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USA

Hands Up, Don't Shoot: Ferguson on Center Stage

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Two Americas. Two realities. Race matters. Us against them.

The mass media have swarmed all over Ferguson, Missouri for one reason : The Black community went into the streets after the police murder of Michael Brown, and refused orders to leave. They have inspired solidarity actions taking place all over the United States and internationally, including Latino, Asian and white young people along with African Americans.

“Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” spread across the country. It reflects a reality for African American boys and men when in contact with the police. There is genuine fear that any wrong move could lead to your death. Racial profiling is commonplace in cities small and big. Accountability for cop violence is not.

A majority of white people, on the other hand, especially in middle or upper class communities, rarely experience cop brutality. Police serve and protect them. So they believe African Americans must be at fault, not the police.

Whites in Ferguson, Missouri, a six-square mile town of 21,000 people, don’t see discrimination or racism ; they see Black people rioting in their neighborhoods. Popular culture propagates fear of African American men. Guns are flying off the shelves at gun shops as whites armed themselves in the St Louis area. Yet whites, 30 percent of the population, control the power structures and police. Black people have no political power.

Ferguson joins a long list of places where the lives of African Americans have been taken away by police violence. The dehumanization and disrespect that Black men suffer by society reflects a broad culture of institutional racism. It is not an accident that a white cop feels threatened by an unarmed 18 year old teenager.

The 28-year-old cop, Darren Wilson, was hidden away as the community erupted for five days. The 53-person militarized police force (only three are Black in a city with a 69 percent African American population) used armored vehicles and weapons more appropriate in Iraq and Afghanistan. All wore camouflage fatigues.

The police sought to control the truth by presenting “Big Mike” Brown and the community as violent and out of control to gain white support and to justify massive military type force. The occupied community is presented as subhumans who are throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails at cops. Police in Ferguson and St. Louis County were indoctrinated with this dehumanizing and disrespectful view of the Black community.

The Murder and Aftermath

On August 10, the cop instructed Brown and his friend to move from the street to the sidewalk. They didn’t do so and a struggle ensued, the specifics of which are contested. Brown was then shot and killed with hands turned up some 35 feet away from the patrol car. His body was left on the street for four hours.

Between August 12 and 13, police officers fired tear gas and rubber bullets at lines of angry but peaceful protesters, many of whom were in their own front yards when attacked. Reporters were detained and attacked including from the Huffington Post and Washington Post.

Aljazeera America reporters familiar with war zones in the Middle East were hit by tear gas and shot at with rubber bullets by police SWAT Team. CNN cameras filmed an officer addressing a group of protesters by saying "Bring it, you fucking animals, bring it." Weapons for war are now common among many police departments. This militarization is not to fight terrorists but to control the common citizens of these communities "to put down civil unrest.

The structural racism of U.S. society means that police departments meet their quotas of arrests by going after the "others" who are African Americans, Latinos, and Arabs and all Muslims. Young Black men are profiled by cops, arrested and prosecuted by a justice system that is far from color blind. A common comment heard in Ferguson's Black neighborhoods : "we demand respect and justice."

Once the cop's name was released on August 15, the police spun a new reason why Michael Brown was murdered. The story changed to a shoplifting incident a few blocks away, allegedly by Brown, at a convenience store"yet the police chief admitted that Wilson did not know that Brown was a suspect when he shot him.

Blame the Victim

The alleged robbery was a classic tactic of misdirect (a "smokescreen") of blaming the victim for his own death, said Brown's family. Many whites had already assumed Brown was a criminal. What torpedoed the planned coverup were the eyewitness accounts. It put politicians on the spot, including the Democratic Governor Nixon. The cops had to retreat. Nixon appointed an African American captain, Ron Johnson of the Missouri Highway Patrol, a native of Ferguson, to be the public face of the police force.

Later the Governor imposed a curfew after some protesters started looting stores August 15. Community leaders condemned the action of a few who did not reflect the majority support for defiant but peaceful protests. The provocative actions, many by unknown people coming into Ferguson, played into the cop's assertion that they had to use heavy force to keep order.

The insensitive response by the police and white politicians exposes what every African Americans knows all too well : Black people live in a racially divided country where different rules apply. It recalls the 1960s when African Americans were treated as less than human, cops were seen as an occupying force, and demands for "community control of the police" became popular.

