

The birth of a militia: how an armed group polices Black Lives Matter protests

In Utah, members of a militia claim their presence deters protesters from becoming violent and destroying the state

The Guardian

https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/27/utah-militia-armed-group-police-black-lives-matter-protests?fbclid=IwAR3vwbb56v3hDVQJxx-k9Vy8X_9CsnOLKRx7BXWZxoKO0tiURNnnc4VzKQ0

Nicolle Okoren in Provo

Mon 27 Jul 2020



The Utah Citizens' Alarm is only a month old, and yet it already boasts 15,000-plus members. The citizen militia's recruits wear military fatigues and carry assault rifles. Their short-term goal, they say, is to act as a physical presence of intimidation to deter protesters from becoming violent and destroying the state of Utah. Their long-term goal: to arm and prepare the state of Utah against underground movements they believe will incite civil war.

The group was conceived in reaction to a Black Lives Matter protest against police brutality organized by different groups in Provo, Utah, on 29 June. That day, a white protester pulled out a gun and shot another white man, who was not protesting but driving his vehicle into the protest route. Two shots were fired, and one hit the driver in the arm. Protesters claim the shooting was in self-defence because the driver was hitting marchers; the police found this claim to be unsubstantiated.

When Casey Robertson, 47, watched a video of the incident, he felt outraged that this could happen in his "little town of Provo". He posted on his Facebook page and a local yard sale page that "protesters descended on downtown Provo and terrorized citizens and SHOTS WERE FIRED." He explained that Insurgence, one of the organizing group, was planning another protest for the next night and he rallied "concerned citizens" to come together, armed and ready to do their part in protecting downtown businesses.

This was a call to arms. Utah Citizens' Alarm was born.

"I was like, 'We need to stand together as citizens and go down there and show these people that we're not going to allow violence, and that we are not going to allow these anarchist violent groups to tear down Provo,'" Robertson told the Guardian. "It's not going to happen without a fight."

Utah Citizens' Alarm has since organized regular military-style trainings for its members. Robertson says he has been tipped off "by secret sources within the government and law enforcement" that underground organizations like antifa are being funded by Isis, and are using groups like BLM to wreak havoc in the community to destroy American cities and ideals. Even if none of these theories stand up to scrutiny, he is dead set on not letting it happen.

Robertson was born and raised in Provo. His dad was a Provo police officer and his mother a police dispatcher. He has voted both sides of the political aisle – he voted for Clinton and Obama, although he now considers himself a conservative. To him, this is not about politics, but good and evil, and he is ready to die for this cause.

“My biggest fear, probably, is my children being brought up and having to grow up in a country that has completely lost its freedom, and that is under attack, and that is turning into this cesspool of violence and chaos,” he said. “Our enemy is now within, and that’s really scary to me.”

This already has a chilling effect on protests: organizers have begun cancelling protests out of fear of Utah Citizens’ Alarm coming and escalating the already heated emotions. So far, militia members remain unchallenged, using their second amendment rights to openly bear arms in public throughout the state.

‘We are here to protect the community’

That same Black Lives Matter protest that inspired Robertson’s fear was originally planned as a pro-police event in downtown Provo. John Sullivan, 26, the founder of Insurgence USA, a group for racial justice and police reform, organized a counter-protest alongside several other organizers. Protesters were to meet at the Provo police station at 6.30pm that night.

Sullivan, one of the few black men organizing for racial justice in Utah, is not from Provo but Sandy, a suburb of Salt Lake City. Provo is a hyper-religious Latter-day Saint college town located 45 miles south of Salt Lake City. The city is made up of about 110,000 people, 88% white, 16.6% Hispanic, and less than 1% black. Local quirks include a strong second amendment culture, strong self-reliant groups, end of world preppers, a booming music scene and a charming Center Street that has at least three ice cream parlors and only recently got its first coffee shop, as the predominant demography does not drink coffee for religious purposes.

The Black Lives Matter protesters started to march. They yelled “Whose streets? Our streets!” at drivers and lingered in front of cars, some of which started plowing through the crowd, claiming protesters had surrounded them and would not let them leave. (Videos show this was not the case.)



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John Sullivan of Insurgence USA speaks to Black Lives Matter protesters and counter-protest groups.

Photograph: Steven Waggoner

Brian DeLong, a philosophy student at Utah Valley University, was grabbing a coffee when he saw protesters pass by. He joined in the march. At the intersection of University Avenue and Center Street, he was hit by a silver Excursion going southbound and immediately heard two gunshots, one after the other. DeLong bounced off the car and realized about five other people had also been hit. The driver frantically drove off.

Nine minutes later, an ambulance appeared on the scene. The police did not come, and only appeared in full riot gear at 9.40pm when protesters made it back to the front of the police station.

Drivers driving into protesters resulting in people shooting guns is becoming more frequent. On July 25, an Austin motorist drove into a crowd and fatally shot a protester. On the same night, another driver drove into protesters in Aurora, Colorado – except it was a protester who took out his gun and ended up shooting two fellow protesters.

After the Provo protest, a policeman told Josianne Petit, 34, a criminal defense paralegal and founder of Mama & Papa Panthers, an organization dedicated to helping parents of all races in raising black children, that the police were inside watching the whole protest on Facebook Live. She said: "I felt fundamentally betrayed. I had worked with Provo PD extensively prior to that protest and I thought I had a good working relationship with them, but to hear the complete disregard they had for the lives of protesters was alarming to me, but also devastating."

