

The Battle for Public Space Plays Out in Trump's Backyard

The fence Trump built around the White House was the exclamation point on a week of military occupation in D.C. But the streets around it have a different message.

By [Kriston Capps](#)

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The D.C. local government painted a portion of 16th Street leading up to the White House with the words Black Lives Matter. *Bill Clark/CQ-Roll Call, Inc via Getty Images/Assisted by City of DC*

The Battle of Lafayette Square is over. After a week of largely peaceful protests against police brutality near the White House, the troops summoned to Washington, D.C., are departing. The U.S. Department of Defense issued an order to stand down while the mayor said that her city doesn't want to quarter these soldiers any longer. On Thursday night, as a major thunderstorm soaked the District of Columbia, out-of-state troops could be seen leaving the city by the caravan.

The next phase of the standoff in D.C. already looks like a siege. Facing more protests over the killing of George Floyd and others by police, the Trump administration took steps to dig in on Thursday. Crews erected a black fence barrier stretching from the White House north around Lafayette Square, where federal law enforcement officers fired tear gas on protesters on Monday evening to clear the way for President Donald Trump's notorious photo-op at nearby St. John's Church. The perimeter of the new fence extends south to Constitution Avenue, encompassing the entire Ellipse, a park area previously open to the public. This is an escalation in a long-running effort by the Trump administration to fence off the pedestrian areas around the White House. The plaza between the White House and Lafayette Square in particular is one of the most vital public forums in the country, where people gather every day to petition the government (and take selfies). Now it's sealed off behind a security barrier.

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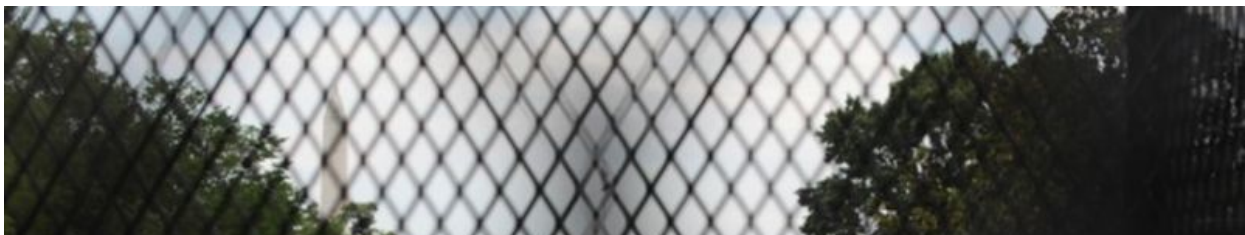
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D.C. is settling in for the long haul, too. The local government is looking to draw a sharp contrast between the bunker mentality at the White House and what the city would like to present about its core values. Before dawn on Friday morning, with help from some protesters, city workers began painting "BLACK LIVES MATTER" across 16th Street in enormous letters spanning the road. Broad and underfoot, the phrase is designed to suffuse the approach from the city to the president's house. The city wants to use the street itself to broadcast a message, much as cities and police departments in New Jersey have painted a blue line down main streets as a reference to the "thin blue line" cop flag. In D.C., both the street and the text terminate at Lafayette Square, in front of St. John's Church, a block that D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser renamed on Friday as "Black Lives Matter Plaza."





A new fence stretches from the White House north around Lafayette Square, where federal law enforcement officers fired tear gas on protesters on Monday. *Yasin Ozturk/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

Huge letters in bright street-paint yellow render “Black Lives Matter” as a notice. It’s the color of civic infrastructure, a warning of an emergency happening on our streets. The text on 16th Street – where demonstrators have been writing messages of hope and anger in paint and chalk all week – leads directly to the White House, casting not a little blame on its current occupant for exacerbating tensions, but also indicating where the buck stops, period. The president won’t be able to avoid the message if he ever leaves the White House by the front door again. Trump finally built his wall; his critics painted around it.

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Some of his critics are Bowser’s critics too: The [Black Lives Matter chapter for D.C.](#) wrote in a tweet that Bowser’s art installation was a “performative distraction” designed to “appease white liberals while ignoring our demands.” Indeed, protesters amended Bowser’s street painting on Saturday night, adding “DEFUND THE POLICE” to the original “BLACK LIVES MATTER” sequence. The city let it stand. Whether it’s protest theater or tactical urbanism, Black Lives Matter Plaza points to twin currents in the D.C. protests – the mayor taking a stand for statehood and protesters refusing to let her off the hook.

To keep with the symbolism of the moment for a minute, though, it is no surprise that government recalcitrance to take action on this criminal justice crisis has devolved into the crude tactics of building walls and fences. Washington was designed with ideals about democratic participation in mind. Pierre L'Enfant borrowed the plan for the District from Baroque-era estate-planning concepts, which called for broad radial avenues fit for hunting on horseback through dense forest. In the L'Enfant Plan, many of these radial avenues terminate at the Capitol and White House, “emphasizing the foundational concepts of the state,” according to Thomas Luebke, secretary for the U.S. Commission on Fine Arts and the author of the book “Civic Art.”



The historic plan of Washington, designed by Pierre L'Enfant in 1791. *National Park Service*

People have long argued that Washington was designed to intimidate foreign powers. When Baron Haussmann rebuilt Paris in the mid-19th century, he used broad avenues to cut through dense urban city in order to facilitate military movement and thwart insurgent barricades. It's unclear how much this thinking also informed L'Enfant's design principles.

Yet on Tuesday evening – with a curfew of 7 p.m., nearly two hours before sundown, on the day that National Guard soldiers and federal troops and military police first arrived in the District – lofty questions about design and tactics weren't historical or theoretical anymore. When the curfew arrived, the city felt silent in a way it hadn't even during the early weeks of the

coronavirus pandemic shutdown. On street corners all around downtown, soldiers stood, looking mostly bored, standing guard by military materiel previously used in Afghanistan.

This week, soldiers secured an expansive cordon of downtown D.C. with the White House at its epicenter. The empty streets on the outer edges of the federal lockdown felt alien and hostile; the protests at the White House were totally different, charged with a feeling of communal energy and a sense of righteousness.

When dusk gathered during the curfew, the emptied streets revealed the civic genius behind the L'Enfant Plan. Cutting through downtown, it was possible to peer at the Capitol from many blocks away, or catch sight of the White House plaza from damn near across the city. The protesters who gathered at Lafayette Square this week came to fulfill that plan. The city was designed so that it was always clear to people where to go to sue for their rights. But that has not always been possible for disenfranchised Americans. For a majority-black city without representation in Congress and its own problems with police, drastic change is needed inside and out.

Police made no arrests at the protests in D.C. on Wednesday night – zero arrests, despite the fact that 5,000 protesters gathered near the White House and marched through the streets; zero arrests, despite the baseless claims from the White House that agitators had previously stashed glass bottles, baseball bats, and metal poles in hidden caches; zero arrests, despite the countless and unidentifiable active-duty soldiers, federal prison guards, and other out-of-state men with guns stationed in the District.

Rain arrived late this week in time to cut the already-intense summer heat and wash off the lingering scent of chemical burn downtown. The White House captured a public park behind a gate, so the city deputized a street to take its place. The siege resumed on Saturday, when the biggest protest yet took place, with the president fortified behind a wall and demonstrators determined to be heard through it.



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