

Public Comments at Olympia City Council meeting, June 9, 2020

I'm [Zoltán Grossman](#), a resident of the West Side for 15 years. I was horrified that last Thursday night, false rumors were circulated of rioters coming to the West Side. On the basis of these false rumors, small businesses boarded up their windows, far-right militiamen armed with semi-automatic weapons took up position by Private Sector Arms, and instead of investigating who these armed men were, *two* OPD officers thanked them. A small restaurant next door closed up in disgust and [fear of these "idiots."](#) At a Friday morning press conference, the Mayor and City Manager not only failed to acknowledge the armed far-right threat, but [amplified false rumors.](#)

Olympia is being played. Around the country, [misinformation has been circulated](#) that outsider anti-fascists are coming in busses to small cities to loot and burn, then the Three Percenters, Proud Boys, and other far-right paramilitary come in to supposedly "protect" small businesses from the phantom threat. [Up to 50 men patrolled Coeur d'Alene](#), a multiracial family accused by being Antifa was [terrorized at a Forks campground](#), and a large [armed group patrolled Snohomish](#) against phantom rioters and punched out a protester.

On the other hand, the [Snohomish police chief was reassigned](#) for overlooking the armed threat to his community. [Police in Richland arrested](#) a racist counterprotester for intimidation when he brandished a weapon next to a Black Lives Matter protest, and a [Tri-Cities petition](#) and [city official](#) demand that armed racist militias be reigned in. Why are these conservative towns doing more to protect Black Lives Matter protesters than supposedly more progressive and enlightened Olympia, where vigilante gunmen [regularly shadow](#) the protests?

It's only a matter of time before one of these guns goes off, and our city leaders who amplified these false rumors will be so surprised and shocked that it happened. Where did these odd, nonsensical conspiratorial rumors come from in the first place? Why was a twitter account from the [Salish Sea Black Autonomists](#), clearly operated just by one person, given more credence as a threat than the reality of armed far-right vigilantes? Why was that rumor believed so easily, so soon after a [far-right hoax](#) linked the Thurston County Democrats to Antifa? Why did Private Sector Arms [claim that one of the sources of the rumor was Law Enforcement](#)? Why doesn't OPD identify the members of the paramilitary groups, and check their criminal records and any history of violence against residents and political opponents, even to protect its own officers?

Why are police and city officials seemingly following a naïve or biased political and racial double standard, that the mere *claim* of a threat from anti-fascists or Black people is more dangerous than an *actual* threat from real armed far-right paramilitary groups?

We want answers. Instead, we get hair-splitting arguments that the hand signs of the militiamen were three fingers of the 3%ers rather than the OK White Power sign. The [Three-Percenters](#) are not only pro-gun rights and anti-government regulation, but according to a KING5 report are [virulently and sometimes violently anti-immigrant](#) and [anti-Muslim](#). Their leaders regularly associate with the Proud Boys, who are more explicitly "western chauvinist" or pro-White Power, and provided [security at the Charlottesville march](#), later [regretting it](#). [Police in California](#) and [New Jersey](#) have disciplined officers for fraternizing with the 3%ers, and when the 3%ers tried to guard Army recruitment centers, the [Army deemed them to be a security threat](#). You

could be asking researchers on the far-right networks in the Pacific Northwest, such as the [Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights](#), who [warn law enforcement](#) away from ignoring or coddling paramilitary vigilantes.

The program director of the [Western States Center](#), [said](#): 'Far-right and anti-government groups are eagerly helping spread misinformation about anti-fascist protesters gathering in local communities...The rumors may not be true, but extremist groups find them useful for activating their supporters and sowing turmoil and division. We encourage law enforcement, media and the general public to carefully evaluate claims and guard against spreading misinformation'."

Why are OPD officers overlooking or coddling these play-soldiers intimidating Olympia residents, especially at a volatile time like this? We all know what would happen if Black Lives Matter protesters openly brandished semi-automatic rifles on the streets, which *they* obviously have *not* done. [RCW 38.40.120](#) forbids unauthorized groups to "associate themselves together as a military company or organize or parade in public with firearms." [RCW 9.41.270](#) outlaws the carrying of any weapon "apparently capable of producing bodily harm, in a manner, under circumstances, and at a time and place that either manifests an intent to intimidate another or that warrants alarm for the safety of other persons." Given the violent polarization underway in the country, the meaning of that very "time and place" has fundamentally shifted in recent weeks. Despite open-carry laws, no one has the right to use semi-automatic rifles to intimidate others exercising their free speech.

I've studied how small armed nationalist militias grew to threaten democratic institutions and unleash ethnic violence in Bosnia, Ukraine, and other countries--don't think it can't happen here. If our city leadership normalizes militia weaponry on the streets of our city, there's nothing to stop paramilitaries from chilling and silencing dissent and generating fear in communities of color. And that's even if the bullets are never fired. God help us if the weapons are used, but if they are don't tell us you weren't warned. You can take the knee all you want, but actions matter more than symbols. Summon the political will to enforce the RCWs forbidding unauthorized militias and intimidation with weapons. If you cannot guarantee public safety for all city residents, you're abdicating your most important responsibility, and should make way for someone who will.

Thank you for listening,
Zoltán Grossman