

Tracing Militarism in Media, Public Opinion, and Everyday Life

RESEARCH MEMO: MEDIA COVERAGE AND AUDIENCE RECEPTION

ReThink Media & Costs of War Project | June 2026

This memo presents select findings from a multi-year, multi-method research initiative examining American attitudes toward militarism — how it is covered in the news, how the public understands and experiences it, and how military power shapes everyday life in the United States. The research initiative was conducted by ReThink Media and Dr. Jennifer Greenburg in collaboration with the [Costs of War](#) project at Brown University, with additional support from Purdue University.

The findings reported here draw specifically on the media and audience research components of that larger project: a quantitative analysis of nearly 70,000 articles from 12 major national outlets¹ (December 2019–April 2025); a qualitative framing analysis of a hand-coded subsample of 300 articles; a reception study² with 30 US news consumers; and a nationally representative poll³. The initiative also includes ethnographic fieldwork by Jennifer Greenburg examining how militarism is experienced in communities across the United States; findings from that component are reported in the companion memo. A summary of key findings and coalition guidance across all components is available in our advocacy brief.

The findings point to three interlocking conclusions with implications for journalists, editors, funders, and anyone working to make the domestic consequences of militarism more visible in American public life.

Militarism is framed as something that happens “out there”

Across the full dataset, coverage of military-related issues is concentrated around a small number of international flashpoints. Roughly one-third of articles reference Russia (33%), with substantial shares mentioning Ukraine (28%), China (26%), Israel (18%), and Iran (15%). The pattern is consistent: militarism enters the news most often through distant conflicts and foreign policy arenas, not through domestic institutions, communities, or consequences.

The most frequently coded theme across 300 randomly selected articles was “US Global Role” — articles portraying the country as a central actor in world affairs, whether as global leader, ally, or military aggressor — appearing in 98 articles (~33% of the sample). Nearly as common was “Foreign Threats and Global Dangers” (86 articles, ~30%), a framing in which coverage hinges on the presence of adversaries or instability abroad, from overt threats to the US military to simmering geopolitical tensions that could indirectly affect US interests. By contrast, “Domestic Economic Impact” — coverage tracing how military spending ripples into local economies, jobs, or community resources

¹ Media analysis corpus: 12 national outlets (AP, CBS News, CNN Wire, MSNBC, NBC News,, New York Times, NPR, Reuters, The Guardian US, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Washington Times) plus a separate headline analysis of ~11,500 Fox News headlines via Muck Rack. Fox News could not be incorporated into the main scraped dataset due to site access constraints.

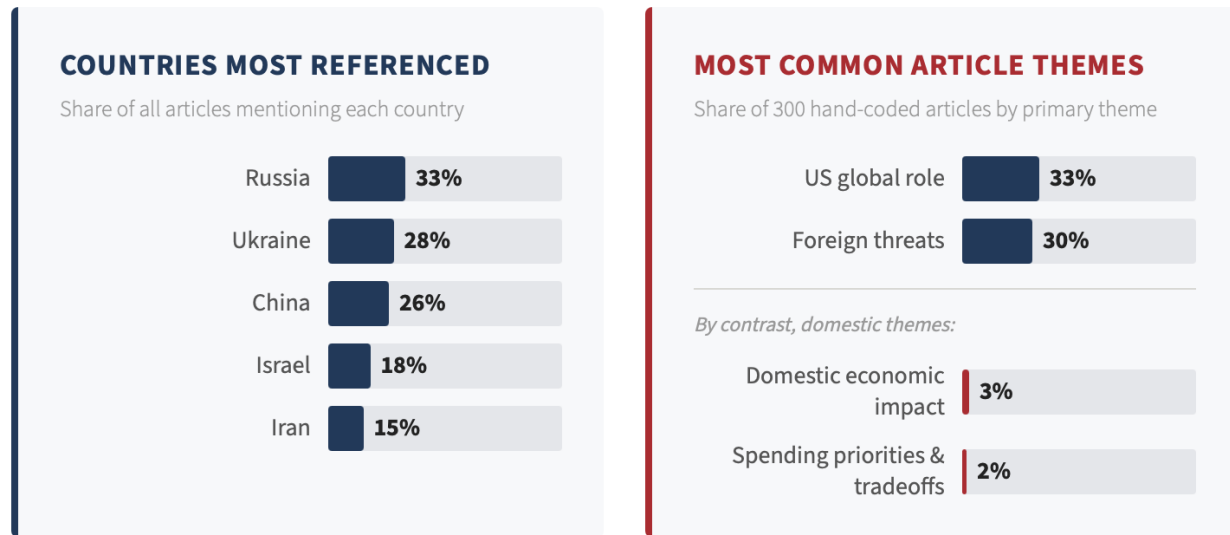
² Reception study participants (n=30) were recruited by YouGov for demographic diversity, not statistical representativeness. The study was conducted as a three-day asynchronous online community, November 2025.

