

Richmond, Virginia police chief ousted following days of violent attacks on protesters

By Ray Coleman
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On Tuesday, June 16, the Democratic mayor of Richmond, Virginia, Levar Stoney, announced Richmond Police Department Chief William Smith had resigned willingly from his position. The RPD had been involved in numerous attacks on protestors demonstrating against police brutality and racism in the three weeks leading up to the announcement.

Smith, a 23-year veteran of the RPD who was less than one year into his role as police chief, had drawn scrutiny for the actions of the Richmond police against demonstrators in the days preceding his resignation. As early as June 1, Smith's police fired tear gas, unprovoked, against demonstrators. The day before, Smith had made gestures of support for the protests. At least 400 people have been arrested while protesting in Richmond over the past weeks.

Events began to escalate quickly last weekend. On Saturday night, police officers in an SUV hit multiple people on Monument Avenue as protests continued late into the night. RPD claimed the protesters had "trapped" the vehicle with bicycles and their own bodies. The police even went so far as to blame protesters hit by the SUV for allowing themselves to be in the way "as it attempted to leave."

The following night, protesters rallied outside the Richmond Police Headquarters to demand answers to the incident involving the SUV. In response, the police attacked the crowd with fogs of pepper spray. Andrew Ringle, a journalist who writes for the Virginia Commonwealth University newspaper the *Commonwealth Times*, was present on Sunday night and filmed the police clashing with protesters.

Ringle recalled to local news station WRIC-TV, "Some officers were getting in arguments with protesters that were speaking directly to them. Occasionally other officers would come up and pull

one officer away from protesters to sort of de-escalate the situation. The turning point was when police used pepper spray on protesters. That's when things started getting really tense."

Smith attempted to paint the weekend protests as a violent mob that devolved "into rioting and violence that lasted through the night and into the early morning hours," adding that the protesters went "far" beyond "what is considered to be lawful First Amendment activity." Smith's statement is absurd considering Richmond City Council Members Stephanie Lynch and Michael Jones, both Democrats, were present at the weekend demonstrations. Lynch was even hit by the pepper spray cloud on Sunday evening.

The final straw in Smith's tenure as chief appears to have come Monday night just hours before his ousting, when media present at protests outside the police headquarters captured more images and video of Richmond police, dressed in full riot gear, firing tear gas and smoke canisters into the crowd and also hitting protesters with rubber bullets. Both Lynch and Jones tweeted that the situation on the ground was becoming untenable.

At Tuesday's press conference, Stoney said, "The past two weeks have been the most challenging period of my mayorcy, frankly one of the most challenging periods of my life."

Presenting himself as someone caught purportedly between two opposed and yet equally just forces in society—the masses of demonstrators demanding an end to police violence and racism, on the one hand, and the forces of law and order on the other—Stoney said he had requested Smith's resignation that very morning in order to help the city take "a new approach to public safety."

The mayor thanked Smith, who did not attend the

press conference, for being a career police officer and “a good man.” Stoney named United States Marine veteran and Richmond SWAT team member Maj. William “Jody” Blackwell, another 23-year department veteran, as the interim chief.

“Interim Chief Blackwell is willing and able to focus on the necessary public safety reforms. He will lead our healing and trust-building within our community,” Stoney said.

In a statement of his own, Blackwell stood resolutely with his law enforcement colleagues, saying, “I have some of the greatest men and women employed by the Richmond Police Department and they stand judged by people who refuse to even sit down and talk to us civilly. We as a community need to step up and take our city back because too many sit in silence. I’m afraid. However, my love for this city and my love for these men and women, it will not cause me a challenge as far as reacting. And we’re going to get this city back.”

The media could not help but notice that at the same time as Stoney was invoking this language of “trust-building” and reform, RPD was building a large barricade around its headquarters.

Stoney claimed the police department has to wall itself off from the community in order to defend itself against “a small contingent” of violent rioters. Stoney deferred to the old standby defense of blaming “outside agitators” who do not care about “the black men and women who the cause was originally about.” The peaceful protestors, local politicians and journalists hit by his police department’s tear gas and rubber bullets seemed to have escaped Stoney’s memory.

The *Washington Post* promoted the changing of the guard in Richmond as a progressive move towards peaceful police-community relations. For its part, the *Post* reported on Smith’s resignation as a result of the public-relations challenges he faced as police chief. In an article this week, the *Post* wrote, “Smith, who is white, had struggled to project a consistent tone to the city’s African American community during the recent protests.”

The ousting of Smith in Richmond comes amid a number of forced departures from police departments around the country. On June 13, less than 24 hours after police in Atlanta cop shot Rayshard Brooks in the back as he ran from a Wendy’s parking lot, Atlanta

Police Chief Erika Shields resigned from her position. The outrage over Brooks’ death has added fuel to the global protests against police brutality.

Similarly, in Prince George’s County, Maryland, Democratic County Executive Angela Alsobrooks on Thursday accepted the resignation of PGPD Police Chief Hank Stawinski. Stawinski’s department had been the subject of a 94-page federal court document alleging systemic mistreatment of minority police officers and intimidation of whistleblowers in the department. Prince George’s County, while largely working class, is the wealthiest African American-majority county in the United States according to census statistics.

Top-level changes at police departments around the country are bound to continue as public opinion increasingly turns against police departments deploying repressive measures against peaceful protesters. Reshuffling leadership with the promise of reforms, however, is a dead end that will not reduce police attacks on the working class nor alter the fundamental role in society the police play as the armed guards of capitalist property and inequality.

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