

# An all-Black group is arming itself and demanding change. They are the NFAC

 [edition.cnn.com/2020/10/25/us/nfac-black-armed-group/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/25/us/nfac-black-armed-group/index.html)

When two loud bangs rang out on the streets of Lafayette, Louisiana, no one knew where the gunshots came from as protesters gathered to demand justice for another Black man killed by police.

Among the crowd was a group of armed Black men and women who call themselves the "Not F\*\*king Around Coalition" or NFAC. The group did not run toward the gunshots or break formation. Instead, they knelt on the ground amid the confusion, and then walked away after their leader shouted, "fall back! fall back!"

The all-Black, Atlanta-based group has grown in size out of frustration during a summer of protests against questionable policing and the deaths of countless Black people at the hands of police, said their founder John Fitzgerald Johnson.

Their presence has caused a stir in the cities they've visited and the group has drawn some criticism after people accidentally fired a weapon during two of their rallies, including the one in Lafayette.

Started in 2017, the group has marched in Stone Mountain, Georgia, calling for the removal of the nation's largest confederate monument; Brunswick, Georgia, for Ahmaud Arbery; Louisville, Kentucky, demanding more transparency in the Breonna Taylor case; and most recently Lafayette, Louisiana, in the name of Trayford Pellerin. Along with protesters rallying in multiple US cities, largely White groups have also showed up and asserted their Second Amendment right to bear arms. Unlike many of those groups, Johnson says his group emerged as a response to enduring racial inequality and police brutality.

"We're not 'effing' around anymore with the continued abuses within our community and the lack of respect for our men, women and children," Johnson told CNN.

The all-Black group, Johnson said, intends to protect, self-police and educate Black communities on firearms and their constitutional rights.

"We are not against anyone," said Johnson, who is also known as Grand Master Jay.

## Group is exercising its constitutional rights, founder says

Large Black armed-groups aren't something often seen in the US. The most well-known was the Black Panther Party established in 1966 after the shooting of Matthew Johnson, a Black teenager killed by police. The group has since mostly disappeared.

NFAC already stands apart from other groups across the country, Thomas Mockaitis, a professor of history at DePaul University and author of "Violent Extremists: Understanding the Domestic and International Terrorist Threat," told CNN.

"In one sense it (NFAC) echoes the Black Panthers but they are more heavily armed and more disciplined... So far, they've coordinated with police and avoided engaging with violence," he said.

Johnson said the group is made up of "US citizens exercising our constitutional rights and the color of our skin shouldn't make any difference."

"Nobody says anything when other demographics pick up weapons, decide to arm themselves and confront the government over anything from wearing a mask to being cooped up in the house, but when certain demographics arm themselves all of a sudden people tend to act as if the Constitution doesn't matter," Johnson said.

There's no moral equivalency when comparing NFAC to White armed groups, Mockaitis said.

"The White militia movement is older, larger, probably more heavily armed, certainly more pervasive, it has many more people and it has been violent."

And while Mockaitis said NFAC has made some questionable comments, including challenging White armed groups during a Georgia rally, he does not believe the NFAC has an overtly racist ideology.

## **Black and armed in Kentucky, Georgia and Louisiana**

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NFAC's members clad in black have raised their fists and shouted "Black power" in at least three cities without major incidents but days of tensions have preceded their rallies.

"Black boots, black pants, black button-down shirt, black mask, shotgun, semi-automatic or rifle," Johnson said in a social media video announcing the group's plans to "descend" on Louisville for a July 25 rally, [CNN affiliate WDRB](#) reported.

The NFAC's arrival quickly became a concern among city officials. At the time, the city had seen more than a month of protests centered on the death of Breonna Taylor and some had turned violent.

David James, president of the Louisville Metro Council said officials simply didn't want people marching on city streets with guns.

Per state law, no one other than the Kentucky National Guard or Kentucky active militia "shall associate together as an armed company or drill or parade with arms" without the governor's permission. City officials still decided not to invoke that rule, James said.

A spokeswoman for Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer said in a statement that city officials have worked hard to communicate with all groups, including NFAC, and have seen largely peaceful protests.

"Balancing protesters' First Amendment rights with our duty -- and our practical ability -- to protect public safety requires flexibility and communication," said Jean Porter, the mayor's deputy director of communications.

The possibility of having an armed Black group clashing with an armed White group was also a factor. A few weeks before, the NFAC had marched on a Confederate memorial in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and one of its members called for a showdown with White vigilante groups.

When asked about that incident by CNN, Johnson said the NFAC was exercising free speech rights. They knew White armed groups usually gathered at that location, Johnson said, and the NFAC was responding to "that threat."

