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The Stakes

Trump has repeatedly threatened to deploy the military inside major cities run by Democrats

defend their communities from his threats

If Trump wins the
election, this is
what's at stake

 Trump's disdain for cities run by Democrats has been a consistent theme of his politics. Composite: Getty/Guardian Design Team

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Senior Democrats in US cities are preparing to defend their communities in the event of [Donald Trump's](#) return to the White House after the former president has repeated threats that he would use presidential powers to seize control of major urban centers.

Trump has proposed deploying the military inside major cities largely run by [Democrats](#) to deal with protesters or to crush criminal gangs. He has threatened to dispatch large numbers of federal immigration agents to carry out mass deportations of undocumented people in so-called “sanctuary” cities.

He also aims to obliterate the progressive criminal justice policies of left-leaning prosecutors.

“In cities where there has been a complete breakdown of law and order ... I will not hesitate to send in federal assets including the national guard until safety is restored,” Trump says in the campaign platform for his bid to become the 47th US president, [Agenda47](#).

Trump [provoked uproar](#) earlier this week when he called for US armed forces to be deployed against his political rivals - “the enemy within” - on election day next month. But his plans to use national guard troops and military personnel as a means to attack those he sees as his opponents go much wider than that, spanning entire cities with Democratic leadership.

Mayors and prosecutors in several US cities are collaborating over strategies to minimize the fallout. Levar Stoney, the Democratic mayor of Richmond, Virginia, a city of over 220,000, said he was aware how difficult it would be to resist Trump given the enormous powers at a president’s disposal.

“It’s very difficult to autocrat-proof your city,” he said. “But you have to have backstops, and mayors are working in coalition to ensure they can be a backstop against these divisive policies.”

Gillian Feiner, senior counsel of States United Democracy Center, a non-partisan group working to advance democracy and fair and secure elections,

said that many organizations were evaluating the legal landscape and preparing for practical challenges should Trump win. “State officials’ awareness of the threat level is high,” she said, noting that their alertness stood in contrast to 2016 when many states were taken by surprise by Trump’s actions.

Larry Krasner, the progressive district attorney of Philadelphia with whom Trump **clashed several times** during his presidency, said he was taking the former president at his word. “It is incredibly serious for big cities that lean strongly Democratic, as Philadelphia does, when a potential president who identifies with dictators all over the world talks about conferring on federal authorities powers they do not have.”



© Larry Krasner, the progressive district attorney of Philadelphia, 7 November 2022. He predicts that Trump would face severe blowback if he tried to carry out any of his promised threats. Composite: Ryan Collerd/AFP/Getty Images/Guardian Design Team

Krasner predicted that Trump would face severe blowback if he tried to carry out any of his menaces. “We’re not going to let somebody carry out a coup as soon as he’s in office, whether with tanks or on paper. My father served in world war two, and countless Americans died to resist fascism. If anybody tries to orchestrate a coup they’re going to encounter tremendous resistance.”

Trump’s disdain for cities run by Democrats has been a consistent theme of his politics. In his 2017 **inauguration speech** he vented against the “crime and

the gangs and the drugs” within “inner cities”, dubbing them “this American carnage”.

During the turbulence following the police killing of [George Floyd](#) in 2020, Trump sent hundreds of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers, including border patrol Swat teams from the Bortac unit, to Portland and Seattle to protect federal property in running battles with militant protesters. Democratic officials in Portland asked for the 750 officers to be withdrawn, saying they were exacerbating the crisis, and a later investigation by the [DHS inspector general](#) criticized the deployment as ill-conceived and poorly executed.

A spokesperson for Portland’s mayor, Ted Wheeler, said that “city leadership and bureaus have been working for months in collaboration with our external partners to prepare for the upcoming election”, but declined an interview request.



Portland police officers chase demonstrators after a riot was declared during a protest against the police killing of Daunte Wright, a Black man whose car was stopped in Minnesota, in 2021. Composite: Nathan Howard/Getty/Guardian Design Team

Trump also deployed the national guard and Secret Service agents in the nation’s capital in June 2020. Federalised officers used tear gas and flash bangs to disperse a [Black Lives Matter](#) crowd in Washington DC so that the sitting president could stage a much derided [photo op](#) in which he raised a Bible outside St John’s church close to the White House.

In total, federal Swat teams drawn from 16 government divisions were deployed to quell the nationwide civil unrest following Floyd's death, [an audit](#) from the Government Accountability Office found.

In the build-up to November's election, Trump has made his attack on big liberal cities a central pillar of his re-election campaign. Ahead of the Republican national convention, which nominated him as presidential candidate, he called Milwaukee, host of the event, a "[horrible city](#)".

He has also denigrated Washington DC, telling a campaign rally last month that he would "take over the horribly run capital of our nation ... clean it up, renovate it, rebuild it, so there's no longer a nightmare of murder and crime".

