

OPINION

Rittenhouse and the Right's White Vigilante Heroes

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Kyle Rittenhouse, the 18-year-old who shot and killed two men and wounded a third last year during protests of the police shooting of Jacob Blake, was found not guilty Friday of all charges by a Wisconsin jury.

One can argue about the particulars of the case, about the strength of the defense and the ham-handedness of the prosecution, about the outrageously unorthodox manner of the judge and the infantilizing of the defendant. But perhaps the most problematic aspect of this case was that it represented yet another data point in the long history of some parts of the right valorizing white vigilantes who use violence against people of color and their white allies.

Rittenhouse has emerged as a hero and cause célèbre on the right, with people donating to help him make bail and one Republican strategist telling Politico that he “could see a future in which Rittenhouse becomes a featured speaker at the conservative confabs where activists congregate.”

The idea of taking the law into one's own hands not only to protect order, but also to protect *the* order, is central to the maintenance of white power and its structures. The killers of Ahmaud Arbery on trial in Georgia are also vigilantes.

George Zimmerman, the man who shot and killed Trayvon Martin in 2012, was also a vigilante, and also embraced by the right. Money also poured in for Zimmerman's defense.

In 1984, subway vigilante Bernard Goetz shot four Black teenagers who he said were trying to rob him. He was hailed as a hero, but then more details about him began to emerge. One of his neighbors wrote in *New York* magazine that he had heard Goetz say at a community meeting that "the only way we're going to clean up this street is to get rid of the spics and niggers."

This list is long, and doesn't only include individuals, but also organizations and entire periods of American history. I am sure that many in the white Citizens' Councils and the Ku Klux Klan also saw themselves as vigilantes.

Perhaps the most prolonged period of violent white vigilantism occurred in the decades following the Civil War, as lynchings surged.

This vigilante impulse, what some call justice and others terror, has been a central feature of the American experience. So has the way people have made heroes of vigilantes, encouraging, supporting and defending them.

When Donald Trump was running for office in 2016, he encouraged his supporters to assault rabble-rousers at his rallies while promising, "I'll pay the legal fees."

The St. Louis couple who waved guns in front of Black Lives Matter protesters in the summer of 2020 were invited to speak at the Republican National Convention.

One could argue that the entire Jan. 6 insurrection was one enormous act of vigilantism.

You could also argue that our rapidly expanding gun laws — from stand your ground laws to laws that allow open or concealed carry — encourage and protect vigilantes.

It goes without saying how ominous this all is for the country. Or, to turn the argument around, how intransigent the country is on this issue of empowering white men to become vigilantes themselves.

Black vigilantes are not celebrated, but feared, condemned and constrained by the law.

Perhaps one of the more prominent Black groups that one could argue had a vigilante impulse was the Black Panthers. They were seen as a threat. As I have written before, in 1967, when the Panthers showed up armed at the California State Legislature, a largely white place of power, the public was aghast.

Then-Gov. Ronald Reagan said: “I don’t think that loaded guns is the way to solve a problem that should be solved between people of good will. And anyone who would approve of this kind of demonstration must be out of their mind.”

The California Legislature passed, and Reagan signed, the Mulford Act, which banned the open carry of firearms in the state. The N.R.A. supported the measure. The bill’s author, Don Mulford, said at the time, “We’ve got to protect society from nuts with guns.”

Whether a vigilante is viewed as radical or righteous is often a condition of the skin they’re in.

And the verdict in the Rittenhouse case is only likely to encourage more vigilantes, those who want to keep or impose “order,” those irked by the idea that disorder could flow from injustice, those who don’t want to see streets filled with people demanding equity.

The great threat, and real possibility, is that there are other Rittenhouses out there — young men who watched this verdict and saw how the right has embraced and celebrated a murderer, and now want to follow his lead.

The worst thing for America would be that this case becomes exemplar and precursor.