

United States: Portland's MAX Murders, the Alt-Right, and the Left's Response

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Portland, Oregon became national news, following the May 26 murders on the MAX (the city's light rail system). The killer, Jeremy Christian, slashed the necks of three white men (one survived) who tried to end his threatening tirade against two black teenage girls, one wearing a hijab.

Contents

- [Portland Police: A Dark \(...\)](#)
- [The People Respond](#)
- [Who Is Jeremy Christian?](#)
- [Rising Tide of White Supremacy](#)
- [Ties between the Alt-Right and](#)
- [Oregon's White Nationalist](#)
- [A Law and Order Response](#)
- [The Left Organizes](#)

Shortly after he boarded the train, Christian, who was shirtless and drinking from a wine bag, began spewing racist and Islamophobic slurs. The two young women moved from their seats to stand near the train doors so they could exit at the next station. Micah Fletcher, sitting nearby, rose to confront Christian who shoved him. Taliesin Myrddin Namkai-Meche came to Fletcher's aid. At that moment, Christian pulled a knife from his pocket and attacked the two men. A third man, Ricky John Best leapt to their defense and was also stabbed. The train pulled into the next station and Christian left, followed by two riders who told the police of his location. Best died at the scene and Namkai-Meche at the hospital. A fourth man, Marcus Knipe, came to Fletcher's aid, staunching the wound and helping him to calm down to reduce blood loss. Following an operation that included removing jaw bone fragments from his throat, Fletcher survived.

The police arrived and surrounded Christian who was ranting and drinking on a street corner. They waited behind their cars, talking him down until they were able to take him into custody. The two young women left the train at the station and remained unidentified until the next day, when one of them, Destinee Mangum, publicly thanked the heroes who had defended her. The Muslim woman and her family are understandably very reluctant go public, given the string of attacks on Muslim individuals and mosques that have taken place since Trump's election, not to mention the nationally coordinated June 10 [rallies against Sharia Law](#) scheduled for cities across the US, including Portland. (Organizers subsequently cancelled the Portland event.)

The contrast between the way the police handled Christian, a white man holding a 4 inch knife after just assaulting three people, and their trigger-happy responses toward Black suspects, two of three men shot by police just since the beginning of 2017, reveals much about racism in the Portland police force.

Portland Police: A Dark History

On May 10, Transit Police shot and killed Terrell Johnson, a Black man with a box cutter, [as he fled across the MAX tracks](#) and non-fatally shot a suicidal white man with two replica guns. In February, 17 year old Quanice Hayes, on his knees after being apprehended as a robbery suspect, was [gunned down and killed](#) by officer Andrew Hearst. Activists have dubbed Hearst a “serial killer”—in 2013 he fatally shot a mentally ill man who charged officers with a broken phone—two killings in the course of a seven year career. He has been cleared in both killings and remains on the force.

Portland’s Black community has long struggled with a police force that harbors white supremacists. In 1981, two officers tossed [four dead opossums](#) in front of the Burger Barn, a black-owned restaurant in Northeast Portland. They were fired, sparking an angry counter-demonstration as hundreds of cops marched on City Hall. An arbitrator reinstated them, reducing their penalty to a 30 day suspension.

Four years later, in 1985, and in an eerie precursor of the killing of Eric Garner, Lloyd “Tony” Stevenson died after Officer Gary Barbour subdued him with [a choke hold](#) in a parking lot, following an altercation. Barbour refused to give Stevenson CPR and he died later at the hospital.

After the community mobilized in protest, the Police Chief suspended use of what was then called a ‘sleeper hold’ and set up an advisory committee to review the Police Bureau’s use of all forms of force. In opposition to the Chief, two officers created T-shirts with the slogan, “Don’t Choke ‘Em, Smoke ‘Em” and sold at least 30 at the bureau’s East Precinct. Mayor Bud Clark immediately fired the two officers, but both were later reinstated by an arbitrator. A grand jury refused to indict Officer Barbour.

