

White Nationalist Rally Triggers Tension, But No Violence

Around 20 demonstrators headed to a white nationalist rally walked through the heart of Washington on Sunday, cordoned by rows of police officers and outnumbered by hundreds of counterprotesters who taunted them.

The “Unite the Right 2” event organized to coincide with the anniversary of last year’s racially charged violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, took place in Lafayette Square, across from the White House. But, with the minimal participants on the side of the far-right protesters, the rally didn’t produce the electricity many anticipated.

At the head of the white nationalist group was Virginia activist Jason Kessler, who helped organize last year’s event in Charlottesville. He emerged with a handful of fellow demonstrators from a subway station holding an American flag and walked toward the White House.

Counter protesters who held signs declaring “No Hate” awaited their arrival, chanting “Nazis go home” and “Shut it down.”

There was an enormous police presence to keep both sides apart and avoid the street brawls that broke out last year in downtown Charlottesville. A local woman, Heather Heyer, was killed when an Ohio man, James Fields, drove his car into a crowd of counterprotesters.

At the time, President Donald Trump said there were “very fine people” on both sides, spurring criticism from across the political divide that he was equating the counterprotesters with the rally attendees, who included neo-Nazis and other white supremacists.

On Saturday, Trump condemned “all types of racism” in a Twitter post marking the anniversary.

In Washington on Sunday, counterprotesters organized an afternoon program of music, speeches and poetry readings at Freedom Plaza, east of the White House.

Sean Kratouil, a 17-year-old who lives in Maryland, was wearing a vest with “Antifa” on the back and said he was there to help start a movement of peaceful anti-fascists. He said he was concerned that when rallies turn violent, it makes his side look bad. “Public perception is key,” he said.

Kessler said the rally was aimed at advocating for “free speech for everybody,” and he blamed last year’s violence in Charlottesville on other groups and the media.

“I’m not a white supremacist. I’m not a neo-Nazi,” Kessler said as a train his group boarded in suburban Virginia rolled towards Washington.

In the picturesque college town of Charlottesville, hundreds of police officers had maintained a security perimeter around the normally bustling downtown district throughout the day on Saturday. Vehicular traffic was barred from an area of more than 15 city blocks, while pedestrians were allowed access at two checkpoints where officers examined bags for weapons.

Hundreds of students and activists took to the streets on Saturday evening. Many of the protesters directed their anger at the heavy police presence, with chants like “cops and Klan go hand in hand,” a year after police were harshly criticized for their failure to prevent the violence.

Earlier on Saturday, a group of anti-fascist protesters walked through the downtown area, holding signs with messages like “Good Night White Pride.” But the day was largely free of confrontation.

On Sunday morning, activist Grace Aheron, 27, donned a Black Lives Matter T-shirt and joined hundreds of fellow Charlottesville residents who gathered at Booker T. Washington Park to mark the anniversary of last year's bloodshed.

"We want to claim our streets back, claim our public space back, claim our city back," Aheron said at the park.

Several events were scheduled in the city including a gathering that will include veteran civil rights activist Reverend Al Sharpton and Susan Bro, the mother of the woman who was killed a year ago.

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