

Reporting on Incidents Involving State Actors

The United States has a history of political violence where the perpetrators were themselves, or were aided by, local, state, or national law enforcement or security forces. Such episodes have always run contrary to our democratic ideals, especially when they have been designed to keep targeted communities from exercising full political rights and participation.

Today, covering instances of political violence involving government actors remains challenging. Coverage can inadvertently normalize violent actions, spread fear, and contribute to chilling public participation. Reporting in line with best practices can help mitigate these risks. Below are suggestions to consider as a starting point.

Core Principles of Covering Political Violence

- ✓ Use precise language to avoid signaling that the violence on the ground is more widespread or accepted than it is, or that the ongoing threat level is more severe than is supported by evidence.
- ✓ Engage with targeted communities to ensure coverage also addresses how the violence has affected them, their responses, and their needs.
- ✓ Avoid providing platforms for inflammatory rhetoric, misinformation, or extremism.
- ✓ Provide appropriate context and framing about the causes of the violence, including any intersection with extremist political movements and conspiracy theories.
- ✓ Highlight responses to address and mitigate the violence.
- ✓ Keep the public informed with up-to-date information so they can have a clear understanding of the risks and mitigation efforts.

Guidance for Covering Political Violence Involving State Actors

Provide clear, specific information about the incident.

- What circumstances prompted the violence? Who was involved? What law enforcement or other government agency were part of the violent event? Were private actors involved or assisting government actors?

- Was the use of force proportional to the situation?
- Was this an isolated event or part of a larger pattern of incidents or operations? Include local, regional, and national context as appropriate.
- Be sure to avoid repeating speculation, including about motives. If you must report on misinformation, do so with care. Where possible, describe rather than repeat misinformation or conspiracy theories and always closely accompany descriptions of false claims with accurate information and explanations of events.

Provide context on what professional standard practice would look like and how (if at all) the behavior of the state actor(s) differs.

- In the specific incident, what would standard protocol have been? Was that followed?
- Have the state actors involved completed appropriate training for the type of incident in question, or have they been granted authority that exceeds their training?
- Are the state actors being deployed outside their traditional law enforcement role (i.e., is the National Guard, FBI, or DEA being used in ways outside their traditional role)?
- Is there alignment between different agencies or levels of law enforcement on the type of operation or mission at hand? For example, are local police cooperating with federal agencies or are they at odds with one another? If there is vertical alignment (such as state law enforcement officers being deputized by a federal agency), is the scale and scope of that cooperation consistent with past practice?
- Rely on third-party experts for explanations of standard protocols, how legal standards have typically been applied, and if/how recent practice has deviated from past standards. If possible, do this research in advance to familiarize yourself with the details that audiences may need to understand the context for any particular incident.

Highlight responses from targeted communities and leaders. Take care to center the voices and perspectives of victims.

- Political violence has historically targeted specific groups based on their perceived racial, ethnic, political, or religious identity. For example, Black, immigrant, Muslim, Arab, Jewish, and LGBTQ+ communities have historically been targeted with political violence.
- How is the community responding? Are there efforts to provide mutual aid? Are steps being taken to recover and repair?
- Note: Violence targeting people on the basis of their identity is often a tactic to chill participation in civic life, including through suppressing voter turnout. It is particularly important to provide continual, clear information about community safety, using care not to make violence or threats seem more widespread than they are. Highlight any local efforts to ensure community safety.

Provide the political context.

- Are politicians closely directing the actions and behavior in question? Or is the agency operating with independence?
- Did the event occur proximate to major political events, such as an election, general strike, or mass protest? (See our guides for [Reporting on Political Violence at a Demonstration or Protest](#) and [Covering Political Violence Throughout the Election Cycle](#).)
- Is the violence aligned with narratives or conspiracy theories that are being used to bolster political support or that seek to justify violence (i.e., scapegoating narratives that portray an entire group or community as a threat)?
- Is there evidence that the state actors directly involved are motivated by or adopting a political or partisan narrative?

Showcase relevant disapproval for violence.

- Are public officials, business, faith, or community leaders speaking out to condemn violence and threats? In particular, are any such messages from “surprise speakers” or those whose politics or interests might otherwise be aligned with those responsible for the violence?

Explain the accountability measures that are (or are not) being pursued.

- Are there investigations? Who is doing them? Consult third-party experts on the type of external investigation or internal review that would typically be expected in scenarios involving state actors and the use of force.
- Are any civil or criminal legal actions being taken, either by government offices or by individuals bringing private lawsuits?
- Are there efforts to hold elected or appointed leaders accountable for the incident, as well as the actors directly involved?

Best Practices for reporting on incidents involving state actors

✗ **Don't use vague or sensationalist language** to describe violent events.

✓ **Do provide clear, concrete information** including any context of what events or actions preceded violence.

EXAMPLE

[A Protester Threw a Snowball. Federal Agents Responded with Tear Gas and Pepper Balls](#), ProPublica

✗ **Don't repeat misinformation** or political narratives without fact-checking them.

✓ **Do provide context on the standard procedures**, training, and investigation or accountability mechanisms that usually govern law enforcement's use of force.

EXAMPLE

[ACLU Demands Barr Name Special Prosecutor to Probe Lafayette Square Crackdown](#), NPR

EXAMPLE

[When can law enforcement use force, and how is it investigated? 3 Questions Answered](#), Christian Science Monitor

✗ **Don't focus on individual events** without providing wider context.

✓ **Do center the voices** and perspectives of targeted communities.

EXAMPLE

[Immigrants Detained in Chicago Military-Style Raid Seek Millions in Damages](#), ProPublica

EXAMPLE

[Portland Protesters Who Were Beaten, Snatched Into Unmarked Rental Vans Sue Trump, Department of Homeland Security](#), Willamette Week

EXAMPLE

["I Don't Feel Safe": Black Memphis Residents Report Harassment by Trump's Police Task Force](#), ProPublica

-
- ✓ **Do highlight messages and actions condemning** and responding to violence

EXAMPLE

"Vermont Gov. Phil Scott (R) on Sunday railed against the fatal shooting... 'Enough ... It's not acceptable for American citizens to be killed by federal agents for exercising their god-given and constitutional rights to protest their government.'" [The Hill](#)

EXAMPLE

[How Minnesota Faith Communities are Resisting Aggressive Immigration Operations](#), NPR

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Understanding Federal Law Enforcement in the United States](#) R Street
A series explaining how five major law enforcement agencies work, including their legislative origins, evolution in mission, jurisdictional limits, training standards, and relationship with state & local authorities.
- [Guidance Related to Public Protests and Demonstrations](#)
Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection
A collection of guidance documents for law enforcement articulating best practices for maintaining public order while securing and respecting First Amendment rights.
- [Political Violence in the U.S. \(June 2026\)](#) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
An overview of trends in the United States, including increases in political violence from the U.S. Government.

MEDIA GUIDE DEVELOPED BY



O V
E R
Z E
R O