

How Portland Stopped the Proud Boys

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This was the first summer since 2019 that I have not needed to don armor, strap on a gun or load up a first aid kit to go and report in downtown Portland, Oregon. Since 2017, the Rose City has hosted regular gatherings of far-right militant groups, like the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer, that degenerate into mass brawls with anti-fascist activists. Violence has been regular enough that some local left-wing activists refer to summer as the “fighting season.” But this year, there were no protests or rallies of note.

While the Pacific Northwest, true to its reputation, has an assortment of bespoke local fascist groups, the Proud Boys, a far-right gang that has been labeled a “terrorist entity” in Canada and New Zealand, have been present at nearly every event.

Their absence from Portland this summer is noteworthy. The opposite has been true for much of the rest of the country. There are more Proud Boys chapters now in the United States than there were on Jan. 6, 2021. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project has tracked more than 200 of their public events around the country since they stormed the U.S. Capitol.

And these events have only grown more violent. In 2020, only 18% of Proud Boy-involved events ended in violence. In 2021, 25% ended in blood and beatings. The range of acceptable targets has broadened as far-right political violence has become normalized. The Proud Boys and other right-wing paramilitary groups have disrupted school board meetings in at least 12 states. They have crashed LGBTQ-oriented book readings at libraries and harassed pride rallies.

But in 2022, they didn’t show up in Portland. It’s worth looking into why. But if you want a quick answer, here it is: Portland fought back.

The Rose City has a long history as a hotbed of radical activism amid one of the most conservative parts of the country. Portland is the city where local police officers deputized for the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and that President George H.W. Bush nicknamed “Little Beirut” after intense protests against his visit following the Gulf War. In the 1990s, it was a breeding ground for fascist violence following the murder in 1988 of Mulugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian immigrant, by members of the White Aryan Resistance. Tom Metzger, the group’s founder and a famous Nazi organizer from California, recruited heavily from disaffected young men in Portland. Anti-racist skinheads started organizing in opposition, and over the course of several bloody years, far-right groups were prevented from rallying openly in the city.

This started to change in 2016 with the founding of Patriot Prayer by Washington State native Joey Gibson. Gibson lived in Vancouver, Washington, which is across the river from Portland

and effectively a suburb of the city. Like most of non-urban Oregon, it is extremely conservative. At first, Gibson claimed that his organization's purpose was to "liberate conservatives" from oppression in liberal-dominated cities by hosting prayer vigils, free speech marches and pro-Second Amendment rallies.

The first Patriot Prayer event was a rally in the wealthy neighborhood of Lake Oswego in March 2017. It followed a series of left-wing and liberal protests that were held on Inauguration Day and Presidents Day, which ended in police violence against demonstrators. The Oswego rally ended with lots of yelling but no violence. In April 2017, Gibson organized the "Rally for Trump and Freedom," attended by roughly 300 people. The Three Percenters, a right-wing militia that played a major role on Jan. 6, provided "security" for the conservatives in an early example of the sort of intergroup organizing that characterized the Capitol insurrection.

Fistfights and mass brawls became more common at every event that followed. When I've talked to anti-fascist activists in Portland, there's one fight from these days that comes up more than any other: the Aug. 6, 2017, mass brawl at the waterfront. Members of recognized Nazi groups fought alongside those from Patriot Prayer, and members of the Three Percenters again handled security as hundreds of people exchanged strikes with fists, batons and mace.

The left-wing response to these rallies escalated after May 2017, when former Patriot Prayer marcher and white supremacist Jeremy Christian stabbed two men to death on a train. The attack started with Christian hurling racial epithets at two teenage girls, one of whom was a Somali Muslim wearing a hijab.

To Portland's anti-fascists, the attack was evidence of everything they'd been saying for months: Patriot Prayer rallies were breeding grounds for racist violence. More people started donning black hoodies and crafting makeshift weapons. ("Black bloc," initially a tactic to protect activists' identity by wearing identical all-black outfits, became something of a uniform for Portland's anti-fascists.)

