

By Jasper Craven

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The militarism of Ron DeSantis

Four years into his unjustified imprisonment at Guantánamo Bay, Mansoor Adayfi met a young member of the Navy's Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps who claimed to be his ally. "I saw a fucking handsome person," Adayfi recently recalled in an interview with Mike Prysner, an Iraq War veteran turned peace activist. The dashing military lawyer had piercing blue eyes, white teeth, and dimples. He was armed only with a notebook, and his name was Ron DeSantis. "I'm here to ensure that you are treated humanely," he pledged, according to Adayfi. Desperate and with few other options, Adayfi confided in DeSantis. He later regretted it. "When he turned his face—his true face," he explained, "it was a shock to us all."

The Republican Party's great post-Trump hope for 2024 first touched down at America's torture palace in March 2006. He was just twenty-seven. At the time, the prison's sordid tactics were facing unprecedented scrutiny: the month DeSantis arrived in Cuba, the Supreme Court heard arguments in *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*. In that case, Salim Ahmed Hamdan, a former bodyguard and chauffeur to Osama bin Laden, argued that the military commissions set up to try him and other Gitmo detainees violated both the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the Geneva Conventions. In a momentous five-to-three decision, the court took his side.

In response, military brass rushed to defend and improve their practices. Ultimately, however, they focused more on rhetoric than redesign. DeSantis was then a junior prosecutor, meaning he was probably assigned boring clerical duties like processing security badges and drafting legal memos. But his main mission was ensuring that detainees were treated in line with applicable laws and regulations. "[He] would have been more in damage control mode than anything else," estimated Moe Davis, the former chief prosecutor of the Guantánamo military commissions. Tom Fleener, a former defense lawyer at Gitmo, told me that "Ron knew where the bodies were buried, so to speak." But "all the people around [him] were pitching the party line." Fleener then ticked off this doctrine's key claims. "It was, 'We never grabbed innocent people. These are dangerous people who've committed unspeakable acts. These are enemy combatants. They can't be released. We didn't torture anybody. All our interrogation tactics worked. The information gleaned was true.'"

Fleener paused to take a breath. “Those were the standard mantras back then,” he explained. “All of it was false.” The facts were that many innocent people were being shackled, screamed at, beaten, and sexually assaulted at Guantánamo. Some died. Others were coerced into making false confessions.

Adayfi—who’d been planning to enter university when Afghan warlords kidnapped and funneled him to the U.S. military, which was then offering big bounties for “suspicious people”—always maintained his innocence. And he initially hoped that DeSantis was a genuine lifeline. Adayfi said he and others expressed numerous concerns to DeSantis and his colleagues: they were inadequately clothed, needed medicine, and could barely sleep thanks to loud noise machines. Many asked for prison guards to stop desecrating the Quran. DeSantis heard these concerns, but his presence quickly appeared to be pretextual. Adayfi claimed he failed to fix issues and may, in fact, have been collecting intel on detainee complaints so as to better understand how to inflame suffering and squash solidarity. He was, in other words, a mirage of military accountability.

Shortly before DeSantis arrived at the prison, the *New York Times* reported on the military’s concerns over an ongoing hunger strike prisoners had undertaken to protest their conditions that had lasted for months. The story further revealed a series of brutal measures meant to break the strike. Most often, service members strapped striking detainees into restraint chairs, stuffed plastic tubes down their noses, and pumped them full of Ensure nutritional shakes, sometimes for hours. Adayfi, who participated in the strike, said he was force-fed up to five times a day. While numerous humanitarian organizations, including the UN Commission on Human Rights, later characterized this force-feeding as torture, DeSantis seemed unperturbed. “We were crying, screaming. We were tied to the feeding chair. And [DeSantis] was watching that, he was laughing,” Adayfi recalled. During one session, Adayfi said, DeSantis approached the chair and told him, “You should start to eat.” He responded by puking on the young JAG’s pretty face.

