

Washington, DC police admit use of brute force against peaceful protests in days following death of George Floyd

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An attorney representing local DC police officers last month conceded in federal court that the District's police had participated alongside other law enforcement officials in the incidents of June 1, 2020. The admission comes almost a year after protesters were cleared from Washington, DC's Lafayette Square Park with tear gas in order to make way for then-President Donald Trump to be photographed holding a bible in front of a nearby church.

In a federal hearing on May 28, Richard Sobiecki, the attorney representing the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia, defended the Department's use of tear gas and other weapons. According to the attorney, "discharge of tear gas in that direction [of the protesters] was not unreasonable" because "the curfew, violence of past nights, chaos created by federal defendants" justified it.

Sobiecki was referring to the 7 p.m. curfew imposed by DC Mayor Muriel Bowser following a night of protests where some individuals ended up vandalizing St. John's church and other parts of the park. Nevertheless, there were 20 minutes left before the District's curfew took effect on June 1 when police and federal law enforcement officials began firing tear gas into the peaceful crowd to clear it out.

This marked the first time since the incident happened last year that the MPD publicly admitted its officers had tear-gassed protesters. MPD had previously denied its involvement in the clearing of the demonstrators, which involved tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, flash bangs, and riot shields.

In the days after the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, which sparked massive protests worldwide, protesters gathered peacefully in the park

right next to the White House to demonstrate against police brutality and racism. The Trump administration responded to this eruption of multiracial, multi-generational, and international working class anger by threatening to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 and "dominate the streets."

There were multiple recorded instances of officers in MPD uniforms tear-gassing protesters fleeing the square on the early evening of June 1. Media outlets from local TV station WUSA to the *Washington Post* and Vox reported on the activity of MPD officers at Lafayette Square that day. Trump's stroll through the square to pose for photos with a bible in front of St. John's Episcopal Church became an image that enraged the world, given the sweeps conducted to remove protesters forcefully from the area.

Since that incident, the local chapter of the ACLU, Black Lives Matter DC, and the Washington Lawyers' Committee have filed lawsuits on behalf of the protesters who were gassed, beaten, and shot at that day. Besides MPD, the suit named defendants including former President Trump, former Attorney General William Barr, the US Park Police, and others.

In the latest development in this case, US District Court Judge Dabney Friedrich tossed out most of the suits against federal officials, such as Trump, and agencies such as the Justice Department, granting them "qualified immunity." Friedrich allowed the quest for civil damages to continue against Washington, DC, and Arlington County, Virginia, both of which sent officers to assist in the clearing of the square.

Scott Michelman of the DC ACLU, the lead attorney representing the protestors and victims of the assault that day, skewered the MPD's arguments in court.

Michelman said MPD “suggested at various points they were encouraging people to move south on 17th Street. And that was encouraging via tear gas. That day was scarring in multiple ways just in terms of the unexpected nature of the attack, the brutality of it, and the betrayal that many of them felt.”

Friedrich herself questioned Sobiecki’s reasoning for MPD’s use of weapons against the protesters. Multiple times during the hearing, she said the demonstrations were clearly peaceful, at one point admonishing the government’s defense by saying, “You can’t just whale on someone with batons if they’re running away from you.”

The MPD’s admission is an exposure of the Democratic Party’s hypocritical feigned outrage at the Trump administration’s response. The Democratic Party and sections of the capitalist state, while also attacking protesters, feared that Trump was encouraging a social explosion by his actions and sought to divert the protests. In addition to appealing to the US military to oppose Trump’s dictatorial behavior, the Democratic Party sought to inject heavy doses of identity politics into the discussion, in order to divide the protests along racial lines.

Chief in this regard was the portrayal of the city’s Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser, who, as an African-American Democrat, was a supposed line of defense against the authoritarian Trump administration.

The context of the incident at Lafayette Square Park, amidst the drive by the ruling class to phase out the limited pandemic measures even as cases continued to rise around the country, cannot be separated from the increasingly violent means to which the ruling class has resorted to ensure its continued place high on the perch of society.

Trump’s June 1 press conference, in which he made threats to send in the military to the nation’s capital, marked the beginning of the coup plotting within the state itself. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote earlier this week, “The brutal action in Washington D.C. only hours later, broadcast live on national television, was intended as a demonstration of what the administration planned to do throughout the country.”

Far from being defenders of democratic rights, the Democrats as well as the Republicans responded to overwhelmingly peaceful protests by imposing curfews, mobilizing the National Guard, and maligning

the protesters themselves as fringe elements of extremism within society or as outside agitators. Indeed, in just the eight days following Floyd’s murder, between May 26 and June 2, police departments in major cities arrested over 11,000 people at anti-police protests, according to information compiled by *BuzzFeed News* last June.

The confirmation of MPD’s involvement in the clearing of Lafayette Square established that it was not only elements within the White House deploying state violence against the demonstrators, but the capitalist state as a whole.

Furthermore, rather than acting as checks on executive power, the court system has acted as a clearinghouse for the dismissal of cases against federal and local agencies involved in the June 1 assault, covering up the crimes and coup plotting by Trump and his cabinet.



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