

Self-appointed watchdogs of Texas police are in the streets and in your face

By NIGEL DUARA JUN 28, 2015 | 4:00 AM | ARLINGTON, TEXAS



Dallas police close off a street after a shooting. Citizens with the Cop Block campaign film traffic stops and watch officers for potential violations of search laws. The Arlington chapter does so with a Texas flair. (Laura Buckman / AFP/Getty Images)

Kenny Lovett sweated through an intersection in this Dallas suburb, eyes twitching to either side of the highway. He didn't like being out here exposed in Bike Cop Mike's turf.

Sure enough, enemy colors soon filled the rearview mirror of Lovett's truck — not a bike this time, it was a full-on police cruiser.

"Here we damn go," Lovett said.

The patrol car and a motorcycle sped up and passed him. False alarm.

Lovett and his passenger, Kory Watkins, were out on patrol as part of North Texas Cop Block, the local chapter of a political coalition that has sprung up across the country alongside protests against police violence in Missouri, New York and Cleveland.

The national Cop Block campaign aims to police the police by filming traffic stops and watching for potential violations of search laws. Here in Arlington, the campaign has taken on a uniquely Texas spin.

With the two Texas activists in the cab of Lovett's big Chevy Tahoe, tickets and fines become "robbery," an arrest is "a kidnapping by the state," a concealed-handgun permit is "a tax on the 2nd Amendment." Laws are measured in increments of the rights they take away.

Watkins and Lovett also host a regular Friday night Internet radio show, urging people to know their rights, arm themselves and maintain vigilance against the police state.

"Police get celebrated like rock stars when they slam someone's head in the pavement," caller Dominique Alexander reflected one recent night. "We need to fix this stuff."

"Amen, brother," Watkins replied.

Out on patrol, Watkins and Lovett wait for police traffic stops on small infractions like failing to signal, or visits to conduct welfare checks, which they call a broad excuse to carry out a search. Another Cop Block chapter in Texas, in the town of Riesel, brought lawn mowers to 75-year-old Gerry Suttle's house when she faced arrest because of an overgrown lawn.

Cop Block activists around the country tend to have a common routine. At a police traffic stop, their first step is to pull out cellphones and yell instructions to people who have been pulled over.

That sometimes ends up with the activists getting arrested, as attested to dozens of times on YouTube, where police accountability groups gleefully post shouting matches between police and protesters.

As in the Occupy movement, each Cop Block chapter relies on social media and bears the cultural markers of the places that birthed them. In Berkeley, accountability groups want a demilitarized police, and the fewer guns on all sides, the better.

There's a decidedly different flavor in Arlington, where Watkins has a terrier named Glock, owns at least two editions of the libertarian-flavored "Ron Paul Family Cookbook" and argues that the open carrying of firearms is a civil right.

Watkins, 31, is the surprisingly thin man with the deep voice that became locally famous for shouting matches in the statehouse; after one brusque confrontation Watkins had with a House Democratic leader in January, legislators voted to install panic buttons in their offices. "Understand, it takes a lot to scare the Legislature," Fort Worth Star-Telegram columnist Bud Kennedy wrote afterward. "These are some of the huntin'-est, shootin'-est pistol-packin' sidewinders who ever raised a Ruger."

Clean-cut and fine-boned, Watkins speaks quietly and infrequently when he's off air, and tends to dress like someone lying low in the Caribbean: a plain navy T-shirt, wide-brimmed straw hat and wide sunglasses that take up the middle third of his face.

Lovett is his physical opposite. A thick mustache and sideburns frame his gregarious, eager eyes above a shirt picturing an assault rifle, a bullet and the words "Come And Take It." He laughs often, especially at himself.

"When police pull me over, I turn into a Democrat then," Lovett said. "I answer a question with a question."

Watkins made news in February when he released a video, since taken down, after the dust-up with the Democratic leader. In it, Watkins declares that opposition to guns rights amounts to treason, and "it's punishable by death."

The Arlington police have been casting a wary eye.

"As they have become bolder and more confrontational, group members have increasingly encroached upon officers at scenes of law enforcement activity," Arlington Deputy Police Chief Leland Strickland wrote in a department memo last year advising officers on interactions with Watkins' group.

North Texas Cop Block activists have also drawn attention in the local media for hours-long protests in shopping centers in which they carry antique guns or other firearms that are legal to openly display.

"Fox [News] says we're scaring soccer moms in shopping malls," Lovett said with a grin.

But Watkins has a different take: "We are normalizing people walking around with guns."

Through a crackle of static, a call came across Lovett's radio. It was one they're attuned to, a driver stopped for failing to signal when turning at a well-known intersection.

"They'll use that to turn it into a search," Lovett said.

Lovett wheeled his truck around and skimmed the edge of the speed limit en route to the intersection. They were too slow.

Both cop and driver were gone.

Toward the end of a rather disappointing Saturday afternoon watching Arlington police, Lovett passed a flashing road sign that read, "Protect your car, secure your valuables."

Alternatives came to them quickly. "Secure the Constitution," Lovett shouted.

"Be wary," Watkins countered. "Of everyone and everything."

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