Seven years ago, Adayfi was freed. He’s since written a book about his confinement and become a leading proponent of shuttering the prison. Last year, after catching wind that DeSantis was a rising political star, he tweeted his hope that “Ron doesn’t run Florida like he did at Guantánamo.” He also spread the news to a group chat composed of former detainees. One member texted in Arabic his recollection that DeSantis was “with a group of the most vile officers that tortured us severely.” Another, in English, derided DeSantis as a “stink-rotten ass-hole” and the “real evil devil’s shit!!” This choice of words is telling: as part of their protests, detainees would sometimes throw a mixture of feces, vomit, and urine at the worst prison officials, a practice known as “splashing,” of which Adayfi claimed DeSantis had also been on the receiving end.

Military Mindset

DeSantis did not respond to requests for comments on this story. He's talked little about Gitmo during his political career, other than when he's railed against commonsense efforts to shut it down. But in brief remarks made at a 2016 House hearing, he suggested some firsthand experience with detainees' tactics of rebellion. "The people that are guarding that facility are under an awful lot of pressure because those detainees are very hostile to them," DeSantis said. "And they know that if they do anything that they are all of a sudden going to be subject to . . ." He paused, perhaps unwilling to enter his own bodily humiliations into the congressional record. "It is a very stressful environment for our uniformed personnel who are there."

Ron DeSantis's blind faith to the military in its worst moments doesn't bode well should he ever claim the title of commander in chief.

Some who saw the horrors at Guantánamo Bay broke ranks, spoke out, and fought for the rule of law, consequences be damned. Moe Davis, for instance, instituted a policy that made inadmissible any testimony gleaned through torture. After his directive was challenged, he resigned his post and became an outspoken Pentagon critic, work that likely lost him a medal or two. Charles Swift, the lawyer who brought the Hamdan case to Washington, was forced out of the Navy shortly after he won.

DeSantis, on the other hand, doubled down. Rather than blow the whistle, he honed an uncanny ability to obscure the truth. He's still never strayed from the company line, even as evidence continues to accrue of unjustified abuse by guards and the widespread innocence of detainees. "It is a very professionally run facility," he claimed in 2016. His blind faith to the military in its worst moments—including during his post-Gitmo deployment to Iraq during the bloody 2007 surge—doesn't bode well should he ever claim the title of commander in chief.

And that is clearly where his ambitions lie. As he eyes the presidency, DeSantis is selling himself as strong and independent, a righteous fighter for freedom. He still operates under the assumption that so long as you're draped in the American flag, nothing you do can be deemed wrong or off-limits, no matter how inhumane. It's unclear whether this is a cynical calculation or a genuine belief. What is clear is that DeSantis has revived the rhetoric of 9/11 to launch a

ruthless campaign against the basic rights and dignities of civic life. As governor of Florida, he has banned books, amped up surveillance, diluted citizens' voting power, and leveraged the National Guard for his own ends. Some are rightly worried that he's taking cues from the likes of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a fellow military veteran and master of doublespeak. But DeSantis is also deeply American: a protégé of George W. Bush and other Republican forebears who understood the appeal of strength and brutality to voters, even as the incriminating evidence of unjust conflicts lays all around them.

So distressing is DeSantis's worldview that he's created common cause among Adayfi and Davis, the man once charged with locking Adayfi up. Davis said he views DeSantis as a fascist. He lumped Florida's governor in with senators Lindsey Graham and Roger Wicker, two former JAGs he worked with directly, describing all three as "men motivated more by their lust for power than the principles the military represents." Adayfi sees DeSantis as a relatively minor cog in the Gitmo machine. Still, he's troubled that the governor remains a diehard defender of the place, even as a wide swath of politicians, including Bush, have said the prison should be closed. "[He's] a man who saw what happened as legal actions—torture and abuses—and never reported it, never even objected to it," Adayfi told me. "I believe that he's going to bring this mindset inside the United States." In truth, he already has.

Rules of the Game

The son of a nurse and a Nielsen ratings box installer, DeSantis grew up in Dunedin, Florida, a picturesque place on the Gulf Coast that takes great pains to keep up appearances. A few years ago, one resident was fined \$100,000 over her dirty pool and overgrown grass.

