

Militarization of the Police: A Reflection of United States Foreign Policy

The war is both domestic and international

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Over the last 14 months the notion of the United States as a bastion of human rights and democracy has been further shattered.

With the police killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, it set off not only a rebellion in this St. Louis County suburb but nationwide demonstrations across the country. The rebellion in Ferguson forced the Obama administration to pay some symbolic attention to the plight of African American people who have been largely ignored as it relates to domestic policy over the last several decades.

In fact when it comes to Civil Rights and Human Rights, there has only been regressive legislation and “benign neglect” since the late 1960s. Realizing the complexity of the crisis facing the African American people, other people of color communities and working people in general, the system would rather ignore the problems rather pay any attention to them.

Nonetheless, Ferguson proved to be a turning point in U.S. history. Periodicals published in states that are aligned with Washington issued editorial questioning the domestic and foreign policy posture of the administration of President Barack Obama.

Even though the Justice Department was sent into to St. Louis County to investigate the circumstances surrounding the killing of Michael Brown, no federal charges were ever filed against Darren Wilson or anyone else within the law-enforcement, judicial and municipal systems in the area. The lack of critical response by the Obama administration compounded the discontent after the local authorities decided that there was no probable cause for charges to be brought against Wilson and others in Ferguson.

The report issued by the Justice Department Civil Rights Division did demonstrate clearly that collusion was rampant within these various departments in St. Louis County. Electronic communications were retrieved which illustrated that the African American community was being grossly exploited through traffic stops, citations, questionable arrests and prosecutions.

Many of the suburban municipalities within St. Louis County are economically unviable and consequently utilized racial profiling and targeting as a means of generating revenue. The New York Times reported several weeks after the rebellion and mass demonstrations began in Ferguson that over 12,000 outstanding warrants existed in the small city of barely over 20,000 residents. This came out to approximately two warrants per household in Ferguson.

Residents with outstanding warrants were subjected to immediate arrests and even higher fines or possible jail terms. Such legal problems hampered people's abilities to find and retain employment as well as maintain a stable family life.

What appears to have happened in regard to the situation in Ferguson and St. Louis County is there was an apparent agreement that Wilson and other officials would resign their positions in exchange for not being pursued further by the federal government. It was also announced that some form of amnesty would be granted for residents facing high fines and jail time after being systematically targeted by the police throughout the County.

Such a compromise does not approach the resolution of the deeper problems of national oppression and racism so prevalent within law-enforcement culture. High rates of unemployment and poverty are by-products of national oppression and class exploitation which the American system is built upon.

Militarization Unveiled in Ferguson

Rather than examine the causes behind the explosion in Ferguson, the response of the political superstructure and the law-enforcement agencies was to put down the rebellion with a vengeance. Police came on the scene with armored vehicles, batons, rubber bullets, tear gas, pepper spray, long range acoustic devices (LRAD) and other forms of highly-sophisticated and deadly weaponry.

Numerous law-enforcement departments were deployed in Ferguson along with the National Guard. Missouri Governor Jay Nixon declared a "state of emergency" while law-enforcement implemented a "no-fly zone" over the region.

The youth and workers who took to the streets both violently and non-violently were immediately criminalized. Journalists seeking to cover the story were attacked and arrested.

Corporate media pundits took to the airwaves over cable television networks to put their own spin on developments surrounding the mass demonstrations and rebellions. Those who fought back against the police and destroyed private property were labeled as criminals and thugs. These characterizations provided a rationale for the use of deadly force and the denial of basic democratic rights of due process.

Governor Nixon and local authorities blamed the unrest on "outside agitators" seeking to deflect attention away from the exploitative and repressive conditions so widespread in St. Louis County. President Obama and former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder sought to define the forms of dissent that were acceptable those that were not.

Moreover, the question becomes: where did these weapons, tanks, noxious gases and sound devices come from? These are the same weapons that have been used against the people of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen and other geo-political regions over the last several decades.

