

Statement of Linda Tirado

Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform

Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

“The First Amendment Under Attack: Examining Government Violence Against Peaceful Civil Rights Protesters and the Journalists Covering Them”

June 29, 2020

Chairman Raskin and Ranking Member Roy:

Today marks the one month anniversary of the last time I will have woken up with sight in both my eyes. Tomorrow will be the one month anniversary of the morning I woke up in a hospital and doctors informed me that I had been blinded in one eye. I had been in Minneapolis for fewer than 48 hours.

My name is Linda Tirado, and I am a journalist. I am a writer, a photographer and a published author. I have covered civil unrest in America since 2014, and my work on this beat has taken me to Ferguson, Chicago, Washington, D.C. and the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. I am here to bear witness to my own experience.

I went to Minneapolis because I expected that George Floyd’s death was going to be a catalyst for civil unrest. I arrived in Minneapolis on Thursday, May 28, and was out on the streets taking photos until 4 AM. On Friday, May 29, I went out again around 8 PM. It was the first night with a curfew, but press had been exempted from it so we could do our jobs and cover the news. I was wearing my usual clothes for these situations: a t-shirt and a pair of shorts with a lot of pockets. I had a backpack and wore my press credentials conspicuously on a lanyard around my neck. I always carry my reporter’s notebook in the right side pocket of my cargo shorts and my recorder in the left. I was also holding my professional-grade Nikon camera with a full flash. Protesters could tell immediately that I was working. They asked me more than once who I was working with. Protesters had no trouble identifying me as a journalist.

As I have learned from covering other mass protests, these types of events have similar patterns no matter where you go. Police form ranks and push protesters back; protesters retreat a few blocks. Then a certain detente settles in on both sides while everyone waits to see what will happen next. I arrived during one of those lulls and I took pictures of the police line because it is my job to try to explain to the public what it is happening on the streets.

On May 29, when I heard from protesters that police were deploying tear gas nearby to where I was, I put on my goggles and respirator and headed toward the Fifth Precinct. I would like to share some of the photographs I took that night. These photos show clearly

what I saw. Here is one of my photographs showing the police during one of the moments that I just described. They are holding their line.



DSC_0338

The photos that I am going to show you now were among the last pictures I took with my Nikon camera on Friday night. I took these in the no-man's-land between police and protesters. It is not uncommon for the press to exist in that space, especially photographers.

This is the fifth from last photograph I took. It shows an officer loading his gun from the bandolier on his vest. Ballistics experts will probably be able to tell from this photograph what sort of rounds were used by the police.



DSC_0344

I turn now to the third from last photograph I took. The police are in riot gear and wearing vests that say "Minneapolis Police Department."



DSC_0345

Finally, here is the last photograph I took before I was shot. You can see an officer pointing his gun directly down my camera lens. You can also see that at least one other officer is pointing their gun at me.



DSC_0346

You will also notice in this photograph that a group of officers seem to just be milling about on a street corner. This was not a particularly dangerous moment for them. This was a moment of pause. This group of officers were not part of the ranks who had been holding a line. One even seemed like he was using his phone. The photos do not show police that seemed concerned about my presence, nor do I recall feeling as though I were in any imminent danger. I felt confident in my position because I was readily identifiable as press and because I was not impeding the police.

I recall lining up a photograph, and then I recall pain and wetness. I registered a dull thud and realized I had been hit in the face with something; my goggles came off and tear gas hit my eyes. I realized I was bleeding. I squeezed my eyes shut and started instinctively screaming “Press! I’m press!” hoping that would protect me.

Protesters came and took me by the arm; I recall someone saying they were taking me to the medics. I followed them blindly and let someone bandage my eye. I did not realize how badly I had been hurt. Because head wounds bleed freely, I did not panic. I thought I might just need a few stitches.

Someone put me into their van and drove me to the hospital. Doctors told me I was going into surgery immediately to try to save my eye. I tweeted a photo of my face and a picture of my backpack which I noticed had been hit with a bright green tracker round because I wanted my friends and family to know that I was getting medical care in case

someone had seen me on a live stream. I reported it duly and told the world I would be offline for a while because it is a bad idea to tweet when you are under sedation.

I woke up the next day in the hospital. I remember doctors coming in to tell me that I had lost sight in my left eye. I remember that all I wanted was a whiskey and a steak or at least a really artery-clogging cheeseburger but instead I was given extra bananas for the potassium.

I called my husband and asked him to fly to Minneapolis to drive me home. He is a veteran, who served with the Marine Corps in Fallujah. He is now my nurse, and I joke with him that I have taken more combat injuries than he has.

For the first week, I was not allowed to take a shower. Let me tell you: trying to wash tear gas and dried blood out of your own hair in a bathtub without getting water in your face is tough. I smelled of gas and smoke and sharp copper for a week. I could not get the stink off of me.

I do not know what the rest of my life will be like. I do not know if I will ever be able to cover protests again, or if my injury will make the work I have engaged in since 2014 too risky. But I will write, and I will report, and I will try to do my job as competently as I always have.

I am angry, of course. And I am grieving. And I am worried that the United States is becoming a more dangerous place to be a journalist.

I have lost an eye but not any moral clarity. I was shot in the face for being a reporter. I am grateful that this subcommittee take up the issue of First Amendment violations at Black Lives Matter protests. I will be as responsive as I can, with the hope that we have seen enough rage and pain and fire.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this subcommittee. I look forward to your questions.