Officer Mark Kruger, known in the Portland anti-war movement for his brutality at demonstrations, was also [a Nazi admirer](#). Sometime between 1999 and 2001 he nailed “memorial plaques” of five Nazi soldiers to a tree in Rocky Butte Park as a shrine he called “Ehrenbaum” or “Honor Tree.” Faced by federal lawsuits alleging excessive force during downtown anti-war protests, he took down the plaques which were sequestered in the office of the City Attorney who vigorously fought against producing them. They were finally found by a police internal affairs investigator. Kruger remains on the police force.

The People Respond

A spontaneous outpouring of sorrow and support for the survivors and for the families of the murdered men brought more than a thousand people to gather the following day at the MAX station which has been turned into an informal memorial, honoring the heroism of the three men and filled with flowers, candles, and testimonials such as “you are heroes for fighting against hate,” “love conquers hate,” and “black lives matter.”

On line fundraising campaigns have been established: Two for the families of the heroes: one organized by [the Muslim Education Trust](#) and the other organized by a local restaurateur. In addition there are campaigns to help the [surviving hero](#) with medical costs and a campaign for the [two young women](#).

Who Is Jeremy Christian?

Many of the news headlines about the murders initially identified Christian as a “neo-Nazi” based on his participation in an April 29 “Free Speech” rally and march organized by the pro-Trump group, Patriots Prayer. Christian came to the event draped in an American flag and carrying a baseball bat, which the police took from him. Screaming “sig heil,” “Die Muslims!” and giving the Nazi salute, he was a disruptive presence and a political embarrassment to the Patriots Prayer organizers who deny any connection to neo-Nazis and other white supremacist groups, although observers of their events have identified [known members](#) of right-wing militia and white nationalist groups among the participants. Jake Von Ott, local coordinator for the neo-Nazi group, Identity Evropa, went out of his way to [shake Christian’s hand](#). Others attempted unsuccessfully to force Christian out of the rally and march. Once Christian’s participation in the Patriots Prayer event came to light, they moved to defend themselves from association with him, pointing out that he was a fervent supporter of Bernie Sanders.

They neglected to also point out that he proclaimed, addressing himself to his imaginary audience on Facebook, that he would do as he had threatened: if the Democrats nominated Hilary, he would punish them by voting for Trump. Christian’s Facebook posts reveal political incoherence, a grandiose self image, and an increasing pivot toward the white supremacist themes of the Trump campaign and presidency. According to friends, it was during the campaign that Christian moved from being an apolitical, “anarcho-nihilist” fan of metal bands to adopting anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, racist ideas, including the dream of a white nation in “Cascadia.” And he seems to have become increasingly unstable. Following his arrest, Christian was [identified](#) as the individual who two days before threw a plastic bottle at a Black woman waiting at a MAX station (she pepper-sprayed him and he fled) and a day before was videotaped by a MAX rider as he ranted at the driver of the train and talked about stabbing people. (He had left the train by the time police arrived.)

Rising Tide of White Supremacy

Although the Portland murders got the most press, the Memorial Day weekend saw several incidents of racially motivated assaults. At a Washington state campground, a white man drove his truck onto a campsite where a group of ten or so, including citizens of the Quinalt nation, were celebrating a birthday. He began doing “doughnuts” and when two of the Quinalt campers tried to make him stop, [he ran them over](#), while screaming racial slurs and war whoops. James “Jimmy” Kramer, was killed and Harvey Anderson, injured in the rampage.

In Clearlake, California, a white man yelling racial slurs [used a machete](#) to seriously injure a Black neighbor in the parking lot of their apartment complex.

These are part of a much broader pattern of increasing hate crimes across the US and in the Portland metro area, which, according to the Mayor, has led all major metropolitan areas in reported hate crimes since Trump’s campaign and election.

The home of an Iranian refugee was [vandalized](#), painted with racist graffiti and death threats. Two banners claiming, “[Jews Did 911](#)” appeared recently on a freeway overpass. And an identified member of a white supremacist prison gang, European Kindred, has been charged with a hate crime and held without bail after he [ran down and killed](#)

Ties between the Alt-Right and the Republican Party

The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that the radical right and hate groups were [more successful in entering the mainstream](#) in 2016 than over the last half century. This is certainly true in Portland. Pro-Trump organizations that arose during the campaign or since his inauguration closely cooperate with Republican politicians while creating a protective cover for both traditional and new white supremacist organizations.

