

Missouri governor shifts tactics against Ferguson protests

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15 August 2014

Missouri Governor Jay Nixon has intervened to take control of the official response to mounting protests over the police murder of an unarmed 18-year-old black youth in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, ordering the Missouri state police to assume command of operations in the town beginning Thursday night.

Residents of Ferguson, St. Louis and other cities and towns across the US took to the street again early Thursday evening to voice their opposition to the unprovoked shooting of Michael Brown and demand his police killer be identified, fired and prosecuted.

Initial reports suggested that police were taking a lower profile, as instructed by Nixon, with military-style equipment held in reserve rather than deployed in the provocative fashion seen on previous nights.

The police violence reached its peak on Wednesday night, when hundreds of heavily armed police, dressed in military camouflage and packing enough firepower to destroy the entire town of 21,000 people, attacked peaceful demonstrators, using teargas, smoke pellets and rubber bullets. At least 16 people were arrested, bringing the total to more than 50 since Michael Brown was killed August 9.

The police rampage included the arrest of two journalists, Wesley Lowery of the *Washington Post* and Ryan J. Reilly of the online publication *Huffington Post*, who were detained inside a McDonald's restaurant used by many journalists as an observation post. Lowery was assaulted by one cop, who slammed his head into a soft-drink machine.

The two reporters were released after half an hour without charges, but Ferguson police refused to identify the officers who made the illegal arrest or make available an arrest report.

A St. Louis alderman, Antonio French, who has been live-blogging the protests, was also arrested and held

overnight. He told reporters after his release, "In an American city people are being tear gassed and snipers are pointing rifles at them when they are peacefully assembling."

The scenes from Wednesday night, widely publicized through the media and on the Internet, aroused so much popular opposition that top federal and state officials feared an uncontrollable explosion if the police crackdown continued to escalate.

Governor Nixon announced early Thursday that he would order a change in the tactics used to deal with the protests in Ferguson, describing the crisis there as "deeply troubling." He then made an appearance before a church congregation in the predominately black city, saying he had just been in consultation with President Obama.

At a late afternoon press conference, Nixon unveiled his new strategy for Ferguson, which included putting the Missouri state police in operational control, headed by Captain Ron Johnson, an African American who was born and raised in Ferguson.

Nixon and Johnson both pledged a more restrained police presence, with the military equipment and heavy weapons—including a .50-caliber machine gun mounted on an armored car—removed from the front line. At the same time, both the governor and the police captain reiterated that they would have "sufficient force" available if it became necessary.

The political line-up behind Nixon at the press conference suggested the forces he seeks to mobilize to bring the protests under control. He was flanked by Charlie Dooley, the African American executive of St. Louis County, as well as Captain Johnson, another African American, and other local Democratic politicians, white and black.

Having failed to suppress the protests through police

violence—the turnout has actually increased day by day—the governor is enlisting a privileged layer of the black middle class, represented by the preachers, politicians and police officials, as well as media personalities and political operators such as the Reverend Al Sharpton.

This social layer is charged with defusing the crisis, restoring the shattered credibility of the “justice” system, and cooling off popular anger over the wanton police murder of Michael Brown before it can spread any further.

Mayors and police chiefs all over the United States are looking at the events in Ferguson and making their preparations for further upheavals.

In Detroit, for example, a confrontation Wednesday night on the city’s east side, in which police shot one of two men they were seeking to arrest on charges of an illegal weapons sale, led to the gathering of an angry crowd. At least one man charged through yellow crime-scene tape to accost police, and there were shouted references to the events in Ferguson.

The shift in tactics by Governor Nixon has the backing of virtually the entire US political establishment, with the corporate-controlled media and even several prominent right-wing Republicans deploring the arrest of journalists and the mobilization of armored cars and heavy weapons in Ferguson.

There is an unstated concern that the police-state methods used in Ferguson have given the American people a glimpse of their future, provoking deeply felt outrage. Social media have been filled with photographs and video of the police operations in Ferguson, with veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan posting comments that the scenes resemble their own nightmares of the wars of the past decade.

At the same time, both the politicians and the media seek to divert the popular response into the safe channels of racial politics, even though, as one woman protesting in Ferguson told NBC News Thursday night, “we are divided by race, and we’re divided by class.”

The class divide in Ferguson is a chasm. The city has a poverty rate twice that of the state as a whole. Yet it is located literally in the shadow of vast wealth. At one end of town sits the world headquarters of Emerson Corporation (formerly Emerson Electric), a giant electronics-manufacturing firm.

Five days before Michael Brown’s death, Emerson

announced third quarter sales of \$6.3 billion as well as dividends of \$301 million paid out to shareholders. This quarterly tribute to the wealthy is roughly equal to the total annual income of all households in Ferguson combined.



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