

## ***Why Media Conflation of Activism with Terrorism has Dire Consequences: The Case of Cop City***

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### ***Summary***

The aftermath of 9/11 witnessed the emergence of new laws and policies designed to police individuals regarded as "terrorists." While the popular perception of terrorism centered around Arabs, Muslims, and those who "look Muslim," the U.S. national security apparatus quietly broadened its definition of terrorism to include peace activists, environmental justice activists, animal rights activists, Black Lives Matter activists and others. Counterterrorism resources have been used to infiltrate political organizations that "criticize business interests and government policies," according to the ACLU, despite a lack of evidence that the groups were either engaged in or intended to use violent action.<sup>2</sup> For instance, anti-terrorism training was given to police officers in the lead up to the protests against the Keystone XL Pipeline in 2018.<sup>3</sup> And the U.S. government labeled indigenous activists opposed to the pipeline as "extremists."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> FOIA requests filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 2004 show that the FBI investigated peace activists, animal rights activists, lawyers groups and others. According to the ACLU, the FBI expanded its definition of "domestic terrorism" to include citizens participating in lawful protests or civil disobedience. Since then, various states have followed suit with state laws on terrorism that similarly target lawful protests. ACLU. (2005, December 20). *New Documents Show FBI Targeting Environmental and Animal Rights Groups Activities as 'Domestic Terrorism'*.

<https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/new-documents-show-fbi-targeting-environmental-and-animal-rights-groups-activities>.

<sup>3</sup> ACLU. (2018, September 4). *FOIA Document – Government Email about "anti-terrorism training" ahead of Keystone XL Pipeline protests*.

<https://www.aclu.org/documents/foia-document-government-email-about-anti-terrorism-training-ahead-keystone-xl-pipeline>

<sup>4</sup> Parrish, W.; Levin, S. (2018, September 20). *'Treating protest as terrorism': US plans crackdown on Keystone XL activists*. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/sep/20/keystone-pipeline-protest-activism-crackdown-standing-rock>

This process of labeling activists as “terrorists” is taking place right now in Georgia. Since December 2022, dozens of activists opposed to the construction of a \$90 million, 85-acre police training complex, colloquially known as “Cop City,” have been indicted as “domestic terrorists.” If convicted of these charges, they could face up to 35 years in prison, with a minimum sentence of five years.<sup>5</sup>

Georgia authorities claim that the protestors are violent and have attacked the police, terrorized the community, and destroyed property.<sup>6</sup> Lawyers for those arrested contend that the charges are fabricated and that activists are being harshly penalized for civil disobedience.<sup>7</sup> Human and Civil Rights groups have denounced Georgia’s use of terrorism laws, stating that they stifle lawful protests and erode First Amendment Rights; they have asked Georgia to drop the unfounded charges.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, if such a law were in place in the 1960s, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., born in Atlanta, might have been charged as a “terrorist” for his civil disobedience, potentially facing a lengthy prison sentence.

Alarming, Georgia has deployed state violence to squash the movement, even going so far as to kill an activist encamped in the forest. This is the first time in U.S. history that an environmental justice activist has been killed by law enforcement authorities.<sup>9</sup> This action echoes the use of violence against the Standing Rock movement in North Dakota in 2016, where over 300 protestors were injured by the police.<sup>10</sup> While the police have faced no charges, an activist was sentenced to six years in jail on the grounds of “domestic terrorism” for damaging the Dakota Access Pipeline.<sup>11</sup> This conflation of property damage with terrorism sets a dangerous precedent. Georgia expanded its definition of terrorism to include property destruction in 2017 and is using this law to prosecute activists.

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<sup>5</sup> Carr, C. (2023, March 3). *Letter Calling for Dropping of Domestic Terrorism Charges Against Defend the Atlanta Forest Activists*. Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/03/letter-calling-dropping-domestic-terrorism-charges-against-defend-atlanta-forest>

<sup>6</sup> Among those indicted is a lawyer for the Southern Poverty Law Center who was at the protests as a legal observer. Southern Poverty Law Center. (2023, March 6). *NLG and SPLC Statements on Arrest of Legal Observer*. <https://www.splcenter.org/presscenter/nlg-and-splc-statements-arrest-legal-observer>

<sup>7</sup> Among those arrested and charged with terrorism is a lawyer who works for Southern Poverty Law Center who was at the protests as a legal observer on behalf of the National Lawyers Guild.

<sup>8</sup> Carr, C. (2023, March 3). *Letter Calling for Dropping of Domestic Terrorism Charges Against Defend the Atlanta Forest Activists*. Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/03/letter-calling-dropping-domestic-terrorism-charges-against-defend-atlanta-forest#:~:text=If%20successfully%20prosecuted%2C%20these%20domestic,and%20chill%20free%20speech%20activities.>

<sup>9</sup> Shahshahani, A. (2023, September 15). *Cop Cities in a Militarized World*. Boston Review. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/cop-cities-in-a-militarized-world/>

<sup>10</sup> Dakwar, J. (2016, November 22). *Police at Standing Rock Are Using Life-Threatening Crowd-Control Weapons to Crack Down on Water Protectors*. ACLU. <https://www.aclu.org/news/racial-justice/police-standing-rock-are-using-life-threatening-crowd>

<sup>11</sup> United States Attorney’s Office, Southern District of Iowa. (2022, September 23). *Arizona Woman Sentenced to Six Years in Prison for Conspiracy to Damage the Dakota Access Pipeline*. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdia/pr/arizona-woman-sentenced-six-years-prison-conspiracy-damage-dakota-access-pipeline>

The emerging pattern is one where, on one hand, law enforcement may resort to violence, even up to fatal force, while, on the other hand, protestors face indictment for merely occupying treehouses. To the extent that protestors are charged with violence, the arrest warrants from December and January show that these revolve around acts such as "throwing rocks" and, in a single instance, possessing a weapon.<sup>12</sup> All of this is being justified within the framework of "terrorism" and the associations it carries, shaped by the decades-long "war on terror."

This report, authored by a media studies scholar, sheds light on how six leading U.S. national newspapers, as well as a local newspaper, covered the arrests of 42 activists on the grounds of "domestic terrorism" from December 2022 to March 2023. To date, the majority of terrorism arrests in Georgia took place during this period. Since then, Georgia's Attorney General has used racketeering charges against protestors and their supporters with five additional people being charged as domestic terrorists.<sup>13</sup>

Previous research has shown that the mainstream media's framing of terrorism influences public opinion and shapes support or opposition to policies such as Georgia's 2017 terrorism law.<sup>14</sup> In any well-functioning democracy, it is vital for the media to ask critical questions, provide accurate information, and hold the government accountable for its actions. This report shows that the media coverage of Cop City had a mixed track record in doing so, with some outlets acting as spokespeople for government officials, labeling protestors as violent "terrorists," while other outlets provided more balanced, accurate coverage.

We analyzed articles from six widely circulated national newspapers in the United States: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Additionally, we incorporated Georgia's *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* to provide a local perspective.

Media coverage of terrorism-related arrests in Atlanta largely fell into two distinct camps based on the portrayal of the protestors:

1. **Protestors as Violent:** Media frames that emphasize violence, property destruction, or depict protestors as imminent threats tend to rationalize terrorism-related arrests. This framing often aligns with the government's perspective justifying these

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<sup>12</sup> Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County. (2022, December 15). *Arrest Warrants*. [https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined\\_redacted](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined_redacted)

<sup>13</sup> The Associate Press. (2023, September 5). *61 indicted on racketeering charges in Georgia in 'Stop Cop City' movement*. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/61-indicted-racketeering-charges-georgia-stop-cop-city-movement-rcna103561>

<sup>14</sup> Norris, P.; Kern, M.; Just, M. (2004). *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government and the Public*. Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Framing-Terrorism-The-News-Media-the-Government-and-the-Public/Norris-Kern-Just/p/book/9780415947190>

arrests as essential to maintaining public safety and order. Government sources tend to dominate while the voices of protestors and their supporters are largely sidelined. For example, the *New York Post* had almost twice as many quotes from government sources as from protestors. To the extent that protestors and their supporters are quoted, these quotes were cherry picked to present them in a negative light. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* began this way and had no interviews with protestors during the first round of terrorism arrests in December 2022. The CEO of its parent company Cox, had chaired the fund-raising campaign for Cop City raising \$60 million.<sup>15</sup> And while the paper claims to be independent from Cox, it effectively became the propaganda arm of the Atlanta Police Foundation. However, by March 2023, in the context of growing national and international support for the Stop Cop City movement, there were more quotes from those opposed to Cop City than in support.

2. **Protestors as Concerned Activists:** Media frames that humanize protestors, explore their motivations, and consider the viewpoints of their supporters generally result in a more critical stance regarding the utilization of terrorism legislation. This framing raises questions about the legitimacy of such charges, challenges government actions, and encourages contemplation of whether they are truly warranted. Moreover, it fosters empathy and comprehension of the protestors' goals and concerns. Quotes from protestors and their supporters are given adequate space even while government sources are cited. For instance, *The Washington Post* has generally included twice as many quotes from those opposed to Cop City as from government officials.

The frames used by various media outlets hold substantial sway over public perceptions of terrorism laws, significantly influencing how these laws are interpreted and implemented.

Even though the “war on terror” is supposedly over now that the U.S. has withdrawn from Afghanistan and ended the “forever wars,” U.S. federal and state governments continue to use and even expand punitive measures targeting those within the U.S. who they label as “terrorists.” The U.S. mainstream media sometimes supports this expansion, and in doing so imperils U.S. democracy. All of this is part of the legacy of the post-9/11 wars.

## ***Background***

In September 2021, the Atlanta City Council authorized the construction of an 85-acre police training complex in the Atlanta-Weelaunee Forest area, named the "Atlanta Public Safety Training Center," with an estimated cost of \$90 million. The facility is planned to feature a “mock village” comprising apartments, a nightclub, a convenience store, and other amenities for training police officers from Georgia and other states in urban warfare

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<sup>15</sup> Herskind, M. (2022, February 17). Cop City and the Prison Industrial Complex in Atlanta. Department of African American Studies at Princeton University. <https://aas.princeton.edu/news/cop-city-and-prison-industrial-complex-atlanta>

tactics.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the complex would house a shooting range, an auditorium, and classrooms. This type of training, conducted in a mock village simulating enemy territory, is standard in the military. Consequently, opponents argue that the complex will essentially serve as a "war base" where police would receive training in "military-like maneuvers" and tactics, including surveillance, targeting, and use of force.<sup>17</sup> It's important to note that this training would not be limited to Georgia residents, as an Open Records Request by the Atlanta Community Press Collective revealed that 43 percent of the police trainees would come from outside Georgia.<sup>18</sup>

Opposition to the project began immediately when the Atlanta City Council approved the proposal in 2021. Still grappling with the Atlanta police killing of Rayshard Brooks in 2020, local residents actively resisted the construction of a facility that was anticipated to exacerbate police violence. An analysis of the extensive comments by Atlanta residents submitted to Council members during the September meeting found that 70 percent of these comments opposed the plan.<sup>19</sup> This occurred during a period when the entire nation experienced widespread, multiracial protests against police violence following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Cop City, many concluded, was a response to Black Lives Matter and the demand for structural change. Moreover, as one analysis by *The New York Times* shows, in cities around the country the response to protests in the summer of 2021 was met with a "startling display of violence" by law enforcement authorities.<sup>20</sup>

Environmental justice activists also sounded the alarm about the severe ecological repercussions of Cop City's planned forestland destruction. The Atlanta Forest stands as a critical natural resource, regarded by officials as one of the city's vital "lungs."<sup>21</sup> Activists highlighted that the prospect of clearing nearly 400 acres of this essential forestland for the center would be ecologically devastating. Activists hailing from Atlanta and various parts of the country established an encampment, constructing treehouses and residing in them to thwart tree removal. They were employing a time-tested strategy of civil disobedience, reminiscent of the Civil Rights Movement.