³ Poll conducted via YouGov (n=1,006), May 6-8, 2026. Crosstabs can be made available upon request.

— appeared in just 8 articles (~3%), and "Spending Priorities and Tradeoffs" — reporting that examines the opportunity costs of defense spending relative to other public needs — in just 7 (~2%).

Where military coverage focuses — and what it misses

Media analysis of ~70,000 articles across 12 national outlets, December 2019–April 2025



Country references are based on keyword analysis of ~70,000 articles; figures represent the share of all articles mentioning each country at least once. Theme figures are based on qualitative coding of a random subsample of 300 articles; a single article may carry multiple themes.

The specific domains where militarism intersects most directly with everyday life—health, environment, defense contracting, veterans’ wellbeing, local economic impact—are consistently underrepresented. Key patterns:

- **Climate:** The military’s own environmental footprint is nearly absent from coverage. When climate appears (~5% of articles), it is framed as a geopolitical variable—a challenge to be navigated by military power, not a consequence of it.
- **Public health:** Explicit connections between military activity and public health appear in only 2% of articles. The Red Hill fuel contamination in Hawai’i—one of the rare cases where domestic harm was made visible—generated a distinct cluster of 46 articles, yet even this coverage largely treated the event as an isolated technical failure rather than a structural pattern.
- **Defense contractors:** Major firms like Lockheed Martin, Raytheon/RTX, and Northrop Grumman each appear in well under 1% of articles. When they do appear, they are typically named as suppliers within foreign conflict coverage, not examined as political or economic actors in their own right.
- **Economic impact:** Of the roughly 4% of articles that meaningfully link militarism to economic outcomes, 74% situate those impacts in foreign or international contexts.

Coverage of domestic economic consequences—local jobs, community investment, fiscal tradeoffs—represents just ~1% of the full dataset.

When domestic consequences do appear, they are treated as isolated incidents—not structural patterns. The occasional story that does surface domestic harms tends to frame them as exceptional rather than systemic. The Red Hill case is instructive: while coverage consistently foregrounded community harm and institutional failure, almost none of the 46 articles questioned the broader logic of military base operations or connected the contamination to similar cases elsewhere. In several instances, “national security” was invoked as the rationale for addressing the contamination—effectively subordinating community harm to military priority.

Two Guardian articles stood out as exceptions, foregrounding Indigenous Hawaiian critiques of military occupation. But their framing—repositioning the military as a tool of colonial-capitalist expansion rather than national defense—was essentially absent from other outlets.

Coverage of Pentagon spending reflects a similar dynamic. Even when it appears explicitly, spending is typically rendered abstract, procedural, and distant: debates among Washington elites, aggregate budget figures, and political messaging, with almost no reporting on how military investment reshapes local labor markets, housing, infrastructure, or community life. The Pentagon budget—the largest discretionary expenditure of the US government—is rarely presented as a decision that bears directly on the everyday lives of most Americans.

This framing has structural consequences. When harms are treated as exceptional rather than systemic, they become more difficult to contest—and easier to manage as technical failures or political accidents rather than as products of deliberate policy choices.

Views about the military are conflicted — and sometimes contradictory

If the media analysis tells us how militarism is framed for American audiences, the next question is how those audiences actually make sense of it. To explore that, we conducted an online discussion study with 30 demographically diverse US news consumers — a format in which participants responded to a series of open-ended prompts over three days, read and reacted to real news articles, and could view and reply to one another's posts. The study was designed to capture not just what people think about the military, but how they reason through it: the tensions they notice, the distinctions they draw, and the moments where coverage seems to connect — or fail to connect — with their own lives. What emerged was a picture of public opinion considerably more complex and conflicted than either dominant media frames or simple partisan divides would suggest.

