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Meet the Gun Club Patrolling Seattle's Leftist Utopia

Kim Kelly

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Seattle's bustling Capitol Hill neighborhood has long been a hotbed of gentrification, but right now, the streets surrounding Cal Anderson Park are undergoing a different kind of transformation.

Over the past several days of its remarkable existence, the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) has captured radical imaginations across the country, and struck fear into the hearts of conservative politicians and right-wing media pundits (including the president). Also known as the Seattle Autonomous Zone, the six blocks surrounding Seattle's now-abandoned East Precinct have become a virtually cop-free space, populated instead by a diverse congregation of activists and community members who have turned it into a bastion of radical care and artistic expression.

Last week, the area resembled a warzone, as Seattle police fired tear gas canisters into the crowd and choked out the neighborhood. Now, there is a community garden, a harm reduction clinic, a free food co-op, and artwork everywhere—and local businesses are on board. As Vixen, a Seattle resident

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who has been participating in the protests and declined to give a last name, told The Daily Beast from a quiet spot behind the barricades, “This place has gone from being filled with explosions and tear gas to being a place of healing.”

Comparisons have predictably been drawn between CHAZ and the Occupy movement, but in the place also known as Free Capitol Hill, there is one crucial distance: this time, some of the protesters are armed.

Members of the Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club (PSJBGC)—a leftist community defense and firearms education organization that gained a spate of notoriety last year when a former member, Willem van Spronsen, set fire to an ICE parking lot—have been a constant presence. The club is often asked to provide security for protests and rallies around the Seattle area, and while their involvement in CHAZ is structured more loosely, the presence of armed civilians has raised a few eyebrows.

Leftist gun clubs have been on the rise, and organizations like the Socialist Rifle Association—of which, full disclosure, I am a member—Huey P. Newton Gun Club, Trigger Warning Queer & Trans Gun Club, and other chapters of the John Brown Gun Club have successfully introduced the issue of gun rights and firearms education into the broader leftist discourse. In Seattle, John Brown members have generally been showing up on an individual basis, rather than as part of a coordinated campaign. But as Nick—the group’s towering spokesperson, who like other members requested his full name be withheld given law enforcement’s fixation on left-wing activists—told The Daily Beast, the group was also tapped to provide a security escort for “some very prominent black voices who were doing speeches here at the Autonomous Zone” following the events of last Sunday evening.

That was when a man armed with a Glock (with taped-on extended magazines) drove into a crowd of protesters, and shot a civilian named Daniel Gregory in the arm. According to Nick

one barricade is fairly successful, whatever that looks like—even if it’s in anarchist pipe dreams where it seems successful because it did not get shut down by the cops for two weeks—they will be duplicated, again and again,” crow says. “It may not happen in the next few weeks—or it might!— but it’s definitely going to happen in the future.”

No matter what happens next, the community defenders of Free Capitol Hill believe they have drawn up a new blueprint, however rough, for what it can look like when the people take it upon themselves to defend and protect their communities. As calls to defund and abolish the police continue to pick up steam, this little slice of Seattle offers a stark reminder that a world without cops really is possible, however ephemeral it may be, and despite the potential for armed civilians to cause harm.

“Here’s what’s happened in the last few days of occupation: a lot less tear gas,” Nick told The Daily Beast. “That precinct has not gone on fire, and there’s talk of turning it into a community center if we can get the police to leave. If somebody calls the police, they’ll just show up 30 mins late and end up swatting the wrong address and shooting someone’s dog. Those are all things that we’re missing, and I’m not sure that anybody here has any complaints about that.”

There is no telling how long Free Capitol Hill will remain in its current form. Seattle police have begun popping up inside its faux borders. Donald Trump, who deemed its inhabitants “domestic terrorists,” has called on Gov. Jay Inslee and Mayor Durkan to break it up, and threatened to use military force if they refuse his demands. Both essentially told him to kick rocks, and Socialist Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant has floated legislation to convert the East Precinct into a permanent community center for restorative justice. Sawant, who also recently brought forth legislation banning police from using chemical weapons and chokeholds, said on Twitter that the process for deciding that conversion must include a broad range of perspectives, citing those involved in the CHAZ, black community organizations, restorative justice activists, faith leaders, anti-racists, renter organizations, land trusts, and labor unions that have a proven record of fighting racism.

And as crow explains, the tensions between various community defense strategies is normal, and can even be healthy. “Nobody said autonomy or trying to build these spaces was going to be beautiful always, if you’re not there to convert or to rule over people, it’s always that way,” he said. He would know, having co-founded the Common Ground Collective autonomous project that took root in New Orleans’ Algiers neighborhood in 2005, post-Katrina. “It’s going to be messy along the way, and it’s okay that it’s going to be messy, because we haven’t gotten to try this, and that’s one thing that I hope we give each other a break about.”

