

# Street Warfare In Portland

*"We are all responsible for our dream of storming the heavens. We cannot turn ourselves into dwarves now, after having dreamed, elbow to elbow, each feeling the others' heartbeats, of attacking and overthrowing the gods. This is the dream that makes power afraid."*

**-Alfredo Bonnano**



A manual of military  
strategy



## Introduction

Historically, anarchists have (rightly) been hostile to and skeptical of formal militaries, both due to their rigid, authoritarian command hierarchies and because of the purpose to which they are directed: waging war, enforcing state and class rule, and committing mass murder. Nevertheless, when engaging in violent struggle, one cannot simply ignore or dispense with military strategy; it is absolutely necessary if one is to struggle effectively. Military doctrine is not a mere ideological construct that can be overthrown along with authority, private property, patriarchy, religion, etc. Military doctrine is a practical application, as practical as engineering or chemistry. It can be applied to evil ends or good ones, and regardless of the ends, it is real whether you believe in it or not, and it will be applied *to* you by the pigs whether or not you choose to apply it for yourself.

The purpose of this brief manual is to lay out the basics of military doctrine and strategy for the benefit of street rebels, and to apply these practically to some events that have occurred recently in the city of Portland. This manual does not advocate illegal/criminal conduct in any form or the use of methods described herein. This manual is a document of only academic/intellectual significance.



for the anarchists' desired political objective—abolishing police—is extremely unlikely to be successful in the near term, either strategically or politically. Whatever the political or strategic situation at any moment in time, there is value in “landing punches” on police, by disabling their vehicles, coating every wall with ‘ACAB’ and circle-A graffiti, making their lives miserable generally. But none should fool themselves that the police’s impending defeat is coming. Open confrontation with the police appears to have exhausted its political usefulness.



Some anarchists have suggested the redirection of covert sabotage tactics toward other fruitful avenues, such as monkeywrenching in service of ecological struggle; fighting banks and landlords as they try to evict people during the pandemic, and the police when they attempt to enforce evictions; fighting against immigration enforcement and the carceral system more generally; and anti-militarist and anti-imperialist action however it can be carried out. A guerrilla strategy of ecological monkeywrenching often has the most direct and achievable path to success. It is quite easy to inflict economic damage on the property, tools, and facilities of Earth-ravaging corporations, and even to save animals, trees, and land from destruction.

It is easy for a loosely-organized anarchist movement in a single city to become focused on its local enemy in the city police, and lose sight of the global struggle that anarchism advocates. The drone strikes haven't stopped, the Earth continues to be ravaged, new prisons and detention facilities are built every day. **Street rebels have a duty to fight for their cause effectively. Proper strategy is not just a practical but a moral necessity. Deciding to fight is only the first part of a long and a difficult process. One still has to figure out how to win.**

(and usually been lost). Tragically, a lot of radical movements dwindle into shells of their former glory, their only continuing activity being to try to support their imprisoned comrades long after the particular struggle those comrades fought for has been abandoned.

The purpose of this section of the manual is not to nag rebels, nor to encourage them to moderate of themselves and be less militant. The purpose is only to draw attention to the critical importance of waging struggle in a tactically smart way. If one is going to commit felonies, one should commit the right ones.

## Conclusion: Grand Strategy

At the beginning of the George Floyd uprisings, there was a strategic and political opening. People and energy were in the streets, there were police stations being burned, stores being looted, and governments were terrified enough that they were seriously considering giving concessions to rebels' demands. The city of Minneapolis even claimed they were going to abolish their city's police department.

