

Obama “task force” on policing: A cover for militarization

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President Barack Obama signed an executive order Thursday setting up a “Task Force on 21st Century Policing” to provide cover for increasingly violent and militarized police practices in the name of expanding “community oriented policing.”

According to a White House statement, the panel will work in the context of the “recent events in Ferguson, Staten Island [and] Cleveland,” referring obliquely to the police killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice, and the subsequent protests. But far from seeking to prevent police murders and hold the culprits accountable, the panel will review ways to acclimate the population to police violence, in order to overcome “the simmering distrust that exists between too many police departments and too many communities of color,” as Obama put it earlier.

The panel's essential aim is expressed by the fact that most of its members are current and former police officials, and that one of its co-chairs, Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey, is notorious for repeatedly violating democratic rights.

When Ramsey served as the Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia (MPDC), from 1998 to early 2007, he set up checkpoints to stop motorists at random and collect their information, which was then fed into a massive database.

In 2002, the DC police carried out a mass arrest of anti-IMF protestors, journalists and legal observers that was later ruled a violation of the Fourth Amendment by the District of Columbia Court of Appeals. According to a detective who testified in the case, Ramsey personally ordered the arrests, saying, “We're going to lock them up and teach them a lesson.”

The panel's co-chair is Laurie Robinson, a long-time Justice Department official under the Clinton and

Obama administrations and professor of criminology at George Mason University. The White House said Thursday that Ronald Davis, the current director of the Justice Department's Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office, will serve as the panel's executive director. Davis is the former chief of police for East Palo Alto and had previously been an official with the Oakland Police Department in California.

The list of eleven panelists includes six police officials (including one representative of a police association), two academics and four members of “civil rights” groups or other non-governmental organizations. The panel will hold “listening sessions” before submitting a report to Obama by March 2.

Other police officials on the panel include Cedric L. Alexander, the Chief Operating Officer for Public Safety in DeKalb County, Georgia; Susan Rahr, the former sheriff of King County, Washington; Roberto Villaseñor, chief of the Tucson Police Department; and Sean Smoot, director for the Police Benevolent and Protective Association of Illinois.

The “community and youth leaders” on the panel include Jose Lopez of Make the Road New York (MRNY), a “Brooklyn-based non-profit community organization focused on civil rights” and “education reform”; Brittany Packnett, executive director of Teach For America in St. Louis, Missouri; Constance Rice, co-director of the Advancement Project; and Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI).

These individuals are being brought in to give the appearance of a “community voice” on the board. In reality, all are thoroughly integrated into the political establishment. For example, Constance Rice of the Advancement Project led the Blue Ribbon Rampart Review Panel, which helped make sure that the largest corruption scandal in the history of the Los Angeles

Police Department resulted in no criminal convictions for the officers involved.

The Justice Department's Community Oriented Policing Services Office, while presented by the White House as an alternative to militaristic and violent police tactics, in fact devotes its resources to advising local law enforcement agencies on how to deploy hyper-aggressive police protocols with a minimum of public backlash.

For example, a recent report by the office on the practice of stop and frisk, implemented by cities such as New York to stop, question and search pedestrians without cause, fully supports the blatantly unconstitutional policy. The report notes that while "cautionary findings may lead some police executives to discourage officers from stopping pedestrians, doing so would greatly inhibit the ability to enforce the law and enhance public safety."

The report, entitled "Stop and Frisk: Balancing Crime Control with Community Relations," counsels police officials to "explain the philosophy and purpose behind pedestrian stops," and quotes one "community policing expert" about the importance of "listening to people yell and vent."

Criminal justice researchers Peter Kraska and Louis Cubellis noted the correlation between the militarization of law enforcement and the promotion of "community policing," writing in a 1997 article that, "At first glance one might assume that a trend toward militarization must be in opposition to the community policing 'revolution.' In the real world of policing, however, some police officials are interpreting the reformers' call to adopt a proactive stance, and to 'actively create a climate of order'... as requiring a more aggressive, indeed militaristic approach to enforcing law and order among the 'dangerous classes.'"

The article quotes the commander of one PPU (police paramilitary unit, or SWAT team), who clarified the relationship between "community policing" and paramilitary police, saying, "We focus on 'quality of life' issues like illegal parking, loud music, bums, neighbor troubles. We have the freedom to stay in a hot area and clean it up—particularly gangs. Our tactical enforcement (PPU) team works nicely with our department's emphasis on community policing."

Earlier this month, at the same time as it announced

moves to establish the "Task Force on 21st Century Policing," the White House released a report fully backing the series of programs that have transferred billions of dollars in military equipment to local police throughout the country.

The Obama administration's talk about "community policing" is nothing but a cheap veneer for its continued support for the militarization of law enforcement and its complicity in letting killer cops, such as Darren Wilson, the killer of Michael Brown, and Daniel Pantaleo, the killer of Eric Garner, off the hook for the murders they have committed.



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