One Way to Counter the Far Right? Demilitarize the Police.

BY CASSIE MILLER

The blocks surrounding Portland's federal courthouse turned into a battleground this summer when armed federal troops emerged nightly to violently suppress protests against police brutality.

The streets were continually clouded with tear gas, leaving demonstrators choking, vomiting and suffering disturbingly aggressive arrests. Federal officers shot munitions into the crowd, maimed protesters, pinned unmasked demonstrators to the ground as they were engulfed in tear gas, grabbed people off the streets and placed them in unmarked vehicles, and shot and pepper-sprayed journalists and legal observers.

Despite documented evidence that federal officers escalated violence in Portland, federal agents and other Customs and Border Patrol assets were sent to more cities around the country.

What happened night after night was a truly American phenomenon - a product of the country's hyper-militarized culture that, for decades, outfitted police with surplus military equipment and charged members of law enforcement with
forcefully controlling social unrest.

It fits a larger pattern of political myopia, where punishment and incarceration are almost universally viewed as the primary (or only) apparatus to address social and political problems.

Violence comes at the expense of meaningful structural reforms that could address what brought protesters out in the first place, such as redistributing resources to address historic levels of economic inequality and remedying systemic racial injustice in the criminal justice system.

Beyond failing to make communities safer and disproportionately exposing already overpoliced communities to more violence, the heavy-handed deployment of militarized federal troops has another, very disturbing byproduct: It inflames the paranoia of the far right.

This movement is fired by apocalyptic rhetoric and anchored by the belief that a civil war or race war is imminent—even necessary—to achieve their political vision. Fear that the government plans to disarm its citizens and impose a tyrannical “One World Government” or “New World Order” animates the far right. When militarized troops violently suppress protests across the country, it provides extremists with abundant evidence of state-sponsored violence to prop up conspiracy theories.

Extremists have celebrated the conspicuous show of force against antifascists and other protesters around the country, both because they relish attacks on leftists and hope tensions will escalate into more widespread violence. But they oppose the police even while cheering the aggressive stance they’ve taken toward those they consider their ideological enemies.

“Antifa and DHS [Department of Homeland Security] are 2 rival gangs and they are BOTH violating rights, so I don’t care if they fight each other,” one member of an antigovernment extremist forum wrote. “COPS are our primary enemies in the upcoming struggle,” another posted.

Militarized policing creates a feedback loop: state suppression or violence intended to tamp down on political organizing or protest—whether the focus is on far-right extremists or others—emboldens and mobilizes the far right, thereby justifying more violence at the hands of the state and further fueling the cycle.

Members of the far right feel as if the country is on the cusp of widespread social disorder or even war: “The greatest thing about living in the era that we do now,” a neo-Nazi shared recently with his followers on Telegram, “is that most of us will live to see the day that ALL must choose a side, and THAT is when this motherfucker will finally kick off in earnest.”

It’s no coincidence that at least a dozen men with far-right ties have been arrested for plotting or carrying out violent attacks in this moment of massive political unrest and widespread police efforts to suppress dissent. They want the political order to collapse, and now appears the opportune time to nudge the process along.

Because state violence is so often framed as the only rational response to social disorder, the influence of militarized policing on far-right extremism is one the U.S. government is profoundly unprepared to address. But the history of the American far right, as well as the recent rapid growth and militancy of the present-day white power and antigovernment movements, demonstrate that militarized policing only inflames extremists.

Countering far-right mobilization requires not only demilitarizing our law enforcement agencies but looking beyond policing as a solution to social and political problems.

**Accelerationism and apocalypticism**

Today, the far right views the U.S. government itself as the main impediment to erecting an ethnonationalist and fascist state; as a result, antigovernment animus now unites extremists to a greater degree than it has in decades.

Many factors have played a role in the movement’s turn against the state.

One is the current political landscape, defined by polarization and feelings of political disempow-
Countering far-right mobilization requires not only demilitarizing our law enforcement agencies but looking beyond policing as a solution to social and political problems.

Over half of Americans are dissatisfied with democracy, a trend that has grown alongside a perceived distrust of government and of other Americans. Similar patterns have emerged globally and given rise to far-right and authoritarian populist political parties both in the United States and across the world. They've also contributed to a growing acceptance of violence as a means of achieving political goals. In 2018, political scientist Lilliana Mason found that about 20 percent of American voters appeared willing to tolerate some form of violence in the nation’s politics.

The far right represents the most extreme version of the nation’s growing anti-democratic tendencies—in other words, the movement is a reflection of American culture and not simply its unfortunate appendage.

The movement’s own violence and militancy, then, also cannot be seen apart from the country’s uniquely militarized culture and long history of state violence. The far right has patterned its own paramilitarism after the nation’s law enforcement agencies and military, and in an alarming number of cases, extremists have actually trained in the U.S. Armed Forces to increase their knowledge of weapons and their own capacity for violence.

