

## FORTY-TWO

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On May 25, a Minneapolis police officer was caught on video with his knee on the neck of George Floyd for eight minutes and 46 seconds, torturing and killing Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man. A massive wave of angry protests erupted in more than 2,000 cities and towns on a scale not seen in America since the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. “Black Lives Matter” extended its reach as a rallying cry against racism and police brutality.

While most of the protests against police misconduct and racial inequality were peaceful, television news was filled with chaotic scenes of rioting, looting and buildings set afire in major cities.

In Washington, D.C., a fire was set in the basement nursery of the historic St. John’s Episcopal Church, 1,000 feet from the White House, on Sunday, May 31. Following the fire, the church had been boarded up. A city curfew set by D.C. mayor Muriel Bowser was scheduled to begin the next day, June 1, at 7:00 p.m.

Trump, in a phone call with governors that afternoon, stressed the need to use force against the demonstrators. He wanted an energetic crackdown.

“You have to dominate,” Trump said. “If you don’t dominate, you’re wasting your time. They’re going to run all over you, you’ll look like a bunch of jerks. You have to dominate, and you have to arrest people, and you have to try people and they have to go to jail for long periods of time.”

That day, hundreds of mostly peaceful protesters gathered in the area around Lafayette Square, a seven-acre public park between St. John’s Church and the White House.

At around 6:30 p.m., without apparent provocation, officers in riot gear suddenly advanced on the protesters, tossing riot control devices into the crowd that created loud explosions, sparks and smoke. Videos show officers pushing

protesters to the ground, shooting some with rubber projectiles and spraying others with a chemical agent. Authorities shot “pepper balls”—projectiles containing a powdered chemical that irritates the eyes and nose—at the protesters. Officers on horseback pushed protesters further away from Lafayette Square.

“I didn’t see any provocation that would warrant the deployment of munitions,” Mayor Bowser said afterward.

It was a jarring display of militarized government forces against those exercising their First Amendment rights to assemble.

At 6:48 p.m., just minutes after forces dispersed the protesters, Trump began a speech in the White House’s Rose Garden about the unrest sweeping across the country.

“All Americans were rightly sickened and revolted by the brutal death of George Floyd,” Trump said. “My administration is fully committed that, for George and his family, justice will be served. He will not have died in vain. But we cannot allow the righteous cries and peaceful protesters to be drowned out by an angry mob.

“The biggest victims of the rioting are peace-loving citizens in our poorest communities, and as their president, I will fight to keep them safe. I will fight to protect you. I am your president of law and order, and an ally of all peaceful protesters.”

Trump spent most of the seven-minute address promising to combat what he described as “riots and lawlessness that has spread throughout our country.” He recommended that each governor deploy the National Guard “in sufficient numbers that we dominate the streets.”

“If a city or a state refuses to take the actions that are necessary to defend the life and property of their residents,” he said, “then I will deploy the United States military and quickly solve the problem for them.”

After his Rose Garden address, at about 7 p.m., Trump left the White House grounds. A coterie of advisers followed, including Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley in a camouflage uniform, White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, O’Brien, Attorney General

Barr, Kushner and Ivanka. The president walked the 1,000 feet north through Lafayette Square to St. John's, known as "the Church of the Presidents."

When the president reached the church, Ivanka pulled a Bible out of her white handbag and handed it to her father.

Trump stood in front of the church for about two minutes, holding the Bible awkwardly and waving it around.

"Is that your Bible?" a reporter asked.

"It's a Bible," Trump answered.

A reporter asked the president what his thoughts were.

"We have a great country," he said. "That's my thoughts."

It appeared the president had walked to the church to give photographers and cameramen an opportunity to take his picture with the burned church and a Bible as props.

After a few moments, Trump motioned to his advisers and Meadows, Barr, Esper, O'Brien and Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany walked over to join him in standing in a line in front of the church.

"I am outraged," the Episcopal bishop of Washington, Mariann Edgar Budde, said afterward. "Everything he has said and done is to inflame violence."

"This evening," Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said, "the President of the United States stood in front of St. John's Episcopal Church, lifted up a bible, and had pictures of himself taken. In so doing, he used a church building and the Holy Bible for partisan political purposes."

Later, the White House and the U.S. Park Police defended the dispersal of the crowd, citing "violent protesters." Footage of the protest shows that at least two protesters threw water bottles at the police.

About three hours later, two helicopters operated by the D.C. Army National Guard hovered over the remaining protesters. The helicopters flew as low as 45 feet—below the heights of some buildings—creating wind speeds equivalent to a tropical storm, snapping thick tree limbs, swirling the air with dust and broken glass. Many protesters ran for cover in panic and confusion. The use of helicopters to disperse civilians is a common tactic in war zones.

