

US Cops Are Treating White Militias as “Heavily Armed Friendlies”

Kristian Williams

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A video from the uprising in Kenosha, Wisconsin, shows police giving water to a group of armed white men. One officer uses his vehicle's loudspeaker to tell them, "We appreciate you guys. We really do." Soon thereafter, one of the group, 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse, shot three protesters, killing two.

Among the many effects of the ongoing wave of protests against police violence and racial inequality, one of the most striking is the increasingly overt cooperation between the police and armed right-wing groups, surpassing anything we have seen in decades.

Cops in Portland, Oregon, stood by while Proud Boys and militiamen, some brandishing guns, attacked anti-fascist protesters; when the Proud Boys retreated, the cops fired tear gas. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, after a pro-police political candidate fired into a crowd of protesters, armed militiamen with the New Mexico Civil Guard formed a protective circle around him — and then police formed a protective circle around *them*, and tear-gassed the protesters. Calling over the police radio, one officer described the militia as "heavily armed friendlies."

During Black Lives Matter protests in Chicago, police were seen casually chatting with white men with bats, maintaining a border between historically segregated areas. The cops later described them as "neighborhood people just trying to protect the neighborhood." In Philadelphia, as men with clubs wandered the streets menacing passersby during anti-racist demonstrations, police told neighbors who called 911 that they should be grateful the men were there to protect the area.

John Shirley, the constable in Hood County, Texas, posted a "Call to Action," asking the Oath Keepers to help protect local businesses. In Oregon, Curry County Sheriff John Ward fed baseless rumors of an "antifa invasion," warning that "3 buss [sic] loads of ANTIFA protestors are making their way" to small towns in the area. He followed with a prediction/invitation: "I am sure we have a lot of local boys too with guns who will protect our citizens and their property." Weeks later, as wildfires raged across Oregon, a Clackamas County deputy was recorded blaming antifa for the fires and coaching a militia patrol on the option to use force.

This cozy relationship with right-wing militias and racist mobs cannot be explained by the (very real) prejudices of individual cops, nor by the (equally real) attempts of white supremacists to infiltrate police agencies. It has to be understood as an institutional feature of policing.

Vigilantes, lynch mobs, militias, paramilitaries and death squads all belong on the same spectrum as sheriffs' posses and police. Whatever may separate them in terms of legality is secondary to what they share in terms of political orientation. In each case, the distinguishing characteristic is the use of violence in the defense of a threatened racial hierarchy.

Racist Continuities

These recent incidents only continue a well-established historical pattern.

Following the Civil War, police were often participants, or even leaders, of the extralegal violence intended to return African Americans to enslavement. They continued to play this role well into the 20th century. In the Detroit riot of 1943, as Black and white crowds battled one another, driven by false rumors of a Black man raping a white woman, the police barely discouraged the white mobs, while aggressively beating and shooting Black people at random — killing 17 Black people, but no whites. In an article titled "The Gestapo in Detroit," NAACP attorney and later Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall argued that such a performance was typical:

“[N]early all police departments limit their conception of checking racial disorders to surrounding, arresting, maltreating, and shooting Negroes. Little attempt is made to check the activities of whites.”

During the 1950s and 1960s, in addition to their overt use of clubs, dogs and fire hoses against civil rights demonstrators, the police were also often involved in illegal violence directed against the movement. That includes some of the most notorious cases of Klan violence from the period, such as the Mother’s Day attack on the Freedom Riders, and the murder of three young civil rights workers during Mississippi Summer. In the first, Police Chief Bull Connor and Red Squad detective Tom Cook met with Klan leaders, promising that the police would give them at least 15 minutes in which to attack Freedom Riders without interference. In the second case, Deputy Cecil Price arrested the three civil rights workers, drove them to a deserted area, and handed them over to Klansmen who shot and killed them.

It doesn’t take protests to bring these dynamics to the surface. Following Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was full of men with guns — police, sheriff deputies, National Guard troops, private mercenaries and vigilante militias. Armed amateurs patrolled in pickup trucks and set up roadblocks to prevent Black people from crossing through white neighborhoods. One vigilante stated frankly that they shot anyone “darker than a brown paper bag.” The police were indifferent, and possibly complicit. They refused to take action when Black residents complained of being threatened. And Henry Glover, a Black man who had been shot by white vigilantes, disappeared after he went to the police station for help. His charred remains were discovered a few days later.

