

PERSPECTIVE



JOHN LOCHER/AP

Police walk through tear gas May 30 in Las Vegas. Three Nevada men with ties to a loose movement of right-wing extremists have been arrested on terror charges.

While Trump blames antifa, a menacing far-right 'boogaloo' movement rises



CLARENCE PAGE

In response to nationwide protests over the shameful death of George Floyd, President Donald Trump promises to go after antifa — as soon as he figures out what it is.

No, that's not exactly what the president announced. You have to read between the lines of his tweets, and not too deeply at that.

"The United States of America will be designating ANTIFA as a Terrorist Organization," Trump tweeted May 31, as hundreds of protesters gathered outside the White House gates.

More such statements were made by the president and supported by Attorney General William Barr. "The violence instigated and carried out by antifa and other similar groups in connection with the rioting is domestic terrorism," Barr said at the end of his statement on riots, "and will be treated accordingly."

On Wednesday, Arkansas Republican Sen. Tom Cotton went a step further in a New York Times op-ed, calling for "an overwhelming show of force" to subdue looters, whom he identified as "cadres of left-wing radicals like antifa infiltrating protest marches."

Curiously, that statement came as police in Washington and across the country were regaining control of their streets without further escalation in force. Furthermore, like Trump and Barr, Cotton makes no mention of any group, right- or left-wing, except antifa.

That's a lot to load on an "organization" that's not really an organization. Antifa, short for "anti-fascist," is an ideology and movement that rose in prominence in response to Trump's election.

Like Black Lives Matter, it's intentionally unorganized in a "leaderless resistance" fashion, which leaves both organizations vulnerable to whatever charge people want to lay on them.

Unfortunately, that means Trump, pro-Trump media and other conservatives can use both of those organizations as scapegoats for their anti-terrorist efforts and take public focus away from mostly right-wing groups that really have been linked to real terrorism.

Fox News has mentioned antifa almost five times more often than

CNN has since May 25 and three times as often as MSNBC, according to a Washington Post examination of internet archive data.

The result of this sort of pick-your-own-reality marketplace of news is a lot of myths, half-truths and confusion. Trump has long been known to spread paranoid theories and lies via speech and tweet, but his latest antifa crusade is running headlong into competing conspiracy theories from other sources, known and unknown.

Amid today's social network explosion, a low-level media war has helped inflame antifa fears, particularly in the outer-suburban and rural reaches of Trump Country, where negative thoughts about city life abound.

One breathtaking example came this past week after fake news on a Facebook page for retired police announced a coming invasion of Idaho by "ANTIFA agitators." Scores of residents in Coeur d'Alene and other towns took to the streets with rifles to stand guard. The information about an invasion was not true.

But my biggest complaint about Team Trump's obsession with left-wing groups is the distraction from more clear and present dangers on the far right.

In midweek, for example, three self-proclaimed members of the far-right "boogaloo" movement, which purportedly dreams of a new racial civil war, were held on domestic terrorism charges in Nevada after federal prosecutors accused them of trying to spark violence during police brutality protests in Las Vegas.

According to the filing, the three former servicemen, who were charged with conspiracy to damage and destroy by using fire and explosives, had discussed "causing an incident to incite chaos and possibly a riot" in response to George Floyd's death.

Yet an FBI task force memo leaked to The Nation magazine found "no intelligence indicating antifa involvement/presence" in the protests that broke out May 31 around the nation's capital.

I don't bring this up to suggest that the far left never does anything wrong. I only call for equal protection under the law for those of us who feel no less threatened by the far right.

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Longing for The Clearing, and an escape from the turmoil

BY MARGARET HAWKINS

On a beautiful sunny day in Chicago, just as quarantine restrictions were being lifted across the state, we again were asked to stay home for safety's sake, but for new reasons. Riots were breaking out across the city, and the country. Peaceful protests in response to the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer had turned violent.

Mayor Lori Lightfoot pleaded for order, explaining, with barely tamped down anger, that "you don't come to a peaceful protest with a bowling ball." Our president took a different tone: "when the looting starts, the shooting starts." Floyd's family planned a funeral. The pandemic raged on. Cities burned, again.

I was feeling sorry for myself for more personal, and privileged, reasons. That morning I should have been on the road, driving to Ellison Bay, Wisconsin, to teach a workshop at The Clearing Folk School, a place as different from a rioting city as you can get. I do this every summer, but this year classes were canceled. The Clearing was still on lockdown.

The Clearing, in case you



THE CLEARING FOLK SCHOOL

Classes in fine arts and skilled crafts are part of the roster of options at The Clearing Folk School, near the tip of Wisconsin's Door Peninsula.

haven't heard of it — and why should you have since its very mission is to be a place apart from the world — was founded in 1935 by Danish-born, Chicago-based landscape architect Jens Jensen, at the age of 75. Built on 128 acres of protected land on a bluff overlooking Green Bay, it's based on the idea that everyone needs nature and art and a place to clear

their minds, hence the name. Grades and evaluation are not allowed. Phones are discouraged. There are no TVs. It's the kind of place that attracts retired Midwesterners, though people of all ages and origins come. It's sedate and rustic; I'm sure some would find it boring.

Possibly, the people happiest there have had enough excite-

ment in life and need a respite. The students in my memoir class write about a range of human experience that belies assumptions about homey Midwesternness, though not everyone goes there to wrestle with their past. Some go to paint, to watch birds. To learn how to forage for edible plants and how to use a blacksmith's forge. They go for encouragement, recovery, community, the food.

Being there is a temporary escape from the harshness of the world, an escape that now seems especially desirable. Though there's no escaping it, really. Eventually, you have to go home. And the source of it was always inside you anyway.

The thing about The Clearing is that all the bad human stuff looks different in the woods. You can stand back from it a little.

In the woods, among quiet people occupied by drawing and peering through binoculars and worrying about ticks, there are other things than human stupidity and cruelty, not instead of but alongside of. There are wildflowers, old cedars clinging to bluffs that were formed by glaciers hundreds of millions of years ago,

fox snakes sunning themselves on the road, mostly safe from traffic because there's so little of it.

Every time I go I hope that being there, as a student or a teacher, is not just running away, that it adds something good to the world, if only by dialing down conflict and noise an infinitesimal percent of one degree and replacing it with reflection. Or just silence. I know it's a drop in the ocean. There's no way to scale up a place like this.

Recently I interviewed artist Deke Weaver about his "Unreliable Bestiary," a series of performances dedicated to understanding our connections with endangered animals and habitats. He said he hoped that people wouldn't misunderstand his work and think he didn't care about humans. I hope so, too, because he does, and that would be a false and reductive distinction. Our lives and our problems are all connected, and to enter that interwoven sphere at any point for good or ill is to affect all of it for good or ill. Nature makes us see that. Art can too.

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