



POLICE CLEAR PRO-PALESTINIAN PROTEST CAMP AND ARREST 33 AT DC CAMPUS AS MAYOR'S HEARING IS CANCELED - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on May 9, 2024 by ASHRAF KHALIL | Associated Press



Photo: Rep. Cori Bush, D-Mo., and Rep. Rashida Tlaib, D-Mich., accompanied by George Washington University students speaks during a news conference at the U.S. Capitol, Wednesday, May 8, 2024, in Washington, after police cleared a pro-Palestinian tent encampment at George Washington University

Police used pepper spray to clear a pro-Palestinian tent encampment at George Washington University and arrested dozens of demonstrators on Wednesday just as city officials were set to appear before hostile lawmakers in Congress to account for their handling of the 2-week-old protest.

The House Committee on Oversight and Accountability canceled the hearing after the crackdown, with its chairman and other Republicans welcoming the police action. House Speaker Mike Johnson said, "it should not require threatening to haul D.C.'s mayor before Congress to keep Jewish students at George Washington University safe."

Mayor Muriel Bowser, a Democrat, said she and Metropolitan Police Chief Pamela Smith decided to clear the camp because of signs that "the protest was becoming more volatile and less stable." Among them were indications that protesters had "gathered improvised weapons" and were "casing" university buildings with the possible intention of occupying them, police said.

But Moataz Salim, a Palestinian student at George Washington who has family in Gaza, said the authorities merely "destroyed a beautiful community space that was all about love."

"Less than 10 hours ago, I was pepper sprayed and assaulted by police," he told a news conference held by organizers. "And why? Because we decided to pitch some tents, hold community activities and learn from each other. We built something incredible. We built something game-changing."

Tensions have ratcheted up in standoffs with protesters of the Israel-Hamas war on campuses across the United States and increasingly in Europe. Some colleges cracked down immediately. Others have tolerated the demonstrations. Some have begun to lose patience and call

in the police over concerns about disruptions to campus life and safety.

Police also moved in Tuesday night to break up an encampment at the University of Massachusetts. Video from the scene in Amherst showed an hours-long operation as dozens of officers in riot gear systematically tore down tents and took protesters into custody. The operation continued into early Wednesday. Police said about 130 people were arrested after protesters refused orders to disperse.

"I found it to be a complete overreaction," said Lucas Ruud, editor-in-chief of The Massachusetts Daily Collegian. "It was a completely unnecessary show of force." The staff of the college newspaper counted more than 100 police vehicles on campus for the crackdown.

In Washington, police said they arrested 33 people at the George Washington protest, including for assault on a police officer and unlawful entry. They confirmed they used pepper spray outside the encampment against protesters who were trying to break police lines and enter.

Two Democratic lawmakers appeared at a news conference with five of the students who had been arrested. "I want all Republicans and Democrats to know that they cannot arrest their way out of this growing dissent," said Rep. Rashida Tlaib of Michigan. "This was an explicit attempt to repress students exercising their First Amendment rights."

Rep. Cori Bush of Missouri said that "those who refuse to stop the genocide in Gaza think they can arrest and brutalize their way out of this."

The school said in a statement that while it is committed to free expression, "the encampment had evolved into an unlawful activity, with participants in direct violation of multiple university policies and city regulations." It said later that normal operations had resumed after the "orderly and safe operation" to disperse the demonstrators.

President Joe Biden's press secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre, said the president believes the right to dissent is "fundamental to who we are, but it cannot lead to disorder and violence, threats, vandalism, trespassing and/or shutting down campuses. Students have the right to be safe, and antisemitism is repugnant, and we've been very clear about that."

Throughout the roughly two weeks of the encampment, the scene had been largely tranquil.

The tightly organized demonstrators and pro-Israeli counterprotesters who stood along the edges interacted without serious conflict. Some of the most charged confrontations involved people objecting to the treatment of a George Washington statue, wrapped with Palestinian scarves and flags with "Genocidal Warmonger University" spray-painted on its base.

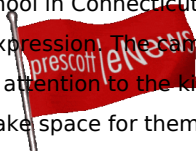
Since April 18, about 2,800 people have been arrested on 50 campuses — figures based on Associated Press reporting and statements from universities and law enforcement agencies after this latest anti-war movement was launched by a protest at Columbia University in New York.

At other U.S. schools:

— Student protesters at the University of Vermont ended their nine-day encampment Wednesday. Among their demands, protesters wanted the school to cancel Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, as commencement speaker because of U.S. votes blocking cease-fire resolutions. The school said Friday that Thomas-Greenfield would not give the address.

— A pro-Palestinian tent encampment was cleared by officers in riot gear at the University of Chicago on Tuesday after administrators who initially adopted a permissive approach said the protesters had crossed a line. Hundreds of protesters had gathered for at least eight days until administrators warned them Friday to leave or face removal.

— The president of Wesleyan University, a liberal arts school in Connecticut, commended the on-campus demonstration, which includes a pro-Palestinian tent encampment, as an act of political expression. The camp there has grown from about 20 tents a week ago to more than 100. "The protesters' cause is important — bringing attention to the killing of innocent people," university President Michael Roth wrote to the campus community. "And we continue to make space for them to do so, as long as that space is not disruptive to campus operations."



— The Rhode Island School of Design's president, Crystal Williams, spent more than five hours with protesters discussing their demands after students started occupying a building Monday. On Tuesday the school announced it was relocating classes from the building.

— New York City police arrested 50 people outside the Fashion Institute of Technology on Tuesday evening after protesters who had been rallying nearby arrived to support a student encampment.

In Amherst, school Chancellor Javier Reyes said he ordered the sweep after talks over a wide range of demands failed to yield an agreement to dismantle the encampment and engage in "constructive discussions."

A week ago, the George Washington encampment was host to a somewhat chaotic visit from several Republican members of the House oversight panel who criticized the protests and condemned Bowser's refusal at that point to send in police.

"We did not have any violence to interrupt on the GW campus," she said then.

But in the early hours of Wednesday, hundreds of Metropolitan Police Department officers descended on the scene, reported The GW Hatchet, the university's student newspaper.

At least two officers deployed pepper spray on protesters, who then set up an impromptu medical area at a nearby market, the paper said. Organizers ran to a convenience store to buy water to rinse their eyes.

The oversight hearing, now scrapped, was another pressure point in the fraught relationship between Republicans in Congress and officials in the heavily Democratic district. Former President Donald Trump has threatened a federal "takeover" of the city, to control crime, if he wins back the White House.

The district is already a federal enclave, though with a measure of self-government and its own police department, over which the federal government can exert control in some emergencies.

Associated Press journalists around the U.S. and the world contributed, including Charles Rex Arbogast, Pat Eaton-Robb, Steve LeBlanc, Jeff Amy, Christopher Weber, Mike Corder, Barbara Surk, Rick Callahan, Sarah Brumfield and Pietro de Cristofaro.