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Dunedin is also notable for being one of the smallest towns that hosts MLB Spring Training. DeSantis was a baseball whiz from an early age. In 1991, his local team reached the Little League World Series. (They were defeated in the first round by a squad from the People's Republic of California.) Seven years later, DeSantis arrived at Yale on a baseball scholarship. It was there that some of the qualities he'd later display to Guantánamo detainees were apparently inculcated. "He has always loved embarrassing and humiliating people," a former

teammate recently told *The New Yorker*. “I’m speaking for others—he was the biggest dick we knew.” A former schoolmate I spoke to described DeSantis as a “bully.” In spite or perhaps because of this sterling reputation, DeSantis was named captain of the baseball team his senior year. In a contemporaneous interview with the

Yale Daily News

, he explained that his leadership approach was modeled after Tommy Kidwell, a prior captain whose “desire to win spread to the whole team.” (Kidwell, who is today a wealth manager in St. Petersburg, did not respond to requests for comment.)

As captain, DeSantis ran off-season workouts and practice sessions. A source I spoke to declined to detail the exact nature of these unsupervised affairs, saying only that DeSantis ran drills coaches wanted “executed outside their watch.” This was good pre-military training, requiring focus, hard work, and, according to DeSantis’s former coach, “disciplining within the ranks.” President George H.W. Bush, a fellow Yale and former baseball captain, visited the squad in 2001 and shook hands with DeSantis. “We exchanged a few words and talked about baseball, as well as the [2000] presidential election in Florida,” DeSantis later recalled. “He was more interested in talking about others than himself. I was quite impressed with him.”

Like both President Bushes, DeSantis was also a member of Delta Kappa Epsilon, a fraternity founded at Yale in 1844. Its alumni include such luminaries as President Gerald Ford, Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and Sidney Souers, the first director of the CIA. The frat’s pledge rituals have at times verged on torture: a 1967 article in the *Yale Daily News* detailed brutal beatings and brandings inside Deke, as the frat is sometimes called. A few years after DeSantis graduated, in 2006, the student paper revealed other berserk rituals:

One night they had to go outside, soaked in beer, and stand in tubs of water. It was so cold outside that they had to pee on each other to stay warm. They also had to bend over naked and had honey smeared on their butt cheeks. Then the brothers threw stuff like oatmeal at them, and they weren’t allowed to scratch.

Four years later, a video emerged in which Deke pledges marched to Yale’s women’s center while chanting, “No Means Yes, Yes Means Anal.” My source contended that hazing in the early aughts was mostly good-natured but added that DeSantis occasionally acted like “a fucking dick.” He continued: “Did I take any redeeming leadership lessons from him? I learned what not to do.”

DeSantis graduated in 2001 with a 3.75 grade point average and a .336 batting average. “One thing I decided was that I wouldn’t be like the stereotype athlete that didn’t do well in school,” he told the *Tampa Bay Times* in a short, gushy profile published upon his graduation. He went on to demonstrate his intellect by explaining how America’s pastime works: “As an outfielder, you basically need to just cover your territory. That’s different from playing the infield.”

After graduation, he taught history and coached baseball for a year at the esteemed Darlington School in Georgia. Off the clock, he attended high school parties where students were drinking and was photographed being embraced by three women—all seniors, according to the blog that published the grainy photo. “He was cute,” one former female student told the *New York Times* as part of a story on DeSantis’s Darlington days. “We didn’t really think too much about it.” (After this issue went to print, Trump posted the photo on his social media platform Truth Social, writing, “Here is Ron DeSanctimonious grooming high school girls with alcohol as a teacher.”) DeSantis demonstrated other tendencies at Darlington more befitting of a frat house, or a military prison. According to the *Times*

, he once challenged a child to drink as much milk as he could in one sitting, until the boy threw up. “There’s a cruelty to the sense of humor,” Adam Moody, who witnessed the incident and is today a public-school teacher, told the *Times*

Throughout his two semesters teaching history, DeSantis paid special attention to the Civil War. Some students felt his lessons justified slavery. “He was trying to play devil’s advocate that the South had good reason to fight that war, to kill other people, over owning people—Black people,” Danielle Pompey, who is Black, told the *Times*. DeSantis would go on to face similar criticism upon the publication of his 2011 history book

Dreams From Our Founding Fathers

, a direct rebuke to Barack Obama’s best-selling memoir. In its pages, DeSantis minimizes slavery, claiming at one point that the Constitutional Convention had “nothing to do with slavery,” even though the framers—many of them enslavers—debated fiercely over the practice before electing to permit it. Earlier this year, DeSantis extended his campaign of historical revisionism by banning an AP African American Studies program in Florida public schools for its supposed lack of “educational value.”

