

JEFF GOLDEN
STATE SENATOR
DISTRICT 3



OREGON STATE SENATE

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We're a fractured people. In America, in Oregon, in many Oregon communities, our arguments have become so toxic that it's hard to see a path forward. It's exhausting. We look for chances to come together, moments when we can take a breath and start to hear each other more clearly.

We might have a moment like that now. Could Oregonians—Trump, Biden, Sanders and Limbaugh fans, libertarians and full-on-socialists, people with skin of every human color—stand together for kicking paramilitary riot troops out of our biggest city?

I'm not talking about cross-the-board agreement on racism in America or whether to join Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. That won't happen in our lifetimes. I'm asking if we have it in us to leave ideology at the door, look clearly at what's actually happened in downtown Portland, and come together to call it out as a mortal threat to rights that make us proud to live in this country. In this heyday of alternative facts, I know that "looking clearly at what's actually happened" is a heavy lift, but let's give it a shot.

After some fifty consecutive nights of organized protests, the President declared Portland a "city under siege" that needs militarized force to restore order and protect federal property. Any fair-minded scan of the past month's news coverage tells a different story. What we've had is a steady pattern of peaceful demonstration punctuated by outlying moments of vandalism, arson or theft, with virtually no injury to people that wasn't instigated by riot police. Some of these property crimes are ignited by people who think they're striking out against racism. Some are the calculated work of provocateurs, hardcore opponents of BLM trying to discredit the movement with fiery images of chaos. Amidst all kinds of claims about which side's responsible for what damage, nobody knows for sure.

It's easy to get lost in the thicket of these arguments. What I hold as clear fact is that the paramilitary campaign in Portland is meant much less to protect federal property, which stands safe and sound under the watch of well-equipped local police, than to showcase the President's recent command to state and city authorities to "dominate the streets."

That phrase didn't bother everyone. I receive emails—mostly form letters, a few individually written—deeply worried about civil unrest in Portland. They blame BLM or Antifa or nameless anarchists for it, want it crushed and don't care who does the crushing. In the face of the violence, the high-octane footage of looting and cars aflame, they're unimpressed with First Amendment hand-wringing. (As I wrote that last sentence—true story—an email came in that said in part

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“These are not children that don’t know better, but are behaving as such. The federal government should come in and do the jobs of those don’t [sic] do theirs.”)

What *doesn't* bring right and left together at times like these, I’ve learned, is debating facts. So, let’s momentarily take their premise that Portland’s burning, and its outgunned police department needs reinforcements. Which of us wants that in the form of troopers in generic camo, leaping out of unmarked vans to whisk people off the sidewalk to unknown locations for unknown lengths of time, refusing to identify themselves or their agency? How many times have we watched that drama in China, Syria, Iraq, Myanmar, Indonesia, Uganda, Chile, Argentina, Guatemala, or Nicaragua in their very worst days, with worse and bloodier days to follow?

Witnessing that from afar always gives me a rush of gratitude for living in a country where that can’t happen. If you feel differently—if you think events call for domination of the streets—here’s my question: is there one valid reason that federal forces couldn’t have come to Portland in the full light of day, straight-up law enforcement, instead of taking a page from an opening chapter of the death squad playbook?

Mentioning death squads can seem inflammatory. We’re not there. But I keep thinking of the frog that famously boils in the pan of gradually-heated water. Portland events have cranked up the temperature ten degrees all at once, enough to notice and jump out. A dark and completely unnecessary strain of state-security violence is germinating before our eyes. It will grow if we don’t stand up to reject it. We can keep disagreeing on Donald Trump, on race dynamics in America, on what policing should be. But let’s get out of this pan together.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jeff Golden".

Senator Jeff Golden, Oregon Senate District 3