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Why US activists are wearing inflatable frog costumes at protests against Trump

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Blake Lawrence

PhD Candidate (Design) and Performance Artist, University of Technology Sydney

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Three frogs, a shark, a unicorn and a *Tyrannosaurus rex* dance in front of a line of heavily armoured police in riot gear.

Over the past few weeks, activists taking part in protests against Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) across the United States have donned inflatable animal costumes. The aim is to disrupt the Trump administration's claim that the protests are violent "hate America" rallies.

The result is a sight to behold, with many encounters between police and protestors going viral.

Whether they know it or not, these costumed activists are contributing to a rich history of using humour and dress to mobilise against and challenge power.

The ICE crackdowns

Since its creation in 2003, ICE has enforced immigration laws on the ground, arresting, detaining and deporting undocumented immigrants convicted of criminal activity.

During Donald Trump's first term as president (2017–2021), the agency expanded its operations to target and deport many people with no criminal record.

This expansion sparked the June 2018 Occupy ICE protests, inspired by the broader global Occupy movement challenging corporate power and economic inequality.

The first major Occupy ICE action in 2018 occurred in Portland – a city known for its creativity and dissent. It grew from a rally organised by the Direct Action Alliance into what federal officials called a “very, very peaceful” encampment with kitchen tents, kids’ spaces and media hubs.

The protesters forced the temporary closure of the facility for about eight days, before federal officers cleared the site and erected a fence around its perimeter.

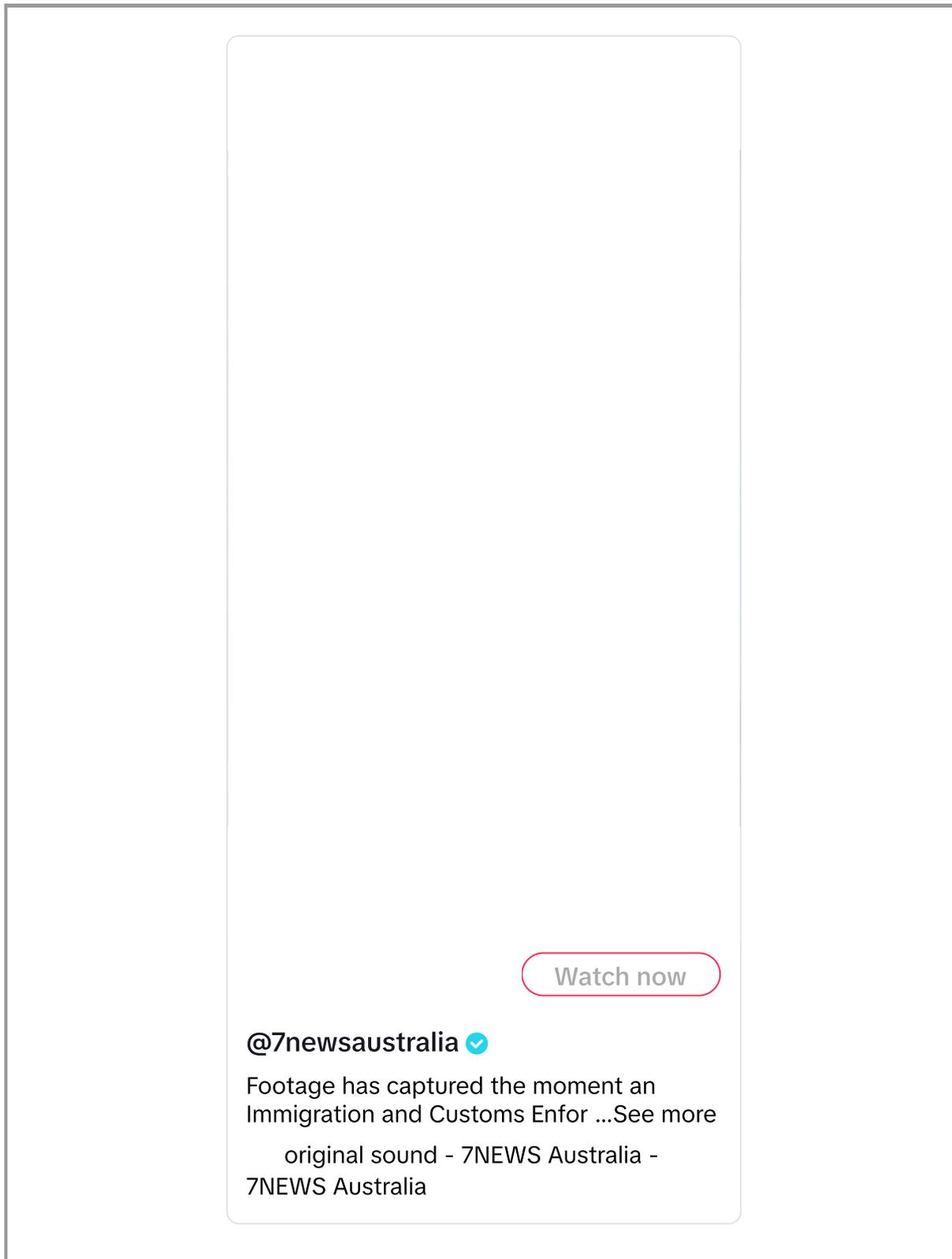
Following Trump's re-election this year, ICE operations have intensified again, with the repealing of policies that prevented enforcement operations in sensitive areas such as schools and hospitals. Protests have followed.

