

## **In Portland, lawlessness aplenty**

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The latest reports from Portland, Oregon, where raucous street protests have continued nonstop for nearly two months, are nothing short of frightening: unmarked vans carrying federal agents in camouflage but with no insignia seizing protesters in the streets and hustling them away. It's something you'd expect to see in an authoritarian state.

But where liberals see fascism in Donald Trump's America, many conservatives see a legitimate and overdue law enforcement response to chaos and anarchy abetted by Democratic local government. And, as often happens, the truth is complicated.

To some extent, the claims of abductions are overhyped: they are framed so as to evoke a resemblance to the disappearances (and, in many cases, extrajudicial murders) of activists and dissenters under dictatorships, particularly in Central America. No one in Portland has been "disappeared"; the man whose account of his detention set off the alarm says he was released without charges about 90 minutes later when he refused to answer questions without a lawyer. That doesn't sound very fascist.

However, it seems likely — based on statements by federal officials — that Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Patrol agents in Portland are violating the law by detaining people without probable cause and nowhere near the federal property they are supposed to be protecting. Writing in *The Bulwark*, a center-right online magazine, Cato Institute constitutional scholar Walter Olson argues that the evidence points to "anonymous, arbitrary, and unaccountable police behavior" and that Congress should investigate.

But Olson also points out that there are good reasons for emergency action in Portland. While journalists sympathetic to the protesters have downplayed their attacks on the city's federal courthouse as graffiti vandalism, there also have been repeated arson attempts.

Meanwhile, right-wing journalists reporting from Portland, such as Andy Ngo, paint a frightening picture of a city in the grip of anarchist violence, terrorized by Antifa with the connivance of the Democratic mayor. Ngo, who was assaulted while covering a protest a year ago, has done some brave work on the ground; unfortunately, he is also known to spin or even bend the facts to promote an agenda.

Unfortunately, at this point, the mainstream media may not be entirely trustworthy when it comes to violence associated with the recent anti-racist protests, either. Michael Tracey, a maverick left-wing journalist, makes a strong case in an article in the online magazine *Unherd* —

based on his own travels across America — that many media reports have downplayed the devastation inflicted by the riots, particularly on minority communities. It's notable that the deaths of two black teenagers gunned down in late June in Seattle's "Capitol Hill Occupied Protest Zone" have received little attention outside Fox News and other right-wing media.

So, what is really happening in Portland? A friend who lives there says that while the situation is a mess and the leadership is incompetent, life in the city is mostly normal outside the epicenter of the protests, which occupies a couple of blocks. Yet The New York Times reports that many businesses downtown are still boarded up because of the unrest.

To some extent, both the right-wing and the left-wing narratives are true. Portland's Democratic leaders have allowed a dangerous level of lawlessness because they see the protests as a good cause. Federal law enforcement has engaged in lawlessness of its own while hyping the threat of violent anarchy. Trump wants to use the situation to grandstand as the heroic savior of law and order.

And, depressingly, accurate and unbiased accounts of the facts are hard to find.