

When Campus Cops Attack

FEATURES

Student and Air Force veteran Tariq Khan got beaten down. So did the Bill of Rights.

By Jacob Fawcett, George Mason University
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When military recruiters set up a kiosk at George Mason University on September 29th, Tariq Khan, a Pakistani American and Air Force veteran, assumed that he was allowed to protest. After all, GMU is a public university and the Johnson Center, where he stood, is a public facility. Even more notably, the school itself is named after George Mason, the father of the Bill of Rights who wrote that freedom of speech "is one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty and can never be restrained but by despotic governments."

Only an hour later, Tariq sat in the Fairfax County Adult Detention Center with an untreated head wound on charges of trespassing and disorderly conduct. What went wrong?

Witness accounts vary in detail, but the consensus narrates a chilling description of the state of free speech at GMU. Standing next to the recruitment table with a handwritten sign on his chest reading "Recruiters tell lies. Don't be fooled," Khan was quickly surrounded by ROTC members and bystanders, one of whom ripped off his sign. A University official soon appeared and instructed him to leave; when Khan refused, citing his right to peaceful protest in a public facility, campus police officer Theodore Reynolds arrived on the scene. According to graduate student and witness David E. Curtis, Reynolds was **more than enthusiastic** in silencing Khan: "The responding police officer physically assaulted Tariq next to the stage in the JC, putting him in a headlock, choking him, and then proceeding to throw him against the stage. The entire time, Tariq announced, and witnesses concur, that he was being non-violent and not resisting."

The incident has turned the George Mason campus into a battleground over basic civil liberties. Word of the arrest spread rapidly over the weekend, and by Monday afternoon on October 3rd over a hundred students gathered on the campus's central North Plaza in support of Tariq. "This isn't just about Tariq, or even about what Tariq said," said Golnesa Moshiri, a friend of Khan's, during the rally. "This is about free speech, and this could have happened to any one of us." Only days later on October 5th during a University Life-hosted teach-in on the arrest, several faculty members compared the arrest to similar Vietnam-era controversies; Khan's academic advisor, Professor Victoria Rader, observed that "We are in one of those historical eras when the government attempts to curtail free speech."

At the center of the controversy is **University Policy 1110**, which prohibits "the sale, distribution, or solicitation of any products, goods, food,

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beverage, service, [or] newspaper” without “prior authorization.” Khan is accused of having violated this ban by “handing out information,” according to one University official – an allegation which both Khan and eyewitnesses have repeatedly denied – but civil libertarians have observed that the policy itself runs afoul of the [Supreme Court’s 1983](#) ruling that “the State may [only] enforce regulations of the time, place, and manner of expression which are ... narrowly tailored.” GMU Students for Peace [argues](#) that “if the vague list of items previously given [in Policy 1110] can be construed as including the simple dissemination of information, then there is no possible way that 1110 can be understood as *narrowly tailored*.”

Students and faculty have also expressed growing concern with police surveillance tactics after two campus officers prominently filmed Monday’s rally from the roof of a nearby building. In light of recent lawsuits filed by the ACLU which [allege](#) that “local police are engaging in intimidation based on political association and are improperly investigating law-abiding human rights and advocacy groups,” their fears may be justified. Assistant Chief of Campus Police George Ginovsky has insisted in the [Washington Post](#) that “We’re not saving [rally surveillance footage] in an intelligence file or handing it over to the FBI or anything like that,” but in a phone interview, Campus Police Chief Michael Lynch admitted that Mason police are under “no [policy] restrictions that I know of” regarding such matters. Lynch also confirmed that the Mason Police Department employs a liaison, Lieutenant Norman F. Barnes, to the Joint Terrorism Task Forces – an agency which has [come under fire](#) from the same ACLU campaign as a proxy used by the FBI “to monitor, interrogate and suppress anti-war and other political protesters.”

In response to the groundswell of protest, Provost Peter Stearns issued a [statement](#) on behalf of the University promising “to review Johnson Center and other relevant policies, to make sure they are compatible with freedom of speech” and to “work to identify those individuals responsible for any alleged violations.” This is, as one faculty member at the teach-in put it, “a step in the right direction,” but for the several hundred signatories of a [petition](#) sponsored by GMU Students for Peace, much is left to do. The petition calls on the “University to drop all charges surrounding” Khan’s arrest, and on the “University campus police to account for and destroy the videotaped surveillance” of the subsequent rally.

The arrest of Tariq Khan signifies a dramatic test, not only for the growing peace movement in the United States but for the fate of our civil liberties as well. Less than a year ago George Mason made [national headlines](#) for canceling an invitation to filmmaker Michael Moore under enormous pressure from Virginia delegates Richard Black (R-Loudoun) and Robert Marshall (R-Prince William), prompting the prestigious national honor society Phi Beta Kappa to [reject](#) Mason’s chapter application “citing concerns about academic freedom.” Now Mason finds itself embroiled in yet another free speech controversy, and precariously close to establishing a dangerous precedent of *de facto* censorship institutionalized through vague policy, selective enforcement by administrators and political overseers, and intimidation tactics of surveillance and police brutality. Students and concerned citizens alike are encouraged to join GMU Students for Peace in calling for a University worthy of its namesake by signing our petition at www.gmupeace.org.

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