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<sup>16</sup> Atlanta Police Foundation. *Public Safety Training Center*.

<https://atlantapolicefoundation.org/programs/public-safety-training-center/>

<sup>17</sup> Stop Cop City. *What Is Cop City?* <https://stopcop.city/what-is-cop-city/>

<sup>18</sup> Atlanta Community Press Collective. (2023, January 24). *Over 40% of Anticipated Cop City Trainees Would Come from Out-of-State*.

<https://atlprescollective.com/2023/01/24/over-40-of-anticipated-cop-city-trainees-would-come-from-fro-m-out-of-state/>

<sup>19</sup> Torpy, B. (2023, January 25). *OPINION: Gov't 101 and the tough decisions surrounding 'Cop City'*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

<https://www.ajc.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-govt-101-and-the-tough-decisions-surrounding-cop-city/5BQVUR7PDJE4HEQLLWCIGV2JSI/>

<sup>20</sup> Barker, K.; Baker, M.; Watkins, A. (2023, March 20). *In City After City, Police Mishandled Black Lives Matter Protests*. The New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/20/us/protests-policing-george-floyd.html>

<sup>21</sup> The Atlanta City Design. *Our Future City*. <https://www.atlantaga.gov/home/showdocument?id=30594>

Cop City is significantly funded by private corporations. A large portion of the project's funding, approximately \$60 million, originates from a private entity, the Atlanta Police Foundation, while \$30 million is slated to come from taxpayer money.<sup>22</sup> Donors to this center include Bank of America/Merrill Lynch, Chick-fil-A, Coca-Cola, UPS, and other influential entities. The Atlanta Police Foundation operates without public accountability, answerable solely to its board comprising executives from nearly all major Atlanta-based corporations, including Delta, Home Depot, Equifax, Wells Fargo, Waffle House, Carters, Inc., and more. Notably, some of the same companies that have publicly supported racial equity programs in response to Black Lives Matter protests have financially supported police training, contrary to the advice of activists who advocate for investments in social programs aimed at reducing the need for policing.<sup>23</sup>

On December 13, 2022, the government of Georgia sent state and local police forces to dismantle the activists' encampments and clear the area for construction. In the process, they apprehended six protestors, indicting them as "domestic terrorists." Notably, this marked the inaugural use of the 2017 Georgia law by the state's law enforcement to charge protestors with terrorism. An analysis of the arrest warrants shows that the primary accusation centered around their association with Defend the Atlanta Forest (DTAF), a group the warrant claims is designated as "domestic violent extremists" by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).<sup>24</sup>

However, according to the ACLU<sup>25</sup>, DHS has not classified DTAF as terrorist. In fact, research reveals that there is no established group called DTAF. Instead, there exists a website that has adopted this name, explicitly identifying itself as a "media clearinghouse for sharing news, perspectives, and updates from the on-the-ground movement."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the website states that its administrators do "not organize protests, actions, or events." Numerous human rights organizations have raised concerns about the terrorist designation invoked by Georgia authorities. Human Rights Watch, for instance, suggests that this is a "fabrication concocted by the DeKalb County Police Department," the entity responsible for issuing the arrest warrants.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Simon, M. (2023, March 14). *Cops And Donuts Go Together More Than You Thought: The Corporations Funding Cop City in Atlanta*. Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/morgansimon/2023/03/14/cops-and-donuts-go-together-more-than-you-thought-the-corporations-funding-cop-city-in-atlanta/?sh=8ddc676bc60c>

<sup>23</sup> Simon, M. (2023).

<sup>24</sup> Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County. (2022, December 15) *Arrest Warrants*.

[https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined\\_redacted](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined_redacted)

<sup>25</sup> Toney, D. (2023, June 12). *Press Release: ACLU of Georgia Demands State Accountability For Atlanta Training Center Related Arrests Based on False Accusations*. ACLU.

<https://www.acluga.org/en/press-releases/press-release-aclu-georgia-demands-state-accountability-atlanta-training-center>

<sup>26</sup> Defend The Atlanta Forest. <https://defendtheatlantaforest.org>

<sup>27</sup> Carr, C.; Boston, S. (2023, March 3). *Letter Calling for Dropping of Domestic Terrorism Charges Against Defend the Atlanta Forest Activists*. Human Rights Watch.

[https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/03/letter-calling-dropping-domestic-terrorism-charges-against-defend-atlanta-forest#\\_ftn7](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/03/letter-calling-dropping-domestic-terrorism-charges-against-defend-atlanta-forest#_ftn7)



The protest movement, known as Stop Cop City, comprises a diverse array of groups and individuals, ranging from environmental justice activists to those advocating against police violence.<sup>28</sup> Given this broad coalition, there isn't a single coordinating entity, making it challenging for observers to discern who Georgia state authorities consider to be "terrorists." In the arrest warrants<sup>29</sup> issued on January 21, 2023, DTAF is not mentioned, instead the activists are charged with domestic terrorism for property destruction and the use of "explosives/fire"<sup>30</sup> works towards police in an attempt to coerce/intimidate police."

Responding to inquiries from Grist journalists, a spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) clarified that DHS does not categorize any U.S. groups as "domestic violent extremists," although they do provide guidance on the matter to state authorities.<sup>31</sup> It's worth noting that while DHS does maintain and regularly update a list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), which can be readily accessed online, no such list, to the best of our knowledge, exists for domestic terrorists. The FBI and DHS do offer categories of those considered to be domestic terrorists, such as "animal/environmental violent extremists," "anarchist violent extremists," "anti-government/anti-authority violent extremists etc., but not specific groups such as al Qaeda, ISIS etc."<sup>32</sup> The search function by keyword on Domestic Violent Extremism provided by DHS yields no results when "Defend the Atlanta Forest" is entered.<sup>33</sup> It is important to emphasize that affiliation with an FTO, including making a charitable contribution that inadvertently supports an FTO, constitutes a criminal offense carrying significant prison sentences. Instances of "material support" for terrorism have led individuals raising funds for humanitarian aid in various parts of the world to face lengthy imprisonment.

In a seemingly analogous policy move, in June 2023, Georgia arrested three leaders of the *Atlanta Solidarity Fund*, on the grounds of money laundering and charity fraud.<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>28</sup> Stop Cop City is also known as Block Cop City. See, Block Cop City. <https://blockcopcity.org/call-to-action>; Atlanta Community Press Collective. (2023, September 12). *Block Cop City group issues call for mass action to stop construction*. <https://atlpresscollective.com/2023/09/12/block-cop-city-group-issues-call-for-mass-action-to-stop-construction/>

<sup>29</sup> Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County. (2022, December 15) *Arrest Warrants*.

[https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined\\_redacted](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined_redacted)

<sup>30</sup> Homeland Security. *Domestic Violent Extremism (DVE)*.

<https://www.dhs.gov/keywords/domestic-violent-extremism-dve>

<sup>31</sup> Brown, A. (2023, January 27). *Documents show how 19 'Cop City' activists got charged with terrorism*. Grist.

<https://grist.org/protest/atlanta-cop-city-terrorism/>

<sup>32</sup> See p.3 Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General. (2023, June). *Audit of the Department of Justice's Strategy to Address the Domestic Violent Extremism Threat*.

<https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/23-078.pdf>. See also, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Homeland Security. (2021, May). *Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism*. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-strategic-report.pdf/view>

<sup>33</sup> Homeland Security. *Domestic Violent Extremism (DVE)*.

<https://www.dhs.gov/keywords/domestic-violent-extremism-dve>

<sup>34</sup> Amy, J.; Brumback, K. (2023, May 31). *Atlanta police arrest 3 organizers behind bail fund supporting protests against 'cop city'*. PBS News Hour.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/atlanta-police-arrest-3-organizers-behind-bail-fund-supporting-protests-against-cop-city>

organization has been instrumental in providing bail for arrested activists and assisting them in securing legal representation. Georgia Governor, Brian Kemp, issued a statement alleging that the three individuals had "facilitated and encouraged domestic terrorism, showing no concern for the impact on others as communities grappled with the destructive consequences of their actions."<sup>35</sup>

In September, 2023, 61 people were charged using racketeering or RICO laws. The Georgia Attorney General, Chris Carr, argued that opposing Cop City amounts to a "criminal conspiracy." The indictment spends 25 pages on DTAF arguing that it came into being during the nationwide protests against the murder of George Floyd, and locally in Atlanta of Rayshard Brooks, as a criminal conspiracy. The ACLU observes that the indictment "paints the provision of mutual aid, the advocacy of collectivism, and even the publishing of zines as hallmarks of a criminal enterprise. In doing so, it flies in the face of First Amendment protections for speech, assembly, and association."<sup>36</sup> Five out of the 61 were also charged with domestic terrorism.

Government and police officials have portrayed the protestors as violent terrorists. For instance, in January 2023, when Georgia State Patrol Troopers shot and fatally injured activist Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, also known as Tortuguita, they claimed that Terán had initiated gunfire. Shockingly, Tortuguita was shot a staggering 57 times. The DeKalb County medical examiner autopsy report, which utilized a Gunshot Residue Kit, indicated an absence of gunshot residue on Tortuguita's hands.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the report noted that Tortuguita, who identified as transgender, was seated with their hands raised.

Unfortunately, the lack of body camera footage, as state troopers are not mandated to wear cameras, leaves the events visually unverified. Nevertheless, Tortuguita's family demanded access to police footage, and audio recordings have captured an Atlanta officer suggesting that friendly fire may have injured the state trooper.<sup>38</sup> Georgia authorities have claimed that Tortuguita was in possession of a firearm,<sup>39</sup> but thus far, no conclusive evidence has been presented to confirm whether they possessed the weapon or used it.

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<sup>35</sup> Amy, J.; Brumback, K. (2023, May 31). *Atlanta police arrest 3 organizers behind bail fund supporting protests again 'cop city'*. PBS News Hour.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/atlanta-police-arrest-3-organizers-behind-bail-fund-supporting-protests-against-cop-city>

<sup>36</sup> Bruce, C.; Shamsi, H. (2023, September 21). *RICO and Domestic Terrorism Charges Against Cop City Activists Send a Chilling Message*. ACLU.

<https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/rico-and-domestic-terrorism-charges-against-cop-city-activists-send-a-chilling-message>

<sup>37</sup> Bailey, P.; Gowitt, G. (2023, March 14). *Autopsy Report*. DeKalb County Medical Examiner.

<sup>38</sup> Fiallo, J. (2023, February 9). *Body-Cam Footage Raises New Questions in Deadly 'Cop City' Shooting*. The Daily Beast.

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/cop-city-shooting-body-cam-raises-new-questions-in-manuel-terans-death>

<sup>39</sup> There is a photo of a gun on GBI's website, but Tortuguita is not holding it and does not appear in the photo. See, Georgia Bureau of Investigation. (2023, April 14). *GBI Investigates Officer Involved Shooting Following Multi-Agency Operation near Site of Future Atlanta Public Safety Training Center*.

<https://gbi.georgia.gov/press-releases/2023-04-14/gbi-investigates-officer-involved-shooting-following-multi-agency>



This is a test case for how state governments can use anti-terrorism laws and policies to suppress dissent. Prior to 2017, Georgia's legal framework categorized terrorists as individuals convicted of planning or executing actions intended to harm at least ten people. The 2017 amendment incorporated specific property crimes into the definition of "domestic terrorism" if the intent was to influence government policies through intimidation or coercion. Under this statute, domestic terrorism now encompasses committing a felony with the aim of "disabling or destroying critical infrastructure," resulting in "significant economic disruption," and with the intent to (a) intimidate the civilian population, (b) influence, modify, or pressure government policies, or impact government operations through the use of "destructive devices." "Critical infrastructure" can pertain to either public or private "facilities, systems, functions, or assets," whether physical or virtual, that provide or distribute "services for the benefit of the public."<sup>40</sup> It's worth noting that twenty other states have implemented similar laws aimed at curtailing environmental defenders and protests.<sup>41</sup> What happens in Georgia will likely have a national impact.

