

On the 54th anniversary of Kent State massacre

Virginia state police assault peaceful anti-genocide protesters at Charlottesville

Harvey Simpkins
7 May 2024

“What country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance?”

-Thomas Jefferson, founder of the University of Virginia

This past Saturday—the 54th anniversary of the Kent State massacre—Virginia State Police in riot gear assaulted and arrested peaceful anti-war protesters encamped near the center of the University of Virginia’s campus, in Charlottesville. Some of the police were armed with assault rifles, which at points were aimed at students. Other cops in riot gear liberally pepper sprayed the encampment. Twenty-five people were arrested for “trespassing.”

Students began the peaceful protest last Tuesday, with faculty and community members soon joining in support. With rain in the forecast on Friday evening, participants erected camping tents. A university policy on tent use, prohibiting them without approval from the administration, included a link to a document stating that “Recreational tents for camping are exempt.” The university quietly deleted the exemption Saturday morning shortly before the police raid.

Prior to the state police assault, the encampment was a peaceful protest of a few dozen students, with minimal police presence. On Saturday morning only about 15 protesters were present when the police surrounded the encampment.

A faculty member supportive of the protesters told *The Daily Progress*, “We pointed out [the exemption] to [the administration] for three days. Faculty have been deescalating, deescalating, deescalating,” she said.

When the police encircled the encampment around midday Saturday, a large crowd gathered to support the protesters, with at least a dozen people breaking through the police line to join the encampment. At around 2:30 p.m., state police ordered people away from the site and then marched in with guns drawn and riot shields. Police threw protesters to the ground and deployed pepper spray overhead of the encampment.

Once the encampment was cleared, state police then pushed a massing crowd of supporters on their backs and began indiscriminately deploying pepper spray into the crowd.

“It was never violent,” a graduate student told *The Daily Progress*. “I’m a teaching assistant, and we were just helping people study for finals.”

Echoing this assessment, a UVA student told the *World Socialist*

Web Site:

By the time I visited the encampment today, around 1:30, the police had already surrounded the encampment, but there was no violence. They had already prepared gas masks and the state patrol were, I believe, changing into riot gear. I don’t think there was any serious attempt at peaceful resolution on the part of the state.

University President Jim Ryan claimed in a letter later on Saturday that the police were used to enforce the university’s purported “long-standing prohibition on erecting tents absent a permit.” Ryan made no mention of the exemption for camping tents, nor the university’s quiet deletion of the policy exemption hours before the police were deployed. Belying Ryan’s claim that the police acted against those erecting tents, the police continued their rampage after clearing the encampment.

Talking out of both sides of his mouth, Ryan added that “freedom of speech is not only protected by the Constitution, it is a bedrock University value.”

Ryan’s fraudulent concern for fundamental democratic rights is particularly ironic given that Thomas Jefferson, writer of the revolutionary Declaration of Independence, founded and designed the University of Virginia in 1819.

Back in 1800, in a letter to the great Enlightenment figure Joseph Priestly, Jefferson wrote, “We wish to establish ... a University on a plan so broad & liberal & *modern*, as to be worth patronising with the public support, and be a temptation to the youth of other states to come, and drink of the cup of knowledge & fraternize with us.”

Ryan instead has offered UVA students a drink from a poisoned chalice, unleashing the force of a reactionary capitalist state on them for expressing opposition to the ongoing genocide in Gaza, which has likely already killed well in excess of 40,000.

On Sunday, 44 members of UVA’s history faculty issued a strong open letter denouncing the police action and Ryan, declaring:

[On] Saturday, the university fell far short of the

aspirations Jefferson articulated in his capacity as the university's first Rector: "Here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it." The drastic move to end a peaceful protest with militarized police, rather than reason, put a swift end to any form of deliberation, debate and democratic process. It violated our commitment as an educational institution to seek understanding and discourage mindless compliance. It has broken the trust upon which free inquiry and expression depend.

