

Sprawling Protest Movement Treads Line Between Justice Agenda and Chaos

Escalating violence and destruction on Friday raised questions about whether a diverse, broadly decentralized protest movement was spinning out of control.

By John Eligon, Matt Furber and Campbell Robertson

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MINNEAPOLIS — The nation woke on Saturday to extraordinary images of chaos and unrest from outside the White House gates to the streets of more than two dozen besieged cities, as outrage over the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis traversed a razor’s edge between protest and civic meltdown.

As state and local leaders braced for more protests over the weekend in cities around the country, they both called for calm and vowed to react strongly to protesters who defied the law.

Gov. Tim Walz of Minnesota said on Saturday that he was activating thousands of National Guard troops — up to 13,200 — to control protesters in Minneapolis who turned out in droves for the fourth night in a row on Friday, burning buildings to the ground, firing guns near the police and overwhelming officers. In addition, the Pentagon ordered the Army to prepare active-duty military police units to deploy to Minneapolis, if needed.

Rallies, looting and unrest expanded far beyond Minneapolis with protesters destroying police vehicles in Atlanta and New York, and blocking major streets in San Jose and Detroit. Crowds in Milwaukee chanted, “I can’t breathe,” and demonstrators in Portland, Ore., lit a fire inside the Multnomah County Justice Center. Hundreds of demonstrators poured into the streets near the Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta, smashing windows, clashing with police officers and vandalizing CNN’s headquarters.

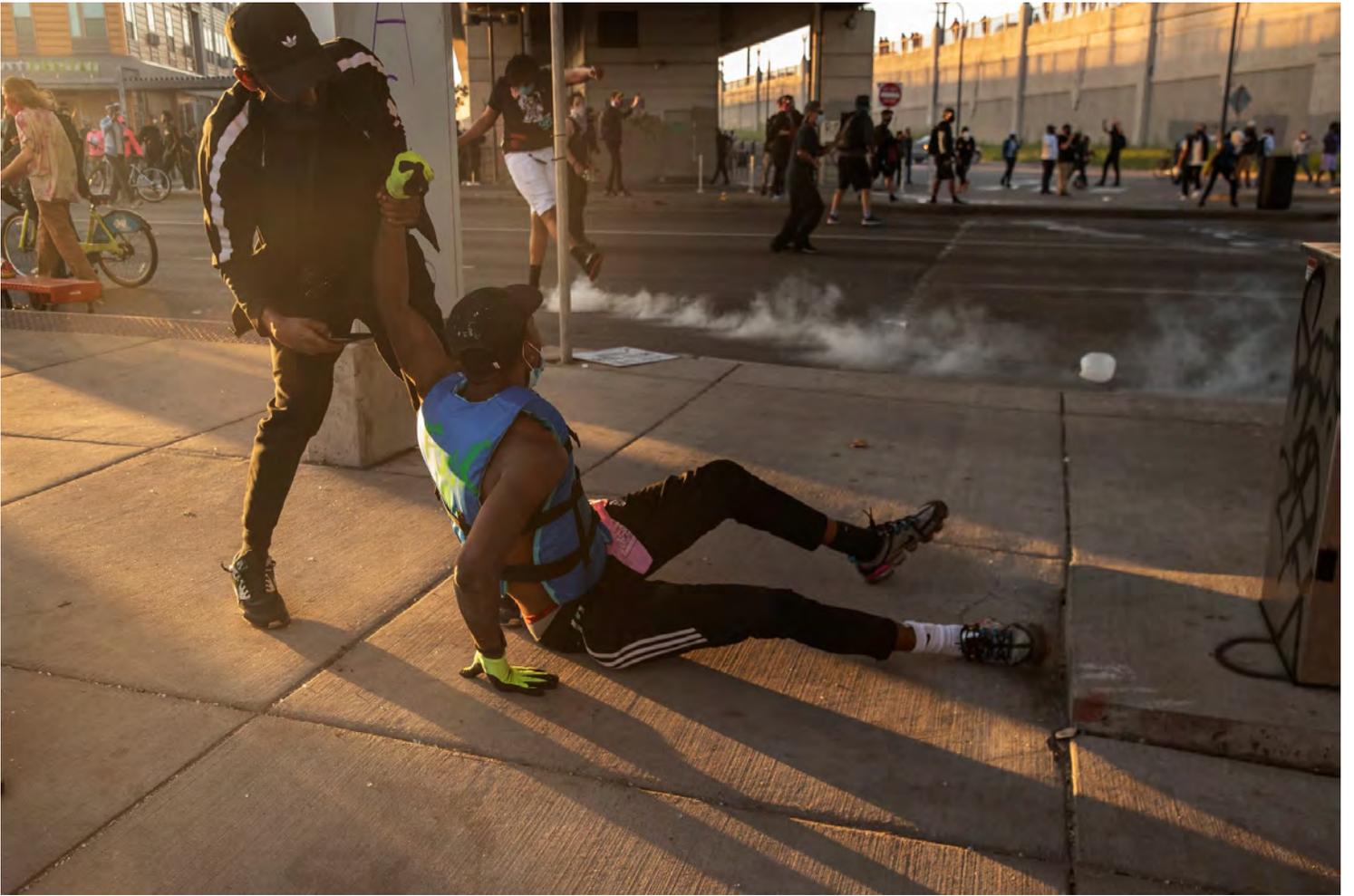
The chaos and rage on such a broad scale evoked the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of recent years; the violence that followed the police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1992; and even the racial strife of the 1960s, when the fury and despair of inner-city African-Americans over racism and poverty erupted in scores of cities, reaching a climax in 1967 and 1968, two years that saw more than 150 riots.