This struggle is also a litmus test for whether police foundations, private entities funded by major corporations, can successfully advance a training facility despite opposition at the local, national, and international levels.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the parent company Cox that owns *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* has contributed to this fundraising campaign, raising important questions about the implications for news media reporting on this contentious project. Alex Taylor, the CEO of Cox, led the fund-raising effort for Cop City.<sup>43</sup>

## **Media Dataset**

This report delves into U.S. news media coverage of the Cop City protest movement, with a specific focus on how the terrorism-related arrests were discussed. The dataset includes articles from six widely circulated national newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Additionally, we incorporated *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* to provide a local perspective.

We conducted our search for relevant articles using the LexisNexis database, employing various search terms such as "Cop City" (the term used by protesters), "Atlanta public safety training center" (the term used by the police and state), "public safety training

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<sup>40</sup> Shahshahani, A. (2023, September 15). *Cop Cities in a Militarized World*. Boston Review. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/cop-cities-in-a-militarized-world/>

<sup>41</sup> Shahshahani, A. (2023, September 15).

<sup>42</sup> Simon, M. (2023, March 14). *Cops And Donuts Go Together More Than You Thought: The Corporations Funding Cop City in Atlanta*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/morgansimon/2023/03/14/cops-and-donuts-go-together-more-than-you-thought-the-corporations-funding-cop-city-in-atlanta/?sh=8ddc676bc60c>

<sup>43</sup> Saporta, M. (2021, June 14). *Opposition grows to police training center at Atlanta Prison Farm*. Saporta Report. [https://saportareport.com/opposition-grows-to-police-training-center-at-atlanta-prison-farm/columnists/maria\\_saporta/](https://saportareport.com/opposition-grows-to-police-training-center-at-atlanta-prison-farm/columnists/maria_saporta/)

center," as well as "Tortuguita" and "Manuel Esteban Paez Terán." These searches encompassed three distinct periods when the initial Cop City protestor arrests occurred: December 2022, January 2023, and March 2023. Each round of arrests pertained to particular actions taken by the police and by protestors and are therefore distinct. The analysis is divided accordingly so as to shed light on the context for these arrests. For each of these periods, we included articles published on the date of arrest and in the ensuing weeks. Articles that substantially discussed Cop City were included in the dataset, while duplicates of the same story (presented with different headlines but identical content) were excluded.

The analysis focuses on how the various U.S. media outlets covered the terrorism-related charges. We sought answers to the following questions: Did the outlets justify the charges, did they scrutinize the use of terrorism laws and provide critical perspectives, or did they bypass the terrorism-related arrests to focus on other aspects of the issue? Additionally, we examined how protestors were depicted, considering whether they were humanized or vilified. This portrayal significantly influences the public's comprehension of the matter. Lastly, we tallied the sources quoted in the articles to gauge how frequently Georgia government and police officials were cited compared to protestors and their supporters.

It is important to emphasize that our analysis does not pertain to the overall coverage of the Stop Cop City protest movement. Instead, it focuses specifically on the narrative angles and frameworks employed in U.S. media coverage of the terrorism-related arrests. Certainly, the Stop Cop City movement raises significant questions concerning environmental degradation, militarized police training, and their impact on black and brown communities, among other concerns. While we touch on these additional frames our primary focus remains on terrorism and the utilization of the 2017 law to criminalize protestors and their allies.

***Period One: December 2022 Terrorism Arrests***

When Georgia initially employed the 2017 terrorism laws to arrest activists on December 14 and 15, 2022, this story did not gain U.S. national media attention. A search conducted on LexisNexis for all seven newspapers from December 13 to 31, 2022 yielded no results from any of the national newspapers. The local paper, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* (AJC) was the newspaper that reported on the arrests and the police's efforts to clear the encampments during this period.

<b>News Media</b>	<b>Number of Articles in Dec. 2022</b>
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	5
The New York Times	0
USA Today	0
The Washington Post	0
LA Times	0
New York Post	0

The Wall Street Journal	0
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### ***Summary of Media Frames***

*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* was the only newspaper in the dataset to cover the arrests on December 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>. Its parent company, Cox, contributed to the Atlanta Police Foundation's fundraising campaign for Cop City and the articles in this period are aligned with the government and with the Atlanta Police Foundation. The protesters are presented as violent, armed with dangerous weapons, and as posing threats. Even though the arrest warrants do not contain charges that are consistent with the claims of violence made by Georgia authorities, the journalists at the AJC quote police and other officials without conducting independent investigations.<sup>44</sup>

<b>News Media Coverage, December 2022</b>	<b>Number of quotes from government, police officials and their supporters</b>	<b>Number of quotes from protestors and their supporters</b>
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	18	10

There are almost twice as many quotes from government and police officials than from those supportive of the protestors. Not a single protestor is interviewed in this entire period. Notably, the voices of local Atlanta residents opposed to Cop City are also conspicuously absent. Lawyers for the arrested, the ACLU, tweets from protestors, and human rights groups make up the ten quotes in the table, above. In a formal sense, the “other side” is given space, but only briefly and often at the end of a story that is predominantly framed by government authorities. Thus, in addition to counting the quotes from various sources, we provide a more detailed analysis of the five stories in the AJC below to shed light on the frames employed.

### ***Detailed Analysis of Media Coverage***

The first story, which covers the police action to remove protestors from the forest, commences with online quotes and tweets from those opposing Cop City, indicating that they were surrounded by the police and subjected to tear gas.<sup>45</sup> These quotes, included in the table above, are the only instance when we hear from protestors, indirectly through their social media posts. The article goes on to reveal that the police entered the forest to disrupt a peaceful act of civil disobedience, a departure from the narrative found in subsequent articles.

<sup>44</sup> Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County. (2022, December 15). *Arrest Warrants*.

[https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined\\_redacted](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined_redacted)

<sup>45</sup> Estep, T. (2022, December 13). *Authorities, activists clashing again at Atlanta training center site*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

<https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/authorities-activists-clashing-again-at-atlanta-training-center-site/4DR15EQKW5FR7MYYTH4222YTUE/>

This discrepancy could be attributed to the limited information provided by the authorities. The Atlanta police spokesperson redirected press inquiries to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), as mentioned in the article. According to the GBI spokesperson, their role was to "assist the Atlanta Police Department and other local, state, and task force members with removing barricades blocking some of the entrances to the training center."<sup>46</sup> This confirmation from the authorities indicated that their objective was to facilitate construction by removing blockades.

In the absence of additional information from the Atlanta police or the GBI regarding the protestors, the reporter sought insight from Alison Clark, Chair of the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center Community Stakeholder Advisory Committee (CSAC). Clark is quoted as asserting that the police responded to fires ignited by the protestors. She further claimed that protestors "shot off fireworks, including in the direction of a nearby fire station." Notably, Clark is identified as a "resident" of Atlanta and not as a police spokesperson. It is unclear what the source for this claim was, especially since the GBI spokesperson did not mention fires or fireworks. Consequently, a figure within the CSAC, an organization closely linked to the Atlanta Police Foundation with a vested interest in casting protestors in a negative light, had the opportunity to influence the narrative. CSAC co-chair Sharon Williams, according to the Atlanta Press Collective,<sup>47</sup> smeared the Cop City forest defenders as "eco terrorists."<sup>48</sup>

The following day, the GBI was more prepared to shape the narrative. The December 14th article quotes a GBI press release stating, "Yesterday, several people threw rocks at police cars and attacked EMTs outside the neighboring fire stations with rocks and bottles."<sup>49</sup> There is no mention, however, of fires allegedly set off by protestors the previous day. Additionally, it mentions that "Task force members used various tactics to arrest individuals who were occupying makeshift treehouses." By exclusively quoting the GBI press release, the journalist attributes the police action to the protestors' unlawful activities.

The article mentions that the forest defenders had attempted to hold a press conference but access was denied to the designated site by the police. Consequently, only the police perspective dominated the narrative. Throughout the remainder of the month, even in the absence of police roadblocks, the AJC made no effort to speak with protestors.

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<sup>46</sup> Estep, T. (2022, December 13).

<sup>47</sup> Atlanta Community Press Collective. (2023, April 6). *CSAC faces internal issues, demands meeting with Mayor*. <https://atlprescollective.com/2023/04/06/csac-faces-internal-issues-demands-meeting-with-mayor/>

<sup>48</sup> There is a long history of treating environmentalists as "eco-terrorists." The ACLU has released a document from a FOIA request on how the FBI understands "Animal Rights/Environmental Rights Extremists." See: Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2011, December 8). *Animal Rights/Environmental Extremism*. <https://www.aclu.org/files/fbimappingfoia/20120518/ACLURM026701.pdf>; See also Eagan, S. (1996 January-March). From Spikes to Bombs: The Rise of Eco-Terrorism. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 19(1), 1-18. <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/spikes-bombs-rise-eco-terrorism>

<sup>49</sup> Estep, T. (2022, December 14). *Atlanta training center protestors charged with domestic terrorism*. The Atlanta Journal Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/breaking-5-atlanta-training-center-protesters-charged-with-domestic-terrorism/KWQ2JZF6GRBAZAV7ASVBKHNWSA/>

The quotes that we do find are from lawyers and human rights advocates. Not a single protestor is interviewed by the AJC.

In an apparent effort to maintain transparency, both of the aforementioned articles include the following disclosure statement: "The James M. Cox Foundation, the charitable arm of Cox Enterprises, which owns The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, has contributed to the training center fundraising campaign. It is among several Atlanta-based foundations that have contributed."<sup>50</sup>

A lengthy article published on December 16th, spanning 1335 words and titled "A closer look at terrorism charges of 'cop city' protestors", delves into the use of the 2017 Georgia law.<sup>51</sup> It mentions that while the arrested activists were accused of having a "direct run-in with authorities" (without specifying the nature of this "run-in"), the "most serious charges" were related to their "affiliation with the left-wing ideologues" in the "Defend the Atlanta Forest" (DTAF) movement. The article goes on to cite anonymous "authorities" who claim that DTAF has "claimed responsibility for far more destructive acts."

The arrest warrants quoted in the article state: "Said group [DTAF] has publicly claimed responsibility for numerous acts while stating their intent was to intimidate employees of the government and private companies into not accepting or completing tasks in and around the site of the Atlanta Police Training Center."

However, we have found no evidence to support these claims, especially given that DTAF, in its current form, operates as an online media clearinghouse.<sup>52</sup> It remains unclear whether the journalist made any efforts to verify the allegations in the warrants and the statements of various unnamed "authorities." The article quotes one such authority who alleges that DTAF was responsible for acts like "firebombing a youth center run by the police foundation," shooting "metal ball bearings at contractors," and "discharging firearms at critical infrastructure." The article conveys these allegations without apparent attempts to verify their accuracy.