Better than Fallujah

After a year at Darlington, DeSantis matriculated at Harvard Law. Former classmates remember him reciting lines from his favorite film, *A Few Good Men*, in which Tom Cruise plays an arrogant Navy JAG with a Harvard Law degree, a penchant for justice, and a love of baseball. Sound familiar? In the movie, Cruise is sent to the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base to defend a pair of Marines who have been charged with murder for their involvement in a fatal hazing drill. His deft courtroom skills ultimately lead to charges against Jack Nicholson's Nathan R. Jessup, the corrupt colonel who ordered the hazing.

Those eager to join DeSantis's fight are invited to enlist in his "freedom team"—by donating, please—or they can pick up a copy of his new book, The Courage to Be Free (1st price: \$35).

In his second year at Harvard, DeSantis followed in Cruise's fictional footsteps and was commissioned as a Navy JAG. His time at Gitmo echoed *A Few Good Men* in at least one morbid way: three months after he arrived on the island, two detainees perished under mysterious circumstances. Their deaths were officially deemed suicides. Years later, however, four former soldiers alleged a cover-up. They said the detainees had, in fact, been murdered at a CIA-run black site. Little was done in response to their claims. Tom Fleener charged that justice in those days was a joke, thanks to "a rigged, show-trial-like process" built on willful ignorance and obfuscation.

Later, as a junior congressman, DeSantis made subtle moves indicative of his true feelings on torture. He worked to defund the United Nations, which aggressively documented torture at the prison, and shilled for Gina Haspel to be named CIA director—a woman directly implicated in the agency's waterboarding practices. He also sponsored an amendment to defund a Pentagon office tasked with shuttering the prison. In justifying this legislation, DeSantis spewed venom about Gitmo's eighty "hardened terrorists" who remained behind bars, despite the fact that only 8 percent of prisoners were thought to be aligned with al-Qaeda. He pledged that "Americans, especially the people whom I represent, can rest assured that none of these terrorists will be brought to their states." Days after this speech, Mansoor Adayfi, who was never charged with a crime, was released and transferred to Serbia, after fourteen years of confinement.

In defending Gitmo, DeSantis once claimed that anybody "would rather spend a night there than in, like, the Fallujah jail or something like this. I mean, it is just night and day." He simultaneously acknowledged and minimized the prison's brutality, arguing that it could have been worse. It was a cynical comparison but one grounded in experience. After his stint at the prison, DeSantis deployed to Iraq as part of the 2007 surge, an ill-fated campaign to ramp up

combat operations in the hope of quelling sectarian strife and stabilizing the country. There, he served as the sole legal advisor to Captain Dane Thorleifson, a Navy SEAL commanding Special Operations Task Force-West. DeSantis advised Thorleifson on the legality of covert missions undertaken by SEAL Team One and Army Green Berets, mostly across the western Euphrates River Valley. Thorleifson, who didn't respond to my requests for comment, gave DeSantis high marks in a 2018 interview with the *Tampa Bay Times*. "I see him all the time on [Fox News]," he said. "I am rooting for him."

DeSantis was also responsible for funneling detainees into Iraq's fledgling and exceedingly corrupt justice system—the same one he would eventually hold up as a foil to Guantánamo—in which prisoners routinely faced coercion, torture, and sham trials based on flimsy evidence, according to a 2008 report from Human Rights Watch. "Defendants often endure long periods of pretrial detention without judicial review and are not able to pursue a meaningful defense or challenge evidence against them," it reads. "Abuse in detention, typically with the aim of extracting confessions, appears common."