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Mattis broke his long-held silence, issuing a statement.

“When I joined the military, some 50 years ago,” Mattis wrote, “I swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution. Never did I dream that troops taking that same oath would be ordered under any circumstance to violate the Constitutional rights of their fellow citizens—much less to provide a bizarre photo op for the elected commander in chief, with military leadership standing alongside....

“Donald Trump is the first president in my lifetime who does not try to unite the American people—does not even pretend to try,” he continued. “Instead, he tries to divide us. We are witnessing the consequences of three years of this deliberate effort. We are witnessing the consequences of three years without mature leadership.”

Trump responded with a series of tweets later that evening. “I didn’t like his ‘leadership’ style or much else about him, and many others agree,” Trump tweeted about Mattis. “Glad he is gone!”

Soon after, Mayor Bowser had “Black Lives Matter” painted in giant yellow letters on the street leading to Lafayette Square and the White House.

Protests against racial injustice and inequities continued to fill streets across the country in the weeks that followed.

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Two days after his law-and-order speech, Trump returned my call. It was the morning of June 3.

“Hi, Bob, how’s the book? Am I keeping you busy enough?”

“You give me new chapters,” I said.

“Yeah. It’s law and order, Bob, law and order. We’re right where I want.”

“Do you have a few minutes to—”

“Law and order, Bob.” He launched into his talking points about how the economy would start to get better, how the states that were reopening were strong, and how the administration was doing very well on vaccines and therapeutics for the virus.

“And we’re going to get ready to send in the military slash National Guard to some of these poor bastards that don’t know what they’re doing, these poor

radical lefts.” And he added pointedly, “Of course, you’re a poor radical left to an extent, I guess.”

I asked if Trump had watched the George Floyd tape.

“Yeah, I saw it. It was terrible. I thought it was a terrible thing. I’ve said it—” He reminded me that in an earlier speech in Florida for a NASA and SpaceX rocket launch, he had talked about George Floyd. He had devoted eight minutes to Floyd.

Where did you watch it? Did he watch the whole thing, or just parts of it?

“Sure I got to watch it. Everybody did. All you need was a television. I watched it numerous times. I mean, mostly I was in the White House, upstairs, because I don’t get to watch much television during the day. I mean, upstairs. And I watched it. It’s been on, it’s been on a lot. No, it’s a terrible thing, and strong feeling toward it. I don’t like it at all. I’m very unhappy about it. And action has been taken and it will be taken, and it will be dealt with. And I think the riots are—I put it out in Minneapolis. That was the worst one of all. They were ripping down the city. They’re all liberal Democrats, every one of them is a liberal Democrat. Hard to believe, right?”

“How did you decide, okay, I’m going to give that law-and-order speech?”

“It was very easy for me to decide,” he said. “Because I looked and there was no law and order. And the radical left Dems and the Democrat—they’re all Democrat mayors or governors. I mean, every one of them. Every one of them. Every one where there’s weakness is that. So that was an easy speech for me to write. Usually I write them and/or substantially adjust them.”

“Did somebody help you?”

“Yeah, I get people. They come up with ideas. But the ideas are mine, Bob. The ideas are mine. Want to know something? Everything’s mine. You know, everything is mine.”

I asked about his walk to St. John’s and the treatment of the protesters there.

“It’s total bullshit,” he said. “They didn’t use tear gas.”

Firsthand witnesses, including reporters, and videos showed law enforcement officers using pepper spray, smoke canisters and pepper balls to disperse the crowd.

“Well,” Trump said, “these nice, wonderful people tried to burn down the church the day before. You know, they were all saying, these were nice people. Well, they weren’t nice people. They were rough people. And the day before, they tried to burn down the church. And so now the Republicans are all on my side. By the way, I had a big night last night. We won all of—every race that I endorsed. And I’m 64 and 0 this congressional cycle, 64 and 0 on endorsements. Both wins, and wins in primaries. And many of them were losing before I endorsed.”

At the time it was true.

“And so the idea of standing there with the Bible, that’s quite a photo,” I said.

“It’s my idea. Nobody else. And a lot of people loved it.”

“A lot of people did,” I acknowledged. “And I’m sure a lot of people don’t.”

“Perhaps.”

“Why did you decide to use the Bible as a symbol?” I asked.