Our analysis of arrest warrants from December reveals that the primary charge against the five activists arrested on December 14th was their affiliation with DTAF.<sup>53</sup> In

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<sup>50</sup> Estep, T. (2022, December 14). Atlanta training center protestors charged with domestic terrorism. The Atlanta Journal Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/breaking-5-atlanta-training-center-protesters-charged-with-domestic-terrorism/KWQ2JZF6GRBAZAV7ASVBKHNWSA/>; Estep, T. (2022, December 13). Authorities, activists clashing again at Atlanta training center site. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

<https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/authorities-activists-clashing-again-at-atlanta-training-center-site/4DRI5EQKW5FR7MYYTH4222YTUE/>

<sup>51</sup> Estep, T. (2022, December 16). *A closer look at the terrorism charges against 'cop city' protestors*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

<https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/a-closer-look-at-the-terrorism-charges-against-cop-city-protesters/YMAUVAGB4FBHFBEMI6BSEQ7D3I/>

<sup>52</sup> Defend The Atlanta Forest. <https://defendtheatlantaforest.org>

<sup>53</sup> Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County. (2022, December 15). *Arrest Warrants*.

[https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined\\_redacted](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined_redacted)



addition, two activists faced charges related to "occupying a treehouse" and sharing videos on social media, as well as "wearing a gas mask." Two others were accused of "throwing rocks," while the fifth faced allegations of "possessing incendiary devices." In essence, the arrested activists did not engage in the kind of violent actions alleged by the authorities. Despite having access to the arrest warrants, rather than conducting an independent investigation, the AJC constructed a public case against the arrested activists based on unverified claims about "firebombing" and "discharging firearms" made by government officials. The AJC participated in the construction of the activists as "terrorists."

Towards the end of the article, space is allocated for the ACLU and the New York-based Brennan Center to critically examine the terrorism charges. The article quotes a former FBI agent and a fellow at the Brennan Center, who stated, "Civil disobedience is a time-honored part of our political system in compelling governments to change policy." He also highlighted that state terrorism statutes allow authorities to "target groups whose ideologies they don't like."

In a formal sense, both sides of the story are presented, superficially addressing professional standards regarding journalistic "neutrality." Yet, the placement of these quotes at the end of a lengthy article in which government spokespersons set the tone is hardly balanced.

Even this modest attempt to provide space for those critical of the use of terrorism laws against protestors is abruptly abandoned in a follow-up article on December 23rd.<sup>54</sup> In this article, the narrative of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation takes precedence. There is not a single quote again from protestors or anyone who might question the use of terrorism charges. Additionally, the primary sources of information are GBI spokespersons and arrest warrants. The article notes:

The GBI originally announced that five people - Francis Carroll, Nicholas Olson, Serena Hertel, Leonardo Voiselle, and Arieon Robinson - were facing the serious charges [sic] for alleged actions that ranged from throwing rocks at police cars to refusing to come out of a treehouse on the training center site, as well as their general affiliation with the 'Defend the Atlanta Forest' movement.

The AJC does not question why these charges are considered "serious" or provide space for individuals who might hold a different perspective.

This article also discusses the sixth arrest of activist Ariel Ebaugh, made on December 14th. This time, it provides more detail, stating that the activist was charged with "walking toward police officers who were in plain view while armed with a rifle and positioning her body in a tactical manner that immediately placed the officers at the scene

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<sup>54</sup> Estep, T. (2022, December 23). *Groups ask court to stop 'destruction' near ;cop city' site*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/neighborhoods/dekalb/groups-ask-court-to-stop-destruction-near-cop-city-site/Q6DHLJUY3ZEM7H4TRYPUZTZMPI/>

in fear of receiving a violent injury." However, it is worth noting that this charge, where officers feared for their safety, is not part of the arrest warrant, which simply states that Ebaugh was "armed with a rifle and handgun."<sup>55</sup> The warrant adds that upon further investigation at the scene, the officer present saw Ebaugh's "messages appearing on her cell phone regarding the police operation to remove trespassers from the property." Apparently, the officer went close enough to Ebaugh to be able to read her text messages, leading one to question whether she in fact had weapons on her that made the officers afraid for their safety.

This is the job of a journalist—to investigate such claims. Yet, the AJC reporter simply acted as a stenographer passing on the claim that Ebaugh posed an imminent threat. The article fails to cite anyone who might present the arrestees' version of events. This omission could be attributed to the journalist assigned to cover the story, who appears not to take the protestors seriously. In an August 12, 2022 article, he characterized the protestors as follows: "They are a seemingly well-coordinated but nebulous group that includes police abolitionists, environmental extremists, and anarchists. They call themselves 'forest defenders' — and they are responsible for a growing list of aggressive, sometimes violent actions that have targeted anything and anyone with connections to the would-be training center."<sup>56</sup>

The only evidence of violence cited is an anonymous email posted on a website called "Scenes from the Atlanta Forest," which appears to be a media clearinghouse, claiming responsibility for burning a tow truck.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the journalist, far from acting as a check on government, willingly participated in constructing the activists as violent terrorists.

On December 28th, during the bond hearing for the six defendants, the AJC allocated a limited amount of space to the lawyers defending them, allowing them to reject the charges. During the hearing, the judge granted bonds for all the defendants, with amounts ranging from \$6,000 to \$13,500, indicating the judge's assessment of the seriousness of the offenses.

While the article covering the bond hearing does provide some room for defense attorneys' perspectives, it predominantly features quotes from state attorneys.<sup>58</sup> For

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<sup>55</sup> Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County. (2022, December 15). *Arrest Warrants*.

[https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined\\_redacted](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined_redacted)

<sup>56</sup> Estep, T. (2022, August 12). *'Forest defenders' use extreme tactics in fight over training center*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

<https://www.ajc.com/neighborhoods/dekalb/forest-defenders-use-extreme-tactics-in-fight-to-stop-cop-city/CQCIHWYWZBATPEX5ZKA6IRVYM/>

<sup>57</sup> Scenes from the Atlanta Forest.

<https://scenes.noblogs.org/post/2022/07/31/tow-truck-set-on-fire-in-south-atlanta-forest-mini-excavator-s-cared-off/>

<sup>58</sup> Hansen, Z. (2022, December 28). *Bond granted to protesters charged with domestic terrorism*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

<https://www.ajc.com/news/crime/bond-granted-to-cop-city-protesters-charged-with-domestic-terrorism/35K5BOEOCVCPCBOYOZG47FJUD7A/>

example, the Deputy Attorney General is quoted as saying, "They've made it pretty clear at this point that they're willing to engage in violence and use fire to keep anybody out of the forest." DeKalb County District Attorney representative, Pete Johnson, is prominently featured with multiple quotes defending the domestic terrorism charges.

The article further states:

Johnson said other protesters were present Dec. 13 but were not arrested because they "didn't incite violence or cause damage to property." He said multiple defendants were living in the trees for prolonged periods of time, wearing gas masks and camouflage. He also said they possessed weapons, including an AR-15, a pistol and multiple knives, in addition to explosives, such as fireworks, road flares and the materials for Molotov cocktails.

Despite the absence of weapons possession in the arrest warrants for the initial five defendants, the AJC published these unfounded claims about rifles, pistols and explosives. The article briefly mentions that the defendants' lawyers disputed these allegations, but it does not provide substantial coverage of their defense. Consequently, the article gives the impression that the defense lawyers merely denied the claims without providing reasons, presenting a lopsided narrative.

Daniel Kane, an attorney representing two of the activists, is quoted as saying: "There is no allegation until the GBI showed up of any illegality other than a possible criminal trespass. So people had been living in and around or coming into the forest for over a year with no problem. I do believe it's a manufactured prosecution."

This represents the sole instance in which the forest defenders' perspective is presented. The article prominently conveys the state's attempt to portray the protesters as violent, armed with dangerous weapons, and posing threats. Unfortunately, interviews with activists who had been part of the movement for a year, shedding light on their motivations and non-violent organization, are notably absent. This deficiency cannot be solely attributed to the assigned reporter but reflects a broader editorial stance within the AJC. Even a cursory effort to humanize the protesters could have revealed their policy against having weapons in the forest, as reported by *The Washington Post* in January.<sup>59</sup>

In light of these observations, it becomes apparent that the AJC, whose parent company contributed to the Atlanta Police Foundation's fundraising campaign for Cop City, covered the arrests in a manner that aligned with the authorities and their corporate supporters. The newspaper effectively contributed to a narrative depicting the protesters as violent individuals armed with guns and knives, reinforcing the notion that terrorism

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<sup>59</sup> Craig, T.; Kasulis Cho, K. (2023, January 21). *Violent protests break out in Atlanta over fatal shooting of activist*. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/01/21/violent-protests-break-out-atlanta-over-fatal-shooting-activist/>

charges were justified. Notably, the voices of local Atlanta residents opposed to Cop City and those of activists from Georgia or elsewhere were conspicuously underrepresented.

### ***Period Two: January 2023 Arrests and the Shooting Death of Tortuguita***

On January 18, 2023, once again, police officers from several Georgia law enforcement agencies embarked on a mission to clear protestors from the forest. Tragically, during this operation, Tortuguita was shot and killed. Seven more protestors were arrested that day using the same terrorism charges. Apart from affiliation with DTAF, the arrest warrants included charges of criminal trespass, occupying treehouses and hammocks, and being present when Tortuguita was shot.<sup>60</sup> One activist was accused of inciting violence by "throwing rocks." Civil disobedience was the primary grounds for the terrorism charges.

In protests called to seek justice for Tortuguita, a small section of protestors engaged in property destruction. This garnered coverage in newspapers outside Georgia. On January 21st, six more people were arrested. This time, the arrest warrants did not include affiliation with DTAF but instead charged the protestors with "domestic terrorism" for causing "significant damages to windows" and a "police car."<sup>61</sup> The warrants also reference the use of "explosives/fireworks towards police in an attempt to coerce/intimidate police."

The dataset encompasses all articles published from January 18th to the end of the month. Notably, during this period, Georgia Governor, Brian Kemp, declared a state of emergency and called upon 1,000 National Guard troops.

<b>News Media</b>	<b>Number of Articles in Jan-Feb. 2023</b>
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	5+1 op-ed
The New York Times	2
USA Today	2
The Washington Post	3
LA Times	0
New York Post	8
The Wall Street Journal	0

### ***Summary of Media Frames***

In January 2023, the Stop Cop City movement garnered significant attention from four of the six national newspapers studied here due to the violence that occurred, notably the killing of Tortuguita, as well as subsequent property destruction.

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<sup>60</sup> Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County. (2022, December 15). *Arrest Warrants*. [https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscmbined\\_redacted](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscmbined_redacted)

<sup>61</sup> Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County. (2022, December 15).

<b>News Media Coverage Jan – Feb. 2023</b>	<b>Number of quotes from government, police officials and those in support of them</b>	<b>Number of quotes from protestors and those who support them</b>
The AJC	17	16
The NYT	10	3
USA Today	11	3
The Washington Post	7	15
New York Post	13	6

*The Washington Post* cites almost twice as many protestors and their supporters as it does government sources. It is no wonder that this newspaper stood out in this period for its humanization of activists. In contrast, and with the exception of *The Times*, the other newspapers demonized them. The *New York Post* has six quotes from protestors and supporters, however, as we will see below these are cherry picked quotes that portray the protestors in a negative light and as violent.

Each newspaper framed the story differently:

1. *The New York Times* placed the story in the context of the nationwide protests against police violence. As such, it provided the most comprehensive coverage of police violence among all the papers studied here, raising critical questions about the militarization of the police. However, *The Times* did not devote space to the charges of “domestic terrorism.” In so doing, it failed to critically reflect on Georgia’s use of terrorism laws to quash dissent. *The Times* has only three quotes from protestors and their supporters as seen in the table above.

2. *The Washington Post* delved deeper into the motivations of the protestors and portrayed them as concerned environmental activists. By humanizing the protestors, *The Washington Post* put into question the use of terrorism laws.

3. The *New York Post* portrayed the activists in a negative light, labeling them as violent Antifa activists and as “outside agitators.” In this way, the *New York Post* justified the use of terrorism charges.

