

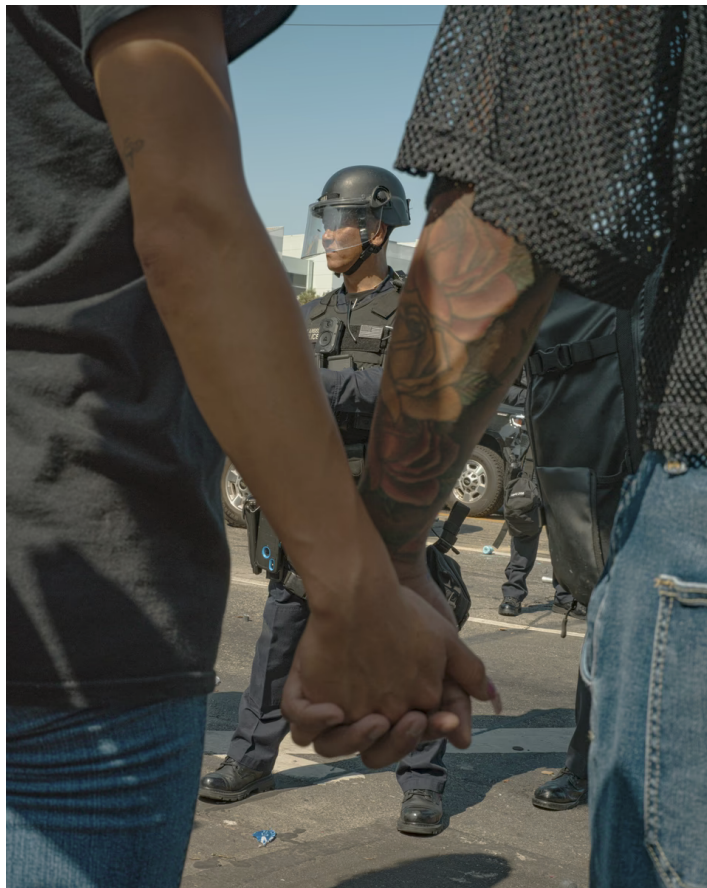
POLITICS

STEPHEN MILLER TRIGGERS LOS ANGELES

The protesters gathered in downtown L.A. are a microcosm of the Democratic coalition that has dominated the city for decades.

By Nick Miroff

Photographs by Robert LeBlanc



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During a lull in the chanting outside the federal building targeted by protesters in downtown Los Angeles this week, I walked up behind a hooded young man wearing a mask and carrying a can of spray paint. He began to deface the marble facade in big black letters. WHEN TYRANNY BECOMES LAW, REBELLION BECOMES DUTY—THOMAS JEFFERSON, he wrote, adding his tag, SMO, in a smaller font.

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SMO told me that he is 21, Mexican American, an Angeleno, and a “history buff” who thinks about the Founding Fathers more than the average tagger does. He said he wanted to write something that stood out from the hundreds of places where FUCK ICE now appears.

“I needed a better message that would inspire more people to remember that our history as Americans is deeply rooted in being resistant to the ones who oppress us,” he told me. “Our Founding Fathers trusted that we the people would take it into our hands to fight back against a government who no longer serves the people.” (The quote, although spurious, captures some of the ideas that Jefferson put into the Declaration of Independence, according to the Thomas Jefferson Foundation.)

Whether what’s occurring in Los Angeles is a noble rebellion, a destructive riot, or a bit of both, the protests here have been the most intense demonstrations against President Donald Trump and his policies since he retook office. They were set off by a new, more aggressive phase of Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids across the city last week. But it’s important to keep some perspective on the size of the confrontations. Los Angeles County covers more than 4,000 square miles, with a population of 10 million, and across much of that sunny expanse, life has carried on as usual this week.

Missy Ryan and Jonathan Lemire: The White House is delighted with events in Los Angeles

The protesters' focal point has been the federal building in downtown Los Angeles where several Department of Homeland Security agencies, including ICE, have offices. Just across the 101 freeway is the El Pueblo de Los Angeles historic plaza, which marks the site where settlers of Native American, African, and European heritage first arrived in 1781. Nearly every city block in this part of town is taken up by a courthouse or some other stone edifice of law or government, including the Art Deco tower of Los Angeles City Hall. In a city built on shaky ground, these civic structures are meant to project stability and permanence. But L.A.'s layered, fraught history seemed very much on the minds of many demonstrators I spoke with, who told me that they felt like their right to belong—regardless of legal status—was under attack.



