

“Community-oriented policing”: A cover for the militarization of police in the US

By Nick Barrickman
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Over the past several days, thousands who have protested the whitewash of the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York City have faced threats, abuse and arrest by riot police clad in military gear. In the case of Ferguson, more than 2,000 National Guard soldiers were deployed in a virtual siege of the St. Louis suburb a week after Missouri's Democratic governor declared a preemptive state of emergency.

Seeking to mollify public anger last August over scenes of armored vehicles rolling down the streets of an American city and police threatening peaceful protesters in Ferguson with weapons from the Iraq and Afghan wars, the Obama administration ordered an executive review of the US federal government's program, known as 1033, which has helped transfer billions of dollars of combat weaponry, including mine-resistant vehicles and military aircraft, to local law enforcement agencies.

Predictably, the review did not oppose the continued militarization of police forces. Offering generalized palliatives such as the need for increased “training” and “transparency” and adding some money to help police forces buy body cameras for cops, the White House report sanctioned the programs, saying “they have been valuable and have provided state and local law enforcement with needed assistance as they carry out their critical missions in helping to keep the American people safe.”

A key component of the Obama's proposal was the setting up of a “Task Force on 21st Century Policing”—co-chaired by Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey—that would focus on the expansion of the “community-oriented policing model.” Ramsey, who during his tenure in Philadelphia and before that as the head of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, DC presided over many attacks on basic democratic rights, might seem like an odd choice for Obama, given the president's claim that

the program is designed at “healing” tensions between communities ravaged by police violence and law enforcement agencies.

However, when one looks into the history of “community-oriented” policing in the US, the reason for the selection of Ramsey becomes clear. In fact, he is perfectly suited for the job.

Billed as a policy alternative to the widely held view of the police as an outside occupying force, the Justice Department web site says its Community-Oriented Policing Services, or COPS, initiative “develops innovative programs that respond directly to the emerging needs of state, local, and tribal law enforcement, to shift law enforcement's focus to preventing, rather than reacting to, crime and disorder.”

In fact, the COPS program has served as a key facilitator of the growth of militarized policing, as well as the spread of community based police informers, since its creation in the early 1990s. Originally formed as a component of then-President Bill Clinton's Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, the program was touted by Clinton as helping to “build bonds of understanding and trust between police and citizens.” The stated goal of the program was to hire over 100,000 police officers nationally and integrate them more fully into communities.

Since its initial implementation, the program has not only failed to stem the spiraling number of police brutality cases across the US, it has served as a cover for them. A 2013 Justice Department report found that COPS “may be a layer added on top of, rather than replacing, traditional patrol concepts.” It added that “many of the interventions used in the name of COPS are traditional methods of intervention (e.g., street sweeps, crackdowns).”

A 2007 study conducted by Peter B. Kraska, a researcher at Eastern Kentucky University, notes the

relationship between the proliferation of “police paramilitary units” (PPUs) and the implementation of so-called community policing. The study, entitled *Militarization and Policing – Its Relevance to 21st Century Police*, notes that by the late 1990s, over 89 percent of all municipalities with populations above 50,000 possessed SWAT team units in their police departments, in contrast to only 20 percent in 1980. Likewise, SWAT teams saw their deployment rates shoot up by nearly 1,400 percent in this same period.

The report states that given falling rates of violent crime during this period, “more than 80 percent of these deployments were for proactive drug raids, specifically no-knock and quick-knock dynamic entries into private residences.” It also adds that this “zero tolerance” method of policing, in which officers mete out overwhelming displays of force for relatively minor infractions, is modeled after US military interventions in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Obama administration is particularly tied to the process of police militarization. Serving then as a senator from Delaware, current Vice President Joseph Biden wrote the bill that would later become the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. In the 2008 presidential election run, both Biden and Obama touted the COPS program as being an effective crime-stopping tool. One of the first acts of the newly elected Obama administration was to expand funds to COPS and other programs facilitating police militarization as a part of its 2009 stimulus bill.

Under these conditions, the appointment of Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey to the position of co-chair in the “Task Force on 21st Century Policing” is all the more ominous. In his position as the head of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, DC from 1998 to 2007, Ramsey was responsible for the mass arrest of hundreds of peaceful anti-globalization protesters and the setting up of traffic checkpoints, where police carried out unconstitutional search and seizures, although they did not have the slightest evidence that their random victims had committed any illegal acts.

Aside from a record of disregard for civil liberties, Ramsey is well versed in the use of identity politics as part of his policing strategy. His profile at the Metropolitan Police Department of Washington, DC notes that the former police chief was responsible for developing “new strategies” to put “more officers on the street and partner with the community,” including “the establishment of special liaison units for DC’s Asian,

Latino, gay and lesbian, and deaf and hard of hearing communities.”

The inclusion of various racial and other identity groups into a network of neighborhood informants is closely related to the policies advocated by a number of advocates of racial and identity politics and the Obama administration itself. These methods have been deployed to spy on and infiltrate protest movements, frame up participants and suppress public dissent.

An article released on the web site *Philly Declaration* states that the “community-policing” model advocated by Ramsey has been “often partnered, especially since the 2001 World Trade Center attacks and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, with a pervasive surveillance function increasingly expected of beat officers under the notion of ‘intelligence-led policing.’”

Obama, like his Democratic predecessor in the White House Bill Clinton, fully embraces the right-wing law-and-order policies long associated with the Republican Party. Far from proposing any government spending programs to combat poverty, poor housing and education, and the lack of a decent future for youth—the real source of crime, drugs and other social ills—Obama has followed up Clinton’s destruction of federal welfare programs with an assault on public education in major cities and the gutting of other essential programs. These right-wing policies have been given a cover by “civil rights” millionaires such as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, who are increasingly despised by workers and youth.

The Obama administration’s continued implementation of the “community-oriented policing model” portends further attacks against the working class. Well aware of the deep hostility of the population to social inequality, attacks on democratic rights and the prospect of new and even more devastating wars, the ruling class is increasingly adopting the methods of a police state to protect its wealth and power.

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