The most searing of Trump's threats towards cities is that he will deploy the national guard, or even regular military forces, to combat urban protests and crime. He told a rally in Davenport, Iowa, last year that he would be much more aggressive in pursuing cities in a second term, saying that he would not wait to be invited in by mayors or governors but would act unilaterally.



 Members of the national guard outside the US Capitol a day after the House impeached Donald Trump and over a week after a pro-Trump insurrectionist mob breached the security of the building on 14 January 2021 in Washington DC. Composite: Kent Nishimura/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images/Guardian Design Team

"The next time I'm not waiting [for local approval]. We don't have to wait any longer. We got to get crime out of our cities," [he said](#), specifically referencing New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Trump's plans to deploy forces inside the cities depends upon his ability to bypass constitutional limits that generally forbid the military to be used in domestic law enforcement. The one exception is the [Insurrection Act](#), which allows presidents to use the military or to federalise the national guard in order to restore order or put down a rebellion that is preventing the execution of US laws.

"If I thought things were getting out of control, I would have no problem using the military, per se," Trump told [Time magazine](#) in April. "We have to have law and order in our country."

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Feiner said that should Trump invoke the Insurrection Act, which would put the national guard under the control of the president as commander-in-chief, there would be "enormous pressure to comply" with his orders. "But that's not the end of the story. State and local officials have lots of levers they can pull to protect their citizens - both legally and practically - and that's what we will see them do."

In the Time interview, Trump also opened up on his plans to send federal agents into cities to round up undocumented immigrants as part of his threat to carry out mass deportations. He railed against "sanctuary cities", municipalities which welcome migrants and resist their police officers acting as immigration officials.

"There's a pent-up demand to end sanctuary cities, because it's just not working out for the country," Trump said. In [Agenda47](#) he threatens to

withdraw federal funds from local police forces that refuse to cooperate with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice).



People carry posters of George Floyd during the March on Washington on 28 August 2020. Trump sent hundreds of homeland security officers to Seattle and Portland during the turbulence following the police killing of the Minnesota man. Composite: Carolyn Kaster/AP/Guardian Design Team

Stephen Miller, Trump's former senior White House policy adviser who is expected to make a comeback in a Trump second term, has laid out some of the plans for mass deportations [in conversation](#) with the rightwing activist Charlie Kirk. Miller spoke of deputizing national guard troops as immigration officers and sending them from Republican-controlled red states into Democratic-controlled blue states whose cities have large, concentrated immigrant populations.

“If you’re going to go into an unfriendly state like Maryland, well, there would just be Virginia doing the arrest in Maryland, right – very close, very nearby,” he said.

Ron Nirenberg, the independent mayor of San Antonio in Texas, said that forcing city officials to act as immigration agents would distract from their proper work. “Let’s be clear, local law enforcement has their hands full dealing with local issues, we don’t need them to be doing the jobs of state and federal authorities.”

The mayor added that Trump’s rhetoric was already spreading fear among legal immigrants in San Antonio, whose population is 64% Hispanic. “People

who are coming to the US through a legal asylum process are being forced to live in the shadows under threat of mass deportation that sends ripples of fear through families and neighborhoods.”

Progressive prosecutors who fail to abide by Trump’s hardline approach - whether by abolishing cash bail requirements that disproportionately hit people of color, or by avoiding custodial sentences for lesser crimes - are also in his sights. He threatens in [Agenda47](#) to instruct the justice department to carry out investigations into “radical Marxist prosecutors” in cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco to see if they have “illegally engaged in race-based law enforcement”.



Trump justifies his aggression towards cities controlled by Democrats based on rising violent crime, yet a report found that for 23 consecutive years the murder rate has been higher in Republican states than in Democratic states. Composite: Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP/Getty Images/Guardian Design Team

Prosecutors are exploring how to protect their offices against a second-term Trump attack. Beth McCann, the Democratic district attorney of Denver, Colorado, joined a simulation exercise over the summer held by the [Brennan Center for Justice](#) that examined responses to a range of threats, including Trump sending in the national guard into cities.

Krasner said that the potential of a Trump return to the White House had “reminded all of us who are progressive prosecutors that we have two jobs: to ensure public safety and justice, and secondly, to defend democracy”.

The irony, Krasner said, was that Trump is justifying his aggression towards cities based on rising violent crime, when in fact homicides are down by more than 40% in Philadelphia this year. A report by the thinktank [Third Way](#) has found that for 23 consecutive years the murder rate has been higher in Republican states that have voted for Trump than in Democratic states.

“The reality is that reform prosecution makes us safer,” Krasner said. “The policies that Trump represents - everybody should have a gun, mass incarceration is good, more division between rich and poor - get your ass killed in Republican states.”

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