

Showdown: Trump Calls for End to Riots in Front of Historic Church

President Donald Trump vowed to deploy the military to “dominate the streets” of America and federal forces followed his lead, aggressively clearing a Washington park of protesters with tear gas so he could walk to a church and pose with a Bible. Across the nation, cities were engulfed in more violence and destruction.

In New York City, nonviolent demonstrations were punctuated by people smashing storefront windows near Rockefeller Center and breaching the doors into the storied Macy’s store on 34th Street, littering parts of Manhattan with broken glass. A vehicle plowed through a group of law enforcement officers at a demonstration in Buffalo, injuring at least two.

Demonstrations erupted from Philadelphia, where hundreds of protesters spilled onto a highway in the heart of the city, to Atlanta, where police fired tear gas at demonstrators, to Nashville, where more than 60 National Guard soldiers put down their riot shields at the request of peaceful protesters who had gathered in front of Tennessee’s state Capitol to honor George Floyd.

Bystander Sean Jones, who watched as people ransacked luxury stores in Manhattan’s chic Soho neighborhood, explained the destruction this way: “People are doing this so next time, before they think about trying to kill another black person, they’re going to be like, ‘Damn, we don’t want them out here doing this ... again.’”

The unrest in Minneapolis appeared to stabilize on the same day Floyd’s brother made an impassioned plea for peace at the location where a white police officer put his knee on the

handcuffed black man's neck until he stopped breathing last week.

The death toll from the unrest began to mount, including two people killed in a Chicago suburb. The police chief in Louisville was fired after a beloved restaurant owner was killed by police and National Guard enforcing a curfew.

An officer was shot shortly before midnight near the Circus Circus casino in Las Vegas. Police had no immediate word on the officer's condition. Four officers were shot in St. Louis, Missouri, where police said they were expected to recover.

Trump, meanwhile, portrayed himself as a hard-nosed, law-and-order president, with police under federal command forcing back peaceful demonstrators with tear gas so he could pose with a Bible outside a damaged church.

Emerging after two days out of public view, he threatened from the White House Rose Garden to deploy "thousands and thousands" of U.S. troops. Then he made a surprise walk across Lafayette Park to a house of worship known as "The Church of the Presidents."

The photo op was condemned by Episcopal Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde.

"The president just used a Bible and one of the churches of my diocese as a backdrop for a message antithetical to the teachings of Jesus and everything that our church stands for," she said.

For nearly a week since Floyd's death, largely peaceful protests by day have turned to chaos at night. Many express frustration that after years of seeking reforms, minorities still suffer and die in police custody. With so many aspects of society and the economy disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, people are demanding fundamental changes, nationwide.

"We have been sitting on a powder keg for some time and it has burst," Philadelphia Police Commissioner Danielle Outlaw said.

The president, seeking his second term in office, vowed to use more force to stop the violence.

If governors don't deploy the National Guard in sufficient numbers to "dominate the streets," Trump said, the U.S. military would step in to "quickly solve the problem for them."

"We have the greatest country in the world," the president declared. "We're going to keep it safe."

As Trump spoke, tear gas canisters could be heard exploding.

A military deployment by Trump to U.S. states would mark a stunning federal intervention rarely seen in modern American history. It drew comparisons to 1968, when Richard Nixon ran as the law-and-order candidate in the aftermath of riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Minutes before Trump began speaking, police and National Guard soldiers began aggressively removing hundreds of peaceful protesters from the Lafayette Park, across the street from the White House, where they were chanting against police brutality and Floyd's death.

Five months before Election Day, the president made clear that he would stake his reelection efforts on convincing voters that his strong-arm approach was warranted to quell the most intense civil unrest since the 1960s. He made little effort to address the grievances of black Americans and others outraged by Floyd's death and the scourge of police brutality, undermining what his campaign had hoped would be increased appeal to African American voters.

The scene in and around the White House appeared to be carefully orchestrated. As the crowd of protesters grew,

Attorney General William Barr arrived in Lafayette Park to look over at the demonstrations and the swarm of law enforcement. Once his path was cleared, Trump, who rarely attends church, then walked through the park and held up a Bible, posing for photos with an all-white group of advisors.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Trump “used the military to push out a peaceful protest so he could have a photo op at a church.”

Federal law permits presidents to dispatch the military into states to suppress an insurrection or if a state is defying federal law, legal experts said. But officials in New York and other states asserted that the president does not have a unilateral right to send in troops against the will of local governments.

Earlier Monday, Trump told the nation’s governors in a video conference that they “look like fools” for not deploying even more National Guard troops. “Most of you are weak,” he said.

“You’ve got to arrest people, you have to track people, you have to put them in jail for 10 years and you’ll never see this stuff again,” Trump said.

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, a Democrat, dismissed Trump’s comments as the “rantings of an insecure man trying to look strong after building his entire political career on racism.”

Former Vice President Joe Biden, the Democratic presidential candidate, vowed to address institutional racism in his first 100 days in office. He met in person with black leaders in Delaware and also held a virtual meeting with big-city mayors.

Biden said hate emerges “when you have somebody in power who breathes oxygen into the hate.”

More than 5,600 people nationwide have been arrested over the past week for such offenses as stealing, blocking highways and

breaking curfew, according to a count by The Associated Press.