Robert LeBlanc

Although the crowd of protesters has not been especially large, drawing at most a few thousand people, it has been a microcosm of Los Angeles and the deep-blue Democratic coalition that has dominated the city for decades. It's a mix of young Hispanic people—many the children of first-generation immigrants—and older liberals, college students, and left-wing activists; also present is a contingent of younger, more militant protesters, who have been eager to confront police and inflict damage on the city's buildings and institutions, and film themselves doing it.

At one point on Monday, I watched a group of jumpy teen boys in hoods and masks who appeared no older than 15 or 16 approach one of the last unblemished surfaces on the federal building. One shook a spray can and began writing in large, looping letters. The nozzle wasn't working well, and his friends began to rush him. TRUMP IS A BICH, he wrote, and ran away.

Observing the crowd and speaking with protesters over the past several days, I couldn't help but think of Stephen Miller, the top Trump aide who has ordered immigration officials to arrest and deport more and more people, encouraging them to do so in the most attention-grabbing of ways. The version of Los Angeles represented by the protesters is the one Miller deplores. The city has a voracious demand for workers that, for decades, has mostly looked past legal status and allowed newcomers from around the world to live and work without much risk of arrest and deportation. Trump and Miller have upended that in a way many people here describe as a punch in the face.

Los Angeles, specifically the liberal, upper-middle-class enclave of Santa Monica, is Miller's hometown, and it became the foil for his archconservative political identity. He is often described as the "architect" of Trump's immigration policy, but his role as a political strategist—and chief provocateur—is much bigger than that. It is no fluke that Los Angeles is where Miller could most aggressively assert the ideas he champions in Trump's MAGA movement: mass deportations and a maximal assertion of executive power. No matter if it means calling out U.S. troops to suppress a backlash triggered by those policies.

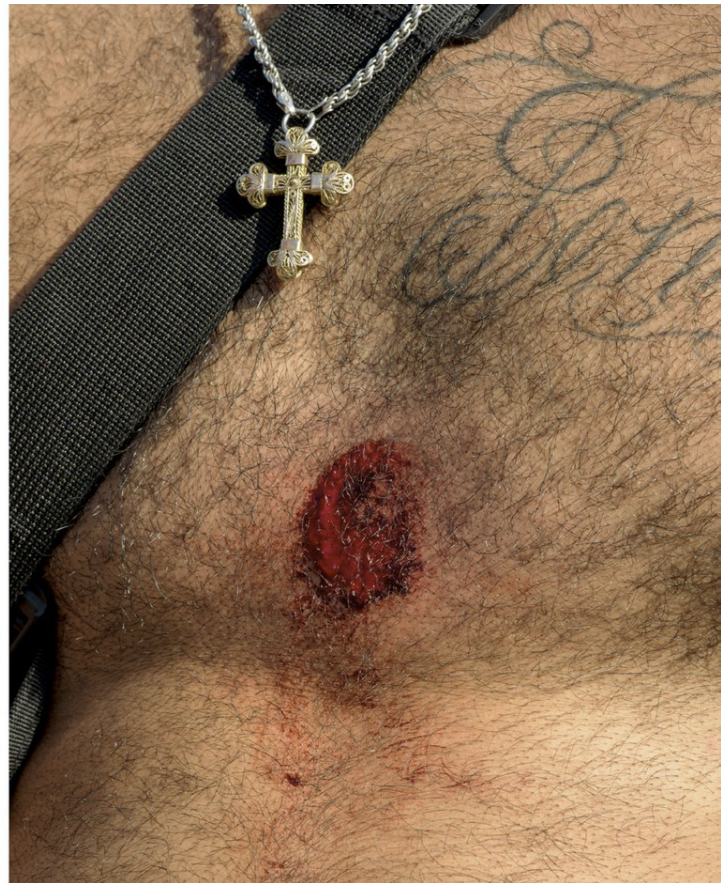
Conor Friedersdorf: Averting a worst-case scenario in Los Angeles

"Huge swaths of the city where I was born now resemble failed third world nations. A ruptured, balkanized society of strangers," Miller wrote Monday on X. He was attacking Governor Gavin Newsom for suing to reverse the Trump administration's takeover of the California National Guard—the first time the government has federalized state forces since 1965. Trump has also called up 700 U.S. Marines.

Miller was defending the use of force to subdue protesters, but he was really talking about something bigger in his hometown. This was a culture war, with real troops.



