

The White House UFC fights are a spectacle. And a reflection of America.

The “Claw” bursting out of the grounds is the perfect metaphor for the moment, injecting bloody spectacle into the country’s birthday celebration.

The Washington Post, June 14, 2026

Column by [Philip Kennicott](#)

The giant UFC arena [towering over the White House](#) makes it look a bit as if the president’s house has been placed in the dome of a snow globe. Or perhaps an alien predator with a maw of steel has descended on the center of Washington to beam up the executive branch. Everything about “the Claw” feels tawdry, especially when they turn on the lights, which send bolts of blue and white illumination down the 154-foot interlocking steel arches, like the LED icicles people hang on trees at Christmas.

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The UFC Octagon and “the Claw.” (Maxine Wallace/The Washington Post)

For people angry at this incursion of commercial entertainment onto National Park Service land — and the injection of a Las Vegas-style spectacle into the celebrations of the nation’s 250th anniversary — the madness of a UFC match at the White House is self-evident. You just have to look at before-and-after images of the mansion’s former stately, serene isolation and the current mix of construction chaos and Times Square glitz on the White House grounds.

Even some UFC fighters, true to the sport’s reputation for a prickly, libertarian cussedness, [have criticized the White House fight night](#), calling it an invitation to corruption (Bryce Mitchell) and an unseemly entertainment for billionaires and political elites, a bit like “The Hunger Games” (Brandon Royval).

The sport has become a multibillion-dollar business, and UFC sees this as an opportunity to further its growth and fuse its identity with an ostentatious display of professed patriotism.

During planning for the \$60 million spectacle on Sunday, the league’s president, Dana White, was adamant that the cameras have an unobstructed view of the White House. If you want to enjoy those views up close and in person, the best bet is to buy one of the sponsorship packages, which [are reportedly going for up to \\$1.5 million](#). For everyone else, the best choice is to purchase a subscription to Paramount+, [now owned by the president’s political allies](#) the Ellison family.

Defenders of the fight say that the Claw is a temporary structure (though Trump has said or joked that it may be permanent), that UFC is incurring the major costs, that the event will engage ordinary Americans with the semiquincentennial, and that there's nothing unprecedented about hosting the martial arts at the White House. Teddy Roosevelt, after all, [enjoyed boxing at the White House](#) and was seriously injured indulging his passion for the sport.

The popular podcaster and UFC commentator Joe Rogan, who helped Trump win the last election, was initially [critical of the event, calling it a gimmick](#). But he could have been speaking for both red and blue America, Trump supporters and Trump critics, UFC fans and people who had never heard of it before, when he said: "There's no more American thing than having a UFC fight on the White House lawn. It's so America. It's so Trump. It's so crazy."

He meant crazy in a good way, and he has backtracked on the criticism. (He will now serve as an on-air interlocutor during the event.)

Once upon a time, spectacles such as parades, pageants and fireworks were a way of creating intoxicating, but often illusory, feelings of unity — that was their power and their inherent danger. Trump's particular talent is staging shows that cleave the country perfectly in twain. He has the uncanny ability to do things that feel to people like Rogan "so America" and to others absolutely un-American, a violation of our values at a level deeper than mere politics, a violation that feels not just wrong, but ugly. The exceptional nation is exceptional for how often it happily violates its own sense of dignity.

There is a serious difference between [Roosevelt boxing for exercise](#) and a command-performance event for Trump (on his birthday) in which 14 competitors beat each other bloody with the White House as a mere prop in the background. Presidents often welcome victorious athletes to the Oval Office, honoring the values embedded in team sports, like cooperation, collaboration and putting collective success above individual glory. But, love it or hate it, UFC matches celebrate other values.

The UFC distills the collective out of sport, reducing it to individual struggle, prioritizing ideas like resilience, determination, suffering. When White was given the coveted speaking slot to introduce Trump as the 2024 Republican presidential nominee, he underscored these same things: "I'm in the tough-guy business," he said. "And this man is the toughest, most resilient human being that I've ever met in my life."

Although it will be staged between the White House and the Washington Monument, which honors the father of the country, the UFC match isn't about celebrating the foundational myths of American democracy. It inhabits a landscape of darker myths, like the perpetual struggle of the frontier, the faux chivalry and resentments of the Lost Cause, the Darwinian drama of survival in a world of hostile forces, enemies, chaos. The invention of America was part of a long discourse about what political philosophers called the state of nature, often depicted as a raw, violent, lawless place that required a collective commitment to governance and the rule of law. And yet, despite our efforts to banish that mythological state of chaos that precedes civilization, we seem always willing to return there.

As Guy Debord warned in his classic 1967 book "The Society of the Spectacle," once you've arrived in this land of mass mythology, even government becomes incidental to the seduction of entertainment. Popular memes, often circulated by the president himself, show Trump as a chiseled fighter, with the physique of a Greek god — or a UFC champion. This is only dissonant if you believe in reality. In the mythical world that uses American symbols like the White House and the Washington Monument as theatrical backdrops for cage fights, the mind accepts the illusion that Trump is tough and resilient, like a champion fighter, because the truth is rendered invisible by the bright lights and euphoria of the spectacle.

As Rogan says, "it's so America."

The UFC Claw is emblazoned with the red-white-and-blue, the Marine Band will play, there will be a military flyover and a fireworks display, as the league tries to dissolve the lines between entertainment, spectacle and patriotism. For Trump, the potential is even greater. Critics have decried the White House event as akin to the gladiator contests of ancient Rome, at which bloodthirsty emperors would preside with life-or-death authority over hand-to-hand combat. This isn't just a role he covets; it's the role he has been playing, as an entertainer, for decades.

Trump takes pleasure in presiding over conflict. The world comes to him, where he, the perpetual winner, lords over contests, over victories and defeats. You're fired. You don't hold any winning cards. You've lost the match. For many Americans, there is nothing surreal about this delight in domination. It simply reflects the world they live in, where people are losing all the time, at the gas pump, at dead-end jobs, in marriages that founder on the shoals of stress and poverty.

There is a strange, touching tenderness to the way UFC fighters come together after a match, often bloody and battered. The winner respects the loser, may lift him up or touch him in some way that acknowledges the mutual martyrdom of causing and receiving pain for the enjoyment of others. When life has been reduced to pure struggle, the last and final freedom is the freedom to suffer.

It's a strange metaphor for America on its 250th birthday, but the optics will be spectacular.