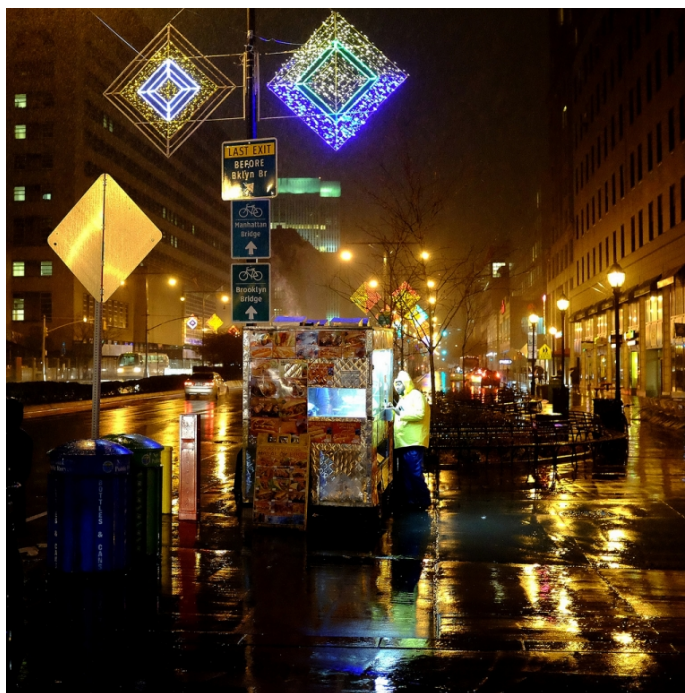


Why are Republicans scared of America's cities?

By **Harry Blain**, Researcher at LSE Cities



Why are senior Republicans describing cities as “war-zones”, security threats and spaces of total disorder?

In May, the *New York Times*' Robert Draper **asked Donald Trump** to name the most dangerous place he has visited in the world. After initially joking “Brooklyn”, the Republican presidential nominee answered “No... there are places in America that are among the most dangerous in the world. You go to places like Oakland. Or Ferguson. The crime numbers are worse. Seriously.” Two months later, Trump **underlined the point**, telling a crowd in Ohio that “you could go to war zones in countries that we're fighting and it's safer than living in some of our inner cities that are run by the Democrats.” This picture of urban degeneration featured heavily in his speech at the Republican National Convention, in which he promised that **“safety will be restored”**:

“Homicides last year increased by 17% in America's fifty largest cities... In our nation's capital, killings have risen by 50%. They are up nearly 60% in nearby Baltimore. In the President's hometown of Chicago, more than 2,000 have been the victims of shootings this year alone. And more than 3,600 have been killed in the Chicago area since he took office.”

Although Trump's claims about “inner-city crime reaching record levels” are **factually false**, the message is clear: Democrats have failed American cities. But this language is not confined to Trump himself, nor is it simply political point-scoring. Instead, it is part of a wider narrative – advanced principally by Republicans – which sees the city as a place of danger, lawlessness and moral degradation.

For Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York City and prominent Trump surrogate, inner cities are plagued with everything from **endemic “black on black” crime** to **voter fraud**. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich has **painted a similarly grim picture**: “We look at Baltimore where 13 percent of the students pass the eighth grade math test. Look at Detroit where about 9 percent of the students are passing a third grade reading test. You know, more Americans have been killed

while Obama was president in Chicago than in Iraq and Afghanistan combined.” “The schools in our urban areas **are a dreaded failure**”, added New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, blaming “the teachers union”, “who say that substandard education in our urban areas can only be fixed by giving it more money and that that’s all they’re going to do about it and not change the underlying problems that we have on violence.”

To be clear, some of this is true and many Democrats have similar concerns about urban poverty and crime. It’s worth remembering, too, that racially coded language has not been the preserve of the Right – as Hillary Clinton’s infamous “**super-predator**” remark demonstrates. Yet, what distinguishes these senior Republicans is their portrayal of entire cities as “war-zones”, security threats and spaces of total disorder.

The idea is not new. In 2003, Richard J. Norton wrote a highly influential paper for the Naval War College Review called “**Feral Cities**”. “In a feral city”, he wrote, “social services are all but nonexistent, and the vast majority of the city’s occupants have no access to even the most basic health or security assistance.” While “a feral city does not descend into complete, random chaos... criminals, armed resistance groups, clans, tribes, or neighbourhood associations, exert various degrees of control over portions of the city.” Norton did not have American cities in mind, focusing instead on Johannesburg, Rio and Mexico City among others. But the key point is universal: “Feral cities do not represent merely a sociological or urban-planning issue; they present unique military challenges.”

If the urban space is seen through the lens of security threats or emergencies, normal rules and conventions no longer apply. Thus, ostensibly for financial reasons, some American cities have already been subjected to unelected “emergency” management – often with **disastrous results**. Others have seen the prospect of the growing militarisation of their police forces, as documented in detail by Radley Balko’s *Rise of the Warrior Cop*. The logic of Trump, Giuliani, Christie and Gingrich sees these measures as either necessary or not going far enough. Mr. Giuliani made this clear in 2014 after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, when he told the (black) Georgetown Professor Michael Eric Dyson: “**White police officers wouldn’t be there if you weren’t killing each other.**”

Race is clearly a major force behind the Republican image of the “feral city.” But perhaps more fundamentally, there is an aversion to the city itself. As Richard Sennett **argues**, cities are – almost by definition – places that have to live with conflict and difference. They unsettle the family, the workplace and social relations, while making poverty and crime more visible. This has scared people across the political spectrum for centuries – and the fear never seems to be eased by more numerous, aggressive and better-armed police. It does, however, remain a powerful tool and emotion: one which has been weaponised by Donald Trump and the Republican Party. The question is: will it help them win?

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