From the end of 2017, livestreams and tweeted video clips from Portland street fights became a reliable content stream for local journalists and right-wing media figures. Many people made an excellent living from simply filming violence and letting the money roll in from various crowdfunding sites. (By 2020, left-wing livestreamers grew more common as well.) The spectacle around these events was a draw for right-wing activists around the country. Portland "antifa" became the boogymen of the right-wing media, and for some activists loyal to then President Donald Trump, it was *de rigueur* to be seen opposing them.

Nothing embodied this stage more clearly than an August 2019 Proud Boys rally. The city government decided to wall both sides off from each other using huge numbers of police officers. This effectively meant that the police acted as an escort while several hundred Proud Boys and their allies marched across a bridge. There were still several clashes that day, but it was less violent than past rallies. The whole mess cost the city of Portland at least \$3 million. Joe Biggs, an influential leader of the Proud Boys, called the event a success and gloated about costing the city money. He threatened to hold follow-up events with the goal of eventually bankrupting Portland.

It was around this time that I moved to town. I'd attended a few of the earlier protests, but by late 2019, what struck me most was the fatalism so many of Portland's left-wing protesters seemed to feel. There was a strong belief that the national media was constantly on the lookout for evidence of "antifa" violence, which the police and the federal government would use as a pretext for a crackdown.

Black bloc anarchists, often filmed in direct combat with far-right brawlers, made the news. But Portland's anti-fascist community was much deeper than that. At their large rallies, between 10% and 15% of the crowd would be actively prepared, if not eager, for a fight. This core of militant activists was supported by a larger community that engaged in nonviolent organizing. There were people who showed up as medics, and others who brought food and water. Some activists would show up with bubble-wrap screens to block the cameras of livestreaming right-wingers. Others came with musical instruments, dressed as bananas or clowns to distract attention and drown out right-wing speakers on megaphones.

Portland protest moments constantly went viral, but one fact that never quite made it outside the local media bubble was how many anti-fascists were older — parents, even grandparents. Several of my sources among the anti-fascists were former Republicans, frightened of what people like Biggs and Gibson might represent. In interview after interview people expressed variants of the same fear: They won't stop in Portland.

They didn't. Biggs was indicted for seditious conspiracy earlier this year, along with four other Proud Boys, for his role in the Jan. 6 insurrection. Three out of five of the Proud Boys charged with sedition had attended multiple Portland protests and rallies. Before they tried to overturn a democratic election, they were fighting in downtown Portland next to Gibson.

Portland was the first wave, the test case. Oregon fascists even breached the state Capitol building in Salem roughly two weeks before Jan. 6. The escalating attacks on school boards and LGBTQ events, the integration of Proud Boys into local parties in multiple states and the growing "political marriage" between the Republican Party and militias mean it's an open question as to whether individuals like Biggs will go down as simple criminals or harbingers of future doom. But as more cities experience the violence and threats Portland lived with for years, it's worth asking why it stopped happening there.

Veteran anti-fascist activists are extremely cagey with the media. You don't have to look far to find cases of them attacking cameras and sometimes the people with the cameras. Many anti-fascists are also cagey with each other, and the anti-fascist community in Portland has more schisms and divisions than is possible to describe here. But if you get any of the folks who've been around a while to open up and answer when the tide turned, they'll say Aug. 22, 2020.

Portland's response to the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 received extensive news coverage. There were more than 100 consecutive nights of protest, most of which ended with the use of tear gas and horrific police violence. Again, the right grew obsessed with Portland. Trump took to constantly threatening anti-fascist protesters. Federal agents were called in. I can remember a moment during the second night of the protests, looking across the street and seeing two men in body armor, with rifles and American flag gaiters covering their faces, standing outside a local business.

Yet through most of it, groups like Patriot Prayer and the Proud Boys stayed away. I think they were temporarily awed by the sheer weight of public support behind the first protests.

In time, the conservative media ironed out their angle. Portland's racial justice protesters were dangerous anarchists and domestic terrorists who had hijacked legitimate protests, the argument went. Many of the most dedicated protesters were, in fact, anarchists. They responded joyfully when Trump declared Portland a "beehive of terrorism." Bee-themed costumes and shields filled the streets the next night.

