

The U.S. Park Police Attack on Peaceful Protesters at Lafayette Square Park

Hearing Before the Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives

Testimony of Amelia Brace

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Thank you Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop, and members of this Committee for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Amelia Brace. I am a U.S. Correspondent for the Seven Network, which is one of the largest broadcast television networks in Australia. I am here to testify about my experience covering the protests in Lafayette Square Park, and, in particular, the incident in which my cameraman, Tim Myers, and I were physically attacked by U.S. Park Police officers when they cleared out the park in the afternoon on Monday, June 1, 2020. Even though we were out of the way of the advancing officers and were clearly identifiable as a news crew, we were directly assaulted without provocation by two separate officers.

This is a situation where the video speaks louder than any words could. This link shows the Seven News broadcast about the incident from the next day, which captures the incident both from the perspective of our own camera feed, which was broadcast live to Australian audiences, and from another angle captured by a local news crew here:

<https://youtu.be/yzNMdWOoC7M?t=33>

The live broadcast, showing the incident and the in-studio anchors' reactions happening in real time, can be seen here:

<https://youtu.be/wkf-znzWKRc>

I would like to speak today about what exactly happened in the video we just saw, and why this event was so deeply troubling for me, even beyond the physical effects of the attack, which do still linger.

My Background and Role as U.S. Correspondent For Seven News

I have been a television journalist for ten years, nearly the whole time at the Seven Network. I have been living in the United States serving as the U.S. correspondent for Seven News since January 2017. Before that, I reported on politics in various bureaus within Australia, including in Canberra, the capital city. I have reported from all manner of locations and at all manner of events. My cameraman, Tim, works freelance for Seven News, as well as for the BBC and the United Nations. In those jobs, he has traveled around the world to cover news and shoot footage, including in Mexico, Jordan, Nigeria, Chad and Ghana. Neither Tim nor I have experienced anything like the treatment we received from the U.S. Park Police on June 1; never before have I been physically attacked by law enforcement simply for doing my job of reporting the news.

As a U.S. correspondent for Seven News, I provide on-camera dispatches on breaking news stories in this country for Seven's various television news programs. Often-times, I will be patched in live on video during these programs, doing what we refer to as a "live cross." Because of the time difference, events that take place in the evening on the East Coast of the U.S. may end up being seen first thing in the morning in Australia. Here, when Tim and I were attacked, we were in the process of delivering a live cross to Seven's daily morning news show, Sunrise (which is similar to The Today Show or Good Morning America in this country).

At any given time, Seven is likely to have three U.S. correspondents reporting from this country, focusing on the major news of the day and/or stories that would be of interest to Australians. But the fact is, the U.S. is widely considered Australia's most important ally. Australians take a keen interest in the political, social and cultural developments in this country. When there is widespread civil unrest in the United States, Australians want to know and understand what's actually happening. I take my job seriously, and believe strongly in the importance of delivering news from within the U.S., to my fellow countrymen and -women.

Reporting on Protests in D.C.: Day 1

When protests erupted throughout the U.S. after the police killing of George Floyd, Seven's U.S. correspondents traveled around the country to report from the scene. One of my colleagues reported from Minnesota; another reported from Los Angeles. Because I was already on the East Coast reporting on a story in Florida, I was selected to cover the protests taking place here in the capital city, Washington, D.C.

My crew consists only of myself and my cameraman, Tim. Tim and I arrived in D.C. separately on Sunday, May 31, around mid-day. We began reporting almost immediately from Lafayette Square. Having seen the nature of the protests and police actions from the days before, we were aware that we would potentially encounter tear gas or other irritants, so Tim had purchased goggles for us to have on hand. And we each already had face masks to cover our mouth and nose because of the pandemic. I had my laminated press credentials issued by the State Department at hand and occasionally held it up to law enforcement when I needed to reiterate that we were there as part of the news media. Usually, this was not necessary since, as can be seen in the videos, Tim was carrying a large, full-sized television news camera over his shoulder.

