

Trump's reactions to the George Floyd protests are a provocative display of presidential overreach



On May 25th in Minneapolis, Minnesota, George Floyd was killed while being arrested by police. His death has sparked a wave of protests against police brutality in the US and across the world. LSE US Centre Director [Professor Peter Trubowitz](#) writes that President Trump's subsequent vow to 'dominate' the protestors will not reassure most Americans as more and more speak out against his overreach.

How should we understand the significance of the protests over the killing of George Floyd?

The protests against the killing of George Floyd on May 25th in Minneapolis, Minnesota, has transformed the national conversation in the US, which is saying something, given that the US is still in the grips of a pandemic that has killed over [100,000](#) and thrown nearly [40 million Americans out of work](#). The killing has brought long simmering tensions over race to a boil, and President Trump's poorly chosen words about "[looting and shooting](#)" and setting "[vicious dogs](#)" on the protestors has only inflamed the situation. At times like this, a country needs its leaders to find words to that offer solace and hope, elevate the conversation above partisanship, and to chart a way forward.

What impact will this have on the presidential campaign?

It is going to further polarize and fray an already divided America. Given the critical role that African-American voters play in the Democratic Party, it is going to pull former Vice President Joe Biden, the putative Democratic nominee, further to the left and into issues that otherwise might not have been central to his campaign. Black Americans are already saying that "[not being Trump](#)" is not enough; they want Biden to say what he is going to do to address racial injustice and police brutality. Biden made a presidential-like [speech](#) yesterday in Philadelphia about the killing, protests, and the unrest, but the country will need to hear more from him, including concrete proposals. Meanwhile, in a [throwback to Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign](#), Donald Trump has seized on the violence that has erupted in America's cities to make "law and order" a central theme of his campaign to rally his base and try to mobilize those white voters who worry more about mass unrest than police brutality.

Why has President Trump vowed to "dominate" the demonstrators protesting police brutality?

Having been ridiculed by the press, at home and abroad, for being weak and ineffectual in the face of the social unrest in America's major cities, the president seems to have concluded sometime last weekend that he needs to show the he is "strong." And so what we saw transpire were a series of highly charged photo ops, starting with a [conference call](#) with the country's governors where he ridiculed them for being "weak" in dealing with the protests, to a [Rose Garden speech](#) where he threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 to deploy US military troops in the cities, to the [forceful clearing of peaceful protesters in Lafayette Park](#) across from the White House so that the president could have his photo taken holding a Bible in front of St. John's Episcopal Church. The president seems to believe that this will show that he is in command and encourage governors and mayors to think twice about not using greater force to re-establish order in their cities. The president is wrong. While many of his core supporters may be reassured, [most Americans won't](#). More and more Americans will speak out against the clear violation of First Amendment rights and the provocative display of presidential overreach.

- This article is based on interview comments Professor Trubowitz gave to [CNBC](#) and [Bloomberg](#) on 1 and 2 June 2020.
- Featured image: Photo by [Julian Wan](#) on [Unsplash](#)
- On Friday 12 June 2020, from 4:00pm to 5:30pm (BST) the LSE US Centre will be hosting the online roundtable discussion, **Race and Policing in America** with Professor Tracey L. Meares, the Walton Hale Hamilton Professor and a Founding Director of the Justice Collaboratory at Yale Law School. [More information and how to attend](#).

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Peter Trubowitz is Professor of International Relations, and Director of the LSE’s US Centre. His main research interests are in the fields of international security and comparative foreign policy, with special focus on American grand strategy and foreign policy. He also writes and comments frequently on US party politics and elections and how they shape and are shaped by America’s changing place in the world.