

From Civics Lesson To Color Revolution: What The ‘Refuse Orders’ Message Really Did

- amuse
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The 90-second video from Elissa Slotkin, Mark Kelly, Jason Crow, Chris Deluzio, Chrissy Houlahan, and Maggie Goodlander looks innocuous at first viewing. A few elected officials, all veterans or national security professionals, appear on camera and remind American troops that they must refuse unlawful orders. The script is familiar. Every recruit learns some version of that principle. Yet context matters. These same lawmakers have spent months describing President Trump’s actual, ongoing orders as unlawful. They released their message in the middle of live litigation over those orders.

They did not speak in hearings or white papers but in a vertical, selfie-style video uploaded to TikTok and Instagram, tailored to the phones of junior enlisted troops. Once we factor in audience, timing, and surrounding narrative, the claim that this was a neutral civics refresher becomes hard to sustain. A far more plausible reading is that it was the first salvo in a color revolution, a carefully framed appeal to the military to begin treating Trump’s commands as presumptively illegitimate.

To see this clearly, it helps to begin with the obvious. The lawmakers did not choose to address law professors, appellate judges, or Pentagon lawyers. They chose the platforms where the youngest slice of the force lives. The Pentagon's own demographic reports put the average age of active duty enlisted personnel at about twenty-seven years old, with the vast majority of new recruits entering between eighteen and twenty-four. The force is, in the basic statistical sense, a young institution. That same age bracket is the most intensely online cohort in the country. Surveys of U.S. adults show that roughly three-quarters of those aged eighteen to twenty-nine use Instagram, and a substantial minority use TikTok, with both platforms far more popular in this group than among older Americans. Short-form vertical video is not a niche medium for them. It is the default way they communicate, relax, and increasingly, consume news.

The military has understood this for years. The services now spend heavily on digital marketing and social [media](#) campaigns precisely because this is where potential recruits live. Official reports describe coordinated efforts to recruit through targeted content on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Independent surveys of Gen Z show that young people often first encounter military messaging as ads or influencer clips in their feeds. Meanwhile, the services' own public-facing descriptions of daily life emphasize that soldiers and sailors have real downtime, evenings and weekends off duty, and leisure periods on base or on ship, which many spend watching videos on their phones.

Put simply, the U.S. military already treats the smartphone feed as a primary communications environment. It is therefore not some accidental choice when six sitting members of Congress, aware of this ecosystem and steeped in national security culture, decide that the right way to talk about "illegal orders" is not a floor speech but a vertical video.

Next, consider the information environment those troops inhabit. Trump's second term has featured an aggressive use of statutory and constitutional authorities. [Executive Order](#) 14167 directed the military to clarify its role in protecting territorial integrity and to assist in sealing the southern border. The

administration has created a National Defense Area in New Mexico to support border enforcement, deployed National Guard forces to Los Angeles and other cities in support of law enforcement, and carried out lethal strikes on boats suspected of transporting narcotics in the Caribbean. Each of these initiatives has sparked intense legal and political controversy. Federal courts have already held that aspects of the Los Angeles deployment violate the Posse Comitatus Act. A judge in Washington has enjoined the District's National Guard deployment as an unlawful intrusion into local policing. Commentaries by international law scholars and U.N. experts frame the maritime strikes as potentially illegal uses of force and even extrajudicial killings. [Media](#) outlets that shape elite opinion have run headlines that treat "illegal orders" as the central question of Trump era civil-military relations.

Now, place a twenty-two-year-old lance corporal or boatswain's mate inside that environment. He hears that a federal judge ruled the Los Angeles deployment unlawful. He hears that critics say the D.C. deployment breaks the law. He sees commentators and international bodies calling narco terror strikes illegal or illegitimate. His governor or mayor may denounce the presence of troops in their city as unconstitutional. In that world, the distinction between an obviously illegal atrocity and a contested deployment becomes blurred. Troops are trained to refuse orders to deliberately kill civilians, to torture prisoners, or to engage in war crimes. They are not trained to independently parse the Supreme Court's doctrine on domestic use of the armed forces or the outer limits of the president's Article II authority. Yet the social and [media](#) environment repeatedly uses the same word, illegal, for all of these things.

Enter the Slotkin-Kelly video. It does not speak in hypotheticals about some generic future tyrant. It arrives in the middle of specific lawsuits that explicitly label current deployments illegal. It is released just as opinion pieces and cable segments ask whether the president is defying the courts and using the military as a domestic police force. And crucially, several of the participants have already taken public positions that label Trump's actual orders illegal. Jason Crow sponsored measures to restrict what he called unauthorized and illegal military strikes.