By this time, however, Iraq's judicial chaos was but one challenge in an increasingly fractious and opaque conflict. A whopping thirty thousand troops had been rushed to the front lines, setting the stage for the war's deadliest year. Local authorities routinely claimed that in addition to abusing detainees, trigger-happy U.S. troops indiscriminately killed civilians, as in the case of the Nisour Square massacre, which occurred on September 16, 2007—around the time that DeSantis's boots hit the ground in Iraq. That day, a convoy of Blackwater mercenaries opened fire on a slew of cars, killing seventeen civilians. Four mercenaries were later convicted in civilian courts on murder and weapon charges before being pardoned by President Trump in 2020.

DeSantis hasn't spoken publicly about the massacre, but he counts a major donor in Betsy DeVos, sister of Blackwater founder Erik Prince. He *has* repeatedly complained that, during the war's most violent period, American soldiers weren't given enough legal leeway to shoot their guns. During a 2018 House hearing, DeSantis vented to Sebastian Gorka about the many "restrictive rules of engagement" that made it nearly impossible to kill the enemy when he was in Iraq. As for the wisdom of the surge itself—which led to the deaths of over eleven hundred troops and more than thirty thousand civilians, in addition to fueling the rise of ISIS—DeSantis briefly notes in his 2011 book that it was "the right policy."

Freedom Isn't Free

DeSantis left Iraq in 2008 with multiple military decorations, including the Bronze Star. (He remains a Navy reservist.) As he subsequently developed a political career, going from freshman congressman to governor of Florida in the space of six years, his military service received no major scrutiny. On the contrary, it was accepted at face value as incontrovertible evidence of his bravery and unyielding commitment to U.S. prosperity.

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Such blind patriotism is to be expected in the Sunshine State, where 1.5 million former service members reside—the third-largest veteran population of any state in America. Florida previously propelled Rick Scott, another self-aggrandizing Navy vet, into the governor's mansion. (He's now a U.S. senator.) One of Scott's big initiatives was to build a "Hall of Fame" for Florida veterans, to which he was then duly inducted, despite his unremarkable career as a radioman on a ship that ventured between Boston, Bermuda, and Puerto Rico. In 2013, Scott's lieutenant governor, another Navy vet named Jennifer Carroll, resigned amid scandal over a nonprofit she had consulted for called "Allied Veterans of the World," which federal authorities charged with laundering hundreds of millions earned from quasi-legal gambling dens.

DeSantis has aggressively courted Florida's veteran voters, as well as the many geriatric civilians who hold dear an old-fashioned view of the red, white, and blue. During his 2022 gubernatorial reelection campaign, DeSantis again turned to Tom Cruise for inspiration with an ad called "Top Gov." In it, he cosplays as a Navy fighter pilot expert at dogfighting with the media. Transposing JAG jargon, he lays out his "rules of engagement" for journalists—which mandate that, when faced with scrutiny, one must "fire back with overwhelming force."

It isn't all macho posturing. On a policy level, DeSantis has also cultivated an image as a champion for veterans. In 2021, he attended a Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) convention held in an antiseptic Orlando conference room, where he stood next to a man dressed as Uncle Sam and declared that Florida was "the number one state for veterans." DeSantis has indeed advocated for generous veteran benefits—notably, ones that he wouldn't deign to extend to mere civilians—like free childcare, mental health services, and substance abuse counseling. He's also pushed generous job programs and has supported efforts to remove licensing roadblocks for former special operators eager to become cops.

Amid a broader war on public school curricula and teachers' unions, DeSantis also stripped certification requirements for veterans who want to work in a classroom. Gary Avery, himself a Navy vet and Florida teacher who seemed generally supportive of DeSantis, said that this initiative had "nothing behind it." He believes veterans can make great teachers but stressed that they need tools, training, and accreditation to succeed. "Coming out of the military you have a sense of how to train others," he told me. "But interacting with little human beings is a much different environment than dealing with sailors." (While DeSantis suggested this initiative would help fill Florida's five thousand open teaching slots, Military.com recently reported that only seven vets have been hired for such positions.)