Patriot Prayer, based in Vancouver, WA, has been responsible for six different pro-Trump “free-speech” rallies and marches so far this year. Although Joey Gibson, leader of the group, denies connection to white supremacist organizations or politics, these rallies and marches have included: [Proud Boys](#), who name themselves “a fraternal organization of Western Chauvinists who will no longer apologize for creating the modern world,” [Identity Evropa](#), which emerged from the National Youth Front, the youth wing of the Neo-Nazi American Freedom Party, [Steven Shane Howard](#), a Klan leader from Mississippi, [Tim “Baked Alaska” Gionet](#) known for anti-Semitic remarks and Nazi salutes and armed militia groups, [The Oath Keepers and Oregon III%](#). Patriot Prayer’s “free speech” rally held in downtown Portland June 4, also featured alt right celebrities from California.

[Kyle “Based Stickman” Chapman](#) attacked a Berkeley protestor with a large stick while wearing a bizarre outfit including baseball batting helmet, gas mask, shin guards and a shield made from a table top. Charged with assault, he was bailed out using some of the \$50,000 for his legal defense raised by WeSearchr, a far-right crowdfunding site. [Pat “Based Trojan” Washington](#) became an on-line celebrity after appearing at a Berkeley rally “bare-chested and wearing a Trojan helmet—more than enough to tickle the alt-right’s “[Larp-y](#)” sensibilities.”

James Buchal, Chairman of the Multnomah County Republican Party (the county within which Portland is located) joined these speakers on the stage where he urged the crowd to become members of the Party. Previously he had announced that because Republicans were under assault by anti-Trump forces attempting to deny their free speech rights, the party was considering asking [the Oath Keepers and Oregon III%](#) to provide security.

In April, John Beavers, a member of Warriors for Freedom LLC (an organization tied to Patriot Prayer) who lives in Washington state had his nose broken in one of the Berkeley altercations. Three days after that event, he was presented with a framed replica of a Trump portrait by a [Washington State Republican party campaign operative](#) whose father is a close ally of Trump. Last January, Joseph Rice, the founder of Josephine County Oath Keepers, and Tim Harris, a leader in Oregon III%, announced [they would run](#) for Chair and Vice Chair of the Oregon Republican Party.

Oregon’s White Nationalist History

The current flourishing of the Alt-Right in the city and the state is the most recent of several waves of White Nationalism in Oregon. In 1857, when a constitution was written in anticipation of statehood, an [exclusion clause](#) was inserted, prohibiting new in-migration of African Americans, as well as making illegal their ownership of real estate and entering into contracts. They were also denied the right to sue in court.

In the 1920’s the Klu Klux Klan was very active in the state and in the city. Holding large public meetings at Portland’s Civic Auditorium, hooded parades on foot and in cars, and burning crosses at Mt. Tabor and Mt. Scott parks, the Klan inducted as many as 1100 members at a time. Klan-backed candidates from Portland were elected to the State Senate and the Multnomah County Commission.

Although the Klan had diminished by the 1930's, Jim Crow laws and practices remained [firmly in place](#) into the 1960's. Portland restaurants displayed "whites only" signs, black people weren't allowed in the city's swimming pools, and the local skating rink set aside a day for black people.

The 1980's and 1990's saw another wave of white nationalist organizing with the rise of skinhead gangs in the city. In 1988, three members of the East Side White Pride skinhead group, affiliated with the White Aryan Resistance, [beat to death](#), Mulugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian college student. In a controversial case, the Southern Poverty Law Center brought a successful civil action against the White Aryan Resistance and the group's leaders, Tom Metzger and his son John, arguing that they incited the murder.

With the rise of the Silicon Forest and related economic expansion, the Portland metro area has grown rapidly over the last two decades, including as a home for refugees, immigrants, and the hip urbanites of the TV show, Portlandia. But beyond the urban core, as in the rustbelt areas of the US, prosperity has by-passed the white working class men whose access to living wage jobs disappeared with the demise of the logging, wood products, fishing and light manufacturing industries. And, as elsewhere, they have been attracted to the alt-right's assertion of their victimization and the righteousness of their struggle to restore patriarchal masculinity and white dominance.

