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Auditors Reviewed How UVa's Police Prepared for White Supremacists. They Didn't Like What They Found.

Dan Bauman

10–13 minutes



On a Friday in August, as torch-bearing white-supremacist marchers encircled counterprotesters at a statue of Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia, one professor [posed an urgent question](#) to a dean on the scene: “Where is UPD?”

In the days and months since the weekend rally that [shook UVa](#) and its hometown of Charlottesville, Va., that question has been asked [again](#) and [again](#). The University of Virginia Police Department’s sparse presence at that Friday march has been a subject of bewilderment and anger.

[A new report](#), the result of an independent review commissioned by the city of Charlottesville, attempts to get to the bottom of that inaction. It delivers a scathing assessment of the police department, not just for its failure to properly intervene against the infamous torch ceremony, but for decisions that “set a dangerous tone for the events of the next day” and “emboldened people who intended to engage in similar acts of violence on Saturday.”

That Saturday, as marchers and counterprotesters clashed at a “Unite the Right” rally, more than 30 people were injured; Heather D. Heyer, a counterprotester, was killed by a white supremacist who drove his car into a crowd.

The commission’s report also admonishes the department for failing repeatedly to coordinate with other local law-enforcement agencies, and for neglecting to seriously plan for an event that had a clear potential to turn violent.

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In a statement to *The Washington Post*, UVa said that “its response to the horrific and unprecedented events in August should have been better.” The statement added that UVa had formed a working group “to look critically at ways in which our response to the Aug. 11 torch-lit march on our grounds could have been more effective, and to institute practices that will prevent violence of this sort from happening again.”

The report takes a broad look at how the city handled the demonstrations. Here are its key findings about UVa:

Even though they had advance warning, the campus police didn't have enough of a plan.

UVa's police chief, Michael A. Gibson, is the subject of especially harsh criticism. On Wednesday, August 9, the report says, Mr. Gibson was made aware of plans by Unite the Right organizers for a possible torch-lighting ceremony to be held on the campus two days later.

UPD Captain Don McGee advised UPD Chief Michael Gibson of these concerns on August 9, noting "[t]here is a concern that the location [for the torch rally] could be the Rotunda or Lawn area." McGee went on to advise Gibson that the march presented a "fire safety issue" and that UPD should "think ahead and plan."

On the night of the march, Chief Gibson doubled the number of officers on duty and positioned them near UVa's historic Rotunda to monitor the event. Additional campus officers were also

available and on call, if necessary, the report says.

Despite those preparations, it continues, the plan developed by Chief Gibson and the police department failed on several counts:

- The campus police did not separate marchers from counterprotesters.
- Chief Gibson did not communicate the potential threat to other first responders, such as the fire department.
- The campus police failed to notify the university community about the pending torchlight rally.
- The campus police did not post any officers near the statue of Thomas Jefferson, even after the scene turned threatening.
- Chief Gibson failed to coordinate a unified response with other local law-enforcement leaders, whose officers were directly across the street.
- The campus police requested assistance from other law-enforcement officers only after the scene became violent. Even then, officers “were disorganized and unfamiliar with the process of declaring an unlawful assembly.”

After the weekend’s events, Mr. Gibson told the commission, he learned of a university policy [prohibiting open-flame devices](#) on UVa property and in its facilities, absent the university’s approval.

The policy “may have permitted him to declare an unlawful assembly before disorders began,” the report concludes.

The local police asked the campus police and senior administrators several times if they needed assistance. The campus police requested help only after the Friday rally had

nearly ended.

Citing Mr. Gibson's interview with the review commission, the report says the police chief had considered the Unite the Right march to be "like any other political event on the grounds. He noted that the university's public areas were fair game for any ideology, and would only intervene if laws were broken."

At 7:41 p.m. on that Friday, the university learned of a social-media post confirming that a march would take place on the university grounds. While Mr. Gibson informed Al S. Thomas Jr., chief of the Charlottesville police, and Rick Lantz, chief of the Albemarle County police, he did not request aid.

Chief Gibson remained relatively unconcerned about the potential march, noting in an email to Thomas and Chief Lantz that his officers were "good for right now" and were "watching this closely." Chief Gibson's lack of concern was shared by senior members of the UVA administration. Shortly after Gibson contacted Thomas and Lantz, City Manager Maurice Jones e-mailed UVA Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Pat Hogan, asking if UVA required assistance that evening. Hogan replied that Chief Gibson had "adequate coverage" for UVA, but asked if CPD would be "available to assist in other areas." Jones responded that he would "find out more."

At 10:07 p.m. a local police officer witnessed from a distance white supremacists encircling the Rotunda. He asked again if the university needed assistance and was told "no."

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Nine minutes later, the report says, a campus officer “finally requested” assistance from the local police. Many of the march participants were already “dazed or fleeing” at that point.

Local law-enforcement officials also faulted the campus police for not providing adequate support. An officer for the Charlottesville Police Department said UVa had refused to allow its officers to “go near” the city’s Emancipation Park on Saturday because it saw the Unite the Right rally as “radioactive.”

The perception, the report says, was that UVa hesitated to intervene in any events with free-speech implications. Mr. Gibson rebuffed that assertion, saying he could not commit his officers to crowd control because he needed them to protect the university in the event of a threat.

A leader of the white-supremacist rally was shocked by the lack of response from the campus police.

Recalling the torchlight march, Christopher Cantwell, a self-described white nationalist and organizer of the rally, said he had been shocked by the lack of a police presence.

“If you notify law enforcement that white nationalists were going to march on a public university with torches, you would think they would take an interest,” Mr. Cantwell said.

The Friday march on UVa set the tone for a tragic Saturday.

Again citing its interview with Mr. Gibson, the commission said the

chief had played down the Friday incident on the campus, “noting that it lasted for less than an hour and did not result in any serious injuries.”

As a counterpoint, the report cites the testimonies of Charlottesville residents who said the lack of a police response persuaded them to attend counterprotests the next day. Walter Heinecke, the UVa professor who had asked where the police were on the night of the Friday rally, predicted at the time that the torch event would mean that “white supremacists will be violent tomorrow.”

The report’s final assessment is even more unsparing.

The Friday night event increased attendance at the Unite the Right rally and stoked apprehension about what would occur. The seeming paralysis of police infected the image of all law enforcement and created a general sense of inadequacy and unpreparedness for the weekend’s events. . . .

Anyone who came to Charlottesville to violently confront others was undoubtedly encouraged by what he saw in person or on video at UVA. We believe that the police passivity on Friday night potentially encouraged violence on Saturday. Had the Friday night event been handled more effectively, it would have set a tone of control and discouraged possible confrontations at Emancipation Park.

UVa’s hospital earned credit for its planning and quick action.

One bright spot in the report is the performance of the UVa Health System, the university’s medical center. The report says that Tom Berry, director of emergency management, recognized that the event could produce casualties after a July demonstration in

Charlottesville by members of the Ku Klux Klan.

The hospital canceled all elective surgeries on the weekend of the Unite the Right demonstrations. Officials were ready to convert the main lobby into a makeshift emergency room at a moment's notice. And the hospital heightened security around its premises.

The vehicular attack on Saturday that killed Ms. Heyer also left dozens injured. The review heaped praise on the UVa Health System and the Charlottesville Fire Department for their preparation and rapid response.

Every person who was injured and needed hospitalization was removed from the scene and received treatment within thirty minutes, a remarkable feat given the circumstances. This prompt, effective response represents a bright success on a day largely filled with failure.