

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

June 4, 2020

The Honorable David Bernhardt  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Bernhardt,

We are writing to understand your justification for the decision to dramatically restrict public access to President's Park, an area managed by the National Park Service (NPS) under your purview as Secretary of the Interior.

Just days after the U.S. Park Police violently cleared a group of peaceful protestors from Lafayette Square Park so the president could pose for an awkward picture in front of St. John's Church, new reports indicate that new barriers are being erected around the White House.<sup>1, 2</sup> These fences are designed to restrict public access and prevent peaceful demonstrations in a place Congress established for that very purpose. Like many other sites and monuments managed by NPS in Washington, D.C., the grounds surrounding the White House are set aside to facilitate the exercise of First Amendment rights. In fact, President's Park is designed to "[p]rovide a large open area associated with the White House for freedom of public expression and assembly activities, as well as for public use and enjoyment."<sup>3</sup>

Ongoing efforts to restrict access and fill monuments and public parks in Washington, D.C. with police and military personnel are an overreaction and deeply troubling. Now, as people come together to express their grief and desire for an end to police brutality and other forms of systemic oppression, our nation needs these spaces more than ever.

The First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and assembly are core to what it means to be an American. The protestors at Lafayette Square complied with the curfew set forth by local officials.

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<sup>1</sup> Egan, L., Smith, A., & Haake, G. (2020, May 30). Police tear gas protesters gathered near White House after George Floyd's death. *NBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/police-use-pepper-spray-protesters-gather-near-white-house-after-n1219751>

<sup>2</sup> Samuels, B. (2020, June 4). More fencing installed around White House complex. *The Hill*. Retrieved from <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/501124-more-fencing-installed-around-white-house-complex>

<sup>3</sup> National Park Service. (2014, September). Foundation Document: The White House and President's Park Washington, D.C.. Retrieved from [https://www.nps.gov/whho/planyourvisit/upload/WHHO\\_FD\\_2014\\_low.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/whho/planyourvisit/upload/WHHO_FD_2014_low.pdf)

They were exercising their rights under the First Amendment. They were assembled peacefully and posed no obvious threat.

In order to assist the oversight efforts of the Committee, please provide answers to the following questions:

1. What was the Department of the Interior involvement in the decision to erect new fences around the White House grounds and restrict public access to President's Park?
2. Has public access to President's Park ever been completely restricted in the past, and if so, under what circumstances and for how long?
3. Was White House perimeter security lacking prior to erection of this new fencing? If so, why was that condition allowed to persist and if not, what new, credible threat against the White House justifies these extreme new measures?
4. How long will the barricades now being erected remain in place, and when will demonstrations be allowed to resume?
5. What is the justification for preventing protestors from entering President's Park?
6. What criteria have you issued to U.S. Park Police in deciding what crowd control measures to institute on federal property under your purview?

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva  
Chair  
House Committee on Natural Resources



Debra Haaland  
Chair  
House Subcommittee on National Parks,  
Forests, and Public Lands