The historians added:

As historians, we are acutely aware that this police action fell on the anniversary of the murder of four student protesters at Kent State University on May 4, 1970. History has not judged those who ordered the violent repression of that protest kindly. History will also judge the University of Virginia's actions on May 4, 2024, and we have no doubt that history will also condemn the disproportionate, draconian and excessive use of force against nonviolent protesters exercising their free speech rights on an academic campus founded by the author of the Declaration of Independence.

Along with the history professors, five members of the faculty and staff at the School of Nursing issued a condemnation of the state violence unleashed on students and faculty, and called for all charges and threatened university discipline to be dropped.

UVA Professor Oludamini Ogunnaike, in resigning from the Religion, Diversity and Belonging task force, issued a stinging rebuke to the university, "Nothing says 'you are not welcome here' quite like violent arrest at gunpoint, an evening in the cells of the Albemarle Regional County Jail, and charges of trespassing on your own campus." At least two dozen student organizations have also condemned the University's actions.

The contrast with how the police handled a rally of actual antisemites on campus in August 2017 could not be starker. Then, thousands of fascists descended on Charlottesville and the University of Virginia campus for the "Unite the Right" rally.

Marching at night in columns, the fascists shouted "Jews will not replace us!" The following morning, dozens of them, armed with assault rifles and shotguns, secured downtown Charlottesville without police interference. Thereafter, vans poured in with Nazis armed with various implements, from guns to knives and baseball bats.

A fascist riot then ensued, as police withdrew from the scene and the far-right thugs attacked anti-fascist counter-demonstrators, beating many, while the police looked on. The melee climaxed with neo-Nazi James Fields Jr. speeding his car through a crowd of anti-fascists, flipping bodies over the hood and killing counter-protester Heather Heyer.

After the bloody event in 2017, one of the leaders of the fascist demonstration, Jason Kessler, acknowledged that organizers had "networked with law enforcement" for months in advance.

As one commentator on X/Twitter noted, above a photo of police in riot gear assembling at UVA on Saturday, "None of these folks showed up when I lived on campus and white supremacists with tiki torches yelling 'Jews will not replace us' marched through campus as I hid my three kids."

The state's support for the fascist rampage in 2017, epitomized by then-President Trump's praise of the Nazis as "very fine people," completely exposes the fraudulent nature of the ruling class's denunciation of anti-genocide protesters as "antisemitic."

When actual antisemites invaded UVA's campus and the surrounding city of Charlottesville in 2017, sections of the ruling class openly celebrated them. Now, with millions around the world, including untold numbers of Jews, opposing the vast crimes committed by Israel, both factions of the ruling class, led by Democratic President Biden, have united to denounce them and slander their defense of the rights of Palestinians as "antisemitic."

The support of fascistic elements continues today as the Biden administration collaborates with the far right to denounce the anti-genocide protests. Some of these figures, such as Republican House Oversight Committee leader Elise Stefanik, propagate real antisemitism through the promotion of the anti-immigrant and antisemitic "Great Replacement Theory," the same conspiracy advanced by neo-Nazis in 2017: that Jews, in league with immigrants, are trying to replace white Christian Americans.

The crackdown on protests at UVA is far from unique in Virginia or nationwide. On April 27, 12 pro-Palestinian protesters, including nine students, were arrested at Mary Washington University in Fredericksburg. On the night of April 28 and into the early morning hours, 80 people, including 53 students, were arrested at Virginia Tech. On April 29, 13 demonstrators were arrested at Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond, including six students.

According to the *Middle East Monitor*, almost 2,500 people have been arrested at colleges and universities in the United States in the past few weeks for protesting against the genocide. The encampments and student demonstrations have now spread worldwide, to Canada, Mexico, England, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Lebanon, Australia, India and more, as outrage only deepens among students and youth at the ongoing genocide and support for Israel by the imperialist powers.



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