Many show respect for military troops, but critique military power

The audience reception study revealed complex, ambivalent attitudes that don't map onto simple pro- or anti-military positions. Participants tended to distinguish between the military as an institution, the political leaders who direct it, and individual service members. This triangulation produced nuanced reasoning — deep respect for troops often coexisted with sharp criticism of recent military actions, spending priorities, and defense contractor influence. This tension was especially pronounced among respondents with direct ties to the military, several of whom brought up the National Guard deployments to US cities:

"My father fought in WWII and was active in the VFW. However, it was a different time and the military was not so politicized. I worry about this president who views the military as his private militia." – Renee, 71

"The men in my family all were active in the military... It's a[n] honored tradition. [But] [s]eeing the military in the news and hearing or reading negativity is disheartening. Our own government in some terms is disrespecting our military men and women... The use of our National Guard by our current President is an atrocity against [the] American people." – Kayla, 27

One participant who grew up in a rural community where military recruitment was common named this tension directly:

"[M]ilitary service tended to be idealized in [my] rural town, and a result was that many people were upset by any criticism of military policy (like the decision to deploy troops in specific places) because they felt like it was insulting to the troops themselves. So it felt like there was a tension between respecting members of the military and having honest conversations about how the military operates, although I think it's possible to do both of those things." – Hannah, 40

Many view military strength as necessary but are mixed on how it is exercised

Another contradiction surfaced repeatedly throughout the reception study: nearly all participants viewed military strength as important, while simultaneously expressing uncertainty, discomfort, or skepticism about how military power is exercised in practice.

Minimal Connection to Everyday Life and Personal Safety

When asked how the military figures into their own personal safety, most participants described it as "always in the background," creating a generalized feeling of security even when the military's concrete role in their everyday lives felt vague. Some respondents hedged their answers, explaining that they "guessed" or "supposed" the military contributed to their safety without being able to identify how directly. As Goldie, 61, explained: "...*maybe* the thought that other countries may find them threatening or intimidating, I suppose I could say I'm supposed to feel safer" (emphasis added).

About half of respondents said they felt little or no connection to the military in their everyday lives, while others described the connection as indirect or abstract. For many, the military was largely perceived as out of sight, operating far from their homes and in ways they knew little about.

Current leadership is misusing the military, putting the US at risk

Participants also frequently worried that current political leadership was misusing military power in ways that ultimately undermined national safety rather than strengthening it. Several respondents described a growing sense that the United States had shifted from being a stabilizing global force to generating unnecessary hostility abroad and fear at home. Many specifically mentioned US complicity in the war on Gaza, military aggression against Venezuela, and National Guard deployments against domestic protesters as examples of this shift:

"[Military strength is] VERY important! It seems that the US has been at peace for so long because we have a strong military. No one would dare attack us! That said – I worry that the fools running US intelligence operations and the DoD are putting us more and more at risk."
– Judy, 64

"Before I believed we were untouchable but right now, I think we might [have] created a lot of hostility. I believe we've attracted some hatred and negative attention to ourselves and we might know the extent of the damage that will cause for future generations." – Jack, 35

These concerns are echoed in recent surveys on the US war in Iran. [Quinnipiac polling](#) (March 2026), for example, has found that a plurality of Americans believe the military intervention has not made the country safer.

Some view military service as unequal burden

Participants also raised concerns about who bears the burden of military labor. A few respondents with direct ties to military communities argued that recruitment practices disproportionately target poor, rural, and Black and Brown communities, framing military service as exploitative. Goldie (61), a Black woman from Arkansas, described this dynamic in racialized terms:

"The military used my people to fight and if they survived, [they] were discarded upon completion [of their service]. They mislead young people into thinking that its a good career... [W]ell, color is definitely relative when it comes to that." – Goldie, 61

Similarly, Hannah, a white woman from rural Illinois, emphasized the tension between military necessity and the potential harm to servicemembers:

"I think the US military has done things that were good and necessary for national security, but I also think that it's often used for unethical and harmful purposes, and that it can be exploitative by recruiting naive young people from poor backgrounds." – Hannah, 40

Others in the study similarly lamented the treatment of veterans after return from service, noting that many struggle with houselessness, difficulty accessing benefits, or long-term mental and physical health consequences stemming from military labor — even as political leaders initiate costly wars abroad.

Support for military strength coexists with critiques of military spending

While participants generally agreed that some level of military strength was necessary, many questioned the scale of current defense spending and argued that resources could be redirected toward domestic needs, including infrastructure, healthcare, housing, and veterans' services.

"We spend so much on our military, but the vast majority of this money isn't being used in ways taxpayers would approve of... So much money is going to create an excess of weapons, more than the US needs to defend itself." – Claire, 28

"On one hand, I understand that we need a strong military to help keep world balance. On the other hand, I wonder why we spend such amounts of money on defense, yet we have an

overinflated economy, decaying infrastructure and high crime rates. Heck, even veterans who have served this country are not adequately accounted for...” – Jack, 35

This tension was also reflected in the polling data. A plurality (46%) of respondents who said US military dominance was important also believed the proposed \$1.5 trillion defense budget was too high. Even among those who agreed that “there is no level of military spending that is too high if it keeps us safe,” 22% still said the proposed budget was too high and 21% were unsure, suggesting that abstract support for military strength does not consistently translate into support for specific budgetary plans. When asked what they associate with US military spending, significant shares of respondents selected “wasteful spending” (43%) and “corporate profits” (36%), reinforcing broader perceptions that military expenditure is excessive and shaped by private interests.

