

Portland should be wary of rise in militia actions

On Sunday, June 4, downtown Portland became the epicenter of the city's rising tension following several confrontations with white supremacists, one tragically ending in the murder of two men on a Max train only a week before.

On that day, several demonstrators, including out-of-state visitors, held a white nationalist rally in Terry Schunk Plaza, a federally managed area across from City Hall. They were a small sideshow compared to the mass of people who assembled across the street in protest.

What happened next has been well documented: Hundreds of additional demonstrators, including members of the anti-fascist, or antifa movement, more aggressively marched into the area. They were blockaded by the massive police force, kettled and dispersed.

Also patrolling the crowds that day – in addition to federal, state and local police – was a paramilitary force that holds no obligation to government authorities, that has its own interpretation of Constitutional rights, and acts without oversight by the residents of Portland. They are the Oath Keepers.

The U.S. Attorney's Office is now investigating militia involvement in the arrest of a man protesting the June 4 free-speech rally, according to a spokesperson for Federal Protective Services, the police division of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Photos and video circulating online show what appears to be federal officers working alongside a militia member to restrain a counter-protester on the ground near the perimeter of the white nationalist rally.

Again, this person has no authority to lay a hand on anyone at this event.

According to a 2016 report from Rural Organizing Project and Political Research Associations, the Oath Keepers and a similar group, Three Percenters, participate in vigilante border militias, spread anti-Muslim rhetoric and “tend to be more aggressive and violent than other Patriot movement groups.”

The report, “Up in Arms: A Guide to Oregon's Patriot Movement,” states there are thousands of Patriot activists in Oregon and that the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, surfaced shortly after the 2008 election of Barack Obama. The Oath Keepers calls itself a “nonpartisan association of current service military, reserves, National Guard, peace officers, firefighters and veterans who swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic.” However, you don't have to have any prior service to join as an associate.

The organization's first priority is to protect the right to own guns – all guns, including assault weapons – under the argument that they have to defend themselves from the federal government in

a Third Reich-like scenerio.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, both the Three Percenters United Patriots and American Patriots Three Percenters have a statewide presence in Oregon, and the Oath Keepers are present in 10 counties, including Washington, Columbia, Lane and Marion. They supported Cliven Bundy's stand with federal agents in Nevada over the use of federal lands, and they supported the Bundy takeover of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge last year.

And they currently have a call out to members to provide security for the numerous rallies billed as the “March Against Sharia” this Sunday, June 10, advertising the fear of a terrorist attack at the events. Portland's March Against Sharia was moved to Seattle.

On an emotional and psychological level, they are driving a wedge of intimidation between the social divisions we should be working to overcome.

Their presence in providing what they call “security” in Portland is cause for alarm. The state law requires security officers to be certified by the Board on Public Safety Standards and Training – or hold a comparable certification from another state. It's unknown if any of the militia members follow any such standards outside of their own organization's tenets.

Certified or not, the city of Portland has struggled, and continues to struggle, to establish a fair and just system around police accountability. There is no accountability with these organizations whose presence is in pursuit of confrontation. They should not be permitted to act under the banner of law enforcement authorities.

And finally, the presence of militia members in other cases – by intention or not – leads to the escalation of tension and the potential for violence. From the Ferguson, Mo., protests after the police shooting of Michael Brown, to Oregon's own Sugar Pine Mine standoff in Josephine County – armed militia members from the Oath Keepers amplified the potential for physical violence.

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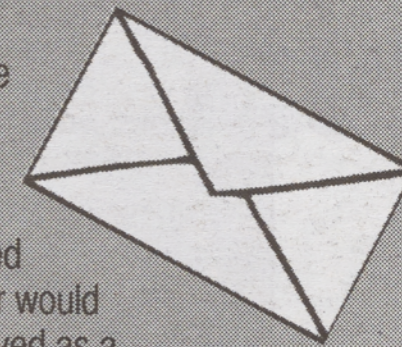
Aggravating the situation are those actors from the antifa movement who have been menacing and aggressive toward Republican and Trump supporters. It's that kind of aggravation that has Multnomah County Republican Party Chair James Buchal say the party is considering inviting the Oath Keepers to future events. Maybe it makes people feel better, but this senseless violence is an obstruction to real change.

In both cases, these two extremes can have a chilling effect on free speech for the majority of people in the middle – for those who are now finding their voice to speak out.

That's what truly needs protecting.

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