Allied Against the Left

It is not only racial panic that cements the bond between the police and the far right, but an antipathy to the idea of equality as such, which also produces hostility against the left. In Los Angeles in the early 20th century, the police deputized members of the American Legion’s “law and order committee” and together raided meetings of the Industrial Workers of the World. During the Palmer Raids of 1919, the Justice Department’s efforts to round up and deport radicals were aided both by local cops and by the American Protective League, a volunteer organization devoted to combating espionage, apprehending draft dodgers and spying on immigrants.

Decades later, in Michigan, a Klan offshoot called the Black Legion beat and sometimes murdered suspected radicals, bombed their offices and burned their homes; the group counted a hundred police officers among its members. During the late 1960s, the Legion of Justice conducted a series of burglaries, beatings and arson attacks on behalf of Chicago’s Red Squad. In San Diego, the Secret Army Organization — a group led and armed by an FBI informant — assaulted Chicano activists, trashed the offices of radical newspapers and attempted to assassinate antiwar organizers.

Police were similarly implicated in North Carolina’s Greensboro massacre of 1979, when members of the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan attacked a demonstration organized by the Communist Workers Party, killing five and injuring 10 more. At the time of the attack, uniformed police were mysteriously absent. Covert agents, however, were very much there: Eddie Dawson, who later said that he was “in charge” of the assault, was a paid informant for the Greensboro Police Department (and, previously, for the FBI). He recruited the Klansmen, arranged the meeting with the Nazis and supplied them with a map of the march route, which he had received from

his police handlers. Bernard Butkovich, a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives agent who had infiltrated the Nazi Party, provided the guns.

Asymmetrical Warfare

As right-wing militants have come to view themselves as insurgents against the existing order, and as police have adopted the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion, the relationship between the cops and the militant right has naturally shifted. And yet, there remains a permanent bias in the police approach to the activities of the right compared to those of the left. There are obvious double standards in the official response to extremism and violence —and even in what activities the police consider “extremism” or describe as “violence.”

That is not to say that the alignment between law enforcement and the far right is automatic, or absolute. The police *can* move against the right wing when they decide to: For instance, soon after two men associated with the Boogaloo movement were arrested for killing two law enforcement officers, and shooting several others, Attorney General William Barr announced a task force to investigate the Boogaloo Boys (and, incongruously, antifa). Within a few weeks, two more Boogaloo Boys were caught selling illegal weapons in an FBI sting. The crackdown echoes federal efforts against the militia movement in the ‘90s, following the Oklahoma City Bombing. Then, too, when the government pursued right-wing terrorists, its efforts tended to focus narrowly on prosecutable crimes, whereas investigations into environmentalists and anarchists during the same period sprawled broadly across the relevant movements and often took on an explicitly ideological tone.

Likewise, in the ‘60s, the FBI did eventually undertake a covert campaign to infiltrate and disrupt the Klan, known as COINTELPRO-WHITE HATE — but 98 percent of its counterintelligence files from the period concerned leftists. The Klan was only targeted following direct orders from President Lyndon Johnson. And, as author and sociologist David Cunningham argues, the Bureau pursued “distinct overall strategies” against the right and left, aiming “to control the Klan’s violent tendencies,” while attempting “to eliminate the New Left altogether.”

Between the police and the organized right there exists an elective affinity, whereas between the police and the organized left there is always a structural antagonism. The defining feature of right-wing politics is its resistance to egalitarianism, while the core function of policing is the defense of existing inequalities. This sometimes puts them at odds — especially when the right threatens the stability of the overall system or directs violence against the police — but more often it puts them on more or less the same side, especially when both are mobilized to defend a system of stratification that they see being threatened. In contrast, the defining feature of the left is its pursuit of ever-greater equality and justice, which inevitably puts it into conflict with both the insurgent right and counterinsurgent police.

The left, the right and the police are together engaged in what Matthew Lyons has long characterized as a three-way fight. But the triangle they form is not equilateral. The police and the right sometimes conflict and sometimes join forces — whereas the left always faces two adversaries.

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