

A Trump Ally Is Training 75 Armed Citizens. Is That a Militia?

Bruce Blakeman, the Nassau County executive, is recruiting “special deputies” to deploy during disaster or unrest. Opponents say the move is dangerous.



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By Corey Kilgannon

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The leader of a New York City suburb is recruiting 75 armed citizens, many of them former police officers, for a force of “special deputies” to be activated whenever he chooses.

Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman, a Republican who has allied himself with former President Donald J. Trump and thrust himself into the culture wars, posted a call in March for residents with gun permits and an interest in becoming “provisional emergency special deputy sheriffs.”

The posting called the initiative a strategy to assist in the “protection of human life and property during an emergency” such as a hurricane or blackout — and perhaps, Mr. Blakeman later added, “a riot.”

The new force has drawn vocal opposition in this well-to-do Long Island county, which is one of the country’s safest, protected by one of the largest police departments. It has plunged Nassau into a national debate about authoritarianism in an election season that some see as a fork in the road for American democracy.

Mr. Blakeman said in an interview that the program was about “providing another layer of protection” for residents. “I didn’t want to be in a situation where we had a major emergency and we needed help and people were not properly vetted or trained,” he said.

But critics have accused him of creating, with little notice or explanation, an unsanctioned militia answering only to him. They called the move especially dangerous amid heightened fears of political violence, and as Mr. Trump promulgates plans for mass deportations and quashing dissent.

Sabine Margolis, an I.T. program manager from Great Neck, said that Mr. Blakeman was using the pretext of an emergency response team to create a “clandestine armed presence.” Her online petition called “Stop Bruce Blakeman’s Personal Nassau County Militia” has received more than 2,600 signatures, and opponents have held rallies pillorying both the program and the lack of details on training, scope of recruitment and parameters of the deputies’ duties.

Mr. Blakeman dismissed criticism that the program is politically motivated, but it has provoked a more forceful reaction than his previous provocations. He has railed against bail reform, migrants and mask mandates, has called Democrats like Gov. Kathy Hochul soft on crime and has portrayed Nassau County as besieged by lawlessness — and used neighboring New York City as a cautionary example.



Mr. Blakeman has allied himself closely with Donald J. Trump, even shielding him from the rain at an appearance on Long Island. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

But Mr. Blakeman's opponents say that giving police powers to civilian gun owners could result in accidental shootings and is an implied threat to minorities and political enemies.

"It's fear-mongering, and it's very damaging to people," said Delia DeRiggi-Whitton, the Democratic minority leader of the County Legislature.

"It's the opposite way we want to be going, a private militia with guns," she said. "We're trying to work on gun control, rather than promote them."

Mr. Blakeman said he created the force so that "in an emergency, if we required them to protect infrastructure or government buildings or schools or hospitals, that would free up our police."

Of roughly 100 applicants so far, about 25 have already been trained, Mr. Blakeman said, and he plans to train 50 more. His office would not provide applicants' names but described the backgrounds of nearly a score of members — a mix of retired

police officials, former veterans and other emergency responders and one bank chairman.

Enrollees receive training in the law, on firearms and on the use of deadly force, Mr. Blakeman has said. Preference goes to retired police officers, military veterans and security guards.

A spokesman said that the county pays members their \$150 daily stipend from tax dollars only when they are activated for emergencies, that they use their own guns and that there is a list of permissible firearms.

Mr. Blakeman said that the program was not a militia and called the gun-control argument “ridiculous.” Being armed, he said, is crucial in an emergency.

“How could you protect infrastructure if you’re not armed?” he said, adding, “What should we do? Hide under the covers?”

The issue of the new force grew particularly contentious after Mr. Blakeman acknowledged in April that the deputies could be activated to patrol chaotic demonstrations. When a WPIX reporter asked whether he could declare a political protest an emergency, he said, “if the riot was to a level where they were burning buildings.”

Asked about the comment in an interview this week, Mr. Blakeman said that protests would be left to the police. Of the special deputies program, he said, “Of course, it would not be used for political purposes.”

Neither the county sheriff nor police responded to requests for comment.



Mr. Blakeman's rules about transgender athletes on county-owned fields drew protesters in February. Anna Watts for The New York Times

In New York, a county executive officially administers budgets and taxes, and services like roads and parks. But the job can also be a way station for higher office, and Mr. Blakeman, in office since 2022, appears regularly on Fox News and other outlets.

His championship of red-meat issues has endeared him to conservative voters in the county of 1.4 million residents. Although Democrats hold a slight edge over Republicans as registered voters there, Mr. Blakeman defeated the incumbent, Laura Curran, partly by campaigning on a promise to “restore law and order.”

In February, Mr. Blakeman made national headlines with an executive order banning transgender athletes from playing on county-owned fields unless they competed on a coed team or the one matching their birth gender. In May, a judge ruled that Mr. Blakeman lacked the authority to issue the order. The next month the Republican-controlled County Legislature voted along party lines to enact it as law.

Jay Jacobs, the Democratic Party chairman for both Nassau County and New York State, accused Mr. Blakeman of using such issues to distract voters from his lack of progress on cutting property taxes and fees and fixing the property assessment system.

“This is all to solidify his extreme right-wing base,” Mr. Jacobs said. “Instead of solving the county’s problems, he’s appealing to the right wing by speaking the language they like: militia, guns, law and order.”

“There is no problem he is looking to solve,” Mr. Jacobs added. “Does he think we’re going to be invaded by Suffolk County?”



Mr. Blakeman said his opponents are turning a simple database into a political weapon. Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

Critics say Mr. Blakeman’s plan reflects intimations of violence by Mr. Trump and his allies. Mr. Trump has said that shoplifters should be shot; suggested that his supporters might commit violence if the Supreme Court ruled against him; and

refused to rule out political violence if he were to lose in November. He plans to deputize local law enforcement officers to carry out mass deportations of migrants.

Ms. DeRiggi-Whitton said in an interview that she had heard from Jewish residents who likened Mr. Blakeman's initiative to the rise of Nazi forces under Hitler. One person referenced the Brownshirts, a paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party formed in the 1920s.

When Ms. DeRiggi-Whitton told reporters this in April, Mr. Blakeman, who is Jewish, called the comparison offensive and demanded her resignation.

His plan certainly has supporters, including Jennifer O'Sullivan, 51, a Republican voter who said the deputies could have helped, for instance, when houses were robbed after being evacuated for Hurricane Sandy.

"The county just wants to be prepared, and they're not just rounding up anyone," she said. "People with full carry permits are extremely law-abiding. They have to have a clean record and referrals regarding their character."

Mr. Blakeman said a similar special deputy program exists in Westchester County, which is led by a Democratic county executive.

But Westchester's chief operating officer, Joan McDonald, said that Westchester's force, which provides support for parade and festivals, operates under a measure enacted by the State Legislature decades ago specifically for the county.

Members receive 178 hours of training, including 67 hours on firearms, in accordance with state standards for peace officers, she said. Most importantly, she said, its deputies answer to the county's Department of Public Safety.

In a recent letter to Nassau lawmakers, Ms. McDonald wrote, "Westchester has not created a private militia, as County Executive Bruce Blakeman has done."

Mr. Blakeman said his critics are assailing — and exaggerating — a program that will make the county safer.

“It’s a database and it’s nothing more than that,” he said. “People are trying to make it more than it is.”

Corey Kilgannon is a Times reporter who writes about crime and criminal justice in and around New York City, as well as breaking news and other feature stories. [More about Corey Kilgannon](#)

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