Audiences want accountability journalism — and the media environment shapes whether they get it

To test how audiences respond to different kinds of militarism coverage, the reception study asked participants to read and reflect on two contrasting articles: a November 2025 [NBC News piece on Taiwan's military preparedness](#) and US support as it builds defenses against China, and an [investigative report by Taylor Barnes for Inkstick Media](#) documenting how RTX (formerly Raytheon) exploited a loophole in its economic development contract with Buncombe County, North Carolina, to claim tax refunds for jobs it never created — then used hurricane disaster relief legislation to secure a new round of state grants while bypassing required public comment.

The contrast in how participants responded to these two articles was striking. The Taiwan piece prompted the kind of reasoning its framing invited: abstract, strategic, concerned with deterrence and alliance politics. The Raytheon piece prompted something different. Participants responded with immediate moral and emotional reactions—outrage, frustration, resignation—and spontaneously connected what they read to broader questions about accountability, tradeoffs, and who benefits from military spending. Nearly all expressed some form of negative reaction, and many recalled the article more vividly than the Taiwan piece precisely because it was grounded in a specific place, a specific company, and a specific harm.

As one participant, Sara (29), put it:

“I appreciated the story about how the military contractor used a loophole for an ill-gotten subsidy. But I wish more time in media overall was devoted to stories like that but also discussing the protests happening at length.”

Jaime (54) added:

“There are not enough stories like these reaching the masses. I am sure there are plenty of instances where large corporations are taking advantage of loopholes and getting tax benefits that would be better spent on things that actually benefited the communities they are in.”

"I wish the media would be more transparent about the billions — trillions? — of dollars the US is spending on the military and what our return on that investment is. ... We need to find out who is profiting off this system."

JUDY, 64 · RECEPTION STUDY PARTICIPANT

A consistent secondary theme was demand for accountability and follow-up. Participants wanted to know what happened next — whether there were consequences, and whether similar situations were unfolding elsewhere. This points to something important for editors and reporters: audiences are not simply looking for the initial revelation. They

are looking for the arc. As Judy (64) put it: "I wish the media would be more transparent about the billions — trillions? — of dollars the US is spending on the military and what our return on that investment is. It has been decades since the Pentagon has passed a financial audit ... The contractors getting tax breaks, the Veterans being unable to get the care they need — we need to find out who is profiting off this system." Many accountability stories in this space take years to resolve, but coverage rarely sustains the thread. The reception study data suggest there is genuine audience appetite for follow-through that journalism is currently leaving on the table.

Participants also called for coverage that connects local cases to broader patterns. The Raytheon story prompted questions about whether similar arrangements exist elsewhere — a demand for the kind of cross-community, structural journalism that our media analysis shows is almost entirely absent from national outlets. As Danarra (44) astutely observed:

"The economic impacts of how military spending and foreign help that is given abroad ripples back into the domestic budget, taxes, and community resources... When coverage only focuses on politics and military strategy it misses the human and systematic consequences."

These responses also illuminate something about why audiences follow military and foreign policy news in the first place. When asked about their news habits, nearly all 30 reception study participants said they follow world news, but their reasons were consistently instrumental and local: they want to understand how distant events will eventually affect their community, their country, the people they know.

"[Foreign policy] will indirectly or eventually directly affect my country, my state, my city, my house."

CMARIE, 37 · RECEPTION STUDY PARTICIPANT

"It will indirectly or eventually directly affect my country, my state, my city, my house," CMarie (37) wrote. Vem (30) put it similarly: "Global events can affect the US and my community. I also want to

understand how the US military is involved in other countries." Audiences are already predisposed to make the connection between foreign policy and domestic life — and the Raytheon article, in a small way, showed what it looks like when journalism meets them there.

