

Plainclothes NYC police grab protester and throw her into unmarked car

By Niles Niemuth
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Shock and anger quickly spread online Tuesday as video posted on social media showed a group of armed men in street clothes snatching a young protester off the street and trundling her into an unmarked van during a peaceful demonstration against police violence in New York City.

While the men refused to identify themselves at the scene of the kidnapping, the New York Police Department (NYPD) later identified them as members of the police force's plainclothes Warrant Squad.

Outrage over Tuesday's incident was compounded by its similarity to the snatch and grab detentions carried out in recent weeks by federal paramilitary police in Portland, Oregon. In that city, a tactical wing of Customs and Border Protection known as BORTAC, sent in by President Trump to crack down on protests near the federal courthouse, has been seizing protesters, throwing them into unmarked vans and taking them to secret locations where they are subject to questioning for hours on end. The element of terror and intimidation is enhanced by the fact that the victims do not know who has picked them up or where they are being held.

All such actions violate the US Constitution's First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and assembly and its Fourth Amendment ban on arbitrary searches or seizures. They also run counter to the requirement that arrests be based on probable cause.

The NYPD played down the unconstitutional arrest, claiming the Warrant Squad routinely uses "unmarked vehicles to effectively locate wanted suspects." But it is clear that the abduction of 18-year-old Nikki Stone was intended to send a signal to demonstrators, as well as the Trump administration, that the New York police are more than capable of cracking down on protests without direct federal intervention.

Trump has repeatedly threatened to deploy federal forces to Democratic-controlled cities throughout the country, including New York, to suppress demonstrations that have continued since the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police on May 25. There have been reports of federal police in Detroit and other cities.

Nikki Stone is a homeless youth who has been participating in protests throughout the city. The authorities have justified her chilling arrest—which bystanders took to be a kidnapping—with allegations of vandalism, including spray painting the lenses of police cameras around City Hall Park. She was released from police custody early Wednesday and charged with several counts of graffiti painting and criminal mischief.

The city's Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, responded to the arrest by upholding the "right" of non-uniformed, unidentified NYPD officers to grab peaceful protesters off the street, while mildly criticizing the timing of the arrest.

"This is not Portland," he said. "I want to emphasize what you see on that video are NYPD officers, federal agencies are not involved! I think it was the wrong time and place to effectuate that arrest. ... I want to affirm very clearly, no one is allowed to damage police property. ... If you damage property it will lead to consequences."

As with Trump's attempted coup on June 1, the Democratic Party has downplayed the authoritarian and fascistic character of Trump's deployment of paramilitary federal forces, dismissing it as an electoral ploy to raise flagging poll numbers. At the same time they argue that they are capable of suppressing protests in the cities they control with heavily armed local police, bolstered when necessary by National Guard

troops under the command of state governors.

Former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate, gave a speech Tuesday in which he endorsed the prosecution of “anarchists and arsonists” and insisted that he would be better equipped to suppress popular anger by coordinating with local police forces. The Democrats have made clear that they are willing to collaborate with the Trump administration in suppressing protests as long as they retain a measure of control.

“This isn’t about law and order,” Biden said of Trump’s crackdown, “it’s about a political strategy to revive a failing campaign. Every instinct Trump has is to add fuel to the fire. That’s the last thing, the last thing we need. We need leadership to calm the water and lower the temperature. That’s how we will restore peace in the streets.”

On Wednesday, Oregon’s Democratic governor, Kate Brown, announced via Twitter that an agreement had been reached in negotiations with the White House for the Oregon State Police to take over policing the area around the federal court house.

Federal police, including Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers, are set to begin a “phased withdrawal” from the city, while other agents from the Department of Homeland Security will remain inside the courthouse. CBP forces deployed last week to Seattle, Washington will also leave that city, following lobbying by Democratic Mayor Jenny Durkan and Governor Jay Inslee, also a Democrat.

“State and local law enforcement will begin securing properties and streets, especially those surrounding federal properties that have been under nightly attack for the past two months,” Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf said in a statement announcing the agreement. “Oregon State Police will coordinate with Federal Protective Service (FPS) officers to ensure all federal facilities remain protected and secure.”

Wolf added, “President Trump has also made it clear that this Administration is ready and willing to partner with state and local law enforcement to protect every American—and you see that commitment in Portland with this plan. The Department and this Administration will also continue to fulfill its solemn obligation to uphold federal law across the country.”

While the Trump administration appears to have backed off for now on the deployment of federal forces against protesters in Portland and Seattle, the Justice Department is moving forward with an expansion of Operation Legend, an “anti-violence” initiative involving the deployment of nearly 100 officers from the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Agency and other federal police agencies to Detroit, Cleveland and Milwaukee. Hundreds of agents have already been welcomed by Democratic mayors in Kansas City, Chicago and Albuquerque, with the assurance that the agents will aid in the arrest of those deemed “chronic violent criminals” by Attorney General William Barr.

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