

The logo for Brisbane Times, featuring the words "brisbane times" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font. The text is centered within a dark blue rectangular background. Behind the text, there is a faint, larger-scale version of the same text, creating a layered effect.

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Trump's military intervention spurs fresh calls for Washington DC statehood

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The residents of America's capital wear their politics on their licence plates. Spend any time in the District of Columbia and you'll notice vehicles everywhere bearing the slogan: Taxation Without Representation.

It's a reminder that the 700,000 people who live in the capital district do not have voting representation in the US Congress, despite paying some of the highest taxes in the country.

"The US is the only democratic country on the planet where the residents of the capital are not represented in the legislative branch," says Bo Shuff, the executive director of DC Vote, a group of Washington residents that advocates for equal voting rights.

"I use Canberra all the time as a comparison," he says.

"Like Washington, it was carved out from another state and established specifically as the seat of government. The difference is that the residents of Canberra have representation in both the House of Representatives and the Senate."

The solution proposed by Shuff and other activists is to convert the District of Columbia into America's 51st state - an outcome that would give the capital's residents one seat in the House and two in the Senate.

A surge in US military police in Washington has intensified demands for statehood. *Credit:AP*

The District is currently represented by Democratic congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, who can serve on House committees but cannot vote on legislation.

The movement for DC statehood has received a surge in momentum over recent days following President Donald Trump's decision to call in the US military to forcibly remove protesters from near the White House.

Statehood advocates have seized on the militarisation of the capital as another reason it should be made into an autonomous state. Unlike in the 50 states, the federal government controls the DC National Guard and the President has the power to take control of the city's local police force.

In a *New York Times* opinion piece calling for DC to be made a state, former national security adviser Susan Rice said: "For one long week, Mr Trump transformed my hometown into a war zone to burnish his 'law and order' credentials.

"Without statehood, Washington was virtually powerless to prevent Mr Trump from using the capital as a petri dish to intimidate protesters, divide Americans and goad activists into ugly street battles to galvanise elements of his base."

The statehood push has been gaining ground in Congress: the Democrat-controlled House last year held its first hearings on the issue since 1993 and House majority leader Steny Hoyer has promised a vote on a statehood bill by the end of the year.

The legislation before the House would leave a small enclave around the White House, Supreme Court and Capitol Building under federal control.

The surrounding residential areas would be converted into a state called Washington, Douglass Commonwealth - honouring black statesman and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, a native of Washington.

DC Mayor Muriel Bowser says the Black Lives Matter mural on the city's 16th street will have "a central place, not in just DC history, but in American history." Washington painted the huge letters on the street leading to the White House.

The new state would be extremely small in size, but would have more residents than Vermont and Wyoming.

Statehood advocates are hopeful they could pass the bill into law if Joe Biden wins the presidency in November and Democrats regain control of the Senate.

"We are far closer than we've ever been before," Shuff says.

Until then, the bill will go nowhere in the Republican-controlled Senate.

Republicans overwhelmingly see DC statehood as a naked power grab by Democrats to gain two Senate seats and make it easier for them to lock in a majority in the upper chamber. Washington is overwhelmingly left-leaning: 90 per cent of DC residents voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election and just 4 per cent for Donald Trump.

Republicans have argued that if Washington residents want full voting rights they should turn their city over to neighbouring Maryland or Virginia. This would allow them to vote in congressional elections without expanding the number of senators.

A Gallup poll last year found that 64 per cent of Americans oppose making DC a state compared to 29 per cent who support it.

Roger Pilon, a legal expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, said a Supreme Court challenge would inevitably ensue if Congress granted DC statehood. He believes the court would strike it down for breaching the US constitution.

"The District of Columbia was set up by the founders so that no single state has excessive influence over the federal government," he says. "The House bill would surround the federal government with a single state...The whole idea is rather bizarre."