4. *USA Today* adopted the position of the government and cast the protestors as terrorists, as activists who are terrorizing project workers and endangering local residents; it too justified terrorism indictments.

5. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* adopted the “outside agitator” frame, focusing on damage and violence while downplaying the local opposition to the training center project. By presenting the protestors as “radical anarchists” and “black revolutionaries” it painted a picture of protestors as outside of normal society and therefore lacking support among local residents. In so doing, it tacitly justified the terrorism indictments. Even though during



this period, the number of quotes from the government and their supporters vs. protestors and their supporters are roughly the same, the narrative is still firmly pro-government.

### ***Detailed Analysis of Media Coverage***

In what follows we discuss how the five newspapers that covered the January arrests framed the issue of terrorism.

**The New York Times:** *The Times* ran the first story, among the seven media outlets studied here, on the killing of Tortuguita at close to midnight on January 18th.<sup>62</sup> In contrast to the *AJC* articles in December, *The Times* article strives to present the protestors' perspective. It commences by citing unnamed authorities who claim that a Georgia state trooper was injured during a shootout that resulted in Tortuguita's death. However, the article also firmly establishes that the violence occurred during the attempt to clear the forest. This is consistent with what the defense attorney noted above in the *AJC* article. In short, there was no violence until Georgia State troopers arrived on the scene to clear the forest.

The article allocates considerable space to Governor Kemp, the GBI, and other authorities to present their version of events, including the accusation that protestors are violent terrorists. However, it maintains a degree of skepticism by noting that the terrorism charges from December were an "unusual step." The article also amplifies the voices of Cop City critics who argue that the training center represents a "dangerous investment in militarizing law enforcement." It grants space for the *Atlanta Solidarity Fund* and the *Atlanta Community Press Collective*, two groups supporting the movement, to challenge the state's account of Tortuguita's death. The article concludes by contextualizing this incident of police violence within the broader context of the nationwide protest movement sparked by the killings of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and others.

In another shorter article published on January 27th, *The Times* discusses the state of emergency declared by Governor Kemp and his call for 1,000 National Guard troops.<sup>63</sup> The story acknowledges that some protestors engaged in property vandalism and damaged police vehicles during the protests that followed Tortuguita's killing. It also references the recent fatal beating of Tyre Nichols by police officers, noting that it may further escalate tensions in Georgia.

*The Times* situated the Atlanta protests within the national context and the growing public outcry over police violence. This is significant since the question of violence and who does or does not wield such violence is central to this case. However, apart from using the term "unusual" to describe the utilization of the 2017 Georgia terrorism law, *The Times* does not delve deeper into this issue. Consequently, it largely sidesteps the significance of Georgia's 2017 law and its application in this case.

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<sup>62</sup> Sassoon, A.; Rojas, R. (2023, January 18). *Protester Killed in Firefight at Site of New Atlanta Police Center*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/18/us/atlanta-police-center-protester-killed.html>

<sup>63</sup> Keenan, S. (2023, January 27). *Georgia's Governor Authorizes National Guard Troops to Keep Order in Atlanta*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/27/us/kemp-atlanta-protests-national-guard.html>

**USA Today:** *USA Today* also covered the shooting death of Tortuguita on January 18th.<sup>64</sup> The article predominantly presents the police's account of Tortuguita's death, with the perspectives of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and the Governor taking center stage and little attention given to the other side of the story. The article reports that "a coalition of law enforcement agencies says the groups are terrorizing project workers and endangering local residents."

In a section addressing the use of terrorism charges, the journalist quotes a GBI representative stating that the protestors "have attempted to disguise" crimes as protests and that there has been "growing criminal behavior and terroristic acts." There is no attempt to critically examine these claims made by the authorities. *USA Today* does not take the initiative to scrutinize the arrest warrants to verify if anyone has been charged with these alleged crimes or "terroristic acts." The newspaper essentially reproduces the vilification of protestors by Georgia government authorities.

This marked the extent of *USA Today's* first hand reporting. The paper did run an *Associated Press* article on January 22nd, which provides a more balanced perspective.<sup>65</sup> While the piece begins with a focus on property destruction, it also acknowledges that the first hour of the protest was peaceful and that protestors remembered Tortuguita as "loving" and "caring." The article further distinguishes between those who engaged in property destruction and the larger group that gathered to mourn Tortuguita's loss and demand an investigation. While this article strikes a more balanced tone, it does not delve into the terrorism charges.

**The Washington Post:** *The Washington Post* published its first story on January 21nd with the headline: "Violent protests breakout in Atlanta over fatal shooting of activist."<sup>66</sup> This article primarily focuses on the property damage mentioned in the headline, aligning with the media tendency to prioritize stories involving death or violence ("if it bleeds, it leads"). While the article acknowledges that only "some" of the protestors, described as "clad entirely in black," were responsible for property damage, the emphasis remains on the arrests rather than the police killing of Tortuguita. The article does not feature quotes from any protestors or their supporters, which sets it apart from the approach taken by *The New York Times*.

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<sup>64</sup> Hauck, G. (2023, January 18). *Authorities identify person killed at Atlanta's 'Cop City' training center site*. USA Today.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/01/18/georgia-trooper-shot-man-killed-proposed-anta-police-site/11077432002/>

<sup>65</sup> The Associated Press. (2023, January 22). *Protest of environmental activist Tortuguita's death turns violent in Atlanta*. USA Today.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/01/22/atlanta-protest-environmental-activist-death-turns-violent/11101472002/>

<sup>66</sup> Craig, T.; Kasulis Cho, K. (2023, January 21). *Violent protests break out in Atlanta over fatal shooting of activist*. The Washington Post.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/01/21/violent-protests-break-out-atlanta-over-fatal-shooting-activist/>

However, a subsequent article on January 26th provides a more comprehensive humanizing perspective on the protestors and their point of view.<sup>67</sup> This comprehensive article shows that the journalist had physically visited the protest site and engaged in interviews with protestors. It puts significant effort into humanizing Tortuguita and other activists, describing them sympathetically. The article offers activists and the ACLU a platform to present an alternative perspective on the domestic terrorism charges.

While Governor Kemp and the GBI are given space to make their case against the protestors, and the article implies that the December raid was in response to protestors setting fire to tires (which contradicts previous information), *The Washington Post* appears to have contacted DHS regarding the charge of domestic terrorism, as indicated in this paragraph:

A DHS spokesman denied that the agency had labeled any group called “Defend the Atlanta Forest” as an extremist group, saying the agency “does not classify or designate any groups as domestic violent extremists.” But the spokesman said the agency does share information with state and local officials when it believes domestic groups or individuals could resort to violence. DHS declined to detail any discussions it may have had with Georgia officials about the protestors.

By quoting DHS, *The Washington Post* put into question the claims of Georgia officials who were relying on DHS to bolster the terrorism charges. It is noteworthy that, as documented in the above quote, DHS responded by denying involvement and did not offer any details on whether it had or had not advised Georgia officials.

The article goes on to quote a member of the *Atlanta Solidarity Fund* explaining that it is not clear if there is even a group called Defend the Atlanta Forest (DTAF):

For one thing, there is no organization called 'Defend the Atlanta Forest' —it's a political slogan said by many people across many different organizations," said Kautz, with the *Atlanta Solidarity Fund*. “Secondly, the idea that voicing a political slogan in a protest makes you guilty of 'domestic terrorism' is clearly a violation of the First Amendment.

It's worth emphasizing that all 13 activists arrested up to that point faced terrorism charges primarily due to their affiliation with DTAF. Our investigation reveals that Defend the Atlanta Forest (DTAF) is a website, as noted above, which acts as a clearing house for information.<sup>68</sup> It also has an Instagram page serving as a news source, encouraging the submission of photos, news, and events via email.<sup>69</sup> It explicitly states that it does not endorse the content it posts but seeks to disseminate information.

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<sup>67</sup> Craig, T. (2023, January 26). *In Atlanta, a deadly forest protest sparks debate over 'domestic terrorism'*. The Washington Post.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/01/26/atlanta-forest-protester-police-riot/>

<sup>68</sup> Defend The Atlanta Forest. <https://defendtheatlantaforest.org>

<sup>69</sup> Defend The Atlanta Forest Instagram Page. <https://www.instagram.com/defendatlantaforest/>

Regarding whether Tortuguita owned a gun and could have used it, the story takes a nuanced approach. It begins by highlighting Tortuguita's reputation for kindness, supportiveness, and idealism when they joined the movement and stayed in the forest. The article mentions that there was a strict rule against bringing guns into the forest, a detail not reported in other newspapers. This is significant as it refutes the charge of forest defenders as violent terrorists.

A person who knew Tortuguita well is quoted as expressing disbelief that Tortuguita could have done anything to warrant being shot. Another individual, however, suggests that Tortuguita may have fired at the police due to their strong dislike for law enforcement. Subsequently, the official Dekalb County autopsy report supports the friend's belief that Tortuguita did not fire any shots.<sup>70</sup>

Among the seven newspapers in our dataset, this article stands out as the most thorough on the question of activist violence and whether terrorism charges are warranted. It offers a different perspective on the nature of the protest movement and marks the first instance where a newspaper sought to humanize the protestors by sharing their stories, hopes, and dreams. This dimension of media coverage is crucial, as dehumanization and vilification are common tactics used by government spokespersons to label individuals as "terrorists."

**The New York Post:** The *New York Post* took a highly critical stance towards the protestors, publishing a total of seven articles on the topic. These articles lacked balance and portrayed the protestors in a dehumanizing light.

The first article, posted on January 19th, featured a headline highlighting activists' call for a "night of rage" following Tortuguita's killing.<sup>71</sup> However, buried within the story, it becomes evident that the *New York Post* sourced this angle from *Fox News*, which reported on a tweet mentioning a "night of rage." This framing attributes the intentions of all activists to a single tweet, portraying all of them as violent and motivated by rage rather than principled opposition to the police training facility and the police shooting of Tortuguita. Notably, this piece did not discuss terrorism charges.

On the following day, the *New York Post* ran an *Associated Press* article with a different and more balanced tone. However, on January 21st, an article focusing on property destruction claimed that the "night of rage" had been called by Antifa members.<sup>72</sup> This assertion lacked evidence to support it, but it is important to note that, since President Trump's announcement of his intention to designate Antifa as terrorists, the term "Antifa"

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<sup>70</sup> Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County. (2022, December 15). *Arrest Warrants*.

[https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined\\_redacted](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23587689-dtwarrantscombined_redacted)

<sup>71</sup> Steinbuch, Y. (January 19). *Atlanta activists call for 'night of rage' after man killed, cop injured*. New York Post. <https://nypost.com/2023/01/19/atlanta-activists-call-for-rage-after-man-killed-cop-injured/>

<sup>72</sup> Reilly, P. (2023, January 21). *Protestors torch police car, damage businesses in Atlanta after activist killed*. New York Post.

<https://nypost.com/2023/01/21/protesters-torch-police-car-damage-businesses-in-atlanta-after-activist-killed/>

has been used pejoratively to discredit leftwing activists.<sup>73</sup> For the *New York Post*, as well as other conservative media outlets, "Antifa" has become synonymous with terrorism.<sup>74</sup>

On January 22nd, the *New York Post* continued to construct a narrative depicting the protestors as violent and destructive.<sup>75</sup> The article briefly mentioned the shooting death of Tortuguita towards the end but focused primarily on other aspects. The following day's story aligned with Atlanta Mayor, Andre Dickens, who attributed responsibility for the property destruction to six individuals from outside the city.<sup>76</sup> Mayor Dickens contended that the protestors were peaceful except for these six, who were alleged to have brought explosive devices.