California officials have sued over federalization of their Guard units in Los Angeles on the ground that it violates Posse Comitatus. Commentators debate whether the National Defense Area and border sealing orders exceed statutory authority. Against that backdrop, the video's central line, you must refuse illegal orders, does not float freely. It attaches in the mind of any half-attentive junior enlisted member to the concrete operations that have already been branded illegal by politicians, judges, and activists.

This connection is reinforced by how the video is framed in coverage. Navy Times, Reuters, and local outlets do not present it as an abstract ethics lecture. They explicitly describe it as a response to Trump's ongoing deployments and strikes, and they repeat the phrase "illegal orders" in that context. The lawmakers themselves, in subsequent statements, insist that they are simply restating the law and defending the Constitution, yet they do so while highlighting Trump's supposed calls for violence and their own courage in the face of presidential threats. The message is not merely that unlawful orders should be refused, which is straightforward and uncontroversial.

The message, once placed in its [media](#) wrapper, is that Trump is precisely the sort of leader who will issue such orders, and that some of his current directives may already fall in that category.

At this point, one might object that the lawmakers are simply performing civic [education](#) for a new generation. After all, troops receive instruction in the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the law of armed conflict. Commanders remind units that they cannot obey orders to shoot civilians or commit war crimes. Why should members of Congress not reinforce the same lesson in modern format for a smartphone audience? The answer lies in institutional role and in the foreseeable effects of their message.

When a military lawyer or commander explains the duty to refuse unlawful orders, the instruction occurs inside the chain of command and typically uses concrete examples of atrocities. Its purpose is to prevent gross violations of the laws of war.

When a partisan elected official offers the same language in a politicized dispute over contested domestic deployments, outside the chain of command, using the rhetoric of “resistance” and “courage” in the face of a sitting president, the function is different. It is not to clarify law, it is to influence which orders troops perceive as lawful in the first place.

Color revolutions, at least in their idealized form, do not begin with tanks firing on the presidential palace. They begin by persuading security services that their loyalty to the constitution or the nation requires them to treat the executive’s commands as provisional, subject to correction by other elites. The mechanism is information, not force. Telephone calls from party leaders, speeches from former officers, and letters from foreign ambassadors all send the same message: the real guardians of the republic will stand aside rather than enforce the president’s will. The Slotkin Kelly video fits this pattern uncomfortably well. Six lawmakers with national security credentials tell troops, in effect, that their oath to the Constitution may soon require them to disobey. They do so in a [media](#) environment that has already told those troops that Trump’s orders are pushing or crossing legal lines. They do it in the very format the military itself uses to shape attitudes online.

We can see the danger most clearly by imagining out a few concrete scenarios. A Marine company deployed to Los Angeles receives orders to assist local police with cordon and security operations while litigation over Posse Comitatus continues. A junior noncommissioned officer, having watched the video and followed news coverage labeling the deployment illegal, begins to wonder whether his mere presence on a city street violates his oath. Perhaps he quietly encourages subordinates to drag their feet or limit cooperation to a minimum. Or a soldier assigned to the National Defense Area in New Mexico, aware that some arrests have been thrown out by local courts and that commentators describe the zone as an unconstitutional military occupation, decides that detaining migrants even briefly may count as following an illegal order. Or a sailor involved in targeting support for narco terror strikes, inundated with articles calling the operations unlawful, starts to believe that withholding effort is the morally correct stance.

In each case, it is the convergence of judicial rhetoric, activist framing, and the congressional video that builds a permission structure for selective disobedience.

Notice that none of these examples involves a patently illegal command. The issue is not an order to massacre civilians or deliberately torture detainees. It is obedience to contested executive policy in a field where the law is unsettled and the courts are actively drawing new lines. Precisely here, the US tradition has insisted that the chain of command runs from the president through the secretary of defense to uniformed officers, and that disputes over legality are resolved by military lawyers and ultimately by the judiciary, not by rank-and-file troops reading headlines. When members of Congress encourage service members to see themselves as autonomous judges of legality in such contexts, they do not strengthen the rule of law. They transform every politically controversial deployment into a potential referendum inside the barracks.

Defenders of the video will say that the lawmakers were simply reminding troops of a pre-existing duty, and that the real threat to civil-military norms is Trump's alleged lawlessness. But this reply misses the core steelman point. Even if one accepts, for the sake of argument, that Trump's interpretation of his authorities is aggressive, it does not follow that individual soldiers and sailors should be nudged by politicians to make their own case-by-case assessments based on cable news and court injunctions. The framers made the president commander in chief precisely so that military operations would be directed by a single elected official rather than by shifting coalitions of legislators.

