



Why 'the debate over Portland is important'

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The clash between federal agents and protestors in Portland is raising important questions about the role of the government in local policing.

“There was a lot of talk after 9/11: Should there be a federal domestic security agency? Congress said: No,” Walter Olson, a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, told Yahoo Finance’s *The Ticker* (video above). “Because... we’ve never had that, and the Constitution reserves that kind of policing to the states and the cities — not the federal government. But we also worried about countries that have that kind of thing, what could happen if they went wrong... [or] turned into a political tool.”

So “the debate over Portland is important that way,” Olson added, “not just because of the things that happened in the past few nights, but to draw the line about where it might go in the future.”

Federal law enforcement officers are seen during a demonstration against the presence of federal law enforcement officers and racial inequality in Portland, Oregon, U.S., July 21, 2020. (Photo: REUTERS/Caitlin Ochs/File Photo)

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President Donald Trump directed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to reinforce local police in Portland, where protests against racial injustice arose after the death of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25. DHS which oversees law enforcement agencies including Border Patrol, Immigration Customs and Enforcement, the Federal Protective Service, and the U.S. Marshals Service, began sending various officers to Portland around July 4 weekend.

“How do you know that they are legitimately federal agents? It can be very hard to spot them,” Olson noted. “They are not wearing badges the way police often do, so lots of dangers of people wondering whether they’re allowed to use self-defense when someone who isn’t well-identified is trying to arrest them.”

Demonstrators face off federal law enforcement officers during a protest against racial inequality and police violence in Portland, Oregon, U.S., July 25, 2020. (Photo: REUTERS/Caitlin Ochs)

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Video footage shows that violence in Portland escalated after the arrival of federal officers. Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler, who opposes the presence of federal agents in the city, was

reportedly tear-gassed by federal agents outside a federal courthouse during protests. Clashes continued into early Saturday morning.

President Trump announced on Wednesday that the Department of Justice (DOJ) would be sending hundreds of additional federal agents into cities such as Chicago and Albuquerque. On Thursday, an unspecified number of Customs and Border Patrol agents headed to the Seattle area to guard federal government buildings in the city.

‘Coming at you on the street trying to take you into a van’

The situation in Portland has sparked concerns about federal overreach and spurred new attempts at oversight.

“They have been dressed in paramilitary style, a couple of these agents are coming at you on the street trying to take you into a van,” Olson stated, referring to reports of federal law enforcement officers stepping out of unmarked vans and detaining demonstrators.

"While I respect the determination to preserve law and order," Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) wrote in an op-ed published by the libertarian magazine Reason, "sending in federal forces to quell civil unrest in Portland further distorts the boundaries, results in more aggression ... and has led to reports we should never hear in a free country: federal officials, dressed in camouflage, snatching protesters away in unmarked vehicles."