The federal government through the Pentagon supplies these armaments through grants to local law-enforcement agencies. Are these the best tools to fight street crime? Or are these weapons supplied to fight existing unrest and more violent rebellions and revolts that are bound to come in the future?

We Can't Breathe: Eric Garner and the Impunity of the State

In Staten Island New York the police killing of Eric Garner provided additional lessons in our understanding of the current character of state repression. Garner's encounter with the police was caught on a cellphone video and transmitted worldwide. His last words gasping "I Can't Breathe" became a rallying cry for those who went into the streets by the tens of thousands in New York and across the country.

Apparently recording of this crime did not matter to the grand jury that acquitted the only police officer investigated in the killing. The billions around the world who saw the video knew that there were many officers who were involved in Garner's death by holding him down, applying pressure to his vital areas and refusing to provide any medical attention while he lay dying.

The youth who videoed the killing was himself targeted for prosecution and jailed. Once again the Justice Department did not take any action against the cops or the grand jury which allowed the police and emergency medical technicians to walk free.

In response to the grand jury decision, tens of thousands of people went out in protest in Manhattan and other areas of New York City. They blocked streets, expressways, businesses and bridges. The city had not seen such an outpouring of spontaneous demonstrations in many years.

New York City has been notorious for its "stop and frisk" and "broken windows" theory of policing. This style of law-enforcement conduct rides the waves of gentrification and forced removals of African Americans, Latinos and working class people in general throughout the municipality.

Obviously there is a concerted effort to drive millions of oppressed, working class and poor people out of the cities throughout the U.S. In New York, despite claims by officials that crime has been reduced by 80 percent, the plight of marginalized working class has worsened.

The homeless problem in New York is worse than it has ever been in the city's history. A recent front-page article in the Sunday New York Times published on August 29 exposed the plight of those living in homeless shelters.

Those are the ones who are inside although living with bed bugs and other vermin in overcrowded buildings. Others are unfortunately sleeping on the streets in subways, storefronts, in Times Square and other areas.

Nonetheless, the liberal administration of De Blassio has no program for providing decent housing to those who need it. Wall Street with all of its propaganda about an economic recovery ignores the conditions of the most vulnerable and miserable.

Baltimore: A Flashpoint for Repression and Impoverishment

Just earlier this year in late April young Freddie Grey was killed by the Baltimore Police Department. This was by no means an isolated incident since the city has a long tradition of systematic racism in housing and police-community relations.

However, after the killing of Grey who died in police custody, the community rose up in

rebellion. Immediately the Governor declared yet another “state of emergency” moving into Baltimore personally and effectively taking control of the city from its African American woman Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake.

What was interesting about the rebellion in Baltimore was the more developed counter-insurgency strategy and tactics implemented. Thousands of police officers from various agencies were deployed from across the state as was the case in Ferguson, along with thousands more National Guard troops.

Nonetheless, the authorities utilized a cadre of so-called “community groups” including churches, gang members, elected officials, and other operatives to come into the unrest areas encouraging youth and workers to leave the streets and go home. They were told by these “community activists” to abide by an unjust curfew and to work with the cops and the National Guard.

Tactically they were also covered by the corporate and government-controlled media to present another face of the community to the public. After the first three days of demonstrations and unrest, the media portrayed the community as being hostile to law-enforcement and private property. Suddenly by the time the National Guard and Governor had entered the city, the people who were presented to the press were residents opposed to the unrest and working towards “restoring order”, or we should say restoring the existing order.

Hundreds of these “community activists” stood between the crowds and the police with their backs to the law-enforcement agents and their faces towards the people. This was quite a symbolic effort to turn a section of the city against those who were fed up with the repression and exploitation.

Baltimore, like Detroit, has been hit over the last decade by massive home foreclosures and neighborhood blight. Hundreds of thousands have been forced out of their neighborhoods in East and West Baltimore to make room for the “developers and investors.” The banks were at the root cause of this displacement.

