

Bess Goldstein

Weapons Were the First Warning  
*What Will It Take for Black Lives to Matter?*

*1:10pm:*

The sun's blistering reflection shines off the bald, sweaty heads of the Philadelphia police department, currently stationed on the I-76 Parkway. The normal whirl of the busy highway is interrupted by the emergence of peaceful protestors marching towards them. Colorful flags, banners and signs wave above the mixture of angry, focused and fearful faces lining the crowd. A deep drum beat echoes from the heart of the protest, carrying the movement in rhythm with their chants.

Yells for peace, screams for equality and justice fill the air around them. Sweaty limbs scramble in the humid chaos, and the thick stench of fear and uncertainty begins to rise. Many weak bodies sit on the side of the road for their water, gasping for air as they take their masks off for a brief moment. A few yards ahead, the Philadelphia police wait along the empty highway, standing six feet apart from one another. Their uniforms are heavy, decorated with metal canisters and wooden batons, ready to be used at any moment.

Along the edges of the parkway, a SWAT team begins to move in on both sides of the crowd, closing in on the enthusiastic yells echoing from underneath the tunnel. Cars freeze in their places on the long crowded road, honking in support of the thousands of protestors approaching North 21<sup>st</sup> street. Many drivers get out of their car and join the march, not knowing of the horror that would come next.



*Protests in Philadelphia, c. June 1st, 2020*

On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the death of George Floyd sparked the international outrage of millions across the United States. George Floyd was an innocent black man visiting Minneapolis, but died at the hands of two police officers who kneeled on his neck for over 8 and a half

minutes. Floyd passed away from asphyxiation, all because of a claim of a possible false 20-dollar bill. (Eligon, NYT 2021) The news of his death spread quickly, across the country and the world. Not only were there protests, vigils and memorials, but Floyd's death impacted how the United States viewed police brutality, and how they saw the Black Lives Matter movement. Many were reminded of how change needs to occur now. Black and brown people across the country are still dying at the hands of police, perpetuating violence and systemic racism in the US.

*1:14pm:*

Casey's red converse rip at the rubber, and flop on the pavement under the hot summer heat. Her tired legs ache for rest, or even just a breath of fresh air. It doesn't help that she is surrounded by thousands of singing and screaming protestors, marching towards the end of a shallow tunnel. The drumbeat that once carried the crowd is silenced by an eerie presence, waiting for. The buzz of helicopters whir around the tunnel, blending into panicked shouts that come from around her. Casey jerks her head behind her to see a wall of clear riot shields, barely 20 feet away. The shields block the faces and badges of officers as the crowd is trying to disperse, running in every possible direction away from the highway. But to no avail, there is no clear exit. Casey flies in the opposite direction of the shields, dragging her friend's hand with her. They both sprint through the dispersing crowd, trying to avoid the swinging batons and yells from police officers, and run up the embankment, a steep thorny hill that leads to a 10-foot wall. People fill in every space next to her, desperately trying to escape before the police reach them. Despite Casey's speed, she is unable to escape the imminent violence enclosing her.

The anger and grievances of millions across the US sparked the first visible gatherings of the Black Lives Matter movement in the last few years. They initially began in Minneapolis, Minnesota, but in every city there are brutality cases, some more than most. The protests also spread to Philadelphia, which is a city known for their mishandlings of situations with police violence. Even so, the same Philadelphia police department on the I-76 parkway was located in West Philadelphia the day before. They chased down peaceful protestors for miles, attempting to disband the large groups of people. The police's weapons were fired into the homes of small families, where some parents and children were hit with rubber bullets. (Vargas, 2020)

Repeated instances of brutality and the immense history of black culture in Philadelphia led the city to become a very fueled fire for the Black Lives Matter movement, which was demonstrated both through protest and other forms of support. Many were not able to attend the protests due to COVID-19. "I wrote a Black Lives Matter sign and hung it up at work." Bea Stewart, an immunocompromised college student tells me how they almost lost their job over advertising the anti-racist movement.

Although these visible protests were generally new to the Black Lives Matter movement and their supporters, the racial tensions between communities of color, specifically black people and the police have always been high, especially in the past few years. The killing of innocent black people by police is unfortunately not a new subject to the United States, and Floyd's death was unfortunately not the first. Many organizations have been working against police brutality and for intersectional antiracism, like a recent movement named Black Lives Matter that's been active since 2014. Many major cities led large demonstrations of Black Lives Matter supporters that adopted George Floyd's death as the catalyst for their movement. During the summer of 2020, researchers documented over "7,750 demonstrations associated with the Black Lives Matter movement", in cities and small towns all across the US. (Beckett, 2020)