Oversight of that power belongs to Congress and the courts, not to social [media](#) campaigns targeted at E3s and E4s. If lawmakers believe a deployment is illegal, they have tools: hearings, funding restrictions, formal resolutions, and litigation. What they chose instead was influencer-style messaging aimed not at institutional levers but at the mindset of the troops themselves. Nor is it a small thing that the video wraps its legal point in language of moral heroism and resistance. Color revolutions rely on narratives of courage versus fear.

The six lawmakers describe themselves as unbowed by threats and exhort Americans to show moral clarity. They insist that having the troops' backs means supporting those who refuse illegal orders. The implication is that obedience to disputed Trump directives is not just legally risky, it is morally suspect. A young soldier who wants to be on the side of courage and constitutional fidelity is thus subtly invited to think of hesitation, resistance, or quiet noncompliance as virtues. In this way, the video does far more than restate a neutral legal principle. It constructs a moral drama in which the president is at best a potential tyrant and congressional "guardians" are rallying the guardians in uniform against him.

If all of this is foreseeable, then it is reasonable to treat it as intended. In both ethics and law, actors are held responsible for the natural and probable consequences of their actions. Six officials with intelligence and military backgrounds, steeped in debates over civil-military relations, cannot credibly claim ignorance about how their message will reverberate in the ranks. They know how intensely young troops live online. They know that short-form video is not a minor supplemental channel but a primary source of both information and identity formation. They know that their own prior statements and ongoing litigation have already branded specific Trump operations as illegal in the public mind. In that setting, to record and release this particular script, in this particular style, to this particular audience, is to participate in a coordinated campaign to erode the perceived lawfulness of the president's authority.

This does not yet amount to a coup. No troops have mutinied. No generals have refused orders. But color revolutions do not begin at the moment of open defiance. They begin with the creation of what we might call a pre-coup consensus among elites that the head of state is no longer a normal political opponent but a threat to the system. Once that consensus is built, messages to the security services change in tone. They shift from exhortations to stay neutral to subtle signals that neutrality now means refusing to enforce the leader's will. The Slotkin-Kelly video is best understood as one of those signals. It tells the military that the locus of legitimate authority has already shifted, that the constitutional high ground no longer resides primarily in the office of the commander in chief but in a coalition of legislators,

judges, international bodies, and [media](#) commentators who are prepared to declare which presidential directives count as lawful.

A healthy republic does not survive long if its armed forces become a stage on which partisan elites audition for influence. If Americans want to preserve civilian control of the military in more than name only, they should be wary of lawmakers who bypass formal oversight and instead speak directly to troops in ways calculated to shape attitudes toward a sitting president's orders. There is a principled way to educate service members about unlawful orders, through professional military [education](#), chain-of-command instruction, and clear legal guidance about true atrocities. There is also an unprincipled way, which is to drop political messaging into their TikTok feeds and hope they begin to view contested domestic deployments and controversial strikes as de facto illegal. The Slotkin Kelly video sits uncomfortably close to the second model.

Seen in this light, the video is not just a social [media](#) skirmish. It is an opening move in a broader contest over whether Trump's second term will be governed through the constitutional mechanisms that have guided presidents since the founding, or whether unelected networks of judges, NGOs, foreign experts, and now congressional influencers will gradually put the military on notice that its true loyalty lies elsewhere. Steelmanning the case against the video requires us to name that danger directly.

When members of Congress address troops not as representatives engaged in oversight, but as rival centers of authority, inviting soldiers to view the commander in chief's orders as presumptively suspect, they flirt with the logic of color revolution. Americans who care about constitutional government should say so, clearly, before that logic hardens into practice.

Trump's response underscores the stakes. He labeled the group's message seditious behavior at the highest level, called them traitors to our country, demanded they be arrested and put on trial, and warned that their words cannot be allowed to stand because we won't have a country anymore if such conduct goes unchecked. He

described their actions as SEDITIOUS BEHAVIOR, punishable by DEATH, and amplified posts urging that they should be hanged as George Washington would. The republic cannot survive if elected officials actively encourage the military to view the commander in chief's orders as illegitimate.

If these members knowingly participated in a coordinated effort to erode civilian control by signaling to the ranks that the president's directives are presumptively unlawful, then accountability is not optional; it is essential to the survival of constitutional order. They deserve fair trials and full due process. But justice requires that their actions be examined in court, and if they are found guilty, a judge and jury, not politicians, will determine the penalty under federal law, whether five years' imprisonment or the gravest sanction available.

On this view, refusing to hold them accountable would normalize a dangerous precedent: that members of Congress may foment selective military disobedience without consequence. Trump's argument is that the rule of law means nothing if those who undermine the chain of command face no legal reckoning.