We delivered "live crosses" throughout that Sunday evening and overnight. During that night, I saw and reported on a great deal of chaos, including destruction of property, fires, and even some looting of shops. I did not see the fire at St. John's Episcopal Church, but I did see other structures in and around the park on fire, as well as a large bonfire in the middle of the street by the park. We were aware that the D.C. government had imposed an 11 pm curfew. In the hours leading up to that time, we saw the police occasionally mobilize to push protesters away from the park, but it was not until after the curfew went into effect that they cleared the park area completely. As members of the press, we were exempt from the curfew and so we were able to move in among the protesters and behind the police line to capture footage of the scene. By the time I delivered my last few live crosses early in the morning of Monday, June 1, the police had cleared the park and protesters had long since dispersed.

Throughout the first night we were there, the tension between the protesters and police was palpable, and we did see the police use riot gear and so-called “less-lethal” munitions to clear protesters. But the process was relatively orderly and relaxed, to the extent one could ever describe a process like that as orderly or relaxed. The efforts to clear the streets around the park did not kick in until the curfew—in fact, not until several minutes after the curfew—and the process was fairly deliberate and methodical.

Reporting on Protests in D.C.: Day 2—The Attack

The next day, in the afternoon on Monday, June 1, Tim and I went back out to report on the protests. As we left our hotel on 15th Street, we encountered a large march coming down 14th Street and headed towards the Capitol Building. We followed the march, and delivered several live crosses from the demonstration outside the Capitol. The protests there were certainly passionate, but they were peaceful. Protesters occasionally chanted slogans directly at the line of police officers, but I saw no physical altercations. In the late afternoon, the crowd received an alert on their phones announcing that D.C. was imposing a curfew starting at 7 p.m. The crowd began to make their way to Lafayette Square, and we followed them. We arrived around 5:45 p.m., in time to set up for a relatively uneventful “live cross” at 6:00 p.m. The atmosphere in Lafayette Square was similar to the Capitol. The crowd was passionate, but peaceful. In fact, the atmosphere was much less tense than it was the night before, with none of the property destruction or fires we had seen that night.

We were scheduled to deliver a live cross at 6:30 p.m. for Sunrise. We were near the Northeast corner of the square, at H Street and Vermont Avenue, on the sidewalk outside the park. As we were getting ready for the cross, we saw the police lines suddenly start to form. These officers were in full riot gear. Some—which we identified by their uniforms and helmets as U.S. Park Police—carried round, clear shields on one arm, often using their other hand to swing their batons. Other officers carried what looked like modified automatic weapons, which we knew fired “less-lethal” projectiles like rubber bullets.

We were aware that the curfew was not set to kick in for another half hour, so we were confused about what was happening. However, based on our experience the night before, we were not overly concerned by police lining up, as we expected the police forces to only begin clearing the area after curfew.

We did not hear any warning from law enforcement that the area was going to be cleared, or that the curfew was going to start early. Nevertheless, right around 6:30, the line of police suddenly surged forward. We ran a couple hundred feet West on H Street along with the protesters to position ourselves farther away from the line. The police began releasing some kind of smoke and irritant gas, and firing what I thought at the time were rubber bullets. I now understand they may have been shooting “pepper balls” or launching “stinger” grenades, which I understand launch rubber pellets into the surrounding area. Tim was hit with one of those projectile in the back of the neck during this surge. The “TVU”—the piece of electronic equipment that transmits our video and audio feed back to the studio in Sydney, which Tim carries in his backpack—was also hit with a projectile or piece of shrapnel and was knocked offline. (We later realized that the TVU was seriously damaged in that incident.)

After this first surge, we took cover behind a tree on the sidewalk, so that we could regroup and try to get our damaged equipment ready to begin our 6:30 live cross. To our right (looking East) there was a line of law enforcement, which I believe were National Guard or some form of military police, with tall, clear riot shields standing in a line behind a metal barrier along the border of the park. To our left, the street was filled with confused and angry protesters who understood that the curfew was not set to begin for another half hour.

