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## Trump's MAGA base finds its own rallying cry: Defend the police

Tina Nguyen

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First, it was socialism. Then it was antifa. Now, with the latest protests sweeping the nation, President Donald Trump's base has found its newest foil: the snowballing movement to drastically reduce the size and budgets of police departments to constrain discriminatory law-enforcement practices.

The rallying cry of the far left is now becoming the rallying cry of the right, energizing the MAGA movement to defend the police.

“It seems to me that the goal there is to totally abolish the police department and replace it with something else,” said Ryan Fournier, the founder of Students for Trump. “I don't know what 'something else' is. I don't think we've gone that far down that rabbit hole. But I think it's counterproductive.”

The backlash from the right comes even as many conservatives begin to accept the premise that African Americans are being disproportionately targeted by police. A recent Washington Post-Schar School poll found that 53 percent of Republicans backed the protests, and 47 percent believed police killings of black men indicate broader problems, compared to 19 percent in 2014.

But Trump's die-hard conservative base is unnerved by what they view as an extreme solution from extreme leftists. To them, addressing the problem by slashing resources to law enforcement is an attack on the central tenet of the Republican Party — law and order — and one that Trump himself is setting up as a wedge issue to bolster his case for reelection in the coming months.

“First of all, on some level, I think it's perceived to be more of an empty slogan than a serious policy response,” said Clark Neily, vice president for criminal justice at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. “And second, it is indelibly associated with the left, which for many people is all they need to know about it in order to oppose it.”

Initially, conservatives across the country — Trump supporters or not — dismissed the idea as an impossibility as slogans like “Defund the Police” and “Abolish the Police” first appeared on signs during Black Lives Matter protests. The slogan morphed virtually overnight from liberal fever dream to tangible policy when the Minneapolis city council voted overwhelmingly to disband the city's police department and restructure its approach to public safety.

The concept of defunding the police, as proponents of the movement explain it, is straightforward: Redirect police budgets toward programs addressing broader community needs such as mental health care, housing for the homeless and crime prevention. Further along the spectrum is the idea of either disbanding or abolishing the police force altogether, replacing first responders instead with social workers, mental health providers, and other community figures.

At the core of these ideas is the belief that the initial set of reforms widely adopted by police in the wake of the Ferguson protests in 2014 — implicit bias training, body cameras, and community engagement — were not sufficiently effective.

In the immediate wake of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, there is little recent polling on what Republicans and other conservatives believe may be the best path toward police reform, made even murkier by the fact that even pro-reform activists in Minneapolis are still grappling with a tangible plan for a post-police world.

But one thing is clear. “I don't think it makes sense to replace professional police officers with decades of training, to have citizens do it. And then to abolish police in general — like just completely get rid of the police — is getting rid of the justice system altogether,” said Brandon Tatum, a former Arizona police officer, pro-Trump commentator and a founder of the Blexit Foundation, which seeks to persuade black voters to stop voting primarily for Democrats.

“You have the lawmakers to write the laws, you have the police to enforce them,” Tatum said. “And you have the court that ensures people have constitutional protections and due process. They don't have a legitimate argument. It sounds like people are just talking and virtue signaling and not really coming up with an effective conclusion.”

Among the MAGA commentariat — rattled by images of violence, looting and so-called leftist antifa militants among the largely peaceful protests over the past week — the premise of slashing police budgets, or axing departments altogether, sparks the most partisan rage.

“The ‘defund the police’ movement, if it's enacted, will be the deadliest public policy disaster in modern American history,” tweeted Fox radio host Dan Bongino on Saturday. “ANY politician who refuses to speak out against this abomination should be forced to attend the thousands of funerals of innocents that will result.”

On his Fox News program, Tucker Carlson predicted that defunding the police was “a move toward authoritarian social control cloaked in the language of identity politics,” among other charges, envisioning a future ruled by a “woke militia” where “the diversity and inclusion department at Brown University had the power to arrest you.”

“Conservatives have always taken pride in themselves about being the law and order party, and Republicans of being the law and order party,” said Jonathan Blanks, a visiting fellow at the free market-oriented Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity, who focuses on police reform. “Because that goes hand in hand, the idea that you would attack one of the most trusted and respected institutions in the country, is anathema to that way of thinking.”

Bypassing subtlety, Trump repeatedly tweeted his opposition to the concept in recent days by saying that while the “Radical Left Democrats” and Joe Biden wanted to defund the police, he was the candidate of “LAW ENFORCEMENT.”

“Sorry, I want LAW & ORDER!” Trump wrote.

At the very least, Blanks suggested that this rhetoric would cement his loyalty among overt racists. “The white identity politics that Trump played to three and a half years ago, that resentment, sometimes it is tied to pro-police sentiment,” said Blanks. “It's not necessarily that they're like, ‘Oh, I hate black people.’ But they think that ‘black people are different, and they don't love America, and they hate police. So we love police.’”

Outside of that core, Trump has ample opportunity to secure Republicans in general with his defend-the-police stance. Local police are one of the most beloved institutions among Republicans, second only to the military.

Blanks observed that it was largely a phenomenon of how Republicans, a largely white demographic, interacted with police. “There's this really huge disconnect between the law-and-order folks who think of police officers as people who come to help and try and keep the road safe, as opposed to people who are trying to prevent crime by harassing people who happen to look different than they do,” he said.

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While that perception might be changing among some Republicans and Trump supporters, their proposed solutions still give cops the benefit of the doubt, even if they were solutions proposed five years ago: bias training, accountability programs, better equipment.

But Tatum thinks the energy behind the defund-the-police movement is largely driven by opportunists looking towards the November election. “They don't have any realistic prospect to defund anything before the election,” he said. “But in reality, I don't think any conservative places or any municipalities, when it comes down to the citizen's vote, nobody's going to vote unanimously to defund police officers.”

The worldwide protests over George Floyd's death could, in theory, end up with meaningful police reform, given the growing bipartisan consensus that something must be done. But confusion about the left's slogans promises to allow Trump's base to define the term how they want.

“Everybody seems to need to get on the same page,” Fournier said. “Are you for fully abolishing the police department and having no law enforcement? Or are you for taking away some of their funds — which I think is counterproductive because they need more training, they need to do more reform — and then giving it to other resources? I think everybody sits on a different page with that. There has to be a conversation on that because there's many conservatives who think they fully want to get rid of police.”