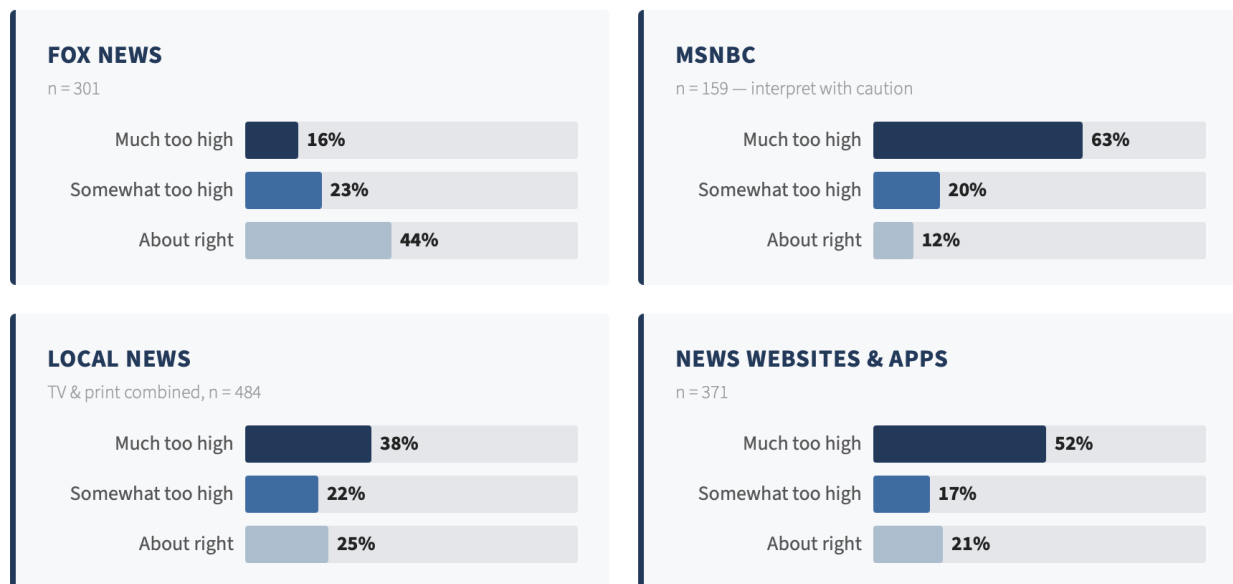
It will perhaps come as no surprise that in today's polarized media environment, *where* people get their news shapes their views on the military and related issues. Our poll bore that out: views on the

recently proposed \$1.5 trillion FY2027 military budget varied sharply by news source. Among Fox News viewers, 44% say the budget is “about right” and only 16% say “much too high.” Among MSNBC⁴ viewers, the picture is strikingly different: 63% say the budget is much too high, while only 12% say it is about right.

Views on the Proposed \$1.5T Pentagon Budget, by News Source

Among registered voters who used each source in the past week (respondents could select multiple sources)

■ Much too high ■ Somewhat too high ■ About right



Source: YouGov survey of 1,006 US registered voters, May 6–8, 2026. Figures are row percentages among respondents who selected each source in the past week. “Somewhat too low,” “Much too low,” and “Not sure” responses omitted.

Notably, local news consumers — those who rely on local TV or print — are the most politically mixed of any source we examined: 38% say the budget is much too high and 25% say it is about right, a distribution nearly identical to the overall sample. That cross-partisan spread suggests a potentially large and persuadable audience for militarism coverage — and one that, notably, tends to trust local news more than national outlets (70% vs. 56%⁵). However, what local news is actually covering on these issues — and whether it is filling gaps that national coverage leaves open — remains an empirical question for future research.

⁴ The MSNBC figures in this memo reflect the outlet’s current name (MS NOW) in the survey platform; all references use “MSNBC” for clarity.

⁵ [Pew Research Center](#) (October 2025) finds that 70% of Americans have at least some trust in local news organizations, compared to 56% for national news — a gap that holds across party lines.

Implications for Journalism and Democratic Discourse

Our research keeps returning to a core tension: Audiences are capable of nuanced moral judgment about militarism. They express outrage at contractor profiteering, frustration with misplaced priorities, and concern about tradeoffs, but they rarely experience it as a domain where democratic action is possible. Media coverage that foregrounds distant conflicts and abstract budget debates may be reinforcing that sense of inevitability, even among skeptical audiences.

The locally grounded, accountability-focused reporting that does exist demonstrably breaks through that abstraction. Audiences respond to it. They remember it. It prompts the kind of moral reasoning and emotional engagement that conventional foreign policy coverage rarely achieves. The gap is not between what audiences are capable of and what journalism offers — it is between what journalism could offer and what structural, institutional, and resource constraints currently allow.

For journalists, this points to the democratic value of reporting that foregrounds connections: between military power and private industry, between distant wars and domestic communities, between abstract budgets and lived consequences—and that follows those stories through to accountability and resolution, where audiences are hungry for more than the initial revelation. For editors, publishers, and media funders, it points to the importance of creating and sustaining the conditions—beats, resources, editorial homes—that make this reporting possible. And for advocates and communicators, it suggests that pairing critique with concrete, place-based stories may be more likely to move people than abstract arguments about spending levels or strategic priorities.