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Missouri Shooting Provokes Mainstream Backlash Against Militarized Police

By Lucy Steigerwald

August 14, 2014

On Saturday, a still-unnamed member of the Ferguson, Missouri police force fatally shot 18-year-old Michael Brown. The police say that after Brown was stopped for walking in the street, he shoved the officer back into his car, and fought him for his weapon. Brown, unarmed himself, then ran from the car, and was shot about 35 feet from the officer. The officer reportedly was treated for a "facial injury."

That, then, is the best case scenario – an extrajudicial execution of an individual who assaulted a police officer for (unlikely, but humanly possible) reasons, and then ran. Dorian Johnson, 22, who says he was walking with Brown when the shooting occurred disagreed with the allegation about Brown attacking the officer. He says the cop yelled at them for walking in the street, and then grabbed at Brown, who tried to run and was shot. Brown then turned around with his hands up, but was shot again multiple times.

Another witness says the young man had his hands up while he was shot. Ferguson, Missouri, population 21,000 majority black in population, but not on the police force or the city council, is now suffering from the creeping militarism of the US. But it's not creeping, so much as blowing up now.

After some protesters turned to rioting and looting on Sunday night, there were 32 arrests. Monday, there were 15 arrests, but no further reports of looting. The majority of the protesters

who were in the streets over this shooting are unquestionably nonviolent. Since the first night of protests – before any looting – police have confronted them in the manner which they are now accustomed. They looked like the military. They used teargas, rubber bullets, and wooden bullets on protesters. The Ferguson Police Department even decided not to name the officer who shot Brown due to the amount of threats they reportedly were receiving over the incident.

Wednesday afternoon and evening, the protests continued, and police barricaded roads and ordered folks to disperse. The Federal Aviation Administration issued a no-fly zone for aircraft under 300 feet over Ferguson, conveniently barring news helicopters. On Wednesday, reporters with Huffington Post and *The Washington Post* were arrested for not leaving a McDonalds quickly enough when riot cops demanded it – as well as for filming police. They were held for about an hour, only being freed after journalist called the chief of police on their behalf. A St. Louis alderman was taken into custody for unlawful assembly, among ten other arrests that night. Throughout Wednesday and into the night, more weapons, including rubber bullets and teargas, were used on protesters who had the audacity to not run home and hide in the face of police demands. (Though video showed teargas hitting front lawns of homes, so it's not as if that was safe either.)

It's pretty basic. The actions of a few individuals who were violating the property rights of store owners are not supposed to negate the rights of Americans to assemble and express their outrage over the state of policing. But they do, and did. And the people guarding our streets and enforcing our laws, if American freedom means anything anymore (or if it ever did) are not supposed to look like this guy. But they do.

The occasional reports of bottles and bricks thrown at police during these protests should be countered with the question, what the hell is your body armor and Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Proof Vehicle for then, you babies? Why did we give you 4.3 billion dollars in war gear from the Pentagon since 1990, and untold billions from the Department of Homeland Security since 2006? In 2013 alone, 450 million dollars in gear was handed out to police departments the US over. This includes Ferguson.

Ferguson-style crackdowns happens in other cities, often during politicized events such as NATO, G-20, or WTO meetings. Yes, these summits often involve important political figures who could potentially be threatened by a rogue person in the crowds. They are also highly political, and therefore it is vital to protect the speech of everyone who feels the urge to protest them, or the leaders who attend. If the right to free assembly was only for praising the government, it wouldn't count as a right.

Every time middle class white kids – see: Occupy Wall Street – suffer police brutality, it's tempting to say, yeah, now you know what it's like for the minorities, the homeless, the suspected drug users, or other members of the expendable class. Indeed, it is when important people like the mayor of a little Virginia town, suffer, say, a SWAT raid that suddenly reform is possible, if limited. The poor and the minorities who now feed American prisons had to stay there for three decades before anyone noticed it was a problem. But are they now noticing? Could mainstream politics finally include objection to the kind of police behavior we have seen in Ferguson?

It's possible. Libertarian-sympathetic politicians Rep. Justin Amash (R-Mich) and Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky) both expressed disgust over the cop-soldier similarities. On Thursday, Paul actually penned a *Time* piece that explored the origins of the phenomenon. This is miles away from the tough on crime hysteria that used to come from the right. It's a great reason for optimism. President Barack Obama, for his part, on Thursday offered platitudes about togetherness and rights to free press and expression with which he clearly does not agree.

Interestingly, Amash and Paul are both politicians who have pushed back against the American war state (even if it's not as much as antiwarriors would prefer). If the Ferguson police continue doing everything wrong, as they have, backlash against unarmed people being oppressed by a military-like force may continue. And maybe if this kind of force doesn't belong in American streets, it doesn't belong anywhere else either. If a wrecked Iraq, and a warzone in Missouri can somehow provoke optimism, it's the quiet hope that those against one may learn to be against the other.