There was a war to be fought because victory of some kind, even if only minor and partial victories, was a viable possibility. Wars are fought to achieve political objectives. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century military strategist Clausewitz wrote that "war is the continuation of politics by other means". Military doctrine, the three types of objectives described in this manual, are ultimately only means that are used to attain some end. War should not be fought for its own sake, pursuing these strategic objectives is pointless if the winning army has no actual political agenda to enact upon victory. And it is especially pointless if the objectives cannot actually be achieved in the first place. The strategic opening seems to have closed, not only in Portland but across the US, and while the political opening is still open, it has narrowed—people don't hate the police as much today as they did in June 2020. Violent struggle

## Overview of military strategy

In war, there are three primary kinds of objectives. These are the things that two opposing sides are trying to accomplish when they engage each other in warfare. One needs always to keep them in mind, and use them as the framework for deciding every tactic one uses, if one is to fight effectively. The three types of objective are as follows:

1. ***Neutralization of enemy personnel*** – This primarily consists of killing the enemy's troops, but also can be accomplished by injuring or wounding them so they cannot fight, capturing them as prisoners, or inciting them to disloyalty: which means either they drop their weapons and desert, or they mutiny in some form and change sides (sometimes covertly, sometimes only partially) to fight against your enemy instead of fighting *for* them.
2. ***Area denial*** – This consists of taking and holding physical space (land, buildings) so as to deny its use to the enemy. You fight the enemy to seize their territory, basically. Traditionally in warfare, this is the primary measure of success, capturing more and more territory until the enemy is surrounded or has almost nothing left and they must surrender because they cannot fight anymore. But it is not the only way to win wars, and alone it is sometimes not sufficient to win.
3. ***Resource denial*** – This consists of stealing, ruining, or destroying the enemy's necessary materiel and resources, such as their weapons, ammunition, and vehicles (trucks, tanks, ships, planes, helicopters), but also important less solely-military-purposed resources such as fuel, food, money, raw materials, construction materials, etc.

By definition, each of these three offensive objectives also implies an equivalent *defensive* objective that is the inverse of the offensive objective: preventing the enemy from doing all these things to you. In war one aims to (1) *prevent* one's own

side's personnel from being neutralized; (2) to *defend* one's own territory from being captured; and (3) to protect one's own resources from being seized, destroyed, or (most importantly) *wasted* by ineffective or inefficient use.

Due to the low intensity of street warfare in Portland, this manual will focus heavily on the third type of objective, as the most relevant to the Portland context, though there are important lessons to be learned about all six objectives (three offensive, three defensive).

## Objectives of the first type – Personnel

Fortunately, street warfare in Portland has stayed at a rather low level of intensity. Neither side is trying to actually kill the other (despite occasional exaggerations of enemy brutality by either side). Militants whose primary experience of violent struggle consists of minor vandalism, setting small fires, and kicking tear gas canisters back at the police should not imagine that they have the capability to wage an active shooting war with the state.

It is also inconceivable that street rebels could capture any cops or National Guard troops as prisoners of war or would even want to.

However, street rebels have been observed engaging on occasion with elements of the first offensive objective. Cops have occasionally been (lightly) injured with projectiles, laser pointers, Molotovs, or punches to the face. Some rebels also seem to be engaging in the last type of neutralization tactic: which is to incite the enemy to disloyalty, by desertion in particular. Cops are encouraged to “quit [their] job”, and though it is unlikely this was the spurring factor, many Portland police *have* quit their jobs in the past year (since May 2020) due to what newspapers have reported is “low morale” in the face of a year of unrest, and dozens have gone into retirement,



there is something worthwhile to be achieved. Many people throw projectiles when it won't accomplish anything, and many people start fires that will quickly be put out. Some people will throw a punch (or throw a Molotov, apparently), when it serves no tactical purpose in defeating the enemy. There are some quite limited symbolic victories to be gained from these types of things (and sexy riot footage and photos to be captured), but oftentimes it seems that the risk-to-reward ratio is completely lopsided. All risk and no reward. Many people who are the most enthusiastic about throwing things are very lackadaisical about black bloc and covering their face, making themselves easily identifiable, to be the subject of a targeted arrest later and stuck with criminal charges.

Especially in the waning days of an uprising, when the rebels' numbers have dwindled, the popular support and enthusiasm mostly dissolved, when there is no longer any chance of real victories in open confrontations with the police, it becomes especially unadvisable to go out and get oneself a criminal record willy-nilly. If the revolution has not yet arrived, it makes little sense to make oneself a revolutionary martyr.

