

Machinery of Death: When the Government Acts as Judge, Jury and Executioner

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“Police fail to grasp that they are public servants for peace. They should provide a civil service, to enforce the laws equally, without bias and with discretion. They must understand that they do not have immunity or special privileges and — most importantly — are just responsible for apprehending suspects, and [should not act as judge, jury and executioner](#), which too many of them truly believe themselves to be.”—Frank Serpico, former police detective who exposed corruption within the NYPD

The government should not be in the business of killing its citizens.

Nevertheless, the U.S. government continues to act as judge, jury and executioner over a populace that have been pre-judged and found guilty, stripped of their rights, and left to suffer at the hands of government agents trained to respond with the utmost degree of violence.

That the [death penalty was recently abolished in Virginia](#) is just the tip of the iceberg.

While any [effort to scale back the government’s haphazard application of the death penalty](#)—meted out as a punishment, a threat, and a chilling glimpse into the government’s quest for ultimate dominion over its constituents—is a welcome one, capital punishment remains a very small part of the American police state’s machinery of death.

Yet it’s not enough to declare [a moratorium on federal and state death penalty executions](#).

What we need is a moratorium on federal and state violence in all their varied forms (on police shootings of unarmed citizens, innocent civilians killed by the nation’s endless wars abroad, unknowing victims of secret government experiments, politicians whose profit-over-principle priorities leave Americans vulnerable to predatory tactics, etc.), because as long as government-sanctioned murder and mayhem continue unabated, the right to life affirmed by the nation’s founders in the Declaration of Independence remains unattainable.

The danger is real.

Everything about the way the government operates today (imperial, unaccountable and manifestly corrupt) flies in the face of what the founders sought to bring about: a representative government that exists to protect and preserve the life, liberty, property and

happiness of its people.

Police violence is but one aspect of the government violence dispensed without restraint or respect for the rights of the people, but it is widespread.

The casualties are legion.

At a time when growing numbers of unarmed people have been shot and killed for just standing a certain way, or moving a certain way, or holding something—anything—that police could misinterpret to be a gun, or igniting some trigger-centric fear in a police officer's mind that has nothing to do with an actual threat to their safety, even the most benign encounters with police can have fatal consequences.

Unfortunately, police—trained in the worst case scenario and thus ready to shoot first and ask questions later—[increasingly pose a risk to anyone undergoing a mental health crisis or with special needs whose disabilities may not be immediately apparent](#) or require more finesse than the typical freeze-or-I'll-shoot tactics employed by America's police forces.

Indeed, [disabled individuals make up a third to half of all people killed by law enforcement officers](#). (People of color are [three times more likely to be killed by police](#) than their white counterparts.) If you're black and disabled, you're even more vulnerable.

For example, California police sent out to deal with a 30-year-old Navy veteran experiencing a mental health crisis reportedly [knelt on the man's neck for nearly five minutes](#) until he stopped breathing. Angelo Quinto died days later. The circumstances are unnervingly similar to the death sentence meted out to [George Floyd, who died after Minneapolis police officers knelt on his neck](#) for more than nine minutes.

In South Carolina, police tasered an 86-year-old grandfather reportedly in the early stages of dementia, [while he was jogging backwards away from them](#). Now this happened after Albert Chatfield led police on a car chase, running red lights and turning randomly. However, at the point that police chose to shock the old man with electric charges, he was out of the car, on his feet, and outnumbered by police officers much younger than him.

In Oklahoma, police [shot and killed a 35-year-old deaf man](#) seen holding a two-foot metal pipe on his front porch (he used the pipe to fend off stray dogs while walking). Despite the fact that witnesses warned police that Magdiel Sanchez couldn't hear—and thus comply—with their shouted orders to drop the pipe and get on the ground, police shot the man when he was about 15 feet away from them.

In Maryland, [police \(moonlighting as security guards\) used extreme force to eject a 26-year-old man with Downs Syndrome and a low IQ](#) from a movie theater after the man insisted on sitting through a second screening of a film. Autopsy results indicate that Ethan Saylor died of complications arising from asphyxiation, likely caused by a chokehold.

In Florida, [police armed with assault rifles fired three shots at a 27-year-old nonverbal, autistic man](#) who was sitting on the ground, playing with a toy truck. Police missed the autistic man and instead shot his behavioral therapist, Charles Kinsey, who had been trying to get him back to his group home. The therapist, [bleeding from a gunshot wound](#), was then handcuffed and left lying face down on the ground for 20 minutes.

In New Mexico, [police tasered, then opened fire on a 38-year-old homeless man who suffered from schizophrenia](#), all in an attempt to get James Boyd to leave a makeshift campsite. Boyd's death provoked a wave of protests over heavy-handed law enforcement tactics.

