



How is this American? Trump using anti-terror forces for ‘own personal militia’

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Five years ago last spring, fear of a federal takeover of Texas grew so heated in some circles that Gov. Greg Abbott deployed the state guard to shadow U.S. Special Forces during a training exercise to ensure Texans’ “safety, constitutional rights, private property rights and civil liberties will not be infringed.”

It was absurd, of course. Operation Jade Helm 15 was nothing more than advertised: eight weeks of training in Texas and six other states. But the fear — stoked online, the CIA later confirmed, by Russian bots — was real. Some residents stocked up on ammunition and stowed weapons as rumors of impending martial law raged.

This summer, a true threat to civil liberties, with all the hallmarks of genuine authoritarianism, is spreading from city to city and yet the outrage on the right has been, to put it gently, muted. Why?

President Donald Trump has sent a swarm of Department of Homeland Security officers — many of them border patrol agents, trained to enforce immigration laws, not to police American cities — to Portland under the pretext of protecting courthouses and other federal property. On Wednesday, he announced hundreds of federal agents under the auspices of the Department of Homeland Security are headed to Chicago to confront a spike in gun violence and shootings he says local police have failed to stem. Agents are already in Kansas City and are expected soon in other cities, from Albuquerque to Detroit.

“In recent weeks, there has been a radical movement to defund, dismantle, and dissolve our police departments,” he said Wednesday, wildly exaggerating a spectrum of proposed reforms. “Extreme politicians have joined this anti-police crusade and relentlessly vilified our law enforcement heroes.”

Since local officials can’t be trusted, according to the president, he is sending in his own troops. That should alarm every American.

None of the mayors have asked for the federal agents' help. Governors of Oregon, Washington, Illinois and other states have protested loudly. Tom Ridge, the former Republican governor of Pennsylvania and the nation's first Homeland Security secretary, says it "would be a cold day in hell" before he'd authorize a similar deployment of DHS agents to U.S. cities.

The agency, created after the Sept. 11 terror attacks, "was not established to be the president's personal militia," he said.

In Trump's hands, that's what it has become. He is creating a private police force answerable only to him. The self-proclaimed law-and-order president is perverting the rule of law.

In Portland

The situation in Portland is chaotic, no doubt. Protesters have remained in the streets overnight for weeks following the killing in Minneapolis of former Houston resident George Floyd. While mostly peaceful, there have been some acts of vandalism — windows broken, fires set, bottles hurled at police — which Black Lives Matter leaders have disavowed.

When protesters targeted a federal courthouse, DHS officials surrounded the site with agents — mostly from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Agents in riot gear have fanned out into the city beyond federal property to make arrests, lobbing tear gas at moms, raining baton blows on a Navy veteran who stood with hands at his side and snatching citizens off the streets.

"Federal law enforcement officers have been using unmarked vehicles to drive around downtown Portland, detain protesters, and place them into the officers' unmarked vehicles, removing them from public without either arresting them or stating the basis for an arrest, since at least Tuesday, July 14," according to a federal complaint filed by Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum.

In a letter to the U.S. attorney general, Oregon's congressional delegation called the tactics more reflective of those used by "a government led by a dictator, not from the government of our constitutional democratic republic." Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler said the president is not only "breaking the law, but he is also endangering the lives of Portlanders. His actions are unconstitutional."

In a statement to the editorial board, Oregon Gov. Katie Brown said, "This political theater from President Trump has nothing to do with public safety. The President is failing to lead this nation.

Now he is deploying federal officers to patrol the streets of Portland in a blatant abuse of power by the federal government.”

On Thursday morning, Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf defended the arrests in Oregon as legal. He said anyone who threatens a federal courthouse is subject to arrest — and agents may pursue arrests on or off premises. He denied that agents wore no identifying insignia.

“I don't need invitations by the state, state mayors or state governors to do our job. We're going to do that, whether they like us there or not,” he said on Monday on Fox & Friends.

Past presidents have relied on federal agents to enforce federal law — from President Eisenhower's sending the 101st Airborne to desegregate schools in Little Rock to the Clinton Administration's decisions to send federal agents to apprehend Elian Gonzalez in Miami and ATF agents to confront the Branch Davidians in Waco.

But Trump's use of hundreds of agents to police the streets of U.S. cities, without the invitation of local officials, is in a whole other category. Is it legal? Experts are divided, but that only makes it more worrisome, said Clark Neily, vice president for criminal justice at the libertarian Cato Institute.

“It's a very dangerous situation because there is at least a pretext — if not more — for some of what the federal law enforcement officials are doing,” Neily said. “Once you have the cover of a fig leaf over their actions, then it is very difficult for anyone — from the Oregon attorney general to the federal judiciary — to rein them in.”

Neily also took a longer view: Democrats and Republicans share responsibility for the steady expansion of federal power across the decades, he said. Congress has entrusted the presidency with vast powers, often assuming self-restraint or adherence to political norms will govern its use.

That is no longer a safe assumption.

“That has helped set the table legally for what we have now, a norm-busting president to come along and weaponize law enforcement. It's very scary,” Neily said.

Mayors in at least 15 cities have objected to Trump's Operation LeGend, his plan to send federal agents to cities — all of them, so far, led by Democrats — to fight crime.

“We welcome actual partnership,” Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot said. “But we do not welcome dictatorship, we do not welcome authoritarianism and we do not welcome unconstitutional arrest and detainment of our residents.”

None of us should. Big-city mayors and Democratic members of Congress have called for investigations of the Trump administration’s deployment of federal forces. Even some Republican leaders have done the right thing and condemned it. But we should all speak out about this abuse of power that is appalling, unneeded and un-American.