In Portland, tensions escalated again this September, when Trump described the city as “burning to the ground” and “overrun with domestic terrorists,” announcing his plans to deploy the National Guard.

A federal judge has so far blocked Trump from doing so, saying the protests don't meet the requirements for rebellion. He will likely keep trying.

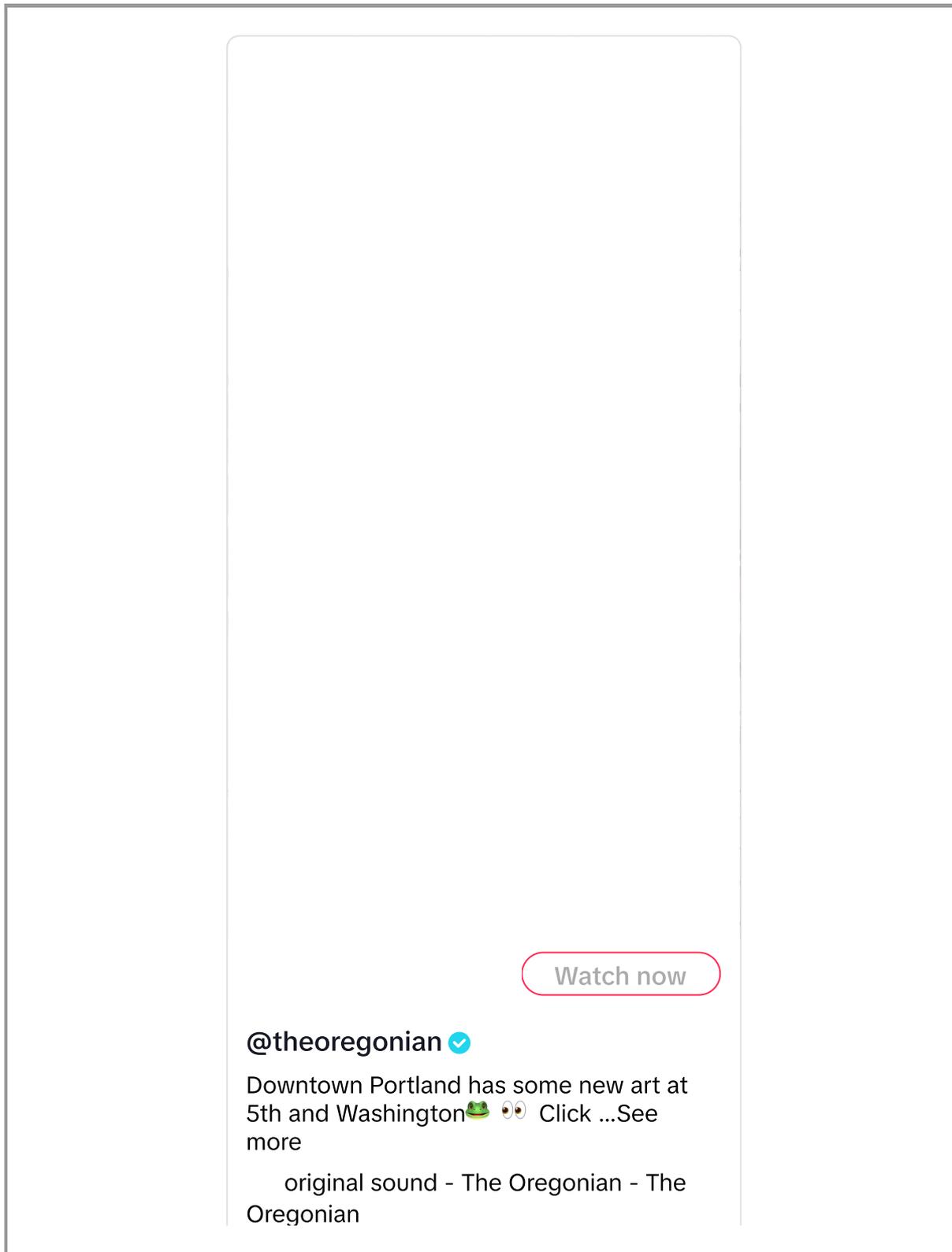
Operation inflation

Protesters in Portland and across the US have long used humour and costume in their demonstrations. In October, a TikTok video showing an ICE agent spraying pepper spray into the air vent of an activist's inflatable frog costume amassed more than two million views.