This moment has not produced anything close to the violence of that era. But it is playing out under dystopian circumstances, with a pandemic that has kept much of the nation at home for months, Depression-era job losses and the public bitterly divided on politics and culture.

As governors and mayors urged restraint, President Trump’s initial reaction on Saturday morning came in a series of tweets that praised the Secret Service for protecting the White House, taunted protesters and assailed Democratic officials.



Protesters clashed with the police in Minneapolis on Friday. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



A protester shot with a rubber bullet was helped by another in Minneapolis on Friday. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



Gov. Tim Walz of Minnesota said that the state was bracing for more protests on Saturday and that the authorities had been overwhelmed by the demonstrations. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

There was a sense of a nation on the brink. “What are you changing by tearing up a city?” Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms of Atlanta asked protesters there. “You’ve lost all credibility now. This is not how we change America. This is not how we change the world.”

The protests continued with new ferocity on Friday night even after Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer who was shown on a cellphone video kneeling on Mr. Floyd’s neck as he lost consciousness, was charged with third-degree murder.

Mr. Walz said that the state was bracing for more protests on Saturday and that the authorities had been overwhelmed by the demonstrations, which he said had devolved into “absolute chaos.” He did not rule out accepting the help of the federal military, although he called it an extreme step.

The roots of the unrest and division are long and deep

But the immediate trigger is a protest movement, ignited by the death of Mr. Floyd, that reflects the street uprisings of the Black Lives Matter movement that came to prominence six years ago.

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The escalating violence and destruction felt like a warning that this moment could be spinning out of control both because of the limitations of a largely spontaneous, leaderless movement and because, protesters and officials warned, there were indications it was also being undermined by agitators trying to sabotage it.

“I need those legitimate folks who are grieving to take this back,” Mr. Walz said at an early morning news conference as a bank, a gas station and several other buildings burned. “Why are we talking about anarchists who are burning down damn buildings?”

And, beyond the chaos in Minneapolis, there were widespread fears that a movement protesting police violence and systemic racism was instead being subverted by images of violence and chaos playing out around the country.



A protester overcome by tear gas being assisted in Louisville, Ky., on Friday. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

Mike Griffin, an organizer in Minneapolis, said these are mostly decentralized protests: “That happens without the black pastor coming in and telling us to do it. That’s organic. These are organic protests.”