Militarization of Police Forces

Glenn Greenwald, the investigative journalist who reported to the world on whistle blower Edward Snowden's disclosures of massive U.S. spying, discussed in an August 14 article for the internet-based Intercept news service the origins of the militarization of city police forces :

"The intensive militarization of America's police forces is a serious menace about which a small number of people have been loudly warning for years, with little attention or traction. In a 2007 paper on "the blurring distinctions between the police and military institutions and between war and law enforcement," the criminal justice professor Peter Kraska defined "police militarization" as "the process whereby civilian police increasingly draw from, and pattern themselves around, the tenets of militarism and the military model..."

As is true for most issues of excessive and abusive policing, police militarization is overwhelmingly and disproportionately directed at minorities and poor communities, ensuring that the problem largely festers in the dark. Americans are now so accustomed to seeing police officers decked in camouflage and Robocop-style costumes, riding in armored vehicles and carrying automatic weapons first introduced during the U.S. occupation of Baghdad, that it has become normalized. But those who bear the brunt of this transformation are those who lack loud megaphones ; their complaints of the inevitable and severe abuse that results.

If anything positive can come from the Ferguson travesties, it is that the completely out-of-control orgy of domestic police militarization receives long-overdue attention and reining in."

New York Times reporters Julie Bosman and Matt Apuzzo in an August 14 article explained,

"Department of Homeland Security grant money paid for the \$360,000 Bearcat armored truck on patrol in Ferguson," said Nick Gragnani, executive director of St. Louis Area Regional Response System, which administers such grants for the St. Louis area.

Since 2003, the group has spent \$9.4 million on equipment for the police in St. Louis County. That includes \$3.6 million for two helicopters, plus the Bearcat, other vehicles and night vision equipment. Most of the body armor worn by officers responding to the Ferguson protests was paid for with federal money, Mr. Gragnani said.

"The focus is terrorism, but it's allowed to do a crossover for other types of responses," he said. "It's for any type of civil unrest. We went by the grant guidance. There was no restriction put on that by the federal government."

While the major Homeland Security grants do not pay for weapons, Justice Department grants do. That includes rubber bullets and tear gas, which the police use to disperse crowds. A Justice Department report last year said nearly 400 local police departments and more than 100 state agencies had bought such less-lethal weapons using Justice Department grant money.

The militarization of police is also related to the "war on drugs" that has brought havoc and death to U.S. cities and to Mexico and Central American nations where youth are fleeing for their lives to the southern U.S. border, and contributed to mass African American incarceration.

The important point here is that the social composition of the police force isn't what causes militarization. While it's a factor as seen in Ferguson where few cops are African American, the bigger problems are policies and training. Racial profiling and targeting of minority communities are taught to all cops—white, Black, Latino, or Asian-American. New York City, for example, has a police force that is majority people of color, yet where a Black man was choked to death on Staten Island, and stop-and-frisk remains a major issue for people of color.

Mass Public Action

What happens next depends on public protests and pressure on the county, state, and federal governments. President Obama and Attorney General Holder have instructed the FBI to investigate the Brown killing. Obama failed as usual to mention the underlying racial divisions and tensions in Ferguson. He implied both the community and cops need to do better ! It's up to the district prosecutor and closed-door grand jury to decide if the cop who killed Brown is even arrested and prosecuted. So far he's on paid desk duty.

Hands Up, Don't Shoot: Ferguson on Center Stage

The country remains divided by race even as some progress has been made for educated African Americans. Ferguson shows that we don't live in "post-racial" society as many hoped with the election of the first African American president. Obama's refusal to take on institutional racism head-on is a reason why whites opposed to full racial equality have been on the offensive since his election in 2008. If anything, Barack Obama's election told whites (at least a sizable minority) to circle the wagons and make sure power is not taken from them.

That's why the hard core of rightwingers and racists in the Tea Party rally around white nationalists who hate Obama and civil rights. It is why voting rights laws are being limited in the Old South and Republican controlled states. The events in Ferguson, Los Angeles, Staten Island, and many other cities show that racially targeted police violence is widespread.

The history of Black people being shot and killed by cops (an average of at least two per week) gets little notice unless video phones are present. Only when African Americans are treated as people and human beings will they respond in kind. Working class and poor African Americans are still waiting for that to happen.

"Hands Up, Don't Shoot" is a demand for fairness and dignity. It is matter of life or death for Black boys and men. It is a universal slogan for all victims of state-sanctioned violence and the oppressed from Ferguson to Gaza

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