Robert LeBlanc



Robert LeBlanc

What was the spark? On May 21, Miller and Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem brought the heads of ICE's regional offices to Washington for a dressing-down. Trump had promised the largest mass-removal campaign in U.S. history and wanted 1 million deportations a year. ICE officers had been making far more arrests in American communities than under Joe Biden, but they were well short of Trump's desired pace. Miller demanded 3,000 arrests a day—a nearly fourfold increase—and demoted several top ICE officials who weren't hitting their targets.

Miller's push is just a warm-up. The Republican funding bill Trump wants to sign into law by Independence Day would formalize his goal of 1 million deportations annually, and furnish more than \$150 billion for immigration enforcement, including tens of billions for more ICE officers, contractors, detention facilities, and removal flights. If Los Angeles and other cities are recoiling now, how will they respond when ICE has the money to do everything Miller wants?

Trump and his "border czar," the former ICE acting director Tom Homan, had been insisting for months that the deportation campaign would prioritize violent criminals and avoid indiscriminate roundups. Miller has told ICE officials to disregard that and to hit Home Depot parking lots.

So they have. The number of arrests reported by ICE has soared past 2,000 a day in

recent weeks. Backed by the Border Patrol, the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and other federal law-enforcement agencies pressed into helping ICE, officers are arresting people who show up for immigration-court appointments or periodic “check-ins” to show that they have remained in compliance with court orders. Last week in Los Angeles, ICE teams began showing up at those Home Depot parking lots and work sites, including a downtown apparel factory. This was a red line for many Angelenos. Protesters told me that it was the moment Miller and Trump went from taunts and trolling to something more personal and threatening. About a third of the city’s residents are foreign-born.

Juliette Kayyem: Trump’s gross misuse of the National Guard

“This is humiliating,” Hector Agredano, a 30-year-old community-college instructor who was demonstrating on Sunday outside a Pasadena hotel, told me. ICE officers were rumored to be staying at the location and two others nearby, drawing dozens of protesters who chanted and carried signs demanding ICE OUT OF LA!

“They are tearing apart our families,” Agredano told me. “We will not stand for this. They cannot sleep safely at night while our communities are being terrorized.”

Some activists have been trying to track ICE vehicles and show up where officers make arrests to film and protest. More established activist groups are organizing vigils and marches while urging demonstrators to remain peaceful. They have struggled to contain the younger, angrier elements of the crowd downtown who lack their patience.

On Sunday, I watched protesters block the southbound lanes of the 101 until police cleared them with tear gas. Some in the crowd hurled water bottles and debris down at officers and set off bottle rockets and cherry bombs. The police responded with flash-bangs, which detonate with a burst of light. There were so many explosions happening, it wasn’t easy to tell if they belonged to the protesters or to law enforcement. I tried approaching a police line, and a boom sounded near my head, making my ears ring.

One group of vandals summoned several Waymo self-driving cars to the street next to the plaza where the city was founded and set them ablaze. People in the crowd hooted and cheered at the leaping flames, and the cars’ melting batteries and sensors sent plumes of oily black smoke toward police helicopters circling above. Firetrucks arrived and put out the last of the flames, leaving little piles of gnarled metal. City officials grew more alarmed the following evening, when smaller groups of masked teenagers rampaged through downtown and looted a CVS, an Apple Store, and several other businesses, prompting Mayor Karen Bass to set an 8 p.m. curfew in the area yesterday.

The smoke and flames began shifting attention away from the administration’s immigration crackdown. The imagery has been giddily watched by White House

officials, and it's fueled speculation that it could create an opening for Miller to attempt to invoke the Insurrection Act. For years he has longingly discussed the wartime power, which would give troops a direct law-enforcement role on U.S. streets, potentially including immigration arrests.



Robert LeBlanc

Yesterday, Trump said that he would not allow Los Angeles to be “invaded and conquered by a foreign enemy,” and that he would “liberate” the country’s second-largest city. His send-in-the-Marines order underscored his apparent eagerness to deal with the demonstrators as combatants, rather than as civilians and American citizens.

Since Trump’s announcement, protesters have been on the lookout for the Marines, wondering if their arrival would signal a darker, more violent phase of the government’s response. But military officials said today that the Marine units will need to receive more training in civilian deployments before they go to Los Angeles.