Beyond the personal costs of getting arrested and receiving criminal charges, the result of large numbers of arrests and criminal trials is a massive draining of movement and rebel resources. Money and time spent on jail support and legal bills are precious, and usually in short supply. And historically legal battles resulting from direct actions have been known to drag on for years or even a decade after the actual battle has ended

station, mostly only chanting, but also smashing a few of the building's windows and ripping out a light fixture before being chased away when police reinforcements arrived to disperse them. In the other case, on the other side of town, quietly and undercover, an individual militant or group of militants cut through a fence to gain entry to a police station's parking lot, where they disabled several police cars by slashing their tires and smashing their windows. In terms of financial costs inflicted, the latter was more effective for the rebels. And in terms of reducing police resources, the latter was also more effective. As far as the authors are aware, though there were a few arrests at the former action, there were none for the latter.

This brings us to one last type of abstract resource, though which might also be considered under the rubric of personnel, and that is the clean criminal records of street rebels. By definition, street rebellion is criminal, and involves committing illegal acts, often major felonies. Felony riot charges have been stuck to dozens, and one person faces attempted murder charges for allegedly throwing a Molotov cocktail at a cop. The petty vengefulness of prosecutors and the brutal length of sentences being pursued are even worse in many other cities than in the relatively liberal jurisdiction of Portland, with its "progressive prosecutor" district attorney.

Most people joining street rebellions come to them having never been in trouble with the law before. Many in Portland are only teenagers. A clean criminal record is an asset to aspiring revolutionaries, because it means they are likely not yet on the radar of the feds, not yet known by the government to be a threat. Many rebels are committed enough to their cause that they feel it is necessary and justified to break the law and risk criminal charges. Many are brave for doing so. But many rebels are not judicious (ironic) in their choice of when to break the law and when to hold off. If one is going to put themselves on the line and in danger, one should do so when

joined police forces in other cities, or left police work entirely. So that's a job well done from a strategic perspective.

What should concern street rebels more is the first *defensive* objective. No rebels in this city have attempted to kill anyone on the state's side, but the cops and federal security forces have come very near to killing rebels on several occasions. Their weapons and use of force routinely cause severe injuries. Obviously they capture rebels as prisoners all the time—that's what getting arrested is. And though it is difficult to measure, it is undeniable that, broadly construed, they have incited many to "disloyalty". In this context, the word *disloyalty* does not carry any moral condemnation, it only refers to someone who has quit the fight in any form, regardless of their reasons (which might be quite reasonable and justified). Plenty of rebels have become demoralized or exhausted and are choosing to stay home rather than continue to fight nightly clashes with the cops; and in a few cases, some rebels have been encouraged or forced to become snitches, which is to say serving the enemy in the capacity of a spy. Some persons among the rebels' ranks may have never been loyal to begin with: undercover infiltrators.

Normally, in warfare, one is not at liberty to stop fighting and quit the army whenever one desires, even if one has volunteered to fight. Desertion, cowardice, and mutiny are all officially-defined criminal offenses, often punishable by death. This compulsion, being forced to fight, is historically one of the things anarchists find most abhorrent about militaries.

In war, having your personnel neutralized means they have become a "casualty". A casualty is a person who has been killed, wounded, or captured. The defensive objective then, obviously, is to prevent one's own side from taking casualties.

Most of the ways to do this are quite obvious and widely known, but some are not. Obviously wearing protective



equipment like helmets, gas masks, and armor to prevent injuries is an important aspect here (that most rebels in Portland have already caught on to). Wearing clothing that covers the face and body, and participating in black blocs generally, is another important aspect, as it prevents rebels from being identified and arrested later and locked up for longer than just a few hours or days in jail.



Street rebels sometimes attempt rudimentary formation tactics to prevent arrests, though they usually do not succeed very well. Chants of “stay together, stay tight” are an encouragement of the group to remain as a unitary mass so that the group cannot be scattered or split into multiple pieces, and so that straggling individuals are not as vulnerable to being snatched and arrested. When police charge, however, most people’s instinct to run takes over, and no amount of chanting will keep the crowd disciplined enough to hold a formation. One tactic for holding a formation together is the famous locking arms that one might have seen in old photos of the civil rights movement. A line of people locking their elbows together cannot be so easily scattered.