The clip exposes the absurd levels of police force against peaceful demonstrators. The protester, Seth Todd, said his intention was to contradict the “violent extremists” narrative, and “make the president and the feds look dumb”.

The Portland frog has quickly become emblematic of resistance, appearing on shirts, signs and street art, including parodies of artist Shepard Fairey’s iconic OBEY design – the authoritarian face replaced by a cartoon amphibian surrounded by the words DON’T OBEY.



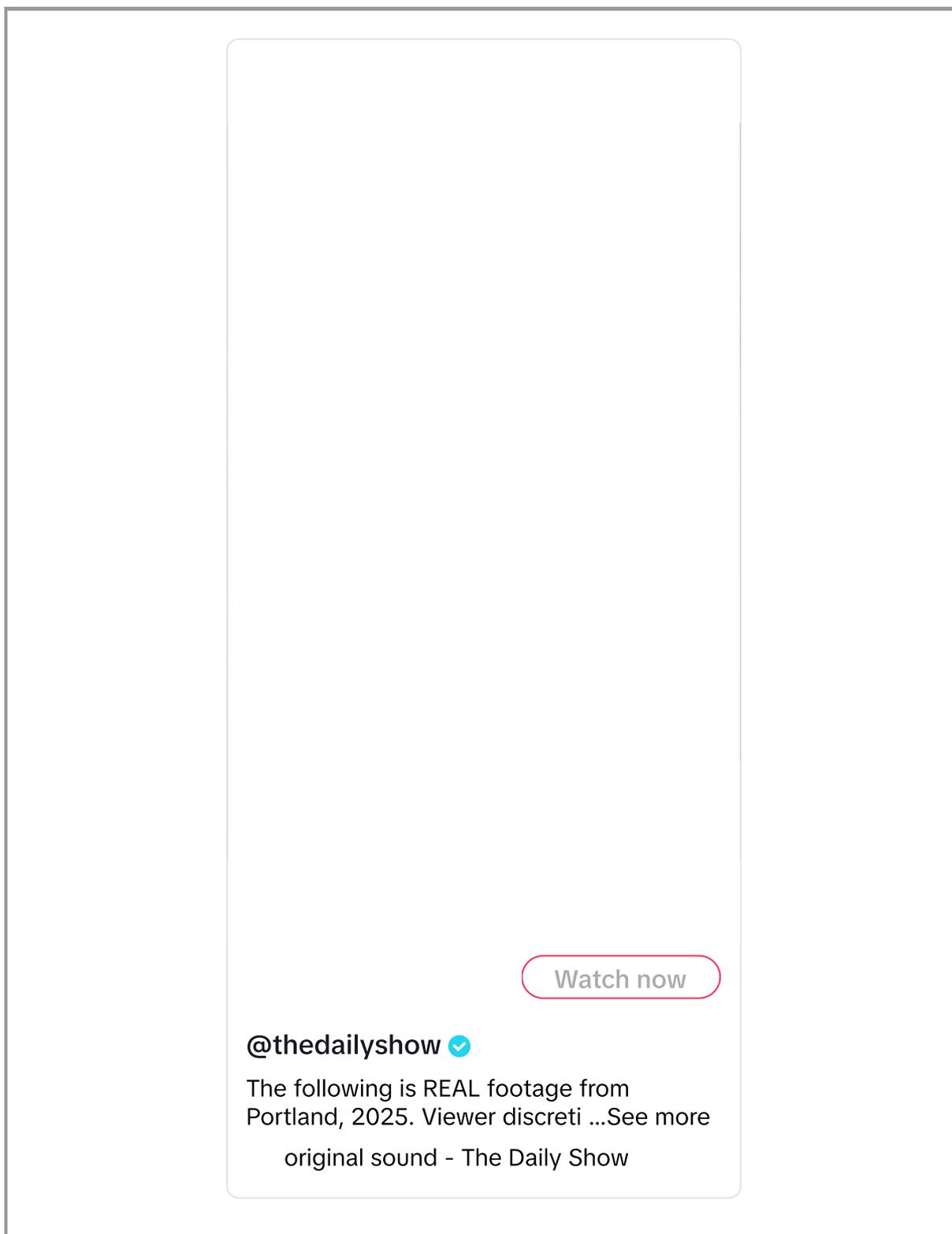
And the frog costume has spawned imitators, with creatures multiplying in protests across the country, including at the recent [No Kings rallies](#). One group of activists launched [Operation Inflation](#), a website that crowdfunds inflatable suits for protesters, aiming to make resistance more visible, playful and safe.

