

We have devoted our careers and our hearts to the honor of the U.S. Armed Forces. As a group, we have served in all branches of the military and senior roles at the Department of Defense. It is heartbreaking for us to see the President of the United States use this sacred force to undermine the constitutional rights of peaceful protestors.

We the undersigned believe the President must reverse his destructive course immediately. He must cease tarnishing the military by employing it against peaceful civilians. He must cease divisive rhetoric and must recognize the legitimate grievances of America's Black communities and the specter of institutional racism, and that peaceful protests are among the rights those of us who served fought to protect.

For those who served, there is particular anguish that comes with watching this nation convulse in unrest, grief, and anger. It is compounded by the horror of the underlying offense: the murder of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement. It was another reminder that our country, founded in the ideal of equality, has never been able to live up fully to that ideal. For many of us, our careers have been focused on threats to America emanating from afar, but all of us recognize that there is no greater obstacle to the realization of our ideals at home than a divided America.

This is a moment that cries out for leadership. We have yet to receive that from President Trump -- indeed, we have seen the opposite. He has again fanned the flames of anger, meeting genuine and raw national emotion with alienating speech and empty photo-ops. Even worse, he has dressed his inherent weakness in the guise of strength, calling on the military and Department of Defense, institutions designed to protect all Americans from our external adversaries, to serve political aims.

We have been heartened to hear some of our most esteemed former colleagues who have served multiple administrations -- including Jim Mattis, Mike Mullen, and John Allen, among others -- speak out. We know that their sense of alarm is reflective of how so many who have served their country feel at this precise moment. It is how we feel as we have listened to this President threaten to turn America's military against our fellow citizens, politicize institutions that must remain above the partisan fray, and erode public trust in our Armed Services. As General Mattis wrote: "We do not need to militarize our response to protests. We need to unite around a common purpose. And it starts by guaranteeing that all of us are equal before the law."

In the midst of our national anguish, we continue to have reason for hope. We recognize the courage of the diverse demonstrators who have taken to the streets to demand change, and we have found comfort listening to some of the mayors, police chiefs, and other local leaders who have been able to meet the moment in their rhetoric and response. We also have noted the statements from several military commands recommitting their forces to protection of the constitution. We believe hope lies with the protestors who marched arm-in-arm with police chiefs who agree with their cause -- not with those who want to "dominate the battlespace."

President Trump has diminished the power of our example. Those of us who have served believe the greatness of our military -- and the greatness of our nation -- depends upon the calls for change in the streets today becoming votes for change in November.

Admiral Steve Abbot, USN (Ret.)
Brigadier General Steven M. Anderson, USA (Ret.)
Brigadier General Ricardo Aponte, USAF (Ret.)
Vice Admiral Donald Arthur, USN (Ret.)
Major General Donna Barbisch, USA (Ret.)
Brigadier General Roosevelt Barfield, USA (Ret.)
Brigadier General Stephen A. Cheney, USMC (Ret.)
Rear Admiral Chris Cole, USN (Ret.)
Major General Peter S. Cooke, USA (Ret.)
Brigadier General John W Douglass, USAF (Ret.)
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Vice Admiral Michael Franken, USN (Ret.)
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Major General Irv Halter, USAF (Ret.)
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Brigadier General Ronald Rokosz, USA (Ret.)
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Rear Admiral Paul Ryan, USN (Ret.)
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Brigadier General Paul Greg Smith, USA (Ret.)
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