But the result from the start has drawn wildly diverse participants. Organizers have been trying to keep the focus on police accountability and social justice issues through chanting and marching. Others have taken to the streets to revel in the energy of the moment. Some have come to loot and set fires.

The protesters come from diverse racial backgrounds with ardent cadres of young white allies quite unlike earlier eras of racial unrest. Some marches are led by national or local activist organizations. Many others are simply spontaneous, sprouting up from long-simmering frustrations in city neighborhoods.

Underlying it at the start was a moment of witness, part anger, part despair, part hope, defined by the seemingly endless drumbeat of deaths as senseless as that of Mr. Floyd’s.

“May 27, 2020, changed my life forever,” said Kayla JuNaye Johnson, 21, a student majoring in criminal justice at Grambling State University, a historically black public university in Louisiana. “I would always go out and support protests but never took full action like I did yesterday. I stood on the front line shouting, ‘Hands up, don’t shoot.’ Now I finally know how us African-Americans felt during the civil rights movement. I am a part of history.”

But the chaos unfolding threatens to send out an entirely different message.

In many communities, the protests reflected both Mr. Floyd's death and simmering local controversies.

One hot spot was Louisville, Ky. Gunfire broke out in the late hours of a demonstration on Thursday that was protesting the shooting death of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old emergency medical technician who was killed by Louisville police officers executing a search warrant. Seven demonstrators were injured. It is still unclear who fired the shots, though the authorities said they came from within the crowd.

"We have to be careful to control our message, and violence changes that message," said Keisha Dorsey, a Louisville city councilwoman who supports police reform. With the endless fire hose of social media, she said, it can become easy for a protest to lose all focus. "At that point, that centralized voice, if it's not cohesive, can get lost," she said.

A demonstration in Columbus, Ohio, on Thursday night, which ended in clashes between the police and protesters as well as damage to the Ohio Statehouse, was not only about Mr. Floyd and Ms. Taylor, but also a number of other black people who were killed at the hands of the police, including a 16-year-old killed in a police sting in Columbus in late 2018.



Protestors demonstrated in front of City Hall in Downtown Los Angeles, on Friday. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

In Phoenix, a controversial local activist called a march which, while not fully supported by the other police accountability groups in the city, ended up drawing hundreds, many of them protesting the long-troubled record of the Phoenix police in addition to the death of Mr. Floyd. In Memphis, an aggressive police response to a demonstration organized by local educators on Wednesday night prompted a second protest on Thursday, in part responding to police actions during the first.

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"It started out as the George Floyd issue," said Ayo Akinmoladun, a Memphis educator who organized what was intended to be a small silent protest. "All of these other issues are now coming out."

DeRay Mckesson became a well-known activist after spending months in Ferguson, Mo., chronicling the nightly vigils and clashes with the police over the killing of Michael Brown.

Mr. Mckesson is not heading to Minneapolis, where he used to live, to protest. Instead, he has been speaking with organizers on the ground to craft strategy, he said, in line with the work he has done in more recent years to develop policy reforms.

“There needs to be an immediate response to the trauma,” he said, referring to street protests. “There are people who do that, and I support that. I can be most helpful pushing around policy changes, structural changes and helping to make sure the story we tell is consistent with the world we’re trying to build.”

In Minneapolis, some local activist groups have led rallies on the South Side, where Mr. Floyd was killed. They have set up tables with fliers as well as handed out water and other things to keep the people at rallies comfortable.



The chaos and rage on such a broad scale evoked the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of recent years. Gabriela Bhaskar for The New York Times



People protesting the death of George Floyd at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, N.Y., on Friday. Gabriela Bhaskar for The New York Times

But young residents, unaffiliated with particular organizations, have led a more spontaneous uprising, said Mr. Griffin, a senior organizer with Community Change, a national activist group.