Despite the attention on the federalized California National Guard troops, they have

had a minimal role so far, standing guard at the entrance to the federal building where SMO and other taggers have left messages for Trump and ICE. Mayor Bass said that about 100 soldiers were stationed there as of today. Trump has activated 4,000, and there are signs that their role is already expanding: Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth posted a photo yesterday of soldiers with rifles and full combat gear standing guard for ICE officers making street arrests. “This We’ll Defend,” he wrote.

David Frum: For Trump, this is a dress rehearsal

In downtown Los Angeles, though, the LAPD and the California Highway Patrol—which are under the control of the state and local Democratic leaders—have been left to handle violent protesters and looters. By insisting that Trump’s troop deployment is unnecessary and provocative, Newsom and Bass are under more pressure to make sure that their forces, not Trump’s, can keep a lid on the anger.

Their officers have fired tear gas, flash-bang grenades, and a kind of less-than-lethal projectile known as a sponge grenade that leaves bruises and welts. One Australian television reporter was hit while doing a live report; many others have been shot at point-blank range. Over more than three days of street confrontations, there have been no deaths or reports of serious injuries.

Some protesters gathered up the spent sponge munitions as souvenirs. With a hard foam nose and a thick plastic base, they resemble Nerf darts from hell. I met one protester, carrying a camera, who wore a bandage around his forearm where he’d been struck minutes earlier. Castro—he wouldn’t give me his first name—told me that he was a 39-year-old security guard whose parents are from El Salvador. He likened the pain to a sprained ankle. “I was born and raised in Los Angeles. I support, I love, I stand for America. I love the U.S.A.,” he told me. “I’m here today to support our people of Los Angeles. That’s it.”

Some Democrats outside the state have chafed at the sight of protesters waving Mexican flags and those of other nations, which Trump officials have seized upon as evidence of anti-Americanism. Protesters told me the flags of their or their parents’ home countries are not intended as a sign of loyalty to another nation. Quite a few protesters waved the Stars and Stripes too, or a hybrid of the American flag and their home country’s.

Hailey, a 23-year-old welder carrying a Guatemalan flag, told me she wanted to display her heritage at a protest that brought together people from all over. That was part of belonging to California, she said: “I was born on American soil, but I just think it’s appropriate to celebrate where my family is from. And America is supposed to be a celebration of that.”

Dylan Littlefield, a bishop who joined a rally on Sunday led by union organizers, told me that he grew up in L.A. with Italian Americans displaying their flag. “No one has

ever made a single comment or had any objection to the Italian flag flying, so the people that are making the flag issue now really are trying to create a battle where there's no battle to be had," he said.

The protests against Trump in Los Angeles have picked up, to some extent, where those in Portland left off. In 2020, anti-ICE protesters targeted the federal courthouse in downtown Portland, and DHS sent federal agents and officers to defend the building and confront the crowds. The destructive standoff carried on for months, and the city's Democratic mayor and Oregon's Democratic governor eventually had to use escalating force against rioters. Newsom and Bass seem keen to avoid the price they would pay politically if that were to occur here, but for now they are caught between the need to suppress the violent elements of the protests and their desire to blame the White House for fanning the flames.



Robert LeBlanc

Trump officials say they have delighted in the imagery of L.A. mayhem and foreign-flag waving, but they face a threat, too, if protests spread beyond blue California and become a nationwide movement. That would take pressure off Newsom and Bass.

Doe Hain, a retired teacher I met in Pasadena this week holding a SAVE DEMOCRACY sign for passing motorists, told me that the ICE push into California symbolizes the worst fears of an authoritarian takeover by a president unfazed by the idea of turning troops against Americans. “I don’t really think I can protest the existence of ICE as a federal agency, but we can protest the way that they’re doing things,” Hain said. “They’re bypassing people’s rights and the laws, and that’s not right.”

Few people I spoke with said they thought the protests in Los Angeles would diminish, even if more troops arrive in the city. There have been fewer reports of ICE raids since the protests erupted, and one Home Depot I visited on Monday—south of Los Angeles, in Huntington Park—had had only a handful of arrests that day, bystanders told me. ICE teams had moved to other locations in Southern California and the Central Valley. They will surely be back.

At a minimum, Miller and other Trump officials have come away from this round of confrontations with the imagery they wanted. Today, DHS released a none-too-subtle [social-media ad](#) with a dark, ominous filter, featuring the flaming Waymos, Mexican flags, looters, and rock throwers. “RESTORE LAW AND ORDER NOW!” it said, with the number for an ICE tip line. It fades out on an image of a burning American flag.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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