These ham-handed initiatives speak to DeSantis's view that service members can do no wrong and are, in fact, the solution to every problem. They also illustrate his desire to import core military tenets like cohesion, domination, and loyalty into everyday aspects of civilian life. His deep support for the veteran community, coupled with his own military status, have provided a valuable political shield—one that protects against attack and makes it easier to smuggle radical policies into the mainstream.

A crucial part of that shield is the abstract notion of "freedom." In his 2021 VFW speech, DeSantis proclaimed that the "men and women who put on the uniform have been the indispensable voice for freedom throughout our nation's history." He clearly sees himself at the forefront of this fight, despite the fact his military career was marked by others' unjust incarceration. In Congress, DeSantis became a founding member of the hard-right House Freedom Caucus, where he sponsored legislation like "The Internet Tax Freedom Act." As governor, he's laid out a series of social and economic policies to transform his state into a "citadel of freedom," including the recent ratification of his "Freedom First Budget." During a bill signing, DeSantis went so far as to compare Florida to West Berlin, a sunny "freedom zone" surrounded by darkness and repression. Those eager to join DeSantis's fight are invited to enlist in his "freedom team"—by donating, please—or they can pick up a copy of his new book, *The Courage to Be Free* (list price: \$35).

DeSantis's incessant invocation of this word seems intended to distract from an agenda focused on restricting basic liberties and, as *New York Times* columnist Jamelle Bouie has argued, making unpopular cuts to what remains of the welfare state. As governor, DeSantis has, among other things, broadened the ability of police to use drones for spying on citizens and collecting evidence. He's fired judges he doesn't like and punished companies who've crossed him. He's censored curricula and overtaken public colleges. He's also attacked voting rights by a number of means, including the subversion of a ratified ballot measure that abolished the permanent disenfranchisement of people convicted of felonies. He has even limited absentee voting, a move that spurred an angry letter to the

Tampa Bay Times

from Will Atkins, a combat veteran out of Port Richey. “Veterans like me across this nation have fought to protect and defend the American ideals we hold dear—like the right to vote, and a free and fair election,” he wrote. “To thank us for our service, Governor Ron DeSantis just made it harder for more than one hundred thousand Florida service members to vote.”

Only the Strong Survive

DeSantis may have learned the fine art of spin from Iraq, an unjustified quagmire of death and destruction that President Bush cast as a war between “freedom and fear.” But his recent actions also seem inspired by Hungary’s Orbán, a new rock star on the American right who, in a speech at last year’s Conservative Political Action Conference in Dallas, dubbed himself “an old-fashioned freedom fighter.” A cavalcade of conservative intellectuals, media stars, and politicians—among them Rod Dreher, Tucker Carlson, and former vice president Mike Pence—have praised Orbán’s efforts to build an illiberal Christian state through policies of oppression, payback, and culture war. Following Florida’s passage of the homophobic “Don’t Say Gay” bill last March, which echoes an Orbán measure, DeSantis’s press secretary acknowledged that “we were watching the Hungarians.” But what’s been largely ignored in media coverage tying Orbán to DeSantis is that these two veterans clearly grasp the political advantages of starting a real war, or at least gearing up for one.

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In 2021, virtually every Hungarian agency either experienced budget cuts or a modest boost to account for inflation. Only two agencies saw significant increases: education—part of Orbán’s efforts to imprint his ideology on the masses—and the defense ministry, which received a massive \$2.4 billion boost as part of a decade-long rearmament program. That same year, DeSantis proposed an eye-popping \$100 million budget increase for the Florida National Guard, which he’d aggressively deployed to crack down on protests over the police murder of George Floyd. As part of his 2022 efforts to draw thousands of cops to the state, DeSantis secured \$5,000 signing bonuses for new recruits, along with other generous benefits. Months later, he slashed state spending on numerous environmental, infrastructure, and education projects.