This charge of "outside agitators" disrupting the peace has a longer history that goes back to the civil rights movement. During that era, it was a common tactic to discredit those advocating for civil liberties by portraying them as agitators from the North, often associated with communism, who were allegedly causing trouble that local residents did not support.

The *New York Post* adopted this "outside agitator" framing in an article on January 25th, supported by quotes from Governor Kemp.<sup>77</sup> The piece did not include interviews with protestors or those in support of the movement, providing little to no context while presenting the terrorism charges as if they were justified.

On January 27th, the *New York Post* published a story quoting podcaster Joe Rogan, who criticized media coverage of the Atlanta protests for describing them as mostly peaceful.<sup>78</sup> Rogan accused the media, without specifying which outlets, of spreading "propaganda" and highlighted instances of violence. On the same day, another article portrayed Governor Kemp's declaration of a state of emergency as a necessary precaution for "anti-cop" protests.<sup>79</sup> The overall tone of these articles was sensational and fervent.

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<sup>73</sup> LaFree, G. (2018, May). *Is Antifa a Terrorist Group?* Society, 1-5.

<https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/antifa-terrorist-group>

<sup>74</sup> LaFree, G. (2018, May).

<sup>75</sup> Keane, I. (2023, January 22). *Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens labels anti-police riots 'domestic terrorism'*. New York Post.

<https://nypost.com/2023/01/22/atlanta-mayor-andre-dickens-labels-anti-police-riots-domestic-terrorism/>

<sup>76</sup> Ngo, A. (2023, January 23). *Spoiled children of privilege trying to burn Atlanta down*. New York Post.

<https://nypost.com/2023/01/23/spoiled-children-of-privilege-trying-to-burn-atlanta-down/>

<sup>77</sup> Keane, I. (2023, January 24). *Six rioters slapped with domestic terrorism charges following violent Atlanta protests*. New York Post. <https://nypost.com/2023/01/24/six-charged-in-violent-atlanta-cop-city-protests/>

<sup>78</sup> Barrabi, T. (2023, January 27). *Joe Rogan calls media 'propaganda department' after anti-police violence coverage*. New York Post.

<https://nypost.com/2023/01/27/joe-rogan-accuses-media-of-being-propaganda-department-after-atlanta-anti-police-violence/>

<sup>79</sup> Pandolfo, C. (2023, January 27). *Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp activates 1K National Guard troops ahead of anti-cop protests*. New York Post.

<https://nypost.com/2023/01/27/gov-brian-kemp-activates-national-guard-before-anti-cop-protests/>



**The Atlanta Journal-Constitution:** *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC)* published its first article on Tortuguita's death on January 19th.<sup>80</sup> In this article, the *Atlanta Community Press Collective* is quoted, expressing uncertainty about the circumstances leading to Tortuguita's death. However, the article aligns with the coverage from December, which presents the activists as fringe elements.

It goes on to portray the activists in a potentially violent light. It mentions an anonymous Twitter account, @scenesatl, which called for "reciprocal violence to be done to the police and their allies." It further notes that the Atlanta Police Department was aware of this threat, with officers on high alert. The article emphasizes the police's commitment to maintaining public safety, echoing the language and rhetoric associated with the war on terror, where police and security agencies are tasked with protecting citizens from violent terrorists lurking everywhere.

Additionally, the article quotes the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) stating that they discovered various items, including mortar-style fireworks, edged weapons, pellet rifles, gas masks, and a blowtorch. These details contribute to the portrayal of the activists as potentially dangerous. Had the *AJC* investigated these claims by checking the arrest warrants it would have found that none of the protestors were charged with possessing these weapons. The only weapon that one activist possessed and allegedly used was a rock.

In an article dated January 20th, the journalist characterizes the protestors as follows: "The reaction to the death of 26-year-old activist Manuel Teran among groups ranging from environmental activists, radical anarchists, and Black revolutionaries in cities around the nation demonstrates the 'Stop Cop City' movement has become a symbol of a larger fight on the far left."<sup>81</sup>

Rather than focusing on concerns related to police violence, this *AJC* article hones in on the tactic of labeling protestors as "far left," positioning them as a minority group. Terms like "radical anarchists" and "black revolutionaries" are employed to potentially alienate the reading public. While the article covers protests taking place across the nation in response to Tortuguita's killing, it appears to make an effort to present these protests in an unfavorable light.

For example, the article mentions that in "Portland, Oregon, a city with a history of fringe left-wing activism, protestors held a candlelight vigil for Teran." The use of the word "fringe" is deliberate and serves as a way to denigrate a non-violent action such as a candlelight vigil. While opponents of Cop City are quoted toward the end of the article, the

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<sup>80</sup> Estep, T. (2023, January 19). *Details trickle out after deadly encounter at Atlanta training center site*. The Atlanta-Journal Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/neighborhoods/dekalb/gbi-charges-five-more-with-domestic-terrorism/M5GKMOE2HIHPHHWMTTUIW7B2A4/>

<sup>81</sup> Joyner, C.; Estep, T. (2023, January 20). *Police training site protest has national reach*. The Atlanta-Journal Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/news/police-training-site-protest-has-national-reach/5MQZEGEPVRB2RNX3URT22GRZWE/>

overall tone is set by a criminal justice professor who provides the labels that the journalists seem to seek in order to distinguish the protestors from the general public. The GBI's claim that Tortuguita owned a gun and that it was found at the crime scene is prominently featured.

On January 22nd, the *AJC* followed Mayor Dickens' lead in portraying those arrested as outside agitators.<sup>82</sup> The article's tone is largely shaped by Dickens and other authorities, with the focus primarily on damage and violence. Notably, there is no inclusion of statements from opponents of Cop City.

However, as a response to both national protests and increased media attention on Atlanta, the newspaper appears to adopt a more self-aware approach later in January. While still leading with the perspective of the authorities, a January 24th article acknowledges:

"Supporters and others, though, say describing protesters as purely outside agitators ignores many locals' long-standing opposition to the training center project. The Atlanta City Council approved leasing the property in question to the Atlanta Police Foundation in September of 2021 – after hearing 17 hours of mostly negative public comment on the issue."<sup>83</sup>

In this piece, there is also an attempt to humanize those arrested by providing information about who they are and the ideals that drive them.

Furthermore, when three notable Atlanta institutions—the Carter Center, the Georgia chapter of the Sierra Club, and the Southern Center for Human Rights—weighed in on Tortuguita's shooting death, the *AJC* reported on their statements. It became apparent that the pressure was mounting, and the story on January 26th concludes with a tweet from Congressperson Rashida Tlaib: "We demand justice for Tortuguita," Tlaib wrote. "I stand with the forest protectors righteously fighting Cop City."<sup>84</sup> We begin to observe a shift in the *AJC* that is more pronounced in the third period.

### ***Period Three: March 2023 Arrests***

On March 4, 2023, a week-long series of actions were called aimed at protecting the Atlanta forest and halting the development of Cop City. On March 5th, an additional 23 individuals, including a legal representative from the Southern Poverty Law Center who

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<sup>82</sup> Stevens, A. (2023, January 22). *Out of state protesters in spotlight with arrests, violence in Atlanta*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/news/crime/out-of-state-protesters-in-spotlight-with-arrests-violence-in-atlanta/VBT KC4G5GVH2HKOPE3SD34JHC4/>

<sup>83</sup> Estep, T.; Stevens, A.; Redmon, J. (2023, January 24). *Arrests point to broad pull of protests against Atlanta training center*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/neighborhoods/dekalb/arrests-point-to-broad-pull-of-protests-against-atlanta-training-center/MNOTVQDHJJAGLMI7MLNMOYC4ZM/>

<sup>84</sup> Estep, T. (2023, January 26). *Carter, King centers call for 'dialogue' in Atlanta training center conflict*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/neighborhoods/dekalb/carter-center-others-weigh-in-on-atlanta-training-center-conflict/V2T02RSGMVEQVGSK6JIUHO7VY/>

was present to observe the protest, were apprehended on terrorism-related charges. In the subsequent analysis, we delve into media coverage spanning from March 4th to March 15th, encompassing all seven media outlets, with the exception of *The WSJ* where we include an editorial from March 30th.

<b>News Media</b>	<b>Number of Articles in March 2023</b>
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	4 + 1 op-ed
The New York Times	3
USA Today	4
The Washington Post	2
LA Times	2
New York Post	4 + 1 editorial
The Wall Street Journal	2 editorials

### ***Summary of Media Frames***

All seven newspapers covered the arrests in March. The most significant change was in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* which switched its coverage from primarily deploying a government lens to one that gave more space to local residents and activists. This can be seen in the number of quotes from protestors and their supporters (14), which exceeds those from the government (10) (see chart below). Overall, with the exception of the two conservative newspapers, all the other papers see an increase in the number of quotes from protestors and/or those in support of them. This marks a significant step forward in terms of humanizing the protestors so that their concerns might be presented sympathetically to the public.

<b>News Media Coverage, March 2023</b>	<b>Number of quotes from government and police officials</b>	<b>Number of quotes from protestors and those who support them</b>
The AJC	10	14
USA Today	9	11
The NYT	9	11
The Washington Post	1	3
LA Times	6	10
New York Post	16	5
The WSJ	6	4

*The New York Times*: *The Times* again conducts the most thorough examination of police militarization. And while it places Stop Cop City within the national context of the fight against police violence, it barely discusses the use of terrorism charges to arrest protestors. Thus, even while *The Times* presents the protestors as having legitimate concerns, by not critically examining the use of terrorism laws it tacitly gives a pass to Georgia authorities' use of terrorism charges.

*The Washington Post:* *The Washington Post* also placed the protests in a national context of anti-police violence and environmental activism. While the articles highlight protestor violence, residents who state that it is law enforcement authorities who are creating a siege atmosphere are also cited. Overall, it adopted a balanced approach, portraying forest defenders and Cop City opponents in a nuanced light. Such a way of framing the protest movement does not justify the use of counter-terrorism methods to target activists.

*USA Today:* The paper emphasized property destruction and the perspective of the Atlanta Police Chief. By adopting a sensational tone, *USA Today* cast the protestors as violent; the implication was that they were therefore deserving of the punishments that followed. A week later when the independent autopsy of Tortugueta's death was released, the paper had a more sympathetic portrayal of protestors.

*Los Angeles Times:* The paper initially focused on property destruction and police actions. Later it offered a more comprehensive view featuring interviews with protestors and a nuanced analysis of the terrorism charges. By humanizing the protestors, it made the use of terrorism laws questionable.

*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution:* Shifted from an unabashed pro-government stance to featuring local activists and faith groups opposed to Cop City. This marked a move away from designating activists as "outside agitators" to more balanced coverage which included sympathetic interviews with dissenters but also protest supporters.

*The New York Post:* Demonized protestors as "Antifa activists" without evidence and supported terrorism charges in editorials.

*The Wall Street Journal:* Painted protestors negatively as a "mob" and as "Antifa radicals" and supported terrorism charges in both editorials.

### ***Detailed Analysis of Media Coverage***

**The New York Times:** *The Times* once again led the coverage as the first national newspaper to publish a story. This extensive article, spanning over 1700 words, provides a comprehensive analysis of the issues at stake, offering a platform for concerns raised by Cop City opponents, ranging from deforestation to the growing militarization of the police force.<sup>85</sup> While incorporating the perspectives of local authorities, the piece contextualizes the week of action within the broader context of the fight against police violence, spurred by the tragic killing of George Floyd, and the nationwide movement it ignited. This framework is indeed crucial and relevant, as is the exploration of the police's increased militarization since 9/11. The article also includes quotes from local residents and national experts, shedding light on the problematic aspects of this trend toward police

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<sup>85</sup> Keenan, S.; Goldstein, J. (2023, March 4). *A New Front Line in the Debate Over Policing: A Forest Near Atlanta*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/04/us/cop-city-atlanta-police-training.html>

militarization. Among the articles analyzed, this one provides the most comprehensive treatment of this militarization angle.