For now, occupants of Seattle’s autonomous zone are building what they can in the time they’ve got left, and providing a shot of inspiration to activists across the country. Conversations with radical activists suggest that there are discussions going on in at least three other major cities about how to follow their lead—if not in having armed civilians on hand, then at least in claiming public space free of traditional policing. “If

and local news reports, the driver then ran over to the police, where he was taken into custody.

Though a suspect has since been charged with first-degree assault, Vixen told the Daily Beast, “We have to rely on each other to protect each other.”

So right now, while police mostly steer clear of the Zone, that’s what they say they’re doing. Right-wing media has worked itself into a lather over the specter of armed leftists patrolling the area’s makeshift borders, but that hysteria only underlines what activists see as their profound misunderstanding of both leftist gun culture and what exactly these people are defending themselves against. As Nick explains, they’re there to discourage white supremacist groups, accelerationist boogaloo bois, and violent gangs like the Proud Boys from trying to harm the people inside.

“It’s not like our club is going force-to-force against the police; that’s not what we do,” he told The Daily Beast.

Their second, and arguably more important, goal, they say, is to ensure that everyone who is carrying inside CHAZ is doing so safely and responsibly, and ideally with community buy-in. According to Nick, members have been joined out on patrol by other armed locals, a hodgepodge of “random community members, affinity groups, [and] antifa that aren’t labeled with a specific group” who have reportedly been helping to fill in gaps in the barricades. The PSJBC’s approach, as they describe it, is heavily focused on de-escalation, and they’ve been leaning on that training as various tensions have surfaced.

“That’s kind of the world we live in, right? We have people who are disciplined with firearms, and people who get into firearms who don’t have that discipline, so when we see it, we’re not policing people; the best we can do is educate people,” Nick said. “Other people are carrying and we want to make sure that people are carrying safely, so we’re also discussing whether we can do trainings for people here.”

It's worth noting that Seattle's Mayor, Jenny Durkan, set a ban on weapons on May 30. In a Saturday statement, a spokesperson for the Mayor's Office told The Daily Beast of the Zone, "There have been individuals with weapons—open carrying is legal in Washington State. While the CHAZ is within the area of the City currently under a weapons ban, the Emergency Order establishing the weapons ban does not mandate enforcement. It gives officers the option to take certain actions (i.e., confiscate weapons) if they deem it necessary"

"The City will continue to assess the area on a regular basis and work with community and other stakeholders on a path forward that allows individuals to demonstrate, businesses to continue their operations, and preserves public safety for local residents," the spokesperson added. "Officers in the East Precinct have continued to respond to calls. [Seattle Police] Chief [Carmen] Best and Command Staff have been on site at the East Precinct including yesterday, and some personnel are now staffing the precinct."

The Seattle PD did not immediately respond to a request for comment for this story. However, Chief Best told KIRO 7 on Friday, of the Zone, "We don't want to exacerbate or intensify or incite problems that are going to lead to harm to the officers or the people who are standing by. We know that several are armed. We want to make sure that we are being very thoughtful about how we respond."

As is unsurprising for an evolving occupation composed of numerous organizations and political tendencies, not everyone is on the same page. Reports of "warlords" trying to fill the vacuum left by the Seattle cops with their own police stylings have been highly exaggerated, but it is true that an activist was seen appearing to hand out a firearm from the back of a car (an action streamed on Facebook), drawing Twitter accolades from an unlikely source: neo-Nazi Richard Spencer.

"Sure, there are occasionally people open carrying, and usually they're people of color, but all that they're doing is exercising the same Second Amendment rights that the 3%ers and right wingers never shut up about," Vixen, who is also a PSJBC member, told The Daily Beast. "But because they're afraid of the c-word, 'communist', [right wingers] lose their minds over it. And unlike whatever's happening in their own personal fantasyland—all this talk of the boogaloo, without the rule of law—the threats of violence against these communities are actually credible."

And while a more liberal project would undoubtedly balk at the mere thought of armed community members strolling through its midst, the explicitly leftist bent of the CHAZ itself allows for a diversity of opinions on firearms and their use. Nick said that everyone he's spoken to has appreciated their presence, save for one older white man who spotted a black man open carrying and fretted, "I thought this was a peaceful protest!" By all accounts on the ground, it is. The protestors themselves say they are just not taking any chances on what—or who—may be lurking beyond their makeshift borders

Ultimately, the CHAZ is a new stab at an ancient idea. As Scott Crow, Anarchist Agency spokesperson and author of *Setting Sights: Histories and Reflections on Community Armed Self-Defense*, told The Daily Beast, it's important to remember that picking up guns "doesn't make you more badass." He added that taking an explicitly liberatory approach and focusing on safety and strategy, as PSJBC members say they've done, is paramount.

"[Guns] are not automatically the most protective thing that you can have; only in certain situations do they work," he explained. "In my analysis, this is the time when it's needed; this is the time when you can go forth and protect the people who are there from random gunshots or anything, without escalating the situation further."