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Black N.J. leaders, clergy not shocked by mob attack at U.S. Capitol, or how police reacted

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Black New Jerseyans were not surprised.

A high school teacher in North Jersey wasn't shocked when a white mob stormed the U.S. Capitol Wednesday. A South Jersey activist failed to be amazed that President Donald Trump incited the violence. A pastor in Woodbury said the siege was a little startling.

"I think the piece that surprises me the most is that I can still be surprised, when America does exactly what it has always done, over and over and over and over again," said Rev. Charles Boyer of the Bethel AME Church.

As the death toll rose to five and calls for Trump's removal intensify, Black residents said Wednesday's attack was just one part of a painful history. Trump had certainly stoked racial fears for years, they said, but white people fighting an election defined by the power of the Black vote was nothing new.

"That's why I think the clearest symbol of what took place (Wednesday) was that Confederate flag flying right inside," Boyer said.

Part of the frustration stemmed from how police reacted.

Several people said they faced far more aggressive officers at peaceful protests they had participated in or witnessed, including Black Lives Matter rallies, in contrast to images Wednesday of some police appearing to offer little resistance to charging white people waving Trump flags.

"We need to handle domestic terrorists the same way we handle terrorism from outside our borders," said Jiles Ship, who served in the U.S. Marine Corps and now leads the state chapter of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives.

Policing different groups differently damages trust in law enforcement, said Ship. The security failures needed to be investigated, especially in light of the death of U.S. Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, he added.

"We've been complaining about this sh-- for 50 years," said Gale Muhammad, leader of the nonprofit Women Who Never Give-Up in Moorestown, which helps prisoners and their families.

A few years ago, Muhammad was invited to the White House, according to a copy of the RSVP she shared with NJ Advance Media. The meeting was to discuss prison reform, she said, but even with an invitation guards kept her waiting outside for an hour while letting other people through.

“My name is Muhammad,” she said. “So you know I had to show my ID three times, take my shoes off, take my socks off, take everything out my pocket book — they damn near had me take my bra off.”

At Columbia High School in Maplewood, the principal distributed resources to help students process the violence, said English teacher TJ Whitaker.

Some teenagers said they were frightened or embarrassed for the country when class met on Google Meet, Whitaker said.

“The overwhelming majority of them were more acknowledging the reality of what America has become,” he said.

He and others did express hope that the incident would jolt the country to action, to both hold perpetrators accountable and work to make sure a similar scene wasn’t repeated.

“When we choose to fawn over flawed leaders and rubber-stamp harmful legislation because it’s the path of least resistance, we kill America,” state Sen. Ronald Rice, D-Essex, said in a statement.

“I am appalled and demoralized. And yet somehow, I am not surprised,” Rice said.

This wasn’t a partisan issue, he said, and truly listening to those we disagree with was one of the only ways to heal.

“We must do better, beginning right now. America needs to reward truthfulness, honor compassion, elevate justice and celebrate diversity.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.