Police raid Occupy DC protest

Kate Randall
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US Park Police raided the Occupy DC encampment on Saturday morning, removing protesters' personal belongings, the majority of tents, and making 11 arrests. Protesters had been maintaining the camp at McPherson Square, one of the last remaining anti-Wall Street protests, for more than four months.

At about 5:30 a.m., dozens of police officers moved on the camp known to protesters as Freedom Plaza, some on horseback and others dressed in full riot gear. With a helicopter hovering overhead, police shut down bordering streets and formed lines within the park. The surrounding area was packed with police vans, tactical assault vehicles, and police motorcycles. One Metro transit station was closed during the course of the raid.

The raid lasted well into the evening as police methodically closed off one section of the park at a time, forcing protesters out, erecting barricades, and then inspecting and removing tents and other personal items.

According to a National Park Service flyer distributed to protesters, police were carrying out "further enforcement" of the ban on overnight camps, which police had begun enforcing at the beginning of the week. Police also referred to the raid as "nuisance abatement." The Occupy DC web site described the raid as a "slow-motion eviction."

Police claimed they were not evicting the protesters, but were simply enforcing park rules against overnight camping. National Park Service (NPS) regulations allow tents as symbolic tools of protest, but they do not permit demonstrators to use them as living quarters.

Park Police spokesman Sgt. David Schlosser said that the operation was being carried out section by section so that areas would remain open to allow Occupy DC to maintain an active protest. He commented remarkably, "The reason we're doing it in sections is so people can exercise their First Amendment rights." He added, "We're very interested in transparency. We want everyone who's watching to understand it's not an eviction."

A number of Occupy DC protesters said that their tents were removed despite the fact that they contained no camping or sleeping materials. Protesters watched as police in hazmat suits placed their belongings into clear plastic bags and hauled them away. Forklifts were used to remove tents and other debris. Police told protesters they would have 60 days to claim their property, beginning Monday.

Protester Melissa Byrne told the *Washington Post*, "This is a slow, media-friendly eviction. We're on federal property, so they have to make it look good." McPherson Square is just blocks away from the White House and, until very recently, authorities have taken a relatively hands-off approach to the protest.

In the early days of the Occupy movement, the Obama administration feigned sympathy for the protest against social inequality. Authorities were apparently hoping to avoid the level of arrests and violence that took place the previous weekend in Oakland, California, when riot police attacked a protest march and made 400 arrests.

A number of Occupy DC protesters had begun moving their bedding and personal belongings from McPherson Square during the week, after Park Police began warning they would be enforcing park regulations. Many whose tents and sleeping gear still remained were forced out of sections of the park and watched as police dumped their belongings into bags.

Park Police spokesman Schlosser claimed that any structure with at least one side open, and which was not being used as living quarters, would remain standing. But as more and more tents were removed, protesters became wary that police were following this rule. In particular, protesters were concerned about the fate of the Occupy DC library.

As it turned out, the library was eventually allowed to

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remain standing. But in the late afternoon, a group of protesters sat with locked arms in front of the library and were soon joined by dozens more. At this point, groups of riot-clad police officers approached the group of protesters from each side and began to push them back, in an effort to block off that corner of the square as part of their roving raid. Numerous protesters were prodded by police batons and pushed up against police shields.

According to DCist.com, one protester appeared to be knocked unconscious, and was then handcuffed and taken away. Another protester reported being knocked over by police while climbing over the chain fence that surrounds the park.

One police officer was hit in the face with a brick. The protester suspected of throwing it was tackled to the ground and arrested and was charged with felony assault on a police officer and assault with a deadly weapon.

U.S. Park Police returned to McPherson Square Sunday, checking that any remaining protesters were complying with the no-sleeping, no-living regulations. Police made 11 arrests over the course of the weekend, many for stepping over police barricades, or refusing to vacate areas when ordered by police. One man was arrested Sunday for allegedly threatening a police officer.

Occupy DC held a General Assembly Saturday evening to plan for the next stage of the protest. A statement on their web site reads in part: “Citizens of a free country should not have to ask for permission to occupy public spaces. Our occupation of McPherson Square is an expression of our right to free speech and peaceful assembly.

“We are maintaining a site of protest—a physical presence that gives visibility and voice to our dissent. We are creating a space in which free speech flourishes—not only the speech of occupiers, but that of the general public, the empowered and the disenfranchised alike.”

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