In Ohio, [police forcefully subdued a 37-year-old bipolar woman](#) wearing only a nightgown in near-freezing temperatures who was neither armed, violent, intoxicated, nor suspected of criminal activity. After being slammed onto the sidewalk, handcuffed and left unconscious on the street, Tanisha Anderson died as a result of being restrained in a prone position.

This is what happens when you empower the police to act as judge, jury and executioner.

This is what happens when you indoctrinate the police into believing that *their* lives and *their* safety are paramount to anyone else's.

Suddenly, everyone and everything else is a threat that must be neutralized or eliminated.

And then you have U.S. Marshals—the federal government's *de facto* national police force—who may be even more violence and unaccountable.

"One reason for the high level of violence," according to an in-depth investigation by The Marshall Project, *USA TODAY* and the *Arizona Republic*: "The Marshals Service's rules are looser than those of many major police departments. [Marshals are not required to try to de-escalate situations or exhaust other remedies before using lethal force](#). And marshals are allowed to fire into cars. Though body cameras have become routine in major police departments, marshals do not wear them."

Marshal task forces, which are made up of local law enforcement officers who get deputized as federal agents but are not necessarily given any special training, are also [shielded from prosecution by the Justice Department](#).

Look more closely and you may find that many of the same cops who serve on marshal task forces also serve on local SWAT teams.

For instance, 23-year-old Casey Goodson was shot and killed outside his family home in Columbus, Ohio by a deputy police officer who [also happened to be a member of a marshals task force](#) and the local SWAT team. Although the cop claimed to have shot Goodson in the back for waving a gun while driving, that police account conflicts with other accounts, which suggest Goodson was [shot on the doorstep while holding a bag of sandwiches](#). Goodson was not a target of a police investigation.

Sariah Lane, 17 years old, was [killed on her way to the grocery](#) when an Arizona cop, also working as a marshal task force member, fired into a Toyota Corolla in which she and her boyfriend were passengers. Task force members, out to get the driver of the car for violating his parole, used an unmarked car to ram the Corolla in a parking lot, boxed it in with other unmarked cars, and then started firing into the car. Lane was [shot in the back of the head](#) with a hollow-point bullet.

Lane's alleged killer, Detective Michael Pezzelle, trains police officers around the country to "[be polite, be professional, have a plan to kill everyone you meet](#)."

Talk about a recipe for disaster: take poorly trained cops, deputize them as federal

marshals, grant them immunity from prosecution, and [authorize them to use deadly force to kill someone who poses an “imminent danger.”](#)

To that noxious stew add the government’s interest in adopting domestic terrorism legislation to “[better monitor and regulate the environments in which extremist ideologies proliferate](#)” and the Biden administration’s pivot to have FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) [assist states and cities in their fight against domestic extremism](#).

Not to be outdone, the Department of Homeland Security is also considering [ramping up its initiatives to combat domestic terrorism](#) by expanding training, providing technical assistance to local jurisdictions for threat assessment investigations, and developing strategies to combat the influence of false online narratives.

Translation: the government is about to rapidly expand its policing efforts to focus on pre-crime and thought crimes.

Given the government’s tendency to manipulate labels to suit their purposes (case in point: consider how [interchangeably](#) the government uses the terms terrorist, extremist and anti-government), that could easily put a target on the back of any American who dares to challenge the government’s agenda or hold it accountable to the rule of law.

This is how “we the people” become enemies of the state.

The ramifications are so far-reaching as to render almost every American an extremist in word, deed, thought or by association.

Yet where many go wrong is in assuming that you have to be doing something illegal or challenging the government’s authority in order to be flagged as a suspicious character, labeled an enemy of the state and locked up like a dangerous criminal.

Eventually, all you will really need to do is use certain trigger words, surf the internet, communicate using a cell phone, drive a car, stay at a hotel, purchase materials at a hardware store, take flying or boating lessons, appear suspicious, question government authority, or generally live in the United States.

We’re playing against a stacked deck.

As journalist Sharyl Attkisson observed, “What’s been most striking to me is just how one-sided the rules are when Americans take on their own government.... It has been dismaying to learn the extent to which rules and laws shield the government from accountability for its abuses—or even lawbreaking.... It’s been a long and frightening lesson.... The rules seem rigged to protect government lawlessness, and the playing field is uneven. Too many processes favor the government. [The deck is still stacked.](#)”

Because the system is rigged—because there are no real consequences for agents of the police state who inflict violence on the American people—and because “we the people” are at the mercy of a government that has almost absolute discretion to decide who is a threat, what constitutes resistance, and how harshly they can deal with the citizens they are supposed to “serve and protect”—Americans will continue to die at the hands of a government that sees itself as judge, jury and executioner.

Something has to give. Something has to change.

What remains to be seen, as I make clear in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#), is whether any of that change will be for the better.

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