Also in Baltimore, it was announced during the spring that 25,000 households would be subjected to water shut-offs as what has been happening here since the imposition of emergency management and bankruptcy in 2013-2014. Although the emergency managers are being ostensibly withdrawn in Michigan, those who are the purported “elected officials” are carrying out the same draconian program of forced removals and benign neglect of the masses.

The lessons of Baltimore, Ferguson, New York and here in Detroit is that the workers and oppressed must be organized independently of the established two-party system. There must be a link drawn between law-enforcement repression, economic deprivation, gentrification and the denial of public services. The militarization of the police is designed to reinforce the system of oppression. All of these variables must be taken into consideration in any program of resistance and fightback against the structures of exploitation and political repression.

Militarization: From the 1960s to 2015

The militarization of U.S. society is as old as the American system itself. However, for the

purpose of this discussion tonight we must look to events of the 1960s when cities exploded from Watts to Detroit during the period of 1965-1968.

Detroit proved to be a turning point in the militarization of the U.S. police when thousands of National Guard and federal troops were deployed to put down the rebellion in July 1967. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder found in its report that the police played an integral part in sparking urban rebellions.

Rather than heed to a program of reform, the society became more militarized and repressive. Under the presidential administration of Lyndon B. Johnson an Office of Law Enforcement Assistance was created.

According to a website entitled "What-When-How", it says that "In 1965, the Office of Law Enforcement Assistance was created in the U.S. Department of Justice. This was the predecessor to the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), which was established as a result of the work of the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice."

By 1968, as a result of a Congressional Commission on crime in the streets, the Law-Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) was created continuing to the early 1980s. This same above-mentioned website notes that to ostensibly achieve the aims of reducing crime in the cities:

"To achieve this objective, the notion of criminal justice planning was introduced to the country. Heretofore, planning in criminal justice was virtually nonexistent. With the passage of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act (1968), LEAA was authorized to provide funds to create a 'state planning agency' in each state that would have as its primary function the responsibility to develop a comprehensive statewide plan for the improvement of law enforcement throughout the state. The act also authorized the states to make grants from a population-based block grant allocation to units of local government to carry out programs and projects in accordance with the planning effort to improve law enforcement."

By the early 1980s the further criminalization of African American and other oppressed communities was well underway. We have witness the growth in the prison-industrial-complex with a rise in the incarcerated population by 500 percent over the last three decades. The "school to prison pipeline" is a reality for the majority of the African American people.

A recent article in Atlantic magazine looks at this phenomena through the experiences of former inmates and the families whose loved ones have been incarcerated. With no real jobs program on a federal level and the rising rates of poverty and marginalization, this problem will not be solved short of drastic and sweeping policy initiatives that are well beyond anything that is being advocated by the White House, Congress and the corporate community.

Therefore, the struggle for justice in the U.S. is up to the people themselves. The organized masses working in solidarity with the oppressed and working people around the globe are the remedies to seriously address these concerns.

This is the charge of the labor movement and the international solidarity struggle. We are part of both and will work with any and every one to achieve total freedom.

Abayomi Azikiwe is the editor of Pan-African News Wire.

Note: This address was delivered on October 7, 2015 before the UAW Local 140 School of the Americas Watch (SOAW) Labor Caucus mobilization and recruitment meeting held at the union hall in Warren, Michigan right outside of Detroit.

The meeting entitled "Resisting Oppression: Reflecting on Our Communities a Global and Local Perspective," also featured Maria Luisa Rosal, Field Organizer for SOA Watch, who presented a historical review of the SOA in Latin America. Jerry and Laronda King of the Civil and Human Rights Committee co-chaired the meeting. Azikiwe began his talk with expressions of solidarity with the UAW members at Fiat Chrysler who were just hours away from a possible strike that would have shut down auto production. Another tentative deal was reached prior to the Midnight deadline at least temporarily averting a strike. This tentative deal like the first one will have to be voted on by the rank and file workers.

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