The militancy, orientation toward violence and apocalypticism of today’s far right is evidenced by the growing interest in “accelerationism.” It is not an ideology but a strategy, premised on the belief that society is so deeply broken that “the system” itself must be torn down. This, accelerationism’s adherents believe, can only be achieved through violence aimed at both the state and social groups perceived as enemies, inviting a repressive response that will eventually help extremists win enough support to mount an insurrection.

The accelerationist’s maxim is that “there is no political solution.”

The mindset that has taken hold in the far right—in which dismantling the state itself is the only way to enact desired political change—is not a new one within the movement. In fact, this moment looks strikingly similar to white power activism of the 1980s and 1990s, when members of the movement themselves became the targets of state violence.

The conclusion of the Cold War played a decisive role in domestic militarization. As perceived international threats receded, military surpluses from the Cold War were made available to state and federal law enforcement agencies as part of the so-called War on Drugs through the National Defense Authorization Act of 1990. Later in the decade, Congress expanded the effort under the 1033 program, which authorized its use for policing related to both drug enforcement and terrorism. Although record-keeping on these equipment transfers is poor, the program has facilitated the transfer of an estimated $7.4 billion in materials to participating law enforcement agencies.

As historian Kathleen Belew notes in her book *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, the moments that most galvanized the far right in the 1990s were a direct consequence of recklessly militarized policing. Two particular events stand out: the 1992 siege at Ruby Ridge—when local and federal agents deployed military equipment on the Weaver family in rural Idaho, killing Vicki Weaver and her son—and the 1993 standoff at Waco when 75 members of the Branch Davidians, an apocalyptic religious sect, died when their compound was engulfed by flames at the end of a standoff with ATF and FBI agents. Ruby Ridge and Waco (where government investigators concluded the fire was set by the Davidians) “inflamed a renewed apocalyptic imagery” and “reaffirmed the state as inherently
evil, supplanting communism as an irredeemable enemy and giving rise to a new surge of militia organizing,” Belew argues.

These events are perennial justifications, even today, for far-right terror. The lionization of the victims of state violence at Ruby Ridge and Waco, as well as the perpetrator of the Oklahoma City bombing, persist as far-right extremists once again center their ire on the state.

Beyond policing
The impulse to choose punitive or carceral solutions for nearly every social or economic problem is deeply embedded in America’s political history. With massive protests arising in cities around the country, America is grappling with the recognition that the nation’s current form of policing causes more harm than good. In recent months, congressional committees have held hearings on white supremacy and antigovernment extremism, providing an opportunity for the SPLC and other experts to offer a wide range of policy recommendations.

But that realization has been a long time coming – and this is certainly not the first time the nation has come to this kind of reckoning. Political leaders have continually chosen state violence and suppression in lieu of structural reforms. Even in the face of widespread civil unrest – including the many “race riots” that erupted in American cities throughout the 20th century – those in political power ignored the findings of commissions that were convened to assess their root causes. Reports consistently pointed to police brutality, unemployment and economic insecurity – problems that required widespread structural changes to address. As historian Jill Lepore recently reported, “Between 1917 and 1943, at least 21 commissions were appointed to investigate race riots, and, however sincerely their members might have been interested in structural change, none of the commissions led to any.”

Stuart Schrader, the author of Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing, recently noted that we now live with the consequences of those choices – particularly President Lyndon Johnson’s decision to ignore much of the Kerner Commission’s report on 1967 urban uprisings across the country. The commission “recommended spending billions to improve housing, education and employment prospects for African Americans. Johnson balked at expensive solutions,” and instead, Schrader wrote, “adopted the commission’s suggestions for riot preparedness with alacrity. Our contemporary situation – police and soldiers outfitted with seemingly endless supplies of tear gas grenades confronting a perpetually underemployed class of young people – is the legacy.”

The obvious first step is to demilitarize the police, first by ending the 1033 program that has helped outfit the nation’s law enforcement agencies with military-grade equipment. But we also need to look beyond policing, and instead address the racial and economic inequality that Americans are now protesting en masse.

The actions we can take to address the root causes of today's social unrest – like helping to alleviate economic inequality, providing a robust social safety net and providing people with necessities like health care and housing – are also some of the most impactful ways to address far-right extremism. This is especially pressing as the coronavirus pandemic continues to worsen what is, in many cases, preventable suffering.

Extremist movements capitalize on uncertainty and instability.

Building a society that values inclusion and socioeconomic security, and meets dissent not with apathy or violence but remedial action takes power from the far right. Without mass crises to exploit, hardship and insecurity to blame on marginalized groups, and state violence to prop up their conspiracy theories, the far right has far less footing for their anti-democratic politics. ▲