We saw the line of police start to advance towards us at a walking pace. We wanted to stay completely out of the way of both police and protesters, so we backed up and moved further down the sidewalk. Eventually we were able to step up onto a raised curb in a small “alcove” created by a short concrete wall running perpendicular to the sidewalk. (I believe it is a wall around a storage shed for the park.) At that point, we had a good vantage point to capture the scene, without being in the way of the advancing police line, since we were sheltered by a concrete wall off of the sidewalk. The line of military police officers was directly behind us (behind the temporary metal barriers) and we identified ourselves to them as members of the press. There were also other members of the press immediately around us along the fence and on the sidewalk. This still from the local news footage of the incident shows how we were positioned (and confirms the presence of other media in that area, since they were able to capture this image directly).



That is me in the blue backpack, with my back to the camera on the right side. Tim is to my left in the baseball hat, sitting on the milk-crate, having just been knocked over by a U.S. Park Police officer, as I will explain below.

We then began our live cross. As I started explaining the situation to the in-studio hosts, the line of police suddenly—and again, without any verbal warning that I could hear—began charging forward at a sprinting pace. As Tim was capturing the footage of this stampede (which was knocking protesters onto the ground), a Park Police officer who was running by on the sidewalk stopped just as he was passing us, turned towards Tim and rammed him in the chest and

stomach with the edge of his riot shield, causing Tim to keel over and drop down to a sitting position on a plastic crate behind him. The officer took a half step back and seemed to pause for a moment, looking at Tim. He then punched his hand directly into the front of Tim's camera and grabbed the lens, causing Tim's head to whiplash backwards. Tim later told me that this caused him to "see stars" for a moment. As this happened, both Tim and I were repeatedly shouting "Media! Media!" at the top of our lungs, to make clear what I would have thought was already obvious.

In an instant, a group of four or five Park Police officers surrounded us, as we continued to shout "Media!" I recall instinctively raising my hands near my face and almost cowering behind Tim, afraid of what this even larger group of officers would now do to us. (This can be seen in the still photo just above.) An officer in the group stood behind the first officer, and placed his arm between the first officer and us, seemingly trying to restrain him. That second officer shouted at us to move further down the sidewalk. We immediately complied. Tim—despite having been knocked down a second earlier—crouched low and began running down the sidewalk. Even though Tim was following the officers' instructions, the first officer pushed the face of his shield against Tim's back to physically prod him forward. I grabbed hold of Tim's backpack, and followed, also crouching low.

As I was running away, I felt something strike me hard across the back and shoulders. I now know, from seeing the local news crew's footage, that a third U.S. Park Police officer reached around the second officer to smack me with his baton in a backhanded motion as I was running away. Disturbingly, in the moments before that, as the other officers surrounded us, this third officer appears to be trying to push his way into the scrum while waving his baton. Unable to get "into the mix" before we started running down the sidewalk, he seemed to go out of his way to make sure to get at least one hit on us.

Again, this all happened as we were broadcasting live to the news desk for the morning show in Sydney. The anchors of the show reacted with shock when they saw the first officer's fist suddenly fill the frame as he punched Tim's camera. Initially, the studio could not hear us, because the attack had knocked the receiver for my microphone off of Tim's camera. As they tried to make sure we were okay, one of the anchors, Samantha Armytage, observed that the police were not discriminating between protesters and the media.

After we ran several yards away from the police line, and Tim reconnected the microphone receiver to the camera, I told the anchors (and Australian audience, which included my own family) what was happening:

Yeah guys, you heard us yelling there that we were media, but they don't care. They are being indiscriminate at the moment. They chased us down that street as you see. They were firing these rubber bullets at everyone. There's tear gas. Now, we are really surrounded by the police and you really saw the way that they dealt with my camera man Tim there, quite violent. And they do not care who they're targeting at the moment.

I also explained that the curfew was not set to come into effect for another 26 minutes, but that the police seemed to be trying to box the protesters in, which would mean that, after curfew, all of the protesters present could be subject to arrest.

The news anchors were curious to understand exactly where we were located, relative to the White House, where President Trump was scheduled to speak in the Rose Garden at any moment. Tim panned his camera to the left to show how we were directly across the park from the front door of the White House at that very moment.

