

## **Antifa Must Obey the Law**

The leftist militia thought they could riot in Clackamas County like they do in Portland. We proved them wrong.

By Ben West

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I am an elected county commissioner, a cardiology nurse, and an officer in the U.S. Navy Reserve who was born and raised in the heart of Portland, Oregon. In 2014 my husband and I successfully sued the state of Oregon in federal court for the right to marry, and overturned Oregon's ban on same-sex marriage. Just a few weeks before making history for marriage equality, my husband and I adopted our son Jay from the Oregon foster system and moved to Clackamas County, which is adjacent to Portland. We thought we had escaped the political radicalism of Portland to raise our son—until it arrived on our doorstep in the form of antifa vs. Proud Boy violence.

For decades, Portland has been characterized by its protests and political extremism. However, starting in 2016 and building up to 2020, the radicalism reached new heights of public intimidation and lawless violence. Over the last three and a half years, I have watched activist district attorneys, judges, and lawyers in Multnomah County including District Attorney Mike Schmidt provide cover and sweetheart deals to antifa and refuse to prosecute the group for its violent actions. Exhausted by the impunity with which groups such as antifa are allowed to operate like an armed militia in the streets—under the apparent protective shield that renders them immune to prosecution—many people question whether the criminal justice system is still effective.

But this summer, Clackamas County—where I now serve as county commissioner—demonstrated that it's not like Portland. Twelve jurors, mostly women, convicted a violent antifa ringleader of a 2021 attack at a public park. What they did was brave, especially since they were being intimidated by members of antifa during the trial. Alissa Eleanor Azar, now a convicted felon, is believed to be the first antifa associate to be convicted at trial in Oregon. On Monday afternoon, she was sentenced to 14 days in jail and 36 months of supervised probation and GPS monitoring.

As a county commissioner in a neighboring jurisdiction, I hadn't seen the chaos that had engulfed Portland spill over into my community until June 18, 2021, when Ms. Azar and Portland-based antifa militants mobilized to attack and shut down a First Amendment-protected event attended by members of the Proud Boys. Local media barely covered the political violence at that event. Poor and at times deliberately misleading press coverage obfuscated the degree of horrific and dangerous brawling instigated by antifa in a public park, making it hard for both local residents and officials to understand what had happened.

I attended the five-day trial of Ms. Azar in Oregon City. As an elected leader, I know the full weight of my responsibility. That's why I spoke up outside the trial to make it clear that this county doesn't welcome political violence. The whole world is aware of the actions of antifa in Portland, but I wanted to know their impact on Clackamas, which shares an approximate 10-mile border with the city of Portland; we're all in the same metro area. Here, unlike Portland, rampant violent outbursts from extremist groups are not commonplace or accepted. Clackamas is a county composed of urban, suburban, and rural communities. Politically, the county is purple; an amalgam of diverse political beliefs and citizens who desire to live together peacefully.

As I sat as in the gallery during the trial, I could not help but notice how most of the courtroom observers were associates of antifa and Ms. Azar—some of whom had been recorded in videos at the riot that the defendant was being prosecuted over. Most of them were masked in the courtroom, concealing their identity. Many of the antifa attendees at Ms. Azar's trial wore Palestinian kaffiyehs to advertise their allegiance to extreme political causes, some of which embrace terror. Their image made it clear that they were part of a political club, or gang, and virtue-signaling their allegiance to the political left.

According to evidence presented in court by the prosecutor, Deputy District Attorney Josh Cutino, part of Clackamette Park was rented lawfully by a Proud Boys associate named Dan Tooze for a voter registration and flag-waving event. As a resident of Oregon City, Mr. Tooze has the right to rent public venues like anyone else, regardless of his political views. Antifa members are afforded the very same rights, but they shy from identifying themselves on official forms as part of their MO which elevates extrajudicial "direct action" over lawful expression and debate.

Like most residents of my county, I do not support either the Proud Boys or antifa. However, public institutions cannot deny people access because of their viewpoints. There is simply no question about the illegality of viewpoint-based discrimination according to our laws and the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees citizens the right to free speech and expression and to peaceable assembly.

In response to the event, Portland antifa members organized online for "direct action" to shut down the event through violence. Dozens traveled to the county both within the state and across state lines in vehicles that were outfitted for battle. Most of them wore black, covered their faces, and brought along melee weapons. Ms. Azar was part of that group.

Antifa's "direct action" in our park reached its climax when one of the group's members desecrated an American flag by lighting it on fire. A Proud Boy member rushed to the burning flag and stomped it out.

What happened next was a violent brawl that was not contained to a small area of the park. Innocent bystanders wanting to enjoy a summer day with their families were instead choked by pepper spray and mace and forced to witness violent fights with weapons. Exhibits in court showed that weapons such as clubs, shields, bear spray, chemical wipes, and even homemade explosive devices were recovered at the scene.

One elderly former Clackamas resident testified of her severe PTSD from the riot and how she, her son, and pet were surrounded during the melee. She told the court through tears that she chose to leave Oregon because of the trauma she endured that day.

I have a responsibility to represent my constituents, and I will not sit quietly and let unchecked crime happen in Clackamas County. I spoke up via video updates on X every day in front of the courthouse to share what I observed in the courtroom. John Hacker, a violent Portland antifa associate and close friend of Ms. Azar's, tried multiple times to use the heckler's veto to silence me from speaking outside the courthouse.

Ms. Azar was found guilty by a jury of her peers of felony riot and disorderly conduct. The jury was hung on the mace charge, which is a misdemeanor; the district attorney will not recharge that crime.

Shortly after Alissa Azar's guilty verdict, Mr. Hacker became more aggressive. I witnessed him punch a man to the ground just steps from the courthouse. He bloodied the victim's face with a puncture wound. As a registered nurse, I provided medical aid to the man until emergency services arrived. He was dazed and had malformations to his upper jaw and face.

Mr. Hacker was arrested a few streets away and charged with fourth-degree misdemeanor assault. He already has an open criminal case in Multnomah County. Similarly, Ms. Azar still faces a charge in Multnomah County for her alleged criminal behavior at a violent Portland State University occupation in May where the library was destroyed in the name of Palestinian resistance; Oregon taxpayers will have to foot the \$1 million bill in damages. It remains to be seen if DA Mike Schmidt will see those cases to the end, or quietly let them drop, as has become the norm in Portland.

America is a country that respects the rule of law. Freedom of speech, enshrined in the Bill of Rights, gives individuals the right to express themselves freely, which is a fundamental human right. However, radical political groups like antifa do not believe in freedom of speech. They assert that all speech that offends them should be violently extinguished. They rely on their political sponsors to protect them from the legal consequences of their repeated acts of political violence which deprive other citizens of their rights.

I am committed to protecting the right to peaceful expression of opinions, even by those with whom I may disagree. The First Amendment would be meaningless if unpopular or uncomfortable speech were not protected. Speech is NOT violence; conversely, speech prevents violence by allowing us to use words and ideas to solve our differences. But for any of that to work, we must enforce our laws protecting speech, free assembly, and ordinary citizens enjoying a day in the park against the effects of political violence.

Being so close to Portland, Clackamas County will never be immune to the public safety problems stemming from political extremism that has been allowed to run rampant in some of our major cities with cover from public officials. But when antifa tried their antics in Clackamas, they failed, because we were willing and able to enforce the laws that are meant to protect us all. If antifa seeks to endanger the public here by carrying out further criminal acts, they will again be prosecuted.