

US: Gunpoint police raid at South Carolina school

Jeff Riley
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Over a dozen police officers in the town of Goose Creek, S.C., stormed into a crowded high school hallway on the morning of November 5, forcing 107 students down on their stomachs at gunpoint.

The commando-style raid was part of a sweep for drugs at Stratford High School in this town of 30,000 just north of Charleston. School surveillance cameras—48 of them are installed throughout the building—captured the scene as frightened students, 14 of whom were restrained in plastic handcuffs, cowered face down with guns pointed at their heads and police dogs sniffing for marijuana.

No drugs were found and no arrests were made. The video shows one of the officers singling out a sitting student, throwing him to his side and pinning him down.

Students and parents in the community were outraged by the raid. One parent, Nathaniel Ody, went to the police department Friday afternoon to file a complaint on behalf of his son, a senior basketball player, who was pulled from another section of the school and placed in the hallway in restraints. His son, he explained, complied, but was placed in cuffs anyway.

Aaron Sims, 14, told reporters: “They would go put a gun up to them, push them against the wall, take their book bags and search them. They just came up and got my friend, not even saying anything or what was going to happen... I was scared.”

The police action touched off a firestorm of protests over the infringement of the high school students’ civil liberties. Graham Boyd, director of the drug policy project for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) commented, “You absolutely cannot bring police with guns drawn into a school.” He explained that police may only target individual students based upon specific evidence of drug activity.

This blatant attack on the constitutional rights of high school students takes place within a definite social and political context in South Carolina. The economic downturn of the past three years has had a devastating effect on the region.

The poverty rate in South Carolina has increased faster than almost anywhere in the South. According to a recent US Census Bureau estimate, 13.5 percent of South Carolinians are living below the federal government’s official poverty line. That is about 540,000 people of all ages, including the elderly, single mothers and children. The official line of demarcation in this instance is that a family of two adults and one child is living in poverty if their annual household income is less than \$12,400. The Census Bureau report states that 26.4 percent of the state’s black residents are living below the poverty level.

Under conditions of dwindling job opportunities and little hope for a secure future, high school students are gravitating toward ROTC programs and service in the military as one of the only means of continuing their education and securing a chance at a job and a decent life. The state of South Carolina has been among the hardest hit by casualties from the war in Iraq.

Less than 60 miles up the road from Goose Creek is Orangeburg, S.C. A town about half its size, it shares many of Goose Creek’s characteristics. The economic crisis has left an entire generation of young adults with little opportunity outside of military service.

Orangeburg has a population of fewer than 13,000. In the past three months, three graduates of Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School have been killed on duty in Iraq. The most recent, Army Specialist Darius T. Jennings, who graduated in 2000, was one of the 16 killed in the downing of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter that was carrying American soldiers on their way out of

Iraq on leave earlier this month.

Jennings's mother, Harriet E. Johnson told the press, "I really don't understand why they're over there. They're saying they don't want us over there and they will continue to kill American soldiers... So why not get them from over there?" She described how her son entered the Army after graduation and wanted to go to college, become a photographer and mentor children.

At Orangeburg-Wilkinson, 85 percent of the high school's 1,800 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches offered to low-income families. More than 10 percent of the student body is currently enrolled in the school's ROTC program.

The political atmosphere in which the police feel empowered to raid a high school with guns drawn as in Goose Creek is bound up with national governmental policies, including the sweeping abridgement of civil liberties in the name of a "war on terrorism."

Moreover, worsening unemployment and poverty throughout the region and much of the US, accompanied by the growing unrest over the mounting casualties in the US government's illegal war in Iraq, have produced an increasingly tense social environment that finds its malignant expression in police violence.



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