

Trump administration deploys unmarked paramilitary units in Washington, D.C.

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On Wednesday, June 3, protesters gathered near the White House in Washington, D.C., were confronted by mysterious personnel equipped in tactical riot gear, including shields and “non-lethal” weaponry. These paramilitary units, which appeared alongside National Guard troops, were virtually absent of any identifying badge or insignia.

In a fascistic rant on Monday, June 1, delivered only minutes after a violent attack by police against protesters exercising their democratic right to peaceful assembly, Trump made clear that his administration is preparing to trample on the Constitution and establish a presidential dictatorship. The appearance of these unmarked paramilitary units must be seen as a significant step in that direction.

When asked by protesters and reporters to identify themselves, the personnel either remained silent, or simply stated, “Department of Justice [DOJ].”

For the few who wore badges or insignias, these were mostly inconspicuous. Those whose markings have so far been identified belong to the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and the BOP Special Operations Response Team (SORT), heavily militarized tactical units within the BOP, similar to the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) units in law enforcement. According to Wikipedia, BOP SORTs are typically employed for “riots, assault on staff or inmates, escape or attempted escapes, hostage situations, any terrorist or military strike on the United States.”

Citing a “senior Justice Department official,” an NPR report on June 1 indicated that US Attorney General William Barr “has directed the Federal Bureau of Prisons to dispatch riot teams to the nation’s capital and to Miami to assist local authorities in responding to protests there.”

In a press conference with Barr, the BOP director,

Michael Carvajal, responded to a question from a reporter about the presence of these unidentified units, saying, “First of all, I’m not aware of any specific Bureau Prisons [sic] personnel being told not to identify themselves.”

“What I attribute that to is probably the fact that we normally operate within the confines of our institution, and we don’t need to identify ourselves. Most of our identification is institution-specific and probably wouldn’t mean a whole lot to people in D.C.”

On the contrary, protesters in D.C. would no doubt like to know who is beating them with batons, dousing them in pepper spray, and shooting them with rubber bullets and tear gas. The presence of unidentified federal and police personnel creates a cover for other groups, including fascistic far-right militias, to freely take part in the violence against protesters. After all, there are a number of websites offering riot gear to civilians which is similar to that worn by the police and military, including riot shields emblazoned with the word “police.”

In addition to BOP personnel, the Justice Department has also deployed agents with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), and the US Marshals Service. Other agencies outside the Justice Department have also been activated. These include the Federal Protective Service (FPS), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Secret Service, and the US Park Police.

While it is unclear to what extent the various agencies are involved, an article in BuzzFeed reported that the DEA has been granted jurisdiction to “conduct covert surveillance” and collect intelligence on protesters. The Park Police have helped assault protesters with smoke canisters and pepper balls.

The involvement of CBP is particularly noteworthy. On May 29, the agency flew a Predator drone (also known as the Reaper) over Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the wake of protests there. This vindicates the analysis of the WSWS, which has always maintained that while agencies such as CBP and ICE are ostensibly directed towards external “threats,” in actuality the buildup of these forces is ultimately directed against the working class in the US.



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