As this was happening, the police lines began advancing again, all the while firing their weapons and releasing various forms of tear gas and smoke grenades. We tried to move further West along H Street, but were squeezed in place with the line of military police to our left, the U.S. Park Police line advancing behind us, and throngs of protesters all around us. In many ways, that was the most frightening part of the experience. We had already been attacked physically and wanted nothing more than to get clear of the continuing onslaught from the police. But we kept finding ourselves caught in the bottleneck created by the Park Police line moving forward so quickly. It felt like there was no escape.

As we turned to run away from this second wave, I felt a sharp pain as I was struck with a projectile directly to my legs and backside. In the video, which was again, still being broadcast live to Australian morning news audiences, I can be heard shrieking in pain and surprise. I had assumed at the time that I was hit with a rubber bullet, and said as much to the camera. Having now seen the wounds caused by actual rubber bullets on others, I believe I was actually struck by a “pepper ball” projectile. (I have compared the feeling to being hit with a paintball at very close range.) I received bruises where I was hit that lasted for several weeks.

Continuing to crouch low, Tim and I pushed our way West as loud flash grenades boomed around us, gas continued to fill the air (causing everyone around us to cough violently, which was particularly unnerving in light of the COVID pandemic), and the police forces kept firing their “less-lethal” guns at the crowd.

Tim and I then ran at a sprinting pace all the way down H Street to the other side of the park, and turned North on Connecticut Avenue to try to escape the bottleneck where we had been stuck. Running (and then speaking on camera) was made all the more difficult by the gas and smoke that was constantly filling the air.

Barely able to catch my breath, I gave an update to the camera, explaining that we had gotten out of the main area, after being hit by (what I thought were) rubber bullets and pepper spray. I told the audience how “we were trying to move on, as the police were asking us to. Obviously, the last thing we ever want is to get in the way. But there was just no opportunity. As you were moving this way, you’re hitting more and more protesters. And the police were just pushing up so quickly—” I then cut myself off to say “we’re gonna keep moving,” as I saw that the police line was continuing to advance further, and explosions continued booming around us. We eventually ran all the way to Farragut Square, but could only pause for a moment before I saw the stampede people continue to run towards us, away from the constantly advancing police line. As I took cover around the corner of I Street at Farragut Square, I told the studio (now over the phone), how “we’ve done our best to get out of the way. We’ve now found ourselves in

almost the exact same situation. It's almost impossible to escape." We pushed forward up the square and turned right on K Street, where we were finally able to catch our breath and assess the damage.

The Aftermath

As a result of the attack, the lens assembly on Tim's camera—a professional grade news camera—was seriously damaged, and would no longer focus properly. His camera's viewfinder (which had been jammed into his face) was also damaged. Tim had an additional lens (with a different focal length) that I was carrying in my backpack. Unfortunately, that lens took part of the brunt of the baton strike to my back, and was also damaged. As I mentioned above, the TVU device that enables us to send our video and audio feed back to Australia remotely, was also malfunctioning from being jostled and hit with the projectiles fired by the police forces in the first rush. Repairing and replacing this equipment will likely cost thousands of dollars. Of perhaps less significance, but still frustrating, I lost one of my wireless "Airpods" and a pair of sunglasses as we were pushed by the police.

I have large bruises that lasted for weeks where I was hit with the "pepper ball" (or whatever "less-lethal" projectile hit me). Both Tim and I have also experienced persistent aches and soreness from where we were hit—Tim, from the riot shield hit and camera punch, and me, from the baton strike. Both Tim and I have consulted with doctors for treatment for the lingering effects from those attacks.

Despite these injuries and the damage to our equipment, we continued to report on the protests and police actions throughout the rest of that night, and over the next eight days in Washington, D.C.

I would be lying if I said I did not feel fear when we went back out to continue to report on the events in the streets. From the beginning, we knew we were entering a potentially chaotic situation, and tried to take precautions. For example, I knew that, if law enforcement used things like tear gas, we would be caught in the cloud just like everyone else. That was why we had protective eyewear. What we never would have expected was that we would be directly assaulted by multiple police officers when we were not in anyone's way, and were clearly identifiable as media, peacefully reporting on the events. I had no way of knowing whether the same thing would happen again as we continued to try to report on the scene. As I've told others since the incident, our instinct as journalists covering a dangerous situation would normally be to run *towards* the police for safety. But this was the opposite; here, the police were the ones we feared.