*Protester in Philadelphia, c. May 31st, 2020*

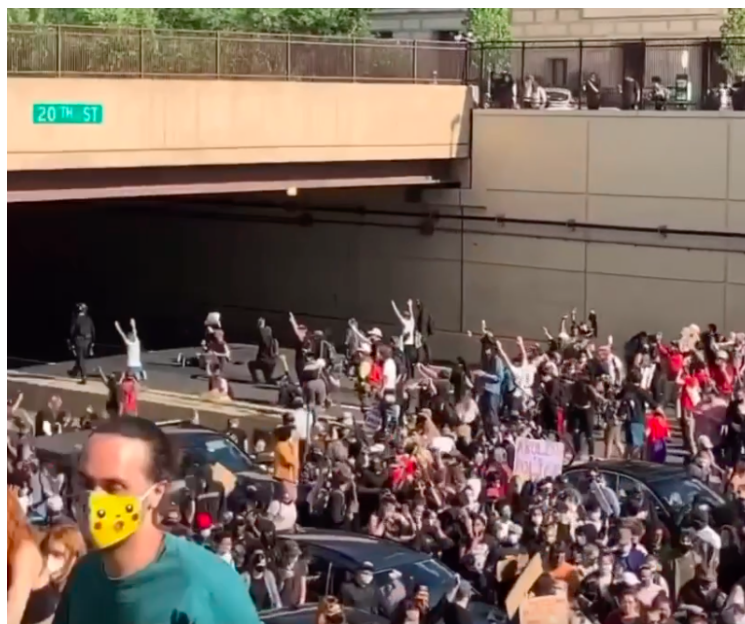
Most, if not all protests during this time were considered peaceful, according to a recent study done by the Armed Conflict Location and Event data project; over 93% of documented protests involved "no serious harm to people or damage to property". However, police authorities were "more likely to intervene in Black Lives Matter protests", they were also more likely to use force with "teargas, rubber bullets and pepper spray or beating demonstrators with batons." (Beckett 2020)

*1:17pm:*

The blue sky that once covered the heads of protestors molds into a dark yellow, a putrid stain on the sky. The summer air is toxic with chemicals, fogging Casey's eyes. "Massive heavy pepper spray was going into the air." Casey explains, "And let me tell you, when I finally realized (the police) had shot tear gas into the air, I couldn't see. I couldn't breathe. That's when people started to go up the hill." The sting of the yellow fog burns her skin, but still she continues to try and reach at the concrete wall at the top of the hill.

Canisters begin to fly in the air, some landing on people's heads, causing them to fall unconscious on the ground. A young girl falls to the ground next to Casey with a large red mark on her face. Casey reminisces this moment of the incident to have been the worst for her, "I had to decide whether to help her and get arrested, or step over her and save myself." Before she could decide, the tear gas filling the air seeps into her lungs, inducing an asthma attack.

Casey fumbles in her bag for her inhaler while still desperately trying to climb away, choking on the lack of air in her lungs. The corners of her vision begin to go black before she sees an officer standing to her left, pulling down her friend. Her friend is a brown man, who was pulled down from climbing the wall. "A policeman just started beating him up with a baton, with no hesitation. He was beaten so badly that his phone was dented in the opposite direction." Police forces were aiming to control the crowd and remove protestors from the highway, by utilizing violence and tear gas to push them into one area. Police were then directing the protestors onto the embankment, as a way to remove protestors from blocking the traffic. Despite traffic beginning to flow again, police continued to tear gas and spray the embankment, beat protestors, and chase them over a 10-foot wall.



*Scene on I-76, Philadelphia c. June 1st, 2020*

According to the Philadelphia police rules on crowd control, "pepper spray should not be used on disorderly crowds or peaceful protestors, only on specific people acting violently." (Reneau, NYT, 5:34) Despite the police force's rules on crowd control, Danielle Outlaw, Philadelphia's police commissioner, in fact defended the teargas use on the highway by justifying that "the option of deploying tear gas was selected when it became evident at that time that other options were not effective." (Vargas, 2020). It was believed through false police reports that peaceful protestors were obstructing a trooper from leaving his patrol car during the protest,

which Outlaw and Mayor Jim Kenney then justified violent action for. However, weeks after the incident, dash-cam footage of that patrol car was released, and it's shown that not only was "the trooper able to leave (the car) freely and join the SWAT team". The footage also revealed police officers describing the protestors as "peacefully walking", and using that language when communicating with other officers. (Reneau, NYT, 2:42)

These findings contradict many of the accounts made by the city police and government officials, and also fuel the tensions and mistrust between the Philadelphia Police and Philadelphians. Subsequently, after the dash-cam footage was released, Mayor Kenney issued an apology regretting the use of tear gas and pepper spray on the parkway, and that the city would "hold police accountable." (Dale, 2020)

1:25 *pm*:

Casey is frozen on the thorny ground, having an asthma attack. Her lungs jerk out and in, aggressively moving the oxygen throughout her body. Tears roll down her burning eyes as her hands get tied behind her with thick, coarse plastic pushing into her wrists. A police woman begins to drag Casey down the hill, ignoring her pleas for her inhaler. Casey is then pulled down and put on her stomach, next to other protestors her age. They all lay in silence, heaving against the grass in order to breathe. Officers push and kick the captured protestors, disregarding the tear gas accumulating on the ground. Police continue to shoot and beat the escaping protestors, allowing tear gas cans to roll down the embankment. Stray cans collect at the bottom of the hill, continuing to release the toxic gas, Casey begins to choke, "I was screaming for my inhaler, but nothing left my mouth. My lungs were out of air." Large, ominous hands grab at her body, pushing her down to the grassy hill. "That's when they searched me," Casey reflected, "and gave me my inhaler."