Strategic silliness

One example that echoes Portland's blow-up menagerie is London's Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA). Members of CIRCA dressed as clowns during anti-war protests in the early 2000s. They played tag around police lines, hugged officers, and marched in absurd choreography.

As scholar Eve Kalyva notes, such actions employ "strategic frivolity": silliness or absurdity in a way that disrupts the scripts between police and protester. By appearing playful rather than menacing, costumed activists directly counter narratives that paint them as violent threats.

The Portland frog and its friends work with the same strategies of silliness. Their dancing and cartoon-like actions make it impossible to frame them as thugs. Their soft forms bounce in contrast to the hard utility of riot gear.



From suffragette sashes to handmaids

Beyond frivolity, activists throughout history have also used dress and costume to more serious effect. In Britain in the early 20th century, suffragettes wore coordinated purple, white and green sashes to project unity in the fight for women's voting rights.

In the US, dress and costume have played important roles in successive movements for African American liberation. During the 50s and 60s Civil Rights Movements, many marched in their best suits and dresses to assert their dignity against dehumanising racism.

The Black Panther Party had an unofficial uniform of sunglasses, berets and black leather jackets, embodying a more defiant style.



The Black Panthers March in New York, in protest of the 1968 trial of co-founder Huey P. Newton in Oakland, California. Getty Images

More recently, demonstrators in the US, Northern Ireland and Argentina have donned the red cloaks and white bonnets of *The Handmaid's Tale* to protest abortion bans.

Similarly, The Extinction Rebellion–affiliated group Red Rebel Brigade stages actions in flowing red robes to mourn environmental loss.

And the wearing of the fishnet-patterned keffiyeh has now become a global symbol of Palestinian support.