At the same time, I felt an even more solemn obligation to go out and do my job, to show the Australian people what was actually happening on the ground in the capital city of its closest ally. In fact, this incident illustrates perfectly how important it is for reporters to be on the scene, witnessing and capturing what's happening directly. The moment when the police began rushing protesters away from the park was so chaotic and rushed that it would have been impossible to know what was actually happening if we had been filming from, say, a couple blocks away. This is something that should be important not only to protesters and civilians, but to the police as

well. I would think that if the situation were reversed, and it was protesters who attacked police without provocation, the police would want that reality documented and reported on.

For that reason, I was shocked to have the U.S. Park Police attack us so directly, even after they knew we were media. I could possibly understand the first officer getting caught up in the heat of the moment, and striking Tim with his riot shield before he realized what was happening. (Though, I would also hope that police officers are sufficiently trained so that they know how to more effectively assess a situation before lashing out with physical force.) However, after he took a step back and realized that Tim was a cameraman, and we were shouting “Media! Media!,” his reaction was to directly punch the camera lens. It felt as if he was trying to aggressively convey that we did not have a right to be there, filming what was happening—even though we absolutely did. The fact that the third officer struck me with a baton as I was running away, after it was abundantly clear that we were media, and were complying with all directives without hesitation, was all the more disturbing.

I was also, frankly, disturbed to see the police dealing so harshly with what had been, up to that point, a relatively peaceful protest. I was, of course, aware of the chaos and destructive behavior by some individuals the night before. But up until 6:30 on that Monday, we had not seen any violence or destruction by any of the protesters. At the time, we were baffled as to why the police were cracking down so violently on a peaceful protest when the curfew had not even kicked in yet. Of course, we later learned that the apparent reason for the police action was to clear the way for the President to walk over to St. John’s church.

During my live cross to Sunrise the next day, one of the hosts, David Koch, asked if I was angry. Here is what I said at the time:

I’m really disappointed It’s not just about the media and the fact that we were attacked while we were doing our job. It’s about the fact that that was before curfew. So every single person that was here had a legal right to be here. And to see these people tear gassed to make way for a photo opportunity for the president in front of the White House in the United States of America is outrageous. This is not the United States that I know at the moment. This is a police state. It’s martial law. And to see civilians treated like that was really, really upsetting.

As a reporter, I don’t like to make myself the story. I’m there to witness and report on what I see, without interfering. But I have been shocked over the past few weeks to see how many reporters in cities around the country have been attacked, beaten, and arrested, just for doing their jobs. In fact, my fiancée, who is here with me today, is a cameraman for Channel 9 News, one of Seven’s biggest rivals. He was in Minneapolis to cover the unrest. On the Saturday night before I was attacked in Lafayette Square, he was driving in a car with the reporter he works with, as well as a security consultant. They were stopped by the police while they were driving after that city’s curfew. Although they had media credentials that permitted them to be out at that time (since the press was exempt from the curfew), the police pulled their car over and placed all three under arrest. They sat handcuffed on the curb for a number of minutes before they were let go. Our experiences are just two of many that have been happening around the country, some much more serious than what happened to either of us. As terrifying

as my experience was, I feel grateful that Tim and I were not more seriously injured, as some of my fellow journalists around the country have been.

The Australian government and people were horrified to see journalists treated this way in, of all places, the United States, which has such a long tradition of protecting the role of the press. As I've mentioned, the attack on myself and Tim was broadcast live to hundreds of thousands of Australians eating their breakfasts—including my family, who were understandably quite worried for my safety. People at the highest levels of our government expressed shock and outrage. The Prime Minister called the incident “troubling,” and directed Australia’s ambassador to the United States to seek a full investigation of the incident. The leader of the opposition party labeled it a “completely unacceptable assault.”

Covering protests does carry unavoidable risks, but the media’s role is essential. We don’t just have a right to be there, we have an obligation. As Australian journalists, we are the eyes and the ears of the people, in this case witnessing civil unrest in the capital of our most powerful and closest ally. It is crucial to democracy that journalists be allowed to do their job freely and safely. And that is certainly something we should expect in the world’s greatest democracy.