

Rutherford Institute Rebukes Trump for Invading, Seizing and Occupying Church Property for Photo Op in Violation of Church-State Prohibitions

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by [The Rutherford Institute](#)

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Rutherford Institute delivered a strongly worded rebuke to President Trump and members of his administration for invading, seizing and occupying church property in violation of longstanding prohibitions against government encroachments on the free exercise of religion. In a letter to President Trump, Rutherford Institute attorneys assert that he and other Executive Branch officials flagrantly abused their power on June 1, 2020, when government agents mounted an armed invasion of St. John’s Episcopal Church; physically assaulted church officials acting in their official capacity; forcefully ejected church officials from church property, thereby preventing them from exercising their right to religious freedom; and used military forces to temporarily seize church property in order to allow President Trump to usurp a religious pulpit for his own political purposes. Warning that the government’s actions could open the Trump Administration up to further legal action, Rutherford Institute attorneys are calling on the president to repudiate

his actions of June 1.

“The Constitution is particularly specific about what the government *cannot* do when it comes to religion: the government *cannot* establish a religion (or favor one religion over another); and it *cannot* prevent the citizenry from freely exercising their religious beliefs. Additionally, the government may not suppress free speech. It may not seize private property without probable cause. And it may not forcefully occupy private property without a court order or the express consent of the property owner,” said constitutional attorney John W. Whitehead, president of The Rutherford Institute and author of [*Battlefield America: The War on the American People*](#). “By storming the grounds of St. John’s Episcopal Church across from Lafayette Park, seizing church property, and installing the president on church grounds for political purposes, the government did not just breach the wall of separation between church and state; they brazenly leveled that wall in defiance of more than 200 years of jurisprudence.”

In the wake of the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers, protests against society’s systemic racism and police violence against people of color have sprung up throughout the nation. On June 1, 2020, protesters gathered on the north side of Lafayette Park, which is across the street from the White House, chanting and holding signs demanding an end to racial injustice. St. John’s Episcopal Church, located on the north side of H Street across from the park, had established an aid station on its patio—staffed by members of the church and the Episcopalian community—to provide food, water, and any necessary medical assistance to protesters. In response to the protests, a phalanx of federal law enforcement officers from agencies including the Secret Service, National Guard, and Bureau of Prisons assembled in full riot gear at the north edge of Lafayette park and on H Street. At approximately 6:15 pm, federal officers began deploying

chemical irritants (“tear gas”) and projectile bombs against the protesters as part of a military-style assault to disperse protesters and clear the way for the president to walk to St. John’s Church for a photo-op. Federal officers stormed onto the church patio with metal shields, driving off those who were assembled there to aid and support the protesters. Rutherford Institute attorneys allege that the Trump Administration violated the First and Fourth Amendments by seizing church property and preventing church members from exercising their religious rights.

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[The Rutherford Institute’s letter to President Trump regarding the government’s seizure and occupation of church property](#)