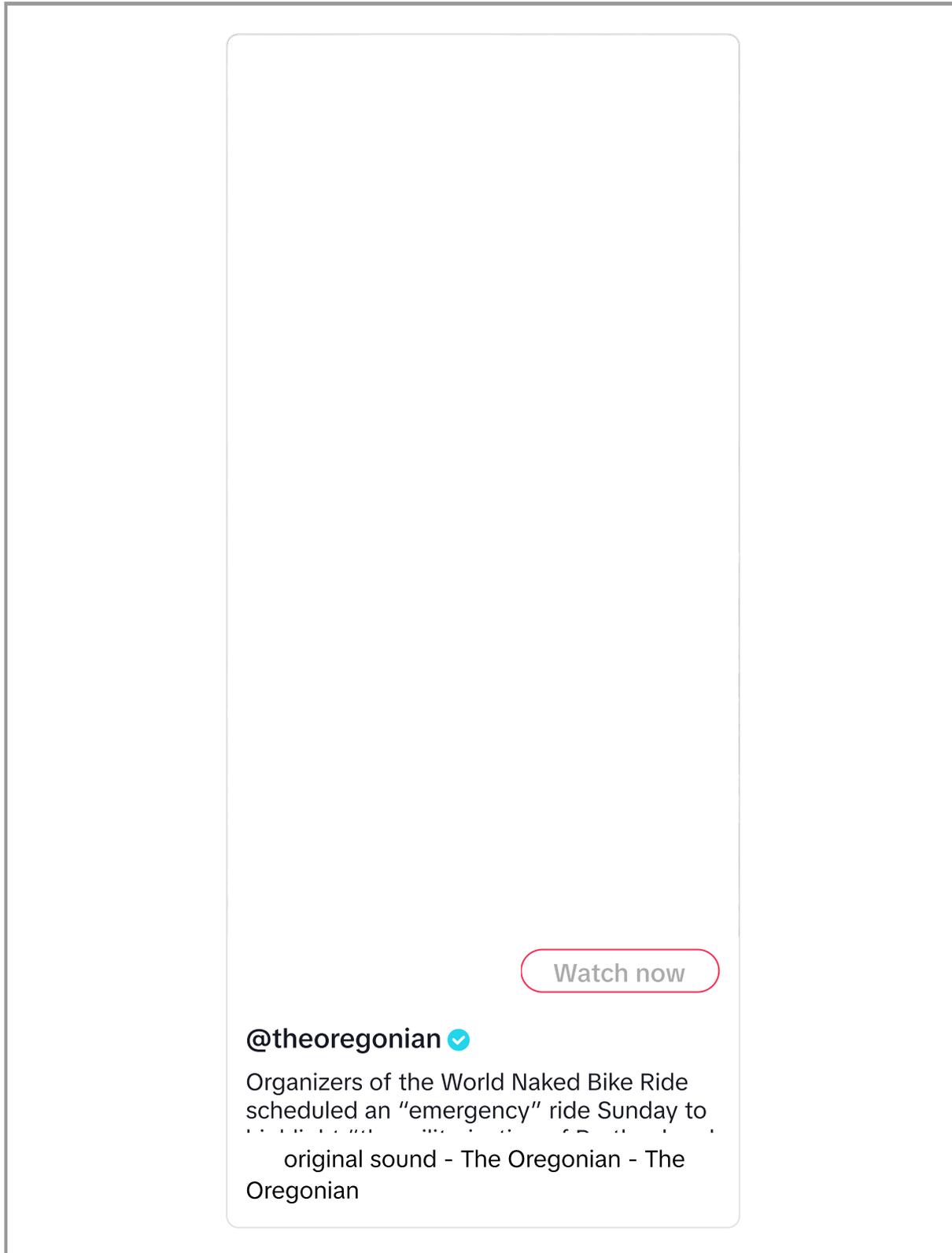
Naked solidarity

On October 12, Portland's anti-ICE demonstrators – many in their inflatable suits – were joined by thousands of naked cyclists in the Emergency World Naked Bike Ride. As costume designer and historian Camille Benda writes in *Dressing The Resistance: The Visual Language of Protest (2021)*, nakedness in protest lays bare the body's vulnerability to state violence.

In Portland, the mix of bare skin and soft blow-up animals heightens both the absurdity and tenderness of the scene. These protesters offer new avenues for direct action at a time when many people's rights and freedoms are at stake.

At the time of writing, ICE was reported to have increased its weapons budget by 700% from last year.

Whether Trump will ultimately deploy the National Guard remains unclear. But across the US, the frogs (and their friends) keep multiplying. Their placards declaring "frogs together strong" remind us of the strength to be forged in unity and laughter.



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