“Because I thought it was terrible that they tried to rip down a church that was built simultaneously with the White House, and whose first parishioner was James Madison. And I thought it was a terrible thing, and a terrible symbol that they could do such a thing. And made a strong statement, and people loved it. Other than the radical left, people loved it. And by the way, they ought to appreciate it, but they tried to knock it as much as possible.”

News reports said he had been rushed to the emergency White House bunker, called the Presidential Emergency Operations Center (PEOC) on May 29. “Did you go down in the bunker?”

“For a period,” Trump said. “I had a choice. And it was really more of an inspection than anything else. Because they wanted me to inspect it. It was a very minor event, and I just went down to inspect it. It was, first of all, it was during the day, where there was no problem during the day at all.

“You know,” Trump continued, “when people get rambunctious, it happens during the night. This was during the day, long before there was any darkness. And they said, would you like to inspect it now? Would you like to go down? I said, oh, I’ll go down. And then they write a fake piece in *The New York Times*, like I’m sitting in a bunker. That was during the day and it was the inspection, the second time I’ve ever seen it.”

“Were you there a long time, or just looking around?”

“Fifteen minutes. Just looking around. Looking around, came right up—it was during the day.”

“It’s not exactly a cozy place, is it?” I said.

“No, it’s just—you know, it was really, you’re supposed to go and inspect it. And I did. And I did it. They said this would be a good time. I said, why? They said, well, we got people outside, but there’s no problem. It was, I think 4:00, 5:00 in the afternoon. It was during the day. It was beautiful.”

“Who suggested that you inspect it?” I asked.

“Huh? One of the Secret Service guys said, you don’t have to do it now—I didn’t have to go down—it was, I went down as an inspection. And they said I went down. And the reason I went down as an inspection was, it was appropriate to do because I had to go down and inspect it anyway. And I got—and they made it sound like I was in there. Not that there’d be anything wrong—plenty of people have been. Not a big deal. Not a big deal. And down there’s not a big deal. But I was only there for 15, 20 minutes. And it was more walking around, looking at things.”

“I see. And you didn’t go again?” I asked.

“No, I didn’t go again. I went one time, very quickly. It was an inspection, and they made it sound like it was—again, Bob, it was during the day.”

“Listen, that’s why I’m asking,” I said.

Attorney General Barr would later say on Fox News that it was not an inspection. “Things were so bad that the Secret Service recommended the president go down to the bunker.”

“There were very few people during the day,” Trump went on. “There were almost no protesters.”

The police had violently broken up the June 1 protest.

“No,” Trump said, “that’s only if you watch CNN and if you watch MSDNC. But—or you read *The New York Times* or your favorite newspaper, *The Washington Post*. Uh, outside of that, the people are very unhappy. These are arsonists, they’re thugs, they’re anarchists and they’re bad people. They’re bad people. Very bad people. Very dangerous people.

“Even the peaceful protesters?” I said. “There are a lot of peaceful protesters.”

“There are not many. I’ll tell you what. Not many. These are very well-organized thugs. You’ll be seeing that when it comes out. These are very well-organized. Antifa’s leading it. These are very well-organized events. Very well-organized.”

Antifa, an abbreviation for “Anti-fascist,” is a decentralized movement. It is not an organization and does not have a leader or membership dues.

“Well,” I said, “we’re going into the election. Everyone keeps asking, suppose it’s a close election, and it’s contested? What are you going to do? Everyone says Trump is going to stay in the White House if it’s contested. Have you—”

“Well, I’m not—I—I don’t want to even comment on that, Bob. I don’t want to comment on that at this time.”

Trump referenced the book I was working on about him. “If I have a fair book, it’s going to be a great book. Did you see the book they wrote about Trump and Churchill? Did you see it? It just came out.” He was referring to *Trump and Churchill: Defenders of Western Civilization*, by Nick Adams, a conservative commentator. “And he gave me a rating as one of the greatest presidents ever.”

Trump turned to his future. “The economy, I’ll do it again. It’s already started. By September, October, the economy will start heading up. And once it starts heading up, and in big numbers, we’re going to have a phenomenal following year. But by September, October—maybe sooner—but by September, October, you’ll start to see tremendous jumps in employment and GDP. And by October it’ll be really big. And the numbers will be announced and I’ll win the election. Watch. Better than where I was before. Better. Where I was riding high.”

I returned to the immediate story of the massive protests. “You bought ownership of the whole problem,” I said, “the racial tensions, by making your declaration of law and order.”

“Law and order, that’s right,” he said. “I’ll take my chances. It would be an honor to get a good book from you, but that probably won’t happen, but that’s okay, too. Thanks, Bob.”