The protests got smaller and smaller over time and, by August, local far-right organizers decided it was safe to move in.

It had been a long, frustrating summer for them, cooped up inside and watching the left march through the streets. Everyone from the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer to the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters and active neo-Nazis rallied their people to action. Most attendees showed up for the “Trump 2020 Cruise Rally,” but there was also a “No Marxism in America Rally” at the same place and time. As we would see again on Jan. 6, the division between these groups was academic at this point.

Hundreds of right-wing street fighters showed up bright and early on Aug. 22, armed with clubs, knives, firearms, hundreds of cans of mace and paintball guns loaded with frozen paintballs. Portland anti-fascists were initially caught off guard by the size of the rally. When I arrived on scene, they were badly outnumbered. But within two hours, more than 1,000 anti-fascists had flooded the square. A summer fighting the police and federal agents had given Portland a sizable base of people who were used to violence and had access to good defensive gear.

Right-wing brawlers had spent years using mace as an offensive weapon. Once they were outnumbered and the fight turned against them, they started spraying madly in all directions around them. Few had thought to bring gas masks, which most anti-fascists had. After blinding themselves with mace, they broke and ran. My strongest memory of that day is a crowd of terrified right-wing activists, waving Gadsden flags, running to the nearby IRS building to beg federal agents for protection.

The police didn’t show up to the 1,000-person street fight taking place at their front door. That was fine with most people: In retrospect, the day had a sense of inevitability. We had all spent the past few years bracing for impact. Now it had come, and we had won the fight.

It’s hard for me not to use “we” at this point. My hand was broken that day by a far-right protester holding a baton and a shield with “God Bless America” painted on it. Journalistic detachment is all well and good but see how far it gets you with the crowd who built gallows on the Capitol lawn.

The very next week, the right came through in larger numbers. A caravan of thousands of cars locked down the streets. Right-wing demonstrators shot at activists and random passersby with paintball guns, carried real guns and sprayed mace as their cars gridlocked downtown. And, just as things seemed to ebb, anti-fascist Michael Reinoehl shot and killed Patriot Prayer member Aaron Danielson.

When you boil out everything but the facts, the story is pretty simple. Danielson and Chandler Pappas (currently doing time for assaulting multiple police officers at an attack on the Oregon Capitol) were both armed with mace and batons and carried loaded handguns on their hips. Reinoehl was carrying a concealed handgun. The shooting occurred outside a downtown parking garage that was a regular scene of street fights. Reinoehl, who claimed self-defense, drew and fired a concealed handgun, killing Danielson. He then fled the scene.

The shooting sent shockwaves through the Portland protest community. Everyone was certain reprisals were coming. And they came: Trump himself bragged about having federal marshals kill Reinoehl a week later. But despite widely publicized outrage by his fellow brawlers, there was no further right-wing counterattack in Portland that year.

This was not for lack of effort.

With the national spotlight back on Portland, the Proud Boys’ chairperson, Enrique Tarrio, ever the media junkie, put out the call for every Proud Boy he could gather. The event, which was to be held at Delta Park, was billed as revenge for Aug. 22 and the killing of Danielson. There

were credible fears that it might be a bloodbath. Large numbers of people on both sides would be carrying firearms.

And then, for the first time since 2017, the state of Oregon intervened.

This may have had something to do with the fact that a local anti-fascist collective leaked chats related to planning for this event from a group called Patriot Coalition. This group included a number of Proud Boys and people who had fought alongside them in various rallies. The leaked chats included threats to attack Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler and kidnap Oregon Gov. Kate Brown. For the first time in four years of violence, Brown declared a state of emergency over what she called a “white supremacist” rally. Police surrounded the Proud Boys event, arresting several.

By all accounts this was an extremely mild “crackdown,” but it occurred alongside a whole raft of felony charges for Alan Swinney, a right-wing demonstrator who had shot bystanders in the face with paintballs and menaced a crowd with a firearm on Aug. 22. Prior to this, Portland police had often colluded with the far right, even allowing a member of the Oath Keepers militia to assist with an arrest. In 2018, they nearly killed an anti-fascist demonstrator by hitting him in the back of the head with a tear gas grenade.