Police told the [Louisville Courier-Journal](#) in July that it was investigating the incident as a negligent shooting and could result in criminal charges. The outcome of the

investigation is unclear. CNN has reached out to the Louisville Police Department for comment.

When the NFAC marched in Louisville, they were met by an armed, largely White extremist group called the "Three Percenters." The two groups yelled at one another but were kept apart by riot police. Shots were fired at the event when a NFAC member dropped his weapon and injured three other NFAC members with buckshot. Johnson has said it was an accident.

The group returned to Louisville on September 5 -- the day of the Kentucky Derby -- and marched to Churchill Downs but they dispersed earlier than planned when another group showed up. Johnson said he didn't want the NFAC getting blamed if there were any clashes, CNN affiliate WLKY reported.

Earlier this month, the NFAC headed to southern Louisiana after seeing a Facebook post from US Rep. Clay Higgins, who represents the 3rd District. The September 1 post on Higgins' campaign page, which has since been removed, included photos of Black armed demonstrators and warned that if such protesters came to Lafayette he would "drop 10 of you where you stand," according to CNN affiliate KATC.

A Facebook spokesperson told CNN the post was removed because it violated the platform's policies against inciting violence.

CNN's attempts to contact Higgins' campaign have not been successful. A spokesperson for his campaign told Fox News at the time that Higgins has a "history of speaking his mind" and he's "very candid and direct."

Earlier this month, Higgins said in a statement to KATC that he recognizes the NFAC's right to peacefully assemble and doesn't not believe the group "carries any violent intent."

Local officials granted NFAC a permit to hold their event on October 3. The group converged there to protest the killing of Trayford Pellerin, a 31-year-old Black man shot by police in August.

"They're our visitors. They're our guests and yet we've rolled out the red carpet for them," Carlos Harvin, chief of minority affairs for Lafayette Consolidated Government, said about the group.

"They want the same thing that we want: a safe community," Harvin said.

The protest ended peacefully despite the arrest of a person who police say accidentally fired a weapon at the event. The NFAC said the person was not part of their group.

## **A counterpoint to other groups, some experts say**

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There isn't one way to police armed groups because every state and city has its own rules but authorities tend to take a "very cautious, almost kid glove approach" with them, said Carolyn Gallaher, a professor and senior associate dean in the School of International Service at American University.

They are walking a fine line between preventing a gun battle on the streets and not appearing like they are sanctioning armed groups, said Gallaher, author of "On the Fault Line: Race, Class, and the American Patriot Movement."

For Judson L. Jeffries, a professor of African American and African Studies at Ohio State University, the NFAC's priority so far has been stopping police brutality and it

would be interesting to see how the group's behavior and ideology evolves going forward.

The group could follow Martin Luther King Jr's train of thought, he says, showing "a great deal of patience and love for those who were oppressing him" or align more with Malcolm X who favored self-defense against White violence.

"I hope we don't get to the point where we witness shootout, open warfare between police departments and these (armed) groups," Jeffries said. "I can't help but wonder if we are nearing that point because there's only so much punishment you can clip on a group of people before they respond likewise."

Johnson has said on multiple occasions that the NFAC is a peaceful group with no record of violent incidents. Authorities in Louisville and Lafayette told CNN no major incidents were reported during NFAC's events in their cities.

Several militia experts also described the group as a counterpoint to some of the largely White armed groups in the United States, especially those that have been associated with White supremacist and neo-Confederate ideologies.

## **What we know about the founder**

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Years before Johnson led the NFAC and called on his social media followers to stand up for the Black community, he served in the military and some knew him as a hip hop DJ and producer.

Johnson declined to discuss his life outside NFAC, but records show he served in the Virginia National Guard and the Army from 1989 to 2006. He was a private when he left the military, according to the Army.

More recently, Johnson unsuccessfully campaigned for the 2016 presidential election as an Independent, according to the Federal Election Commission.

Though the NFAC has clearly drawn several hundred people to their rallies, the membership size just like much of Johnson's life remains unknown.

Johnson won't disclose the membership numbers but said his group grew "exponentially" after the Louisville march and after they dropped the age limit from 21 to 18 years old.

And for some people like Kristen "K.C." Colemon and her 9-year-old daughter, the group is seen as a symbol of empowerment rather than fear.

"It was beautiful to have a group showing America and White groups that we are not backing down," Colemon, a hairstylist from Knoxville, told CNN.

The 31-year-old and her daughter went to NFAC's October 3 rally in Lafayette.

"She knew those guns were there to protect her not to hurt her," Colemon said.

Her daughter anticipated being nervous around so many guns, the mother said, but went home feeling even more proud to be Black.