



Trump rolls out fighter jets, helicopters and bombers for Fourth of July speech

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U.S. President Donald Trump marked his third Independence Day in office by taking over the traditionally apolitical celebrations on the National Mall in Washington and parading an array of military hardware before his adoring supporters.

Mr. Trump spent most of his hour-long address from the Lincoln Memorial recounting tale after tale of U.S. military glory amid drizzling rain. Flanked by tanks, he then introduced a procession of fighter jets, helicopters and bombers to buzz the gathering.

“America is stronger today than it has ever been before,” the President declared as the crowd roared its approval.

The gathering was as controversial as anything in the Trump era, with the President accused of turning a taxpayer-funded event into a campaign rally and needlessly ordering up expensive military hardware to help him celebrate.

And as Mr. Trump girded for re-election, some migrants remained confined to standing-room-only cages along the border with Mexico, Americans had paid more than US\$20-billion in tariffs as a result of the President’s trade war and his approval rating sat in the low 40s.

President Donald Trump appeared to stumble over a portion of his prepared Fourth of July speech in Washington, saying that the army 'manned the air' and took over airports during the Revolutionary War in the late 18th century.

But to the citizens of Trump Nation that descended on the U.S. capital to take in his extravaganza, their President is doing exactly what they want him to. They came to cheer his clampdown at the border, his trade war with China and his appointment of two conservative Supreme Court judges who, they hope, will ultimately impose a judicial ban on abortion.

“We don’t want that immigration coming through our country. There are terrorists. MS-13 gang members. Drugs are crossing the border,” said Jean Sevel, a 76-year-old retired IT specialist and Trump supporter from New Braunfels, Tex., as she sheltered from the blazing 33 C sunshine under the overhang of the Museum of American History.

There is no evidence that undocumented immigrants commit a disproportionate number of crimes. In fact, two studies by the libertarian Cato Institute think tank have found that undocumented immigrants are incarcerated at just half the rate of native-born Americans and, in Texas, are also convicted at significantly lower rates.

But anger at unauthorized immigration has been Mr. Trump's bread and butter. And even the conditions in detention centres – highlighted in a government report earlier in the week that showed crowds of people, including children, held behind cages of chain-link fence, forced to sleep on the floor and not being able to shower for weeks on end – did not bother the President's backers.

“We can't support everyone in our country, if we had all kinds of people coming in,” said John Proveaux, 63, a retired police officer from Meridian, Idaho, as he waited in line to get onto the National Mall for Mr. Trump's event.

During Mr. Trump's first presidential campaign, some Republicans were uneasy at the prospect of a twice-divorced New York billionaire who previously declared himself pro-choice and expressed support for universal health care. But his actions in office, where he has condemned abortion in graphic terms and given the right a Supreme Court majority for the first time since the 1930s, have won over social conservatives.

“I'm glad he's against abortion – that's my number one thing,” said Sheila Proveaux, 57, a retired school teacher and Mr. Proveaux's wife. “He'd like to see God back in our country.”

In a sign of the country's tense political atmosphere, many of Mr. Trump's supporters on the Mall Thursday were wary of providing their names to reporters, citing fears of losing jobs or becoming the target of online vitriol.

One Texas cattle rancher, who would not give her name, backs the President's tariffs: Defending her business from Chinese competition, she said, was ultimately worth the higher prices on imported goods and the retaliation from Beijing that is tanking the livelihoods of U.S. soy farmers.

The Fourth of July celebrations in Washington are shaping up to be unlike any other after President Donald Trump inserted himself into the proceedings and added military displays. People in D.C. are split over the politicization of the traditionally non-partisan event.

The tensions were on full display at a protest near the Washington Monument, where social-justice group Code Pink inflated a replica of the Baby Trump blimp made famous by British activists during the President's visit to London last year.

As protesters chanted “can't build the wall!” Patrick Walsh, a 41-year-old internet conspiracy theorist from Philadelphia, tried to shout them down with a speech about the evils of communism.

Nearby was a second Trump effigy: A 16-foot robot version of the President sitting on a golden toilet, stabbing away at a smartphone and saying “I'm a very stable genius.”

Taina Litwak, a 63-year-old illustrator who came to the protest, said the militaristic element Mr. Trump had injected into Fourth of July festivities, along with the immigration detention facilities, reminded her of the former Soviet Union.

“They’re mixing up patriotism with his cult of personality,” she said. “He’s acting more and more like Stalin as the camp situation gets worse.”

Susan Woodard, 59, in town from South Carolina for concerts by the Rolling Stones and Carole King, said she would skip Mr. Trump’s speech altogether. She said he was trying to turn the Fourth of July into a spectacle “all about him.” And she took issue with his harsh portrayal of refugee claimants.

“These are people that need help – they’re not here to lie and steal. They just want to make a life here and contribute,” said Ms. Woodard, who works as a conservation information officer.

Later, during Mr. Trump’s speech, a group of about 20 protesters marched through the crowd chanting “close the camps” and “impeach now,” while carrying a cardboard cutout of a giant middle finger. Some of Mr. Trump’s supporters threw water bottles at them and drowned them out with boos.

Mark Roberts, a Nashville realtor who sported a red Make America Great Again bucket hat, shrugged off the suggestion that Mr. Trump was co-opting a civic event.

“He’s President of the United States, he can be part of any festivities he wants,” said Mr. Roberts, 52. “Political people want to make everything political. He’s a patriotic American.”