

Tracing Militarism in Media, Public Opinion, and Everyday Life

ADVOCACY BRIEF

ReThink Media & Costs of War Project at Brown University | Prepared for coalition briefing, June 25, 2026

This brief summarizes key findings from a multi-year, multi-method study on American attitudes toward war and military spending — and what those findings mean for advocates and communicators working on peace and security issues. It draws on four research components: a quantitative and qualitative analysis of nearly 70,000 news articles from 12 national outlets; a reception study with 30 demographically diverse news consumers; ethnographic fieldwork across five US communities; and a nationally representative YouGov poll of 1,006 registered voters (May 2026, MoE $\pm 3.5\%$). Full findings are reported in two companion memos: [Media Coverage and Audience Reception](#) and [Public Beliefs, Fieldwork, and Poll Findings](#).

Key findings

1. Militarism is framed in news coverage as something that happens “out there”

National coverage is dominated by foreign flashpoints — Russia (33% of articles), Ukraine (28%), China (26%). By contrast, domestic economic impact appears in just ~3% of articles and spending tradeoffs in just ~2%. Defense contractors are nearly absent except as named suppliers in foreign conflict stories. When domestic harms appear at all — as with the Red Hill fuel contamination in Hawai'i — they are framed as isolated incidents, not structural patterns.

2. Public views of the military are layered and conflicted

Both the reception study and ethnographic fieldwork found that Americans consistently distinguish between individual service members, the military as an institution, and the political leaders directing it. Support for military strength coexists with skepticism about spending, contractor influence, and specific uses of force. Fieldwork across five communities (Hawai'i, Silicon Valley, Minneapolis, Marietta, Groton) found military spending experienced as simultaneously a lifeline and a pressure point — sustaining local jobs while straining schools, housing, and infrastructure.

3. Safety concerns can override Pentagon spending skepticism

Thirty-six percent of voters say there is no level of military spending too high if it keeps Americans safe. But this position weakens considerably when spending is made concrete: 59% say the proposed \$1.5 trillion FY2027 budget is too high. The safety override is heavily partisan (64% of conservatives vs. 8% of liberals) and softens under specific policy questions. Crucially, voters already understand safety broadly: friends and family rank first as a daily safety contributor, followed by local emergency services — with the military third.

4. Concrete, local stories move people — abstract arguments don't

The reception study directly tested this. A locally grounded investigative piece on how Raytheon/RTX exploited a tax loophole in Buncombe County, NC prompted immediate outrage and the impulse to generalize. A conventional foreign policy piece on Taiwan prompted abstract reasoning that stayed inside its own frame. Audiences are already primed to connect foreign policy to domestic life.

Fieldwork found the same: communities engaged most critically with military spending when its consequences were visible in their own backyards.

Coalition guidance

Make militarism local and concrete.

Specific, place-based stories about real harms and tradeoffs — a contaminated water supply, a contractor tax loophole, a crowded school near a base — are more likely to move people than abstract budget arguments. This is what the research shows works, and it occupies terrain that national news coverage largely leaves empty.

Broaden the safety frame.

People already understand safety in terms of healthcare, housing, family, and community — not just military power. Build on that rather than fighting the military-safety association head-on. The poll suggests this alternative frame is already there; it just needs to be activated.

Clarify tradeoffs.

Support for military spending becomes more conditional when people can connect it to everyday insecurities. When voters see the \$1.5T figure, 59% say it's too high. When fieldwork participants learned the actual spending level, roughly three-quarters said it was too much. Make the opportunity costs visible and specific — housing, healthcare, schools, infrastructure.

Make contractors visible.

The public thinks readily about troops and military families, but rarely about who profits from military spending. Both the media analysis and fieldwork confirm that contractors are largely invisible as political and economic actors. Naming their influence, subsidies, and lobbying power shifts how military budgets are understood — and audiences respond strongly when that story is told concretely.

Work with the contradictions, not against them.

Most people hold genuinely conflicting views simultaneously: the military keeps us safe AND spending is too high; military jobs matter AND contractor profits are excessive. Fieldwork found this even among people directly harmed by military activity. These contradictions aren't confusion — they're the starting point. Advocacy that meets people inside those tensions is more likely to make progress than messaging that asks people to resolve them first.

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