

The Boston Marathon and the militarization of America

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The running of the Boston Marathon on Monday was universally hailed in the media as a demonstration of the American spirit and a defeat for terrorism. Last year's event ended with the detonation of two pressure cooker bombs that exploded near the finish line, killing three people and wounding more than 260 others.

Authorities vowed that at this year's marathon, Bostonians would "reclaim the city." Monday's event, which involved more than 36,000 runners and an estimated 1 million spectators, proceeded without apparent incident and was deemed a resounding success. What, in fact, transpired on the streets and in the skies of metropolitan Boston was a police security operation involving massive surveillance of those in attendance and an unprecedented coordination of local, state and federal agencies.

Last year's Marathon bombings were seized on by authorities as a pretext to launch a lockdown of the city and its environs, as police hunted down the nineteen-year-old alleged perpetrator. The area was flooded with thousands of National Guard troops and police, who carried out warrantless house-to-house searches in blatant violation of constitutional protections against unreasonable searches and seizures.

A blanket order was issued covering an area with 1 million residents for all people to "shelter in place," while machine gun-mounted armored vehicles patrolled the empty streets and helicopters buzzed overhead. Public transportation and public institutions were shut down.

This dragnet and suspension of democratic rights, which amounted to de facto martial law, was almost universally praised by the media as a legitimate response to a terror attack. There was no significant protest from any section of the political establishment.

Within months of the April 15, 2013 bombings, the

Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) began an intensive collaboration with federal, state and local authorities to plan for this year's marathon. The operation that fanned out along the 26.2-mile route of the race on Monday, spanning eight cities and towns, involved more than 60 government agencies involved in surveillance, personal searches and crowd control.

In the wake of last year's bombings, the Department of Homeland Security had designated this year's race as a "national special security event." An examination of the methods utilized at the event exposes an operation utilized by government authorities as a test case for mass repression and population control:

Some 4,000 police, two times last year's number, patrolled the route. This included 500 plainclothes officers who had received enhanced antiterror training over the past year. Nearly 100 K-9 units with bomb-sniffing dogs, also double last year's number, were posted along the way.

More than 800 Massachusetts, Maine and Rhode Island National Guard troops were mobilized to work closely with MEMA. For the first time in the 118 years of the race, all of the Guard troops were armed military security forces specialists.

The National Guard also provided civil support teams from 20 states, with personnel specializing in chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and improvised explosive detective teams. An FBI SWAT team was also on hand.

A fleet of HH-60M Air Ambulance Black Hawk helicopters, which flew over the finish line and other parts of the route, were visible throughout the day. Local media reported that the helicopters were equipped with cameras that could zoom in on facial features.

Long lines of spectators seeking secure spots along the railing of the finish line area were subject to search at checkpoints by security personnel equipped with metal detectors.

One hundred high-resolution cameras were posted along the race's path, and cameras from the region's transit system also provided surveillance. Beehive-shaped camera units equipped to carry out facial recognition of an individual along the miles-long route were positioned at various points along the marathon route.

Live feeds from this vast surveillance network were fed to a Cold War-era underground, windowless coordination center nicknamed "the bunker," which was manned by some 260 security officials who monitored the footage.

These sweeping measures were far out of proportion to any perceived threat to the sporting event. They were put in place as part of an effort by government authorities, backed by the media, to condition the population—in the Boston area and beyond—to accept such police-military mobilizations as well as the routine presence of police and mass surveillance in public places.

While seizing on last year's events as a pretext, there has been no explanation from US authorities of how the alleged bombing suspects were able to operate unhindered, despite numerous warnings to the FBI of the terrorist inclinations of one of the suspected bombers, Tamerlan Tsarnaev. The ability of the bombers—once again, as in the 9/11 attack, well known to the FBI and CIA—to carry out their crime was not due to any lack of police or surveillance.

Rather, in the name of a supposed fight against terrorism, the population is being asked to accept as the "new normal" the shredding of democratic rights—including the First Amendment right to peaceable assembly and the Fourth Amendment's protections against illegal searches and invasions of privacy.

In tandem with US global military exploits, such as the current confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, the government is increasingly preparing methods of mass repression at home. Police departments across the country are being militarized, with many using decommissioned armored fighting vehicles for use by urban SWAT teams.

Behind these and other assaults on civil liberties is fear of the buildup of class tensions on the domestic front, fueled by declining living standards and burgeoning social inequality. Under conditions where the system has nothing to offer the vast majority of the American population but poverty and war, the ruling elite is amassing the repressive forces of the police-military apparatus to confront the social explosions that must inevitably arise.

The political establishment's anticipation of this inevitability—not the threat of a terror attack—is what motivated the government's response to this year's Boston Marathon. Proclamations of "Boston Strong" and misplaced patriotism promoted by the media and political leaders seek to blind the population to these stark realities and impart a false sense of solidarity with the forces of the state.

The mass police-military operation on display on Monday should serve as a warning of the methods the ruling elite is prepared to use to defend its class rule.



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