In the 1980's and 1990's, the Republican Party in Oregon avoided association with groups like the White Aryan Resistance. In those decades, the Party was building its base through Christian fundamentalist organizations, like the Oregon Citizens Alliance, that organized Republican voters in opposition to abortion and homosexuality. Both those battles have now been substantially lost in this state. As an alternative, the Party has pivoted toward the new wave of white nationalism.

A Law and Order Response

In the aftermath of the MAX murders, the Mayor and Tri-Met, the transit authority, sounded the "law and order" alarm. Just days prior to the murders, the Tri-Met Board, at the behest of Tri-Met director, Neil Macfarlane, had approved spending \$11 Million for a Transit Police station despite strenuous opposition from both the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757 and Opal: Environmental Justice Oregon, which organizes low-income transit riders. The MAX murders provided a rationale for Macfarlane to propose spending even more money to expand the number of armed police officers on the trains. Both ATU 757 and OPAL issued [statements](#) condemning [this response](#), arguing that further militarization of the Transit system was ineffective and costly. They proposed instead a community-defined, transit ambassador model which de-escalates crises, protects safety without deadly weapons, and provides resources for riders in need.

Mayor Ted Wheeler appealed to Patriot Prayer to cancel their pro-Trump "free speech" rally, scheduled to take place the weekend after Memorial Day. When they refused, Wheeler wrote a letter to the federal government requesting that they rescind the permit that had been issued for the rally which would take place in Terry Schunk Plaza across the street from the downtown federal building. He argued that his responsibility for civic order and respect for a grieving city made this request necessary. The ACLU responded with a letter criticizing the Mayor for what was clearly an intrusion on the right of free speech. This sparked an interesting debate across social media between those who applauded the Mayor's move to stifle "hate speech" and those, many socialists and anarchists, who argued that we had to rely on our own power of mobilization and should never accept state suppression of speech.

The Left Organizes

Forced to accept that the pro-Trump event would proceed and that a mobilization in opposition would also take place, the Mayor, along with the Department of Homeland Security, organized a massive police presence for the day of the rallies.

Rose City Antifa and allied organizations, had already organized a “No Nazis on our Streets Rally,” in Chapman Square just north of the Plaza.

A hastily-formed, fairly broad coalition of 70 groups, organized a rally, “Portland Stands United Against Hate,” that would take place in front of City Hall across the street from the Plaza to the west.

Additionally, a number of rank and file trade unionists who had been organizing within their locals to pass [resolutions](#) committing their unions to challenge “hate groups,” called for a “Labor Against Fascism” rally on the steps of the federal building, just to the east of the Plaza.

The opposition rallies were scheduled to begin at 12:30 pm and the pro-Trump rally at 2:00. By the time the Trump attendees began arriving, there were large crowds surrounding the Plaza. It was estimated that with the three different rallies combined, we outnumbered them by something like eight or ten to one—with [an estimated](#) 2,000 people chanting and beating drums while 200 to 300 rallied for Trump.

Portland Police and DHS officers in full riot gear lined the streets around the Plaza to keep our side and their side separate.

The day ended, predictably, with [the police using](#) flash-bang grenades, pepper spray, and rubber bullets against the Antifa protestors gathered in Chapman Square. At some point the Police Bureau began [tweeting accusations](#) that demonstrators were taking bricks from a restroom structure and throwing them at the police (later proved to be entirely false) and lobbing balloons filled with a foul-smelling substance. This was no doubt to establish “probable cause” for later arrests. About a half-hour before the pro-Trump rally was scheduled to end, the police moved into the Square to push people further north, away from the Plaza. Resistance ensued. About 200 of the people who were pushed out of the Square, including reporters and photographers, marched down the street for a few blocks until they were [kettled by police](#) who allowed them to leave in groups of three after their ID’s were recorded. Ultimately the police made 14 arrests.

Despite this depressingly familiar police over-reaction, the mobilization was an outstanding success. Although many people were afraid to come down to the rallies, we nonetheless organized a very credible and visual opposition that, if it did not demoralize the alt-right (who probably considered us all fake news), certainly moralized our forces.

Johanna Brenner, June 9, 2017

P.S.

* Against the Current:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/5013>