As he grows his pool of cops and soldiers, DeSantis has expanded their powers and lengthened their list of targets. Today, it includes run-of-the-mill criminals, as well as immigrants, activists, and street racers. He's also formed a well-armed election integrity police unit that has arrested a slew of mostly Black residents who mistakenly believed they were eligible to vote thanks to the state's aforementioned ballot initiative. In perhaps his most audacious gambit, DeSantis even proposed resurrecting the Florida State Guard, a World War II-era civilian military force that, unlike the National Guard, is accountable only to the governor. The proposal sparked immediate pushback, including from Charlie Crist, a former Republican governor of Florida, who contended that DeSantis was angling for "his own handpicked secret police."

This is a move of which Orbán would approve. A year after taking office, the strongman revived a government police force called "The Guardians of the Crown," which had stood watch over parliament until 1945. This brigade now enjoys powers that extend far beyond the steps of parliament, including the ability to search citizens' homes at will. A year later, Orbán created "The Guards of the Palace," a force tasked with protecting his lavish mansion. He also established a counterterrorism police force that's been weaponized to squash domestic dissent, largely through surveillance.

In an interview with an Eastern European news outlet in 2020, Ágnes Vadai, a member of Hungary's parliament, summed up Orbán's militarization efforts: "This is clearly a law-and-order based politics, which, instead of counting on society's cooperation, tries to solve everything with law enforcement measures." You could say the same of DeSantis.

You Can't Handle the Truth

DeSantis justifies his deeply hypocritical policies through a selective reading of history. Throughout his 2011 book, he gestures at noble ideals—not just freedom but democracy, equality, even peace—before claiming that, primarily, "the Constitution provided for a potentially potent military force." He zeroes in on "Federalist no. 74," in which Alexander Hamilton claimed that the "direction of war most peculiarly demands those qualities which distinguish power by a single hand." Conspicuously absent from the book is another Hamilton quote that warned when society "enhances the importance of the soldier," it "proportionably degrades the condition of the citizen."

DeSantis's contradictions are so apparent that it becomes difficult to separate spin from

sincerity. It may be that he genuinely believes a strongman can run a free world. This, to him, is what Orbán is doing, and maybe what George Washington should have done too. In a 2017 congressional speech, DeSantis marveled that Washington was “first in the hearts of his countrymen” before expressing stupefaction that he didn’t use this good will to become a permanent fixture. “It is unheard of that you would relinquish power in that way,” he said.

Or perhaps, despite his lofty references to the Founding Fathers, it all dates back to *A Few Good Men* ;
not Alexander Hamilton, but Aaron Sorkin. I suspect that DeSantis entered the service seeing himself as Cruise’s Lieutenant Kaffee: a JAG who’s a bit cocky but effective. When push came to shove, he was willing to stand up for what was right. But as we know, war—and politics—changes people. It can break down optimism and harden the soul. Such afflictions plague Nicholson’s colonel, a crude and hateful man who responds to demands for accountability with the threat of violence.

The film’s most famous line belongs to Nicholson: under Cruise’s tough questioning over his role in another man’s death, he barks, “You can’t handle the truth!” It’s the rest of his monologue, however, that’s important here:

Son, we live in a world that has walls, and those walls have to be guarded by men with guns. Who’s gonna’ do it? You? You, Lieutenant Weinberg? I have a greater responsibility than you could possibly fathom. You weep for Santiago, and you curse the Marines. You have that luxury. You have the luxury of not knowing what I know; that Santiago’s death, while tragic, probably saved lives. And my existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible to you, saves lives. You don’t want the truth because deep down in places you don’t talk about at parties, you want me on that wall. You need me on that wall. We use words like honor, code, loyalty. We use these words as the backbone of a life spent defending something. You use them as a punchline. I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to a man who rises and sleeps under the blanket of the very freedom that I provide, and then questions the manner in which I provide it! I would rather you just said “thank you” and went on your way. Otherwise, I suggest you pick up a weapon and stand a post. Either way, I don’t give a damn what you think you are entitled to!

This screed, much more than Cruise’s competent righteousness, lays bare the rot at the heart of DeSantis’s project: the belief that there’s no price too high for the American way, and we owe those who use brute force to secure it everything.

