

A handful of GOP senators spoke out Tuesday against President Donald Trump, criticizing his visit to a church after police removed peaceful demonstrators from a park near the White House. The remarks came even as most Republicans continued to avoid any disapproval of the president.

In a memorable scene captured live on television, police cleared Lafayette Park so Trump could walk to nearby St. John's Church and pose with a Bible.

Trump's actions drew widespread condemnation from Democrats and religious leaders who said he was misusing the Bible and the church where presidents have prayed for more than 150 years. Some Republicans joined in the criticism on Tuesday.

"There is no right to riot, no right to destroy others' property ... but there is a fundamental — a Constitutional — right to protest, and I'm against clearing out a peaceful protest for a photo op that treats the Word of God as a political prop," said Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse.

South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, the only black Republican in the Senate, said Trump's visit to the church was unhelpful and not something Scott would have done.

"Obviously, if your question is, should you use tear gas to clear a path so the president can go have a photo-op, the answer is no," Scott told Politico Tuesday, while noting he did not personally see the incident.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, said it was "painful to watch peaceful protesters be subjected to tear gas in order for the president to go across the street to a church that I believe he's attended only once." While Americans are justifiably upset that the historic church was set on fire and vandalized, "I thought that the president came across as unsympathetic and insensitive," she said.

Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., called Trump's walk to the church "confrontational" and said it "distracted from his important message in the Rose Garden about our national grief, racism, peaceful protests and lawful assembly." That message "was drowned out by an awkward photo op," Lankford said.

Sasse, who has at times criticized Trump but won his endorsement for reelection, said public officials nationwide "should be lowering the temperature" over protests and violence following the death in police custody of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, in Minnesota. Four Minneapolis police officers have been fired and one has been charged with murder in Floyd's death.

"Police injustice — like the evil murder of George Floyd — is repugnant and merits peaceful protest aimed at change," Sasse said, adding that "riots are abhorrent acts of violence that hurt the innocent." Both messages should be heard as Americans work to end violence and injustice, Sasse said.

Late Tuesday, Trump addressed his GOP critics. "You got it wrong!" he tweeted. "If the protesters were so peaceful, why did they light the Church on fire the night before? People liked my walk to this historic place of worship!"

The comments by the GOP senators were among the strongest by Republicans following Trump's demand Monday to end the heated protests and his vow to use military force to achieve that if necessary. Republicans have frequently muted any criticism of Trump, and only GOP Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah voted in favor of Trump's impeachment in February.

South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the second-ranking GOP senator, said that "as a general matter, I always think it's a good thing for our elected leaders to be spending time at church."

Still, Thune said views of Trump's actions were "going to be in the eye of the beholder. His supporters are going to think ... he was standing up for the things he believes in and they believe in. His detractors are going to say it was a photo op."

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said Trump likely "thought this would be some unifying message, but of course it was for half the country, and the other half were outraged by it. And that's just where we are, sadly."

On Trump's threat to send in the military to quell violence, Cornyn and Thune said they hope Trump does not resort to that.

While Trump "arguably" has the authority to use military force, "so far he hasn't done it," Cornyn said. "Hopefully, he won't do it. It won't be necessary. And we will try to bring some peace back to our communities."

Thune said he would "prefer that these things be handled by the state and local authorities. You want to de-escalate, rather than escalate."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said Tuesday that "Democrats' obsession with condemning President Trump" was blinding them to more urgent priorities, such as "ending the riots or advancing racial justice."

McConnell condemned rioting in his home city of Louisville and other cities, even as he said the nation is united in horror and opposition to Floyd's death. "The legitimate and important voices of peaceful protesters will never be heard over the wailing of fire alarms, the smashing of plate-glass windows, and the sirens of ambulances coming for police officers who have been assaulted or shot in the head," McConnell said.

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, said he was glad Trump went to a "historic church in our capital city that was firebombed by terrorists. It was important for the president to be there and say we will not be cowed by terrorists. All of us have a First Amendment right to speak, but you don't have a right to burn a church."

Collins, who is considered one of the Senate's most vulnerable incumbents, said that at a time when the president "ought to be trying to calm the nation," Trump did not do that.--Net