

Mass protests at University of Virginia after honors student beaten by state police

Tom Hall
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At least a thousand students at the University of Virginia took part in a rally Wednesday night to protest the police attack on Martese Johnson, a 20 year-old African American honors student at the university. As many as several thousand took part in the protests, according to media reports.

The protest Wednesday night was moved around campus several times due to turnout far exceeding organizers' expectations, before it finally settled in an amphitheater on campus. Protesters chanted slogans such as "Black Lives Matter" and "If we don't get it [justice], shut it down!"

Johnson was attacked by police officers from Virginia's Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) after he was denied entry into a bar near campus early Wednesday morning, shortly after the end of St. Patrick's Day. The bouncer at the bar found discrepancies on his identification and asked him to step aside. It was there that ABC agents confronted him.

"[Then an] ABC officer approaches Martese and grabs him by the elbow ... and pulls him to the side," Bryan Beaubrun, who says that he was with Johnson at the time, told the media. "It happened so quickly. Out of nowhere I saw the two officers wrestling Martese to the ground. I was shocked that it escalated that quickly. Eventually [Johnson was] on the ground, they're trying to put handcuffs on him and their knees were on his back." The officers threw Johnson to the ground, bashing his head against the pavement and leaving him with a wound that later required ten stitches.

Bystander photographs of Johnson's blood-drenched face, contorted in pain and anger as Virginia Alcohol Beverage Control Police pin him to the ground, shocked people throughout the country. A video of the aftermath of the attack shows a visibly distraught

Johnson, still bleeding profusely onto his shirt and the sidewalk, shouting at the officers from the ground, "I go to UVA. You f***in' racists...How did this happen?...How did this happen?" A picture taken by local media the following day shows the sidewalk outside the bar still covered in bloodstains.

"He didn't need to be tackled. He wasn't being aggressive at all," Beaubrun said. Brendan O'Toole, a staff member at the bar, told the local *Daily Progress* newspaper that the police "instigated the whole thing," alleging that the assault began after Johnson attempted to pull out a cellphone.

"Literally every time I see him, he has a smile on his face," Johnson's roommate, Joshua Kinlaw, told the *Daily Progress*. "He is kind and humorous. He's never been one to resort to violence or physicality, even in anger. That's why I'm so frustrated about all of this, because I'm positive he did nothing to provoke such violent actions from the ABC officers who inflicted the brutality upon him."

Johnson, who had no prior criminal record, was later charged with "obstruction of justice without force" and "public swearing or intoxication." According to his lawyer, Daniel Watkins, he was not accused of having a fake ID by police, "contrary to early police reports." ABC released an anodyne statement later that day which stated that, "ABC Agents observed and approached the individual [Johnson]," and made a "determination...to further detain the individual based on their observations and further questioning." The arrest report described Johnson as "very agitated and belligerent."

Terry McAuliffe, the Democratic governor of Virginia, announced an "independent" investigation into the incident on Wednesday. UVA president Theresa Sullivan released a mealy-mouthed statement

describing herself as “concerned by the reports of this incident,” and asking witnesses to come forward, declaring that “we stand unified in our commitment to seeking the truth about this incident.” Sullivan made a brief appearance at the protest Wednesday night, “but only spoke to several reporters and did not make any formal remarks to the crowd,” according to Yahoo News.

The unprovoked attack on Martese Johnson has deeply affected students at UVA and people throughout the country because it is a striking manifestation of the daily reality facing millions of young people, who are routinely harassed and beaten by police for either minor offenses or for no offenses at all.

ABC officers in particular have a long history of such unprovoked attacks. Last year the state of Virginia reached a settlement for \$212,500 for a 2013 incident in which seven ABC officers swarmed the car of Elizabeth Daly, also a UVA student, with their guns drawn after mistaking a carton of water and cookie dough that she had just purchased for beer. She was charged with assaulting a police officer with her vehicle and eluding police for attempting to flee from the officers, who did not properly identify themselves, although those charges were later dropped.

The beating of Martese Johnson is also similar to an incident that occurred in Louisiana last month. 17 year-old Brady Becker was tackled and beaten by Jefferson Parish sheriff’s deputies, who suspected him of underage drinking while leaving a Mardi Gras parade with his friends in the New Orleans suburb of Metairie. Detective Nicholas Breaux was caught on video choking Becker, who is white, with his left hand while punching him several times in the face with his right, giving Becker two black eyes and fracturing his jaw. Becker was later charged with possession of alcohol, battery of a police officer, and inciting a riot (for allegedly leading a chant of “f*ck the police”).

Jefferson Parish Sheriff Newell Normand responded to the fallout from the attack by holding a press conference earlier this month in which he threatened physical violence against Becker, declaring “I’m not sure I would have struck him in the face for fear of injuring my hand. But I’d have definitely kneed him in the groin. I’d have kneed him in the stomach. I’d have tried to knock his wind out, because he does not have the legal right or authority to grab my officer.”



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