Sullivan, the organizer, was not prepared for what transpired, nor did he know that anyone had a gun on his side of the protest. He created another Facebook event to hold a protest two days later in response. On that day, the two sides stood facing each other. The protesters carried posters; the Utah Citizens' Alarm carried assault rifles. The protesters wore black; the paramilitia wore American flags. Both groups wore masks. On the west side, it was to protect themselves from the coronavirus. On the east side, masks were a protection from unwanted media attention.

One young man carrying an assault rifle and two magazines of ammunition, with his face completely covered, pointed at the protesters and said: "What they have done is straight out of the communist manifesto ... they say that your political beliefs are now your identity and, if somebody's against your identity, they can justify whatever they do against you because they're now repressing you for not agreeing with you."

He added: "Not everybody over there but the more extremists will agree with that. Black Lives Matter, as an organization, receives money from people who want to see violence happen."

Another young man walked over and said: "They hate America. They say they want to change America, that's un-American."

The BLM protesters were authorized to march in the street. Utah Citizens' Alarm was permitted to march on the sidewalks, guarding the storefronts from the protesters. About 250 policemen were brought in, as well as at least four snipers who stood on the roof of the Nu Skin building, a ten-storey building next to the Mormon temple.

One police officer from Springville, a town just south of Provo, said he trusted 99.9% of the men and women with the guns, and said: "Those men and women would be the first people to take a bullet for any of the protesters there."

At the end of the march, Utah Citizens' Alarm members came to the megaphone and repeated the Springville police officer's line: "We are here to protect the community. We would be the first to take a bullet for each and every one of you."

Josey Gardner, 25, a protester and EMT studying English at BYU, asked: "Whose bullets are they protecting us from? They are the only ones with guns."

A chilling effect on free speech

Utah Citizens' Alarm is now organized into a pseudo-militia under the guidance of ex-military and ex-law enforcement on their newly formed board of advisers. They want Utah to be fully prepared for the "civil war" instigated by underground, militant forces.

The group trains tirelessly. When on site, members are advised to move in groups of three and no less, because they have been told by informants on the inside that antifa attacks single out the strongest members in vulnerable situations. They have escape plans at every site, and promote a firm obedience to the local police, including when asked by them not to come to a protest.

(Provo police chief Rich Ferguson made a statement that the Provo police have no relationship with the Utah Citizens' Alarm, which Sergeant Nisha King, head of the Provo police department's public information team, verified.)



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Opposing protest groups march on opposite sides of the street in Provo. Photograph: Steven Waggoner
Meanwhile, militia members have now been to almost every protest on the Wasatch Front. They come to protests throughout the state with anywhere between 30 to 1,000 members in full uniform (sometimes homemade, sometimes military-grade), some in bulletproof vests, and openly carrying ARs. They silently stand in the background and observe, always on guard believing they may be called upon to act quickly if something goes wrong.

A protest in Taylorsville was cancelled because too many protesters felt the risk was not worth being there. Robertson took this as a win.

Jason Stevens, of Utah's American Civil Liberties Union, stressed the importance of the historical context in what happened in the civil rights movement of the 1960s when armed groups, militias, local chapters of the Ku Klux Klan, white citizens councils, organizations both official and unofficial took it upon themselves to defend what they saw as their rights and property with violent and systemic intimidation and threats to African Americans and others in those areas.

"I am not saying that is what is happening here. But with context, if you are a protester and you see groups like this showing up at your protest, that's got to be in the back of your mind, this history of intimidation and threats."

Outside of Utah, these threats are present and real for protesters. In Omak, Washington, small civilian militias are forming to threaten protesters. In New Mexico, there is another civilian militia group that call themselves the New Mexico Civil Guard reacting to rioting and looting.

In Portland, the threats to free speech and the right to protest are coming from the federal government, which has deployed unidentified agents to quell protests by forcibly grabbing protesters and taking them away in unidentified vehicles.

BLM-adjacent groups held a "Stop Kidnapping Protesters" event in Salt Lake City on 22 July, in reference to what took place in Portland. Robertson and his team came in full garb and made a live video.

Robertson said: "That's the name of the protest – 'Stop kidnapping protesters'. My boy over here translated it as 'stop arresting criminals'. The awesome thing is these people that are out creating chaos and committing crimes, they are being watched. Law enforcement finally started to go around and pick them up and arrest them. I am all for it."

Additionally, lines between the second and first amendment are complicated, especially as open-carry laws in Utah make it legal for groups of heavily armed individuals to gather in places where the first amendment is being honored, such as protests.

"If the right to bear arms is overriding the right to free speech, that may be cause for concern," said Dr Ronnell Andersen Jones, a law professor at the University of Utah. "Our constitutional doctrine hasn't yet had the chance to really tussle with the question of what the presence of guns does to a free speech event. Short of more overt threats of violence, we usually protect protesters with guns in the same ways

we protect protesters without them. But if the express goal of the armed individuals is to intimidate people who might otherwise share their views, that's especially troubling."

In response to Utah Citizens' Alarm, Utah protesters are now arming themselves. John Sullivan of Insurgence USA held his first armed protest on 22 July at the Utah state capitol, carrying an AR-15 and a magazine of ammo. He is encouraging Insurgence USA protesters to purchase guns so they can protect themselves if there is violence.

"Basically, nobody in our group owns a gun except for me; nobody was planning on ever shooting anyone. So the fact that I bought a bulletproof vest and more magazines and our people are buying guns should say a lot. It shouldn't be that way."

Petit, who also organizes alongside BLM and Insurgence USA, has recruited ex-military to train and arm her protesters, because she feels the threat is real as long as Utah Citizens' Alarm is showing up.

"The only way forward is to make sure we are prepared, because at this point the options the only options available to us are when things go crazy we lie down and die, or we fight back.

"And I'm sorry, I'm not lying down for anybody."