However, the adaptation of Georgia's terrorism laws to target protestors is notably absent from the article. It remains unclear why, when 23 more individuals were arrested the following day, *The New York Times* did not undertake a similarly thorough examination of the domestic terrorism charges. Instead, the subsequent article on the arrests primarily focuses on property destruction and the police response.<sup>86</sup> While it acknowledges that only a subset of the larger group of demonstrators, dressed in "black and camouflage" and wearing masks, engaged in property damage, it does not critically engage the terrorism charges. Governor Kemp's statement is quoted in this context: "Domestic terrorism will NOT be tolerated in this state."

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, *The New York Times* dedicates a few paragraphs to discussing the domestic terrorism charges.<sup>87</sup> The article, titled "What is Cop City," takes a question-and-answer format to elucidate various aspects of the conflict (a format also followed by other newspapers, as we will see below). While it provides a comprehensive discussion of police militarization and presents arguments both for and against Cop City, it addresses the domestic terrorism charges in a limited way and fails to emphasize the historical significance of these charges.

The article quotes a law professor explaining how the definition of terrorism has been expanded in Georgia to encompass acts aimed not only at harming individuals but also at coercing government action or intimidating the public. However, juxtaposed with this explanation is a quote from Sherry Boston, the District Attorney of DeKalb County, expressing support for "peaceful protest" but firmly opposing violence. In this way, *The New York Times* appears to somewhat condone the adaptation of terrorism statutes to label protestors as terrorists, failing to critically scrutinize the implications of these charges.

**The Washington Post:** *The Washington Post* published two stories on March 6th that predominantly focused on instances of violence.<sup>88</sup> To be fair, while these articles extensively covered property destruction, they also provided a platform for local residents who expressed opposition to the training facility and concern over the impediments, such as police checkpoints and obstacles, that hindered access to their homes. One resident, voicing disapproval of the police facility, described the situation as feeling like "war in our house," with police offering minimal information.

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<sup>86</sup> Keenan, S.; Fawcett, E. (2023, March 5). *Protesters Damage Property at Site of Planned Police Center in Atlanta*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/05/us/atlanta-cop-city-protests.html>

<sup>87</sup> Hassam, A.; Keenan, S. (2023, March 7). *What Is 'Cop City'? The Atlanta Police Center Protests, Explained*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/cop-city-atlanta-protests.html>

<sup>88</sup> Shavin, M. (2023, March 6). *Protests opposing 'Cop City' in Atlanta again turn violent*. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/03/06/atlanta-cop-city-protests/>; Brasch, B. (2023, March 23). *What is Cop City? Why are there violent protests in an Atlanta forest?* The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/03/06/cop-city-atlanta-protests-explained/>

Additionally, *The Washington Post*, akin to *The New York Times*, aimed to contextualize the Atlanta protests within a national framework. One article from March 6th began by highlighting that the Atlanta protests were "a focal point of national anti-police and environmental activism."<sup>89</sup> Utilizing a question-and-answer format, similar to that adopted by *The Times*, the article explored various facets of the confrontation. While it acknowledged property destruction, it did not sensationalize this aspect of the protest. Furthermore, it subtly critiqued the *AJC*'s coverage of the protests by pointing out that the Cox Foundation had financially supported the proposed training center.

Consistent with the more critical journalism conducted in January, *The Washington Post* portrayed the forest defenders and opponents of Cop City in a more nuanced manner.<sup>90</sup> They accurately identified the opposition as "Stop Cop City" instead of "Defend the Atlanta Forest," which had been designated as a terrorist organization by the state of Georgia. The paper described this group as "a coalition of people against the training center who organize campaigns and call out the many corporate sponsors that support building the center. The group also collects mutual aid and holds weekly supply drives for demonstrators in the forest."

Thus, instead of depicting the activists as fanatics driven by violence, this article, and *The Washington Post* more broadly, opted for a more comprehensive and balanced approach.

**USA Today:** In March, *USA Today* published four articles on the topic. The first, posted on the morning of March 6th, featured Atlanta Police Chief Darin Schierbaum and focused primarily on property destruction.<sup>91</sup> In the print version (unlike the online version), the article began with a direct quote from the police chief, stating that the incident was a "very violent attack." The article predominantly cited Georgia authorities, with only a few quotes from the Atlanta Community Press Collective's statement on Tortuguita's death towards the end. It repeated a line from its January article, citing a "coalition of law enforcement agencies" claiming that the groups were "terrorizing project workers" and "endangering local residents."<sup>92</sup> This terrorism frame was presented uncritically, without independent investigation, unlike *The Washington Post*, which had interviewed local residents expressing concerns about the heavy police presence rather than the protestors.

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<sup>89</sup> Brasch, B. (2023, March 6). *What is Cop City? Why are there violent protests in an Atlanta forest?* The Washington Post.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/03/06/cop-city-atlanta-protests-explained/>

<sup>90</sup> Craig, T. (2023, January 26). *In Atlanta, a deadly forest protest sparks debate over 'domestic terrorism'.* The Washington Post.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/01/26/atlanta-forest-protester-police-riot/>

<sup>91</sup> Neysa Alund, N.; Fine, C. (2023, March 6). *23 people charged with domestic terrorism after attack on Atlanta police center 'Cop City'.* USA Today.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/03/06/atlanta-police-training-center-protests-detained/11411036002/>

<sup>92</sup> Hauck, G. (2023, January 19). *Authorities identify person killed at Atlanta's 'Cop City' training center site.* USA Today.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/01/18/georgia-trooper-shot-man-killed-proposed-atlanta-police-site/11077432002/>



The other article published on the same day utilized a question-and-answer format.<sup>93</sup> While its tone resembled the earlier article, it did provide space for opponents of Cop City, including Tortuguita's family. However, the section on terrorism-related charges simply conveyed the state's justification that protestors had thrown rocks and Molotov cocktails, without critically examining why these actions were labeled as "terrorist" rather than simply unlawful. Overall, *USA Today* did not address the consequences of using the 2017 Georgia law, except for a single line in a March 10th article mentioning criticism from civil rights groups.<sup>94</sup>

However, a week later, when an independent autopsy was released, showing that Tortuguita had their hands raised when they were shot, *USA Today* presented a more sympathetic portrayal of the forest defenders.<sup>95</sup> While it included the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's perspective, it also quoted the lawyer representing Tortuguita's case, who asserted that there was "no factual basis for the charges against" the activists sitting in the DeKalb County jail, characterizing their detention as ongoing "intimidation by the state against dissent."

**The LA Times:** The *LA Times* published two articles on the March arrests. The first, published on March 6th, primarily centered on property destruction and the actions of the protestors that resulted in arrests.<sup>96</sup> Towards the end, it briefly touched on the terrorism charges, mentioning that "some" had criticized the state for being "heavy-handed." It goes on to add that "anyone convicted of the crime [domestic terrorism] must serve the entire sentence, can't be sentenced to probation as a first offender and can't be paroled unless an offender has served at least 30 years in prison."

In a more extensive article published a week later, the *LA Times* offered a comprehensive view of the struggle, with a significant focus on the voices of forest defenders through interviews and quotes.<sup>97</sup> This approach humanized the protestors and paved the way for a more critical discussion of the terrorism charges. The journalist interviewed the parent of a young protestor who, despite describing himself as "peaceful,"

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<sup>93</sup> Yancey-Bragg, N. (2023, March 12). *What is 'Cop City?' Why activists are protesting police, fire department training center in Atlanta*. USA Today.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/03/06/what-is-cop-city-why-activists-protesting-atlanta/11413222002/>

<sup>94</sup> Carless, W. (2023, March 10). *Jan. 6 defendants on the loose; domestic terrorism charges at Atlanta's 'cop city' protest*. USA Today.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/03/10/cop-city-arrests-olivia-pollock-joseph-hutchins-on-run-jan-6/11437673002/>

<sup>95</sup> Yancey-Bragg, N. (2023, March 13). *Autopsy finds 'Cop City' protestor's hands were raised during Georgia fatal shooting, attorney says*. USA Today.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/03/13/cop-city-protester-had-hands-raised-during-fatal-shooting-autopsy/11465917002/>

<sup>96</sup> Martin, J.; Amy, J. (2023, March 6). *23 charged with terrorism in Atlanta 'Cop City' protest*. LA Times. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-03-06/almost-three-dozen-people-detained-after-violence-at-atlanta-police-training-site>

<sup>97</sup> Jarvie, J. (2023, March 15). *The latest epicenter for anti-police protests: Cop City in Atlanta*. LA Times. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-03-15/stop-cop-city-forest-camp-atlanta>

expressed understanding for those who engaged in property destruction, attributing the escalation of violence to the police's actions, particularly the killing of Tortuguita.

The article highlighted a crucial point that Georgia's definition of terrorism extends beyond the federal definition, encompassing property destruction in the pursuit of political goals. It referenced a letter signed by dozens of environmental and human rights groups, urging Georgia to drop the terrorism charges and labeling them as politically motivated prosecutions intended to curtail free speech activities.

While the article presented the police and authorities' perspectives, it was the most comprehensive and sympathetic portrayal of the Stop Cop City movement among the newspapers studied in March. By showcasing protestors as multifaceted individuals, it became challenging to label them simply as "terrorists."

**The Atlanta Journal-Constitution:** At *The AJC*, there appears to have been a shift in the journalists covering the Cop City protests in March. This change in personnel resulted in articles that provided a platform for local activists, community organizers, and faith groups opposed to Cop City. The previous framing of "outside agitators" and "far leftwing" protestors seemed to give way to a more balanced approach that highlighted local voices. This shift did not sideline the authorities and supporters of Cop City; they were still quoted and included in the coverage. While there are 14 quotes from protestors and their supporters, there are 10 from the government and their supporters.

On March 4th, a journalist reported on a peaceful protest during the week of action, emphasizing that it attracted a diverse group of participants, including young activists, families with children, clergy members, and neighbors.<sup>98</sup> The article also mentioned clergy support for the protest, with one clergyman carrying a sign that read "Clergy in support."

To present the other side of the story, an op-ed on March 8th and an article on March 10th focused on Atlantans who supported the planned public safety training center.<sup>99</sup> These pieces highlighted various faith leaders who gathered to emphasize their support for the center and their desire for community involvement in its planning.

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<sup>98</sup> Teegardin, C. (2023, March 4). *Environmentalists, clergy, other activists rally against training center*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/news/environmentalists-clergy-other-activists-rally-against-training-center/IM22H5CIZVEBLFGX5GKRGLR63E/>

<sup>99</sup> Stevens, A. (2023, March 10). *'We're not anti-police': Black clergy leaders say new training center should be a 'bridge'*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/news/crime/were-not-anti-police-black-clergy-leaders-say-new-training-center-should-be-a-bridge/REZUT7H7NRFA3MOEHP3IGPAEXO/>; Torpy, B. (2023, March 8). *OPINION: The privileged, transient warriors protesting police training center*. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-cop-citys-privileged-transient-warriors/KZ5UDGLLLZGXTPXW6KAMJH5SPI/>

In contrast to the sensationalized coverage of property destruction in the past, the piece published on March 6th by *The AJC* takes a more balanced approach.<sup>100</sup> While it mentions the use of Molotov cocktails and includes quotes from the police Chief, it also concludes by highlighting a rally organized by a coalition of faith leaders on the steps of City Hall. These leaders called for a halt to the Cop City project, the dropping of charges against protestors, and an independent investigation into Tortuguita's death. Reverend Keyanna Jones, one of the faith leaders, was quoted as saying, "We are opening our mouths and crying with a loud voice to say that we don't want 'cop city.' I live in East Atlanta, I don't want 'cop city.' I have five Black children, I don't want 'cop city.'"