The long, friendly relationship between police and the far right allowed the fascist street movement to establish itself in Portland. But it also meant that when the police finally turned on them, it came as a titanic shock. The fact that right-wing brawlers were being charged with felonies made Portland a less desirable place to rally. It is, however, worth noting that police and local governments intervened against members of the far right only when elected leaders were threatened.

Exactly one year later, the Proud Boys came back again. Wheeler asked the city to “choose love” ahead of the anniversary rally planned by the Proud Boys and their allies. Portlanders chose to strap on their body armor, load fire extinguishers with paint and head into battle one more time. Again, about 1,000 people rallied to support the anti-fascist cause downtown.

Traditionally, the rallies in which the right has been outnumbered have involved the least violence. They tend to attack only if they think they have an advantage. So at the last minute, the Proud Boys changed the location of their rally from the heart of downtown to an abandoned Kmart in North Portland.

Most anti-fascists remained downtown. But a few traveled to Kmart, where a vicious street fight ensued. There was no clear victory in the resulting brawl. But the violence that day, particularly the destruction of two vehicles by far-right fighters, was well documented. And after being criticized for their “hands-off” approach on the day of the rally, Oregon law enforcement again dropped a range of felony charges on the most prominent attendees.

While the Proud Boys refused to go downtown, one individual with a handgun opened fire on left-wing protesters. They shot back, and the shooter fled before being intercepted by police. Since the killing of Danielson, gunfire has been a regular feature of protests in the Pacific Northwest.

But at the same time, the far right has been notably reluctant recently to attack the Rose City. There have been rallies nearby, in Olympia, Washington, and in Oregon City and Salem. But no meaningful right-wing protest has taken over downtown Portland in over a year. On the second anniversary, nothing happened.

There’s one other data point here. It’s horrible and tragic, but it’s crucial if you want to understand why the right wing’s street movement is scared to act in this city.

In 2018, Patrick Kimmons, a Black Portlander, was shot in the back nine times while fleeing from the Portland Police. Ever since, his mother has hosted near-weekly justice marches in North Portland. Because of their consistency, the events have developed their own protest culture; medics show up each week, “corkers” handle traffic safety, and armed security open-carry firearms in compliance with state laws.

This made them a target for far-right provocateur Andy Ngo, who highlighted the group regularly in his tweets. One of his followers, Benjamin Smith, lived nearby. An avowed fan of Kyle Rittenhouse (who was found not guilty of homicide in 2021 after fatally shooting two men during protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin), Smith verbally accosted and then opened fire on several unarmed people doing traffic security for the justice march. June Knightly, 60, known as T-Rex in the Normandale protest community, died from Smith’s gunfire. Four other protesters were injured. One woman is still paralyzed from the neck down.

Before Smith could reload his .45-caliber handgun, an activist armed with a semi-automatic weapon stopped him by shooting him twice in the hip. It was, and remains, a searing and traumatic night for the entire Portland protest community. Few people I know can talk about it without crying.

But it was also part of a pattern of effective, forceful resistance. The story the right took from Normandale was not easy to propagandize. One of their own had committed murder, and he had been shot by a leftist using the same Second Amendment they had rallied to support. After the 2017 train murders by Christian, Gibson had hosted a “free speech rally.” In 2022, neither Gibson nor anyone else was willing to rally in Portland.

Historically, fascists win when they decide to go for it, to throttle democracies, believing that no one is organized enough to fight them. They take advantage of the fact that most people fear confrontation and that the police tend to tolerate their activism. In Portland, people stood up and opted to call their bluff.

Diligent research, nonviolent organizing and the eventual acquiescence of the state and federal government to enforce the law against right-wing agitators were all factors in the success we see now. But none of it would have happened if an awful lot of people hadn’t shown up, for five years straight, ready to fight.

If the rest of America wants to get through the present crisis, they might learn something from that.

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