

Police Brace for Clash of Protests

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resents everything these (far-right) groups are against," said Heidi Beirich, director of the Intelligence Project at the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate groups. "It's progressive, and even more offensive to them, it's progressive white people who should be on these guys' side."

The groups know they will get a headline-grabbing reaction from Portland's so-called "antifa," whose members have issued an online call to their followers to turn out to "defend Portland from a far-Right attack." Portland's Rose City Antifa, the nation's oldest active anti-fascist group, says violence against right-wing demonstrators

is "exactly what should happen when the far-right attempts to invade our town."

Portland leaders are planning a major law enforcement presence on the heels of similar rallies in June and last summer that turned violent, and the recent hate-driven shooting in El Paso, Texas. None of the city's nearly 1,000 police officers will have the day off, and Portland will get help from the Oregon State Police and the FBI. Mayor Ted Wheeler has said he may ask Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, to call up the Oregon National Guard.

"There's no winning for the cops in a situation like this. There just isn't," Beirich said. "This is hard-core stuff, and I don't think you can be too cautious."

Experts who track right-wing militias and hate groups warn that the mix of people heading to Portland also came together for a Unite the Right rally in 2017 in Charlottesville, Va., which ended when a participant rammed his car into a crowd of counter protesters, killing one person and injuring 19.

The rally is being organized by a member of the Proud Boys, who have been designated by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a hate group. Others expected include members of the American Guard, the Three Percenters, the Oathkeepers and the Daily Stormers. American Guard is a white nationalist group, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, while the

Three Percenters and the Oathkeepers are extremist anti-government militias. The Daily Stormers are neo-Nazis, according to the center.

Portland's fraught history with hate groups adds to the complex dynamic.

Many of today's anti-fascists trace their activist heritage to a group that battled with neo-Nazis in Portland's streets decades ago, and they feel this is the same struggle in a new era, said Randy Blazak, the leading expert on the history of hate groups in Oregon.

White supremacists murdered an Ethiopian man, Mulugeta Seraw, in Portland in 1988. And by the 1990s, Portland was known as Skinhead City because it was the home base of Volksfront, at the time one of the most active neo-Nazi groups in the U.S. As recently as 2007, neo-Nazis attempted to gather in Portland for a three-day skinhead festival.

"When I'm looking at what's happening right now, for me it's a direct line back to the 1980s: the battles between the racist skinheads and the anti-racist skinheads," Blazak said. "It's the latest version of this thing that's been going on for 30 years in this city."

Police, meanwhile, have seemed overwhelmed by the cultural forces at war in their streets.

At the June rally, masked antifa members beat up a conservative blogger named Andy Ngo. Video of the 30-second attack grabbed national attention and further turned the focus on Portland as a new battleground in a divisive America.

Republican Sens. Ted Cruz, of Texas, and Bill Cassidy, of Louisiana, introduced a congressional resolution calling for anti-fascists to be declared domestic terrorists, and President Donald Trump echoed that theme in a tweet last month. Portland's City Hall has been evacuated twice due to bomb threats after the June 29 skirmishes, and Wheeler, the mayor, has been pilloried by critics who incorrectly said he told police to stand down while anti-fascists went after right-wing demonstrators.

"I don't want for one minute anyone to think that because we're being thrust into this political show, that I or the public have lost confidence in (police officers') ability to do what we do," said Police Chief Danielle Outlaw, who is regularly heckled as she leaves City Hall by those who feel the police target counter protesters for arrest over far-right demonstrators.

Police have noted the violence in June was limited to a small area of downtown Portland despite three different demonstrations that lasted more than five hours, with hundreds of people constantly on the move. They also made two arrests last week in a May Day assault on an antifa member that became a rallying cry for the city's far-left.

"We'll be ready for the 17th here in little Portland, Oregon," Wheeler, the mayor, told The Associated Press. "But at the end of the day, the bigger question is about our nation's moral compass and which direction it's pointing."

Blazak, the Oregon hate groups expert, said he worries the extreme response from a small group of counter protesters is starting to backfire. Many in the city oppose the right-wing rallies but also dislike the violent response of antifa, which provides social media fodder for the far-right.

"The opposition is playing right into the alt-right's hands by engaging with them this way," he said.

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