Another article on March 9th covered a rally outside the King Center organized by multiple local social justice organizations.<sup>101</sup> In a shift away from the "outside agitator" framework, *The AJC* shed light on local opposition to Cop City. The article mentioned groups such as "Community Movement Builders," "Movement for Black Lives," and the "New Georgia Project" as sponsors of the rally. Thus, rather than smear opponents of Cop City as "black revolutionaries" and "radical anarchists," the paper made a concerted effort to name local community groups involved in the protests.

While the article did include a quote from the Atlanta Police Chief characterizing property destruction as a "very violent act," the majority of quotes and sources featured individuals critical of Cop City. A leader from the local Community Builders Movement, for instance, stated that they would work to free those arrested, referring to them as "political prisoners." This shift in coverage moved away from labeling protestors as "terrorists" or portraying them solely as "left-wing activists," instead incorporating local voices critical of the arrests.

Overall, *The AJC* seemed to make an effort to address criticisms of its previous coverage by quoting local community activists and faith leaders.

However, the *New York Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* took a different approach. Both newspapers, without providing any evidence to support their claims, smeared the activists as fanatics associated with Antifa.

**The New York Post:** The *New York Post* published three articles on March 6th, all of which primarily focused on property destruction and the arrests. The tone of these articles was sensational, and their sources were primarily Georgia police and other officials. In one of them, the protestors were described as "vandals" who were hurling "bricks and Molotov

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<sup>100</sup> Bunch, R. (2023, March 6). Atlanta City Council shown video of fiery protest at public safety training site. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

<https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/atlanta-city-council-shown-video-of-fiery-protest-at-public-safety-training-site/STRVWER5PVH3FP32YKGYA6ZAXQ/>

<sup>101</sup> Papp, J. (2023, March 9). Social justice groups rally at King Center against Atlanta police training facility. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

<https://www.ajc.com/news/crime/social-justice-groups-rally-at-king-center-against-atlanta-police-training-facility/R7OYF3GCUJHJBPLVOAZ4FPBN44/>

cocktails at cops."<sup>102</sup> The journalist noted that this was not the first time that protests against the facility had turned violent.

Another article began by highlighting the use of Molotov cocktails and then presented the argument from the state Attorney General that an "international group" had come to Georgia with the intention of undermining the training center.<sup>103</sup> This quote was followed by a sentence explaining that they were arrested as terrorists. This framing echoed the rhetoric of the war on terror era, particularly the notion of "foreign fighters" coming to the US. However, in this case, the activists were predominantly white and identified as "French and Canadian citizens." The article also quoted Governor Kemp's statement that terrorism "will NOT be tolerated."

The third article focused on the individuals who were arrested, including a lawyer from the Southern Poverty Law Center.<sup>104</sup> It reiterated the descriptions of Molotov cocktails, fireworks, bricks, and rocks, and quoted the Atlanta Police Chief, who characterized it as "a very violent attack." The article included police mug shots of the 23 individuals arrested on terrorism charges, with some of them described as "smirking."

The *New York Post's* editorial board took a clear stance in opposition to the protest movement. In their editorial published on March 7th, they portrayed the protestors as "Antifa activists" and claimed that all 23 of them were associated with this broad political movement. However, it is important to note that Antifa is not a centralized group but rather a loose coalition of people who are anti-fascist. Historian Mark Bray's research has shown that Antifa is not a singular organization.<sup>105</sup>

Antifa activists have been involved in various demonstrations, some of which have included clashes with far-right groups, such as at the events in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 and in Portland, Oregon. During the Trump administration, government officials and the U.S. media displayed a heightened focus on Antifa, and made claims that they were responsible for acts of violence during protests that followed the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Attorney General, William Barr, notably mentioned "antifa-like tactics" and accused out-of-state agitators of engaging in what he referred to as "domestic terrorism."<sup>106</sup> Thus, the use of "Antifa" becomes a shortcut and an easy way to smear activists as terrorists.

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<sup>102</sup> Griffin, A. (2023, March 6). *Atlanta protesters hurl bricks, Molotov cocktails at police at future 'Cop City' site*. New York Post.

<https://nypost.com/2023/03/06/atlanta-protesters-toss-molotov-cocktails-at-police-at-cop-city-site/>

<sup>103</sup> Crane, E. (2023, March 6). *'International group' involved in Molotov attack on Atlanta's 'Cop City'*. New York Post. <https://nypost.com/2023/03/06/international-group-involved-in-attack-on-atlantas-cop-city/>

<sup>104</sup> Crane, R. (2023, March 6). *Attorney among 23 charged with domestic terrorism in Atlanta 'Cop City' attack*. New York Post.

<https://nypost.com/2023/03/06/splc-attorney-among-23-charged-in-atlanta-cop-city-attack/>

<sup>105</sup> Bray, M. (2017, August). *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*. Melville House.

<sup>106</sup> Tucker, E. (2020, June 1). *What is antifa? A look at the movement Trump is blaming for violence at protests*. PBS News Hour. (The Associated Press).

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/what-is-antifa-a-look-at-the-movement-trump-is-blaming-for-violence-at-protests>

In this context, the *New York Post* used the frame of Antifa without providing any evidence that individuals claiming to be Antifa were present in Atlanta. The editorial primarily centered around criticizing the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which tracks and researches hate groups. The editorial board chastised the SPLC for its criticism of Trump's intention to designate Antifa as a terrorist organization.

Furthermore, the demonization of the protestors was evident in a story about a "rich-kid New Yorker" who was among those charged with terrorism.<sup>107</sup> The article described the social standing of the arrestee's parents in New York City in a tone that purported to be anti-elite while reinforcing the position taken by Georgia authorities. These stories, like others in the *New York Post*, also used descriptions like "violent agitators" to refer to those arrested by state authorities. Finally, even though the *New York Post* has several quotes from protestors or their supporters, these quotes are not sympathetic to their cause but rather quotes that helped the paper construct the protestors in negative ways.

**The Wall Street Journal:** *The Wall Street Journal's* coverage follows a similar pattern. The editorial board published two opinion pieces, one on March 7th and the other on March 30th<sup>108</sup>. It appears that no dedicated journalist was assigned to cover the story. The first piece begins by questioning the double standard on how violence from the political right is condemned while violence from the left is seemingly defended. It characterizes the protestors as a "mob" armed with Molotov cocktails and cites the Atlanta Police Chief's condemnation of their actions as "very violent," framing the incident as an attempt to promote anarchy and destabilization.

The piece proceeds to challenge the Southern Poverty Law Center's statement regarding its lawyer's arrest on domestic terrorism charges. It disputes SPLC's assertion that the arrest is not evidence of any crime but rather reflects heavy-handed law enforcement intervention. The editorial contends that the protestors were responsible for carrying explosives and setting a police car on fire, and it asserts that Tortugueta fired at the police first. However, there is no follow-up story or retraction when autopsy reports contradict these claims.

The March 30th editorial maintains a similarly critical tone. It begins with the assertion that "Antifa radicals" had booby-trapped the forest, defends the Georgia law, and justifies the terrorism charges against the 42 individuals who had been arrested up to that point. The piece concludes by emphasizing that while protesters have the right to engage in

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<sup>107</sup> Andrews, D.; Celona, L.; Crane, E. (2023, March 7). Rich New Yorker among protestors arrested in Atlanta 'Cop City' violence. *New York Post*.

<https://nypost.com/2023/03/07/rich-new-yorker-among-protestors-arrested-in-atlanta-cop-city-violence/>

<sup>108</sup> The Editorial Board. (2023, March 7). *The Siege of Atlanta's 'Cop City'*. *Wall Street Journal*.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/atlanta-cop-city-attacks-georgia-police-training-site-63c4cf40?page=1>; The Editorial Board. (2023, March 30). *The Cop City Booby Traps*. *Wall Street Journal*.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/cop-city-atlanta-georgia-booby-traps-intrenchment-park-protesters-56823adb?page=1>

civil disobedience, they must face severe consequences when they cross the line by “endanger[ing] people” and “destroy[ing] property.”<sup>109</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Despite the end of the "forever wars" after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and a public perception that the global war on terror has concluded, punitive measures developed to target perceived "terrorists" persist.<sup>110</sup> This expansion of state power to control dissenting voices now being labeled “terrorists” represents a troubling legacy of the war on terror, with dire consequences for democracy. In the aftermath of the nationwide protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd, powerful institutions like the Atlanta Police Foundation set out to find ways to control protestors through the militarized training of police. Such training is routinely offered by the U.S. to authoritarian governments in Latin America and elsewhere where the use of violence, including the assassination of dissidents, has become commonplace.<sup>111</sup> The extrajudicial murder of Tortuguita on U.S. soil has brought this home.

In this context, the media, often regarded as the "fourth estate" in a democracy, play a pivotal role. In theory, the media are entrusted with the responsibility of posing critical questions and disseminating accurate information to the public so that troubling practices like the use of state violence and extrajudicial killings are not normalized. In reality, U.S. media institutions have often continued to defer to government sources, reproducing and thus reinforcing the expansion of terrorism discourses to criminalize protestors – with sometimes deadly consequences.

The U.S. media coverage of the Cop City protests is a case in point. At first, the national news media did not cover the terrorism arrests in Atlanta. The local *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* effectively served as the Atlanta Police Foundations’ propaganda outlet. In January, 2022 several national media outlets picked up the story when violence and property destruction occurred, following the "if it bleeds, it leads" framework. However, some newspapers adopted a more critical stance. *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and the *LA Times* humanized the protestors, depicting them as concerned activists opposing police militarization and environmental destruction. The *New York Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*, however, portrayed protestors as violent Antifa activists and justified their arrest on the grounds of terrorism. *USA Today* adopted a sensational tone, in effect also justifying the arrests.

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<sup>109</sup> The Editorial Board. (2023, March 30). *The Cop City Booby Traps*. Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/cop-city-atlanta-georgia-booby-traps-intrenchment-park-protesters-56823adb?page=1>

<sup>110</sup> The White House. (2021, August 31). Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>111</sup> Shahshahani, A. (2023, September 15). *Cop Cities in a Militarized World*. Boston Review. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/cop-cities-in-a-militarized-world/>



As the protest movement gained national and international support, national media paid more attention. All seven outlets covered the story in March, 2023. Also significant is that *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* shifted to a more balanced tone and included the voices of Atlanta residents opposing Cop City. Rather than labeling protesters solely as "outsider agitators" and "far-left" activists who exist on the fringes of society, the newspaper quoted local activists, civil rights groups, and clergy. This happened at the highpoint of government arrests, when 23 more people were indicted on terrorism charges.

However, the analysis also reveals that apart from a handful of notable articles in *The Washington Post* and the *LA Times* that tacitly criticize the wider application of terrorism charges evidenced in Georgia, the majority of the seven media outlets have deferred unquestioningly to government authorities in the use of this label. In consequence, they have effectively supported the ongoing utilization of terrorism laws and discourses in a counter-democratic way.

The word "terrorist" is flexible and states have historically deployed it against those they see as threats.<sup>112</sup> In this case, the Georgia government has used the label to criminalize and harshly punish those involved in peaceful protests, acts of civil disobedience, and/or property destruction. There already exist laws regarding property destruction, to reassign these as "terrorist" with a maximum sentence of 30-years has a chilling effect on all protest.

That the U.S. mainstream media often support this trend is one of the enduring costs of the "war on terror," legitimating state violence while stifling democratic protest.

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<sup>112</sup> Deepa Kumar, D. (2020). *Terrorcraft: empire and the making of the racialized terrorist threat*. Institute of Race Relations, 62(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396820930523>