



AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas

BRANDING COFFEE AND CONSERVATIVE POLITICS WITH THE DALLAS COWBOYS

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On July 5, 2022, the [Dallas Cowboys announced a corporate partnership](#) with the Black Rifle Coffee Company (BRCC). Evoking the patriotic sentiments of the Independence Day holiday, team owner [Jerry Jones praised the opportunity](#) to support the company's mission: "another veteran employed, another first-responder receiving support, or another community event to help adaptive military athletes thrive in the civilian world." The [Cowboys' Twitter feed](#) followed with a 30-second video introducing the partnership, posting, "#CowboysNation, please welcome America's Coffee to America's Team." The Cowboys are among sports' most visible brands and there is a [well-established synergy](#) between the National Football League and the United States military, so the partnership with a "[mission-driven premium coffee company](#) founded to support veterans, active-duty military, and first responders" might seem obvious. Yet, this corporate partnership depends on promoting values that purportedly correspond with sports' claim to "unity" without questioning the symbolic choices that actually mask or undermine those values.

BRCC is not merely a pro-veteran caffeine-provider; it is a self-consciously political brand, built on the premise that one's choice in coffee roaster might correspond with one's

political worldview. BRCC was founded by veteran Evan Hafer in 2014 as a counter to the ubiquitous Starbucks. More than offering an alternative roast, Hafer presented an alternative lifestyle. In contrast to the "implicitly liberal, urban, cosmopolitan and mildly pretentious" Seattle-based chain, [Black Rifle appeals](#) to the "blue-collar, above-average income, some college-educated, some self-made type people." As the [The New York Times Magazine describes](#), "The company billed itself as pro-military, pro-law enforcement and 'anti-hipster.' Early customers could download a shooting target from the company's Facebook page that featured a bowtied man with a handlebar mustache. Its early coffees included the Silencer Smooth roast and the AK-47 Espresso blend."

The Black Rifle lifestyle overlaps with other contemporary opportunities for consumers to "play soldier." In the past twenty years, as [sports leagues like the NFL](#) have promoted spectacular displays of militarism, citizens have sought other ways to experience the military vicariously: whether it is the "[battlefield playground](#)" of lifestyle sports, the "[solider in all of us](#)" in war-themed video games, or the "affective participation" made possible through "[military chic](#)" fashion choices, American consumers can simulate and wear a



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One product from veteran-owned Black Rifle Coffee Company



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military identity not as a form of service but as an aesthetic expression. In the case of BRCC, 15 percent of their annual sales come from merchandise, much of it bearing the “Stars and Stripes” and conspicuous images of guns.

Similar to how the rise of the [Starbucks lifestyle coincided](#) with substantial cultural and economic shifts in the 1980s and 1990s, BRCC appears responsive to contemporary cultural and economic instability, and its founders were all too eager to take sides in the [“culture wars”](#) if it meant they could affirm the military and build a lucrative brand at the same time. Although Hafer did reject any support for Kyle Rittenhouse, who had been photographed wearing a Black Rifle t-shirt, and Eric Munchel, who wore a Black Rifle baseball cap during the January 6 insurrection, he otherwise seems mystified that anyone might accuse him of stoking the flames of [white, male victimhood](#). Yet, Hafer has [mocked Starbucks for hiring Syrian refugees](#), gladly appears with the [talking heads of Fox News](#), and actively aligned his company's [brand with Trump and MAGA](#). It “endorsed Trump's Muslim ban and bought Google ads based on searches for ‘Covfefe,’” and has won public endorsements from Sean Hannity and Donald Trump Jr. And yet the owners appear unwilling to acknowledge a relationship between the violent imagery glorified by BRCC and the actual violence committed in the name of their shared political commitments.

BRCC's unapologetic support for guns and conservative politics prompted criticism of the partnership with the Cowboys, given that the announcement came only one day after a mass shooting at a suburban Chicago Fourth

of July parade and only weeks after the tragedy at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. [Dallas was derided](#) for being careless in its endorsement of a company enthusiastic enough about guns to name its products “AK-47 Espresso Blend” and “Murdered Out Coffee Roast.” We agree this is troubling but find it more concerning that BRCC's expressed values place it in tension with the presumed communal values of sports.

On the one hand, it may appear that the Cowboys are applying their standards differently: five years ago, in response to player protests on behalf of racial justice, they (and the NFL) [defaulted to universal claims](#) about “unity”; with respect to Black Rifle Coffee, there has been no expressed interest in unifying the fan base, only an endorsement of the company's pro-veteran mission. On the other hand, both cases reveal the same underlying logic that celebrates vague notions of “patriotism” and ambiguous commitments to conservative politics.

In 2017, responding to coffee machine manufacturer Keurig pulling its advertising from Sean Hannity's program on Fox, [Hafer boasted](#), “If you love the United States, if you love the Constitution and you love the American war fighter, I'm the f---ing coffee you need to be drinking. If you don't, there's plenty of other options.” Those options may be, from BRCC's perspective, bastions of “progressive, loutish intolerance,” but they're actually considerably more inclusive and welcoming to a wide range of customers. If the Dallas Cowboys were as interested in that inclusivity as they are in caricatured symbols of patriotism, perhaps they truly could facilitate the “unity” worthy of “America's Team.” ■

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