When it comes to the prevention of injuries, many street rebels have donned the role of medic, to provide first aid

Wasting ammo like that is unconscionable. Ammunition is a scarce resource. Street rebels rarely bring their own supply of rocks or glass bottles to throw. And they are unfamiliar with the methods European comrades have used for decades to manufacture their own by breaking up concrete. Prying out bricks and cobblestones with a crowbar, and using hammers and chisels to break up chunks of pavement are time-honored methods of producing perfectly-sized projectiles to throw.



Anonymity, privacy, and secrecy are abstract resources that armed forces rely on, but they are no less important than material resources. Many rebels are versed well in the importance of dressing properly in a black bloc, and leaving their cell phones at home—though many other rebels could of course stand to do a better job at this. Shooing away photographers and streamers is another well-known aspect of this, as video being taken of criminal activity has led to criminal charges. Less well-addressed is the matter of surveillance cameras.

Many surveillance cameras are highly vulnerable and accessible, though rebels frequently ignore them. Painting over them with spray paint or simply ripping them out of the walls is a tactic that has been seldom utilized. Even when high out of reach, wrapping a rope or chain around the plastic arm that holds up a camera and then pulling it down would not be very difficult, if one were so inclined.

From the offensive perspective, the third type of objective is not always pursued most efficiently or effectively. Stated in the previous section was the story of two direct actions. In one case, a black bloc of two hundred protested outside a police

narrative that excessively valorizes the legacy of peaceful protest in the civil rights movement. Property damage is sought after for its own sake, not as a means to an end but as the end in itself, and the goal becomes to maximize the number of opportunities to commit acts of property damage (no matter how trivial), rather than to inflict damage to maximum effect. Everyone is encouraged to throw a water bottle or get a whack in on a piece of glass (any piece), regardless of how little is accomplished. The satisfying sound of glass shattering is seen as the real goal, even if a large crack had already effectively ruined the window and so further smashing is pointless.

Street rebels do not pursue the third offensive objective very efficiently, nor operationalize it strategically. Objects are thrown at police without any concern even for whether the projectile actually hits its target—or any target. It is astonishing the number of water bottles or little pieces of assorted garbage that are thrown over rebels' heads and then land pathetically in the middle of the street, twenty feet away from any cop. The goal seems more to be the emotional gratification of the thrower, who wishes to express their anger and enjoy a certain militant credibility for having been brave enough to commit the felony of attempted assault on a cop. Actually achieving any strategic objective is of secondary importance. The rebels' ammunition, the various projectiles thrown at the cops, is not stewarded very efficiently. Even if throwers could be forgiven for having bad aim or a weak arm and therefore missing their target, oftentimes very lightweight projectiles (such as water bottles) are thrown uselessly at solid walls or police cars, with zero chance they could have broken anything even if they hit their target dead-on. It is in many cases unclear what the thrower hoped to achieve. Conversely, sometimes extremely heavy objects (for example something heavy enough it needs to be held with both hands) are thrown uselessly from a distance so long that the thrower could not possibly hope for it to reach its target. The result is a pathetic heaving of an object onto the ground only a few feet away.

treatment to their injured comrades. The medics have apparently been quite helpful, though there are some things that need to be remembered. Firstly, if an injured person is conscious, mobile, and not complaining of a neck or spinal injury, it is crucial to move them away from the fighting to a safe distance, where they can receive treatment. A crowd of people standing around an injured person lying on the ground are quite vulnerable to police charging at them to cause further injury and to arrest people. Medics already know to urge gawkers and spectators to give a wide distance, so they aren't getting in the way; but medics themselves need to know when it's appropriate to move an injured person away from the police lines. And it's almost *always* appropriate to do so, unless the person has a potential neck or spinal injury that could be worsened if they are moved.