It took the police over 4 minutes to fulfill Casey's request for her inhaler while she was zip tied on the ground, which could have been fatal if not for her cries for help. After what seems like hours, Casey is finally able to regain her breath while planted into the ground. Her lungs inhale a large breath as she is lifted from the ground, and onto a large bus with the other protestors.

Casey did not know this at the time, but the busses were driving to different police stations across Philadelphia county. The entire crowd, but specifically the captured protestors on the I-76 were cited for 'failure to disperse'. She is among the hundreds who were sent to police stations to be held in cells, before they were let go less than an hour later. In order for a citation of failure to disperse to stand, "officers must first give clear warning that people can hear, provide an unobstructed exit route, and allow enough time to leave." (Gjelten, 2021)





*Police Busses, Philadelphia. c. June 1st, 2020.*

Most, if not all protestors on the parkway can attest that none of those steps were put in place or clear enough for the collective group to understand. There was no verbal warning before tear gas was thrown, according to Maya Kohl, another protestor on the scene. “People were just trying to escape; we were running as fast as we could.” Maya explains how the police arrive at the scene, immediately armed with clubs and tear gas. “Weapons were the first warning.” Police targeted protestors, press, and bystanders running away, challenging them, or even filming the scene.

Despite the Philadelphia police describing the protestors as “peacefully walking”, their actions correlated to no such description. The Philadelphia police force perfectly represented apartheid policing, which is policing based off aggression and force, and everything that the Black Lives Matter movement stands against. The empirical evidence and observations on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 suggest how police act when they don’t think anyone is watching; through unlawful force and aggression. There is evidence of false arrests, false police reports, unlawful use of tear gas and violence, dead-end investigations, the list goes on. Even though Mayor Kenney issued a statement saying he would hold police accountable, the only major reforms that took place after the parkway incident “was a temporary moratorium on the use of teargas”. (Dale, 2020) The protests against police brutality were fought with even more police brutality. This response not only angered the protestors, but heightened the need for reform of the local government and task force.

*4:18pm:*

Casey steps out of the small police station gripping a small plastic bag filled with her things. Her inhaler shines through the clear plastic as she takes it out and puts it into her backpack. Her creased, dirty sneakers walk through the dimly lit hallway, crowded with other

protestors. Casey marches behind the group, chattering with the people around her. Everyone was shocked, not yet able to process the traumatic experiences from that day.

She walks through the large doors that lead outside, where she takes a deep breath enjoying the fresh air. Across the street from the station, a mixed group of protestors and worried bystanders hand out water and food to the released protestors. Casey grabbed some water, and collapsed onto the edge of the sidewalk. “I never felt more defeated. I felt like we lost.” Her heart is warmed by the supporters offering food and water, but sinks when she thinks of the events that transpired today, and how so many others were not as lucky.

What is not surprising about these turn of events in Philadelphia is the lack of public information on the I-76 incident. Many police forces across the United States have been caught creating false police reports in order to cover up contradicting evidence, or just unlawful brutality. This censoring of information and covering up by the police not only perpetuates mistrust between the public and the government, but it also affects the media, and how they frame these movements and protests to the world. Interestingly, most large news channels have little to no coverage of many police brutality cases that occurred in cities across the country during the protest surge in the summer of 2020. Barely any large news channels had coverage of the I-76 incident, let alone had interviews of the witnesses there. Even Casey added that “nobody, no journalist or representative, has asked (her or her friends) about their experience of being subject to tear gas and unlawful arrest.” Many stories like Casey’s are being swept under the rug both by false police reports and the media; this may be because there are so many stories to tell, or mainstream media is not ready to broadcast the truth.

Philadelphia, and the rest of the country for that matter, run the risk of becoming an apartheid police state in which force and aggression is used in every interaction with the police. Many black and brown people across the country live in hear of the apartheid police state every day. Movements like Black Lives Matter aim to fight against the violence, and advocate for community style policing, abolishment of the police force, and to make sure voices are heard.

What happened to Philadelphians on this hill is not an anomaly; instances like these have happened before, and will continue to happen without some sort of change. Many similar moments of targeted violence against black Americans have led up to this incident on the I-76 parkway, and the violence cannot be understood until we understand our mistakes from the past. We may not know what this change looks like yet, but what we do know is that every day, a person of color is harmed or killed by a police officer, and each day that goes by without change and police reform, the number of harmed innocent people will continue to accumulate. Avoiding an apartheid-police state and police brutality is one of the most important things Americans should be fighting for when combating racial inequality justice.



*Protest Street Art, Philadelphia c. June 1st, 2020.*

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