Even the Black Lives Matter network had public meetings and agendas and a decision-making structure, he said. Now there is “an army of young people who are more fired up, more pissed off, more ready to be in your face to fix this system than we were five years ago,” he added.

Carol Becker, a longtime Minneapolis resident, took her 13-year-old to witness some of the demonstrations earlier in the week while there was still light out and things were under control. She supported the protests because she believed that the officers were “absolutely wrong,” she said.

But by nightfall, with unrest giving way to tear gas, rubber bullets, and burned and looted businesses, she found herself standing in front of her father’s apartment building, fending off people trying to set it on fire, she said.

“There were protesters at the police precinct,” she said. “When you got even a block away, there weren’t protesters anymore. These people weren’t protesting. They were breaking into things and taking things.”

Minneapolis has a core group of anarchists, residents say, describing them as white activists of the Occupy Wall Street mold, challenging the moneyed elite in a city with a high concentration of Fortune 500 companies.

One man in particular has become a focus of those who believe that outsiders could be trying to discredit the protest movement and its goals. Dressed in all black, with a black gas mask and carrying a black umbrella, the man, known as Umbrella Man and appears to be white if otherwise unidentifiable, was filmed breaking windows at an AutoZone store.

People who are sympathetic to the protests continue to view figures like Umbrella Man with deep suspicion.

“I am well aware there are often people at these rallies who incite violence to discredit those peacefully assembled,” said Camille Gage, 63, an artist in Minneapolis who said that the building where she kept her studio was on fire. “I feared there would be an effort by some to use violence and destruction of property at the rally to honor Mr. Floyd, and I was sadly correct.”

And others warned that some agitators, largely white, were trying to undermine the protests.

Jeremiah Ellison, a Minneapolis city councilman, tweeted that community members told him that “three suspicious white men” started a fire at a well-known barbershop on the city’s predominantly black North Side. The shop was an institution, Mr. Ellison wrote.

“I have a hard time believing ANYONE who lives here would set it ablaze,” he wrote.

But not all protesters were unhappy with some of the destruction. “We’ve tried being peaceful,” said Rashaad Dinkins, an 18-year-old college student from Minneapolis. “We’ve tried doing the kneeling and the silence for so long, and we get criticized for even doing that.”

“This is what needs to be done for the world to pay attention,” his friend, Amra Zahirovic, added. “People have had enough.”



“The police never stand up for us,” Johnnie Green said. “With the Covid pandemic people are hungry and homeless. With no job, what do you expect? I think that’s going to happen to masses of people across this country. We could reach the point that it’s civil war.” Gabriela Bhaskar for The New York Times

It is impossible to manage and control a group as varied and eclectic as those who have shown up at the protest scene in Minneapolis: a 40-year-old black mother of three who had joined her boss, a 21-year-old white woman, to pay homage before their shifts started at a Little Caesars pizza place in the suburbs; Green Party members who were helping with donations at the first-aid station at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church; a trio of young white men dressed in headgear and goggles who appeared ready for battle.

“Cub is my grocery store; I eat here and it’s trashed,” said Johnnie Green, 54, who lives about four blocks away. He studied the graffiti and destruction, considering where he may have to go for groceries now. “I’m an optimistic person, but I’ve never seen this in Minneapolis,” he said, remarking on how friendly and diverse he found the neighborhood.

But he understood where the anger came from.

“The police never stand up for us,” Mr. Green said, sipping on a beer. “With the Covid pandemic people are hungry and homeless. With no job, what do you expect? I think that’s going to happen to masses of people across this country. We could reach the point that it’s civil war.”

Still, in city after city, people turned out, most of them hoping for the best.

“I’m here for peace,” said Kenny Washington, 39, of northeast Minneapolis who came out with her newly minted college freshman son, Trenton Washington, 19, after some rest from the exhausting first night of protest. “Destruction is only going to bring chaos. People want to bring change, and we came back to give peace another chance.”

John Eligon and Matt Furber reported from Minneapolis, and Campbell Robertson from Pittsburgh.

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