Furthermore, a word on the role of medics: in the laws of warfare (in the Geneva Conventions and customary law), medics are granted a special role. They are immune from being targeted and attacked, and they are to be allowed to do their job by all sides of the conflict

without being harmed or captured themselves. Though obviously each side's medics will give priority to their own side's injured, medics are effectively *neutral* persons. Medics themselves are not to carry or use weapons or participate actively in violence. If they do so, this violates their neutrality and cancels their special status, making them valid targets again. For hundreds of years, in fact, it has been considered a war crime for combatants to impersonate medics so as to gain an advantage through fraud. Medics (or soldiers disguised as medics) shooting guns or using ambulances to carry troops and weapons is considered to be a war crime known as *perfidy*. Abusing this minimal trust that warring sides have to

place in each other would lead to warfare becoming even more brutal and savage than it already is, with no mercy shown even for medics or civilians or surrendering combatants with their hands in the air.

In Portland, the police usually do not respect the rebel medics' self-appointed role, but it has been observed that medics are not always honoring their own role either. Throwing projectiles is generally unacceptable if one has put a red cross on their helmet or their jacket to indicate that they are a medic, as this is participating in the conflict as a combatant. Similar rules apply to journalists and the press.

## Objectives of the second type – Area

In traditional warfare, the primary objective is to capture and hold territory, and/or to defend one's existing territory from being invaded by the enemy. Guerrilla warfare and other non-traditional modes of warfare complicate this picture, as sometimes combatants do not necessarily intend to *immediately* capture and hold territory, and the side of the conflict that holds all the territory might still be losing: as in many of the US's imperialist wars, where insurgents harass, ambush, and inflict casualties on the occupying US army until eventually the costs and losses are too great and the US must give up and leave.

In high-intensity urban unrest, street rebels sometimes do manage to physically overtake the police, forcing the cops to retreat and allowing rebels to hold streets and buildings as their own "territory", at least for a little while. If all the force the cops can muster is insufficient to take the territory back and "restore order", then the actual military is called in, in the form of the National Guard, and street rebels stand no chance of holding out against them (if they did, then a mere riot would be upgraded to the level of a true civil war).



It is not always clear however that all rebels understand this is their strategy. The authors of this manual would not presume to give orders to the rebels or appoint themselves as movement strategists (and to reiterate, do not advocate criminal conduct of any kind), but it is unclear what the overall strategy could be if this weren't it.

Some rebels appear to view their role primarily in symbolic, discursive, or moralistic terms. They believe there is a spectrum of action one could take against police brutality, starting with the least militant in the form of legal peaceful protests, then escalating to unlawful protests (billed as "direct action marches") defying police orders, escalating further to criminal acts of riot and property destruction, and then perhaps (theoretically) escalating maximally to the most extreme act, which would be to actually hurt or kill people. Many rebels rhetorically advocate this (in the form of painting "Kill Cops" as a slogan), though virtually none appear to own guns or be prepared to actually do it. In the rebel milieu, minor acts of property destruction seem to take on the role of a symbol or a statement, *owning the libs* who condemn rioting as "going too far", and perhaps arguing against a mainstream



## Objectives of the third kind – Resources

Theoretically one could imagine a kind of primitive warfare fought entirely with fists, but in practice, all warfare relies on materiel. An army needs *arms*, after all. And a group intending to pursue violent struggle needs not only weapons to use against its enemy, but also the necessary supplies to maintain itself. They say an “army marches on its stomach”, which means that if the troops are not fed, they cannot fight. In modern warfare especially, the protection of one’s own economic resources and the destruction of the enemy’s economic resources become the primary objectives to pursue, almost more important even than killing the enemy’s troops. In World War II, Germany and Japan’s military strategy mainly involved trying to cut off the supply of food and fuel to their enemies, and the US and UK’s strategy mainly involved bombing their enemies’ factories and railways so that weapons could not be produced and supplies could not reach the forces fighting on the front.

