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Police Militarism in America

In Many Communities Cops are the Terrorists

by DAVE LINDORFF

8/14/2014

The apparent murder by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, of Mike Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old black youth who was shot a number of times while he was allegedly on his knees with his hands up in the air, pleading "Don't shoot, I'm not armed," is exposing everything that is wrong with policing in the US today.

The Ferguson Police Department, reportedly nearly all white, patrols a St. Louis suburban community that is largely African-American, which is already a recipe for disaster in a country that is drenched in racism. The Ferguson PD is also reportedly using the kind of aggressive policing — arresting people over minor infractions — that can quickly escalate into violent confrontations. In this case, it appears Brown's offense was jay-walking and perhaps talking back to the police officer — the first being a citation offense, and the second not even illegal.

When this shooting happened, instead of immediately attempting to calm things down, the Ferguson Police Department went all paramilitary, sending massive numbers of up-armed cops in military gear into the community, backed by armored vehicles. They responded to understandable community protests with tear gas and, later, with solid wooden and rubber bullets designed to hurt and injure but not kill (though clearly at close range there is always that danger). Several more people have already been shot by police, leaving them in critical condition.

Adding to community outrage is the refusal by police to release the name of the officer responsible for killing Brown, or even to release the initial report of his autopsy — both the kind information that would be readily available were the shooter not a police officer.

What's wrong here? So many things that it's hard to know where to begin.

First of all, unless an officer is under attack, or unless members of the public are threatened, there is simply no justification for a police officer to unholster a service revolver or worse, to fire at, a person who is allegedly committing some minor offense.

Nor, even after having fired shots, is there any justification for an officer to continue to fire at someone who is manifestly unarmed and who is not threatening anyone, as appears to have been the case when this officer continued to fire at the kneeling Brown.

Second, once a tragic outrage like this has occurred, it is totally unacceptable for the police department involved to withhold the information concerning the officer's identity. Police are not CIA agents. They are public employees responsible to the community in which they work. When they decide to become "peace officers," they are signing on to be responsible members of the community they are policing. In a democratic society they cannot be permitted to hide behind their badges. Public knowledge of who is doing that policing is a critical deterrent to the dangerous tendency for police to see themselves in an oppositional role with respect to the community they are policing — as a sort of occupying army.

Ferguson Police Chief Thomas Jackson said he is withholding the name of the officer who killed Brown (who has been put on paid administrative leave from his patrol assignment), because of fears that he and his family could be at risk, but that is not an acceptable justification. Police, as I already mentioned, are public employees and know the risks they are taking when they decide to be cops. Their spouses also know the risks. If the police are worried about security, they can provide protection for the officer and the officer's family, but in an incident like this the community, and the family of the victim of this killing, also have rights — including the right to know who the officer is and what his prior history has been. For example, did he have a history of abusive arrests or other questionable shootings?

As for the withholding of the autopsy, police say they are awaiting the result of toxicology tests on the body. That's a common ploy of police in shootings, on the theory that if they can find evidence of alcohol or drugs, it will somehow diminish public outrage over the shooting. But in this, as in many such police shooting cases, whether or not Brown was inebriated or drug addled would have no bearing at all on the justification for the shooting. According to witnesses Brown was on his knees with his hands raised when the officer, who had already shot the him at least once, walked up to him and fired more shots at him, killing him in the street. Toxicology tests are irrelevant. What is important is how many shots were fired, where they hit him, and what the trajectories of the bullets were. And the public has a right to know this information as soon as possible.

Particularly since 9-11 and the launching of the so-called War on Terror, police across the country have been deliberately mythologized into "heroes," and have effectively been morphed

from "peace officers" into "combat troops" in an amorphous and largely imaginary "war." In this "war," the enemy, initially unseen and largely nonexistent foreign "terrorists," gradually shifted to become a larger group of "others" – in particular darker-skinned immigrants and, especially, African-Americans. Increasingly white people too have been added to this "enemy" category as police have become ever more militarized. (This author was threatened with arrest last year by a thuggish local suburban Pennsylvania cop when I questioned, correctly, the officer's false assertion that hitch-hiking was illegal in the state. Had I continued to protest and to insist that I had a legal right to stand on the side of a secondary road, out of the roadway, with my thumb out, I would likely have been roughly grabbed, hand-cuffed, and hauled off to jail for something which, even if I had been too close to traffic, would have been a non-criminal charge, like a parking violation.)

In many communities of color today, police routinely patrol the streets all decked out in military-style gear, complete with kevlar helmets, semi-automatic weapons, and body armor. They do this not because they are in danger — the incidence of officers being shot in the line of duty has fallen to rates not seen since the late 19th century — but in order to make them more intimidating.

Back in the mid-1960s, when police forces in most cities were almost lily-white, black areas of major cities across the country erupted in riots over the same kinds of incidents as what just happened in Ferguson. Out of those riots, a resistance grew, including the founding of the Black Panthers. That kind or community resistance, while it was brutally challenged by police and by the FBI, also led to reforms, such as the hiring of many minority police officers, to the establishment of civilian police review boards, and to the election of minority mayors and council members.

9-11 undid much of that.

In most communities in the US, we now have police who are described, quite appropriately, as law "enforcers." The term "peace officer" today sounds anachronistic.

We urgently need a new era of reforms that puts police back in the role of "public servant," and both of those words needs to be equally emphasized. As public employees, police must not be permitted to hide anonymously behind their badges. Their actions must be open to public inspection. And they need it to be made clear by their supervisors, and by the elected officials who ultimately are their bosses, that they are "servants" of the citizens of the community in which they work.

Such a change will not come easily. The police will not willingly surrender their new powers as "enforcers." Those powers will have to be wrested away from them. And doing that will require the kind of community organizing and resistance that we saw in the 1960s.

I'm not calling here for vigilantism, or street warfare. I am calling for a peaceful but militant community resistance to existing police militarism.

I'm reminded of an incident back in the late 1970s when I was living in Los Angeles. I had just come out of a theater where I had watched a showing of Ralph Bakshi's excellent dystopic film "Wizards." As I walked towards my car in the mall parking lot near the inter-racial working-class community of Silver Lake, I saw police helicopters and dozens of squad cars converging on a residential neighborhood across the main street. Curious to see what was going on, I trotted over to have a look.

I came upon the scene, flood-lit by noisy helicopters hovering above, of a car that had just been stopped by several LAPD squad cars. It had apparently been stolen by three joy-riding Latino teenagers. As I looked on, the three were yanked out of the vehicle by officers, some of whom had guns drawn. The boys were brutally slammed against the car amid a lot of yelling by the officers, whose numbers were growing by the minute as new squad cars arrived.

It was getting ugly, and I was worried about the boys, who were not very big. Suddenly a crowd began to grow, as local people, mostly Latino, from the surrounding houses, poured out into their yards to see what was going on. These local men and women began to yell at the cops:

"Don't you hurt those boys!"

"We see you, and we see that they are not injured! Make sure they stay that way!"

"We're watching you! If they get hurt, we're going to report you!"

The scene visibly calmed down. The cops stopped yelling. The boys, cuffed, were led to squad cars to be brought downtown for booking. But there was no violence. None of the kids ended up getting hit. I don't know what happened to them later at Parker Center downtown, but what was developing into a nasty situation was defused by the presence of the community, who stood in solidarity against the cops.

This is what we need today: community resistance to police abuse, and a demilitarization of policing.

In too many communities across America today, as in Ferguson, Missouri, the "terrorists" in our midst are the police themselves. We need to end that situation.