

Trump uses Democratic cities as stage for “law and order” theatrics

Observers noted that federal officers in Portland caused more trouble than they solved. That may have been the point.

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#)

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A bloodied demonstrator is arrested by federal police during a Black Lives Matter protest at the Mark O. Hatfield United States Courthouse on July 27 in Portland. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

For more than three weeks in July, federal police terrorized people in Portland, Oregon, who participated in downtown protests against police brutality and antiblack racism.

Agents from the Department of Homeland Security, usually dressed in camouflage, would grab people off the street, pulling them into unmarked vans—often without explanation. The agents also fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the protesters, who

had been convening every night since May 25 when a white police officer killed George Floyd, an unarmed black man, in Minneapolis.

“People are coming in with their jaws falling off,” an emergency room nurse told the *New York Times*, explaining the level of force troops were using against protesters.

The official story from the White House has been that President Donald Trump sent forces to the Portland protests in order to protect the nearby federal courthouse. According to local media, the day before federal officers arrived, the doors of the courthouse were shattered when protesters attempted to barricade them.

Yet observers noted that the troops seemed to be creating more trouble than they solved.

Sara Fischer, rector of Saints Peter and Paul Episcopal Church on Portland’s east side, joined the protests in mid-July after taking time to discern where she was needed most. She told the *Century* that having federal troops downtown significantly escalated the level of violence, which, prior to their arrival, had been minimal.

“Their response—tear gas, pepper balls, flash-bangs—did nothing to quell [the situation],” she said.

But that may have been the point.

In late July, unnamed Trump campaign and administration officials told the *Washington Post* that the president saw Portland as an opportunity to create an arena where he could show himself off as a field general of sorts. It was part of a larger pivot toward “law and order” deemed necessary given how poorly most Americans believe he is handling the coronavirus pandemic.

So, at the same time that municipalities like New York and San Francisco were exploring what it might look like to defund the police, the Trump administration began rolling out new ways to rev up law enforcement and boost the president’s desired tough-on-crime image.

Sending militarized federal police to Portland was just one tactic.

Four days after federal forces arrived in Portland, the Justice Department relaunched a 2019 program, now dubbed Operation Legend, in which federal agencies work with local law enforcement to address violent crime. Except cities don’t ask to be in the

program. In fact, most mayors aren't notified that their city has been "selected" for a "surge" of federal agents until a few hours before it's announced by the White House—if they are notified at all.

By the start of August, the Trump administration had singled out six cities for Operation Legend: Chicago, Albuquerque, Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Kansas City, Missouri.

In a press conference, Trump argued that the Democratic leaders in cities like these actually caused their recent hikes in violent crime because they welcome undocumented immigrants and are open to spending less money on policing.

Mayor Tom Barrett of Milwaukee expressed his concern that in conscripting cities to Operation Legend, Trump was simply looking for opportunities to create more political division.

"Federal agents are not welcome here for that purpose," Barrett said in a statement.

Likewise, Mayor Tim Keller of Albuquerque told local media he was worried about any program that was subject to the "whims" of the White House and that, if necessary, the city would sue the federal government to prevent federal agents from coming.

Back in Oregon, Gov. Kate Brown filed a lawsuit against the Department of Homeland Security and three other federal agencies before ultimately negotiating a deal with the Trump administration to end what she called an "occupying force."

The deal called for a "phased withdrawal" of federal forces as the bulk of the work of protecting the courthouse was handed over to the state police.

It's hardly the victory protesters wanted.

The day the federal troops began their withdrawal, the grassroots organization Portland's Resistance tweeted, "Oregon cops are now here, guns pointed at *us*."

Lenny Duncan, author of *Dear Church* and a recent Portland transplant, was also quick to point out that the removal of federal police does not mean protesters are now safe from law enforcement. The state and local police are not much better.

Nevertheless, Duncan told the Century that everyone in the nation should be alarmed by what happened with the federal police in Portland—especially with the upcoming election.

“They have now field tested this paramilitary force, and they know most of the public won’t believe it until they see it,” he said. “This administration will run you over in pursuit of its goals. That should terrify anyone.”

But with the removal of the federal troops, Chuck Currie, a United Church of Christ minister and the director of the Center for Peace and Spirituality at Pacific University, hopes there will be a narrative shift.

“Federal police in Portland dramatically changed the tenor of the protests and, to some degree, took the focus off Black Lives Matter,” he said. “It was important for Portlanders to resist the Trump administration’s attack on our city . . . it is equally important that attention is now refocused on addressing racism.”