Street warfare in Portland is usually not so intense as that, but the same *principles* apply. The objective of the rebels is to disrupt the orderly conduct of society and to inflict economic damage on its many enemies. Anarchists in particular intend to inflict damage on the state’s facilities and on capitalist corporations in the form of banks, chain restaurants, and retail outlets. While there is something to be said for playful *jouissance* and the delights of rebellion for its own sake; in general, anarchist militants have, as a practical matter, the goal of retaliating destructively against the state for the police murders of black people, as an act of revenge and intimidation, as well as slowing down the orderly administration of government and rendering it less efficient and effective. Wasting the police’s time and doing property damage is a way of doing that: of burning through their budget and exhausting their bureaucrats.

In the very first days of the Portland unrest, there were some very brief moments when police were in retreat, when the Justice Center was invaded (and righteous fires set), when downtown shops were undefended long enough that they could be looted. But since then, rebels have not posed any serious threat of taking and holding space against the police. Rowdy protests outside police stations and courthouses generally persist at the sufferance of the police, who can—and do—choose to break up and disperse the rebels at basically any time they choose. Once the police make the decision to gather their forces and march to push them away—sometimes pushing them dozens of blocks away—rebels have never been able to do anything other than retreat. This is not a criticism or indictment of the rebels, merely an acknowledgement of the reality: they are too poorly armed, too few in number, and too disorganized to be able to seriously challenge police control of public space, to actually push the cops back when they come to push.

At times, street rebels have appeared cognizant enough of this to acknowledge the futility of even attempting to hold space in defiance of police orders. Rebels have occasionally chosen to play to their own strengths, the crowd staying mobile,



smashing and spraying graffiti as they move, rather than choosing a single place to try to have a showdown with the overwhelmingly more powerful police. On rare occasion, rebels have dispensed with the mode of mass demonstrations entirely, and have adopted methods of truly covert sabotage. One time recently, while a bloc of two-hundred were facing off outside a police station, managing only to break a few windows before a riot was declared and they were forcibly dispersed, at the same time on the other side of the city one or a few anonymous individuals cut through a chain link fence at a different police station, and slashed the tires and smashed the windows of nearly a dozen parked police cars. Adopting covert guerrilla tactics is historically the method revolutionaries use when they face an enemy too powerful to fight head-on. We will return to this incident in the next section.

However, control of public space can be more fluid than the classic lines on a map might indicate. It is not always as cut-and-dry as either holding or retreating. Sometimes a band of rebels is mobile, as mentioned previously, and sometimes the mob is not directly engaging the police but also not immediately fleeing either. There are gray areas, and moments of time where the situation is in flux. Though the disconnected rebels are generally unorganized, there are some crude methods of rallying group cohesion and communicating tactics and strategy.

One method of doing that is the classic call-and-response chant of “whose streets? *Our streets!*” This is not merely an exciting chant or an ideological statement. The point of chanting it is not simply to make noise, nor simply to make a communist ideological statement about the people’s common ownership of the street. The point is to gauge the temperature

of the crowd when entering an engagement with the police. When police order the crowd to disperse, starting up a chant of “whose streets?!” is a way of communicating to the police that their orders to disperse will be defied, and rallying the crowd to a collective strategy: “no surrender! We will be resisting and not retreating right now.” If the chant catches on widely and enthusiastically, then the crowd is collectively voting in favor of that strategy. If the chant fails to catch on or fizzles out, that means that morale is low and the crowd is not fired up and prepared for a defiant confrontation at that moment, and prefers to retreat. This is by no means a foolproof way of communicating, not everyone will be quite on the same page. But unfortunately, the tactic has at times been effectively neutralized by ideological nitpicking, when people have decided to change the callback from “our streets!” to instead shout “stolen land!” The chant can no longer serve its purpose very effectively, once it has been stripped of its immediate *practical* meaning, and only become an abstract political slogan.

At any rate, the question of relative strength between warring sides, and the ability of one side or the other to take and hold physical space is of paramount importance. Many times, rebels engage in conflicts where they are seemingly *attempting* to invade and occupy a particular space: a street, a park, a police station, though they know they have no real chance of doing so, and are simply waiting to be chased away by superior police force. In light of the third kind of objectives described in the next section, this can sometimes make sense. But sometimes the strategy is foolhardy and inefficient. It is crucial to military strategy to understand that the *format* of most battles is two sides battling to control space, and rebels must keep that format in mind at all times.