becomes militarized, we need to investigate what's going on in individuals' minds. What does an individual boy or man think he is doing when he begins wearing camo? What was the appeal to a young mother when she first dressed her infant in "baby camo"? To what degree are people making conscious choices to wear militarized fashion and to what degree are they buying what's available because the fashion industry has chosen to turn camo and army green into clothing staples? How much do people really want to wear camo and other militarized fashion? How are manufacturers shaping what people *want*?

While these dynamics are endlessly complicated at an individual level, at a broader level, military fashion tends to normalize war and its place in society. Beyond normalizing, militarized fashion tends to glorify war, the military, and the military's technology, violence, and values. Such fashion indeed camouflages what the U.S. military actually does, portraying war as clean, bloodless, and positive, hiding the death, injury, and destruction of war, including for camouflage-wearing military personnel.

More broadly, militarized fashion enlists people in and makes them susceptible to the step-by-step process of militarization. While militarization is a macro-level political, economic, and ideological process involving greater amounts of societal resources and labor dedicated to war and preparations for war, at an individual level it involves the adoption of particular, often gendered sources of pride, fears, beliefs, values, and aspirations. Here, for instance, are just a few: the belief that it is natural to have enemies; the worry that one's own country will be weak if it lacks a potent military; the belief that to be patriotic one has to support the military; the valuing of a form of masculinity that fits with soldiering over alternative sorts of masculinity; the assumption that only a man can serve effectively in the role as US commander in chief; and taking pride in being associated with a military as a father, mother, wife, son or girlfriend.

Fashion designers and apparel marketers play on a mix of these beliefs and values, for example, to sell "camo," helping to make it "cool" and creating desires for it among consumers. There is nothing "natural" about the popularity and appeal of camo and other military fashion in recent decades. The U.S. military and the clothing industry have had a complicated two-way relationship for at least a century that has shaped people's tastes and the fashion industry. From the World War II Army Nurse Corps wrap dress to the recent development of an "Army tactical brassiere," the military has long employed civilian fashion designers to create uniforms and apparel in part to attract and retain potential recruits. This relationship has, in turn, shaped civilian fashion and what clothing is available for people to purchase – and desire.[13] Following World War II, for example,

[13] For a good history of this relationship, see the podcast *Articles of Interest,* season 7, "Gear."

designers were "transforming the styles of women soldiers and war workers into a beauty ideal," as historian Einav Rabinovitch-Fox explains.[14]

Beyond shaping ideas about what's beautiful and cool, military fashion plays a role in shaping ideas about gender, about masculinity and femininity, what it means to be a man and a woman, and how one *should be* a man or a woman. Camo "sells itself as empowering," fashion critic Louisa Rogers writes about its use in fashion targeting women. "The popular cultural associations of camouflage are still dominated by militarized masculinity. Its translation into womenswear suggests that in wearing it, we can take on the qualities of the male military hero."[15] Camo and other military-styled fashion similarly seem to promise men the ability to buy a particular version of masculinity revolving around strength, power, the use of violence, and the idea of the male military hero.

Learning to See Through the Camouflage

Not every consumer buys either the clothes or the message. Some decide to stop wearing and buying military fashion. Some engage their friends in conversations about the effects of military fashion, how wearing camo isn't cool, how it both glorifies war and hides its deadly realities.[16] Veterans have shredded their uniforms to make paper and other art, building on the example of veterans in the Vietnam War era who drew on, painted, and altered their uniforms as forms of protest.[17] Activists have held anti-militarist fashion shows to call attention to the militarization of clothing and our minds.[18] Some countries even prohibit civilians from wearing camouflage.[19]

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[14] See, e.g., Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, "The military has long had ties with the fashion industry," Washington Post, August 22, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/made-by-history/2022/08/22/military-has-long-had-ties-with-fashion-industry; Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases.*

[15] Louisa Rogers, "The Symbolism of Colour and Camouflage in Contemporary Fashion," blog, LouisaRogers.net, March 25, 2023, https://www.louisarogers.net/blog/2023/3/24/the-symbolism-of-colour-and-camouflage-in-contemporary-fashion.

[16] See Cynthia Enloe, "Militarization Starts During Peacetime," in *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023), 138.

[17] See, e.g., Barbara Williams Costentino, "Transforming Military Uniforms Into Paper Art Can Bring Healing," Next Avenue, May 22, 2024, https://www.nextavenue.org/transforming-military-uniforms-into-paper-art/; Frontline Paper for Veterans, Frontline Arts, https://www.frontlinearts.org/frontline-paper, accessed December 8, 2024.

[18] Christine Ahn, John Feffer, Gwyn Kirk, "Fashioning Resistance to Militarism," Foreign Policy in Focus, March 9, 2009, https://fpif.org/fashioning_resistance_to_militarism/.

[19] World Population Review, "Camouflage Clothing Laws by Country 2026," accessed February 3, 2026, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/camouflage-clothing-laws-by-country.

Militarized fashion, like militarization more broadly, is not inevitable. It is not unstoppable. It can be challenged. We can learn to see through the camouflage to look squarely at war and its terrible costs.[20]

[20] See Enloe, "Militarization Starts."