

The Justice Department report on Ferguson police: An indictment of American capitalism

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The US Justice Department released a report on Wednesday documenting systematic and wanton brutality, violence and outright criminality on the part of police in Ferguson, Missouri, carried out in violation of the legally protected constitutional rights of the city's population.

The report found that the Ferguson police—the department responsible for the killing of unarmed teenager Michael Brown in August—engaged in “stops without reasonable suspicion and arrests without probable cause in violation of the Fourth Amendment; infringement on free expression, as well as retaliation for protected expression, in violation of the First Amendment; and excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment.”

The report documented numerous examples of egregious abuse at the hands of the police. It noted that in one incident, police sicced a dog on a fourteen-year-old boy, then “struck him while he was on the ground, one of them putting a boot on the side of his head.” The officers were “laughing about the incident afterward.”

The report also found that the city operates what one judge likened to a “debtors’ prison,” issuing vast numbers of arrest warrants and throwing the poor in jail in order to force them to pay traffic tickets. It notes that, for the city’s poor and low-income residents, “Minor offenses can generate crippling debts, result in jail time because of an inability to pay, and result in the loss of a driver’s license, employment, or housing.”

The conditions described are a devastating indictment of the American economic and political system. The actions of the police in America are much more in line with what would be expected in an economically backward dictatorship than a major industrial power, one that declares itself to be a role model of democratic rule for the whole world.

Obama responded to the Ferguson report on Friday with his typical admixture of cynicism and deceit. Calling the police practice in Ferguson “oppressive and abusive,” Obama declared that “it turns out” that protestors against police violence in the city “weren’t just making it up.” He added, however, that the abuse revealed was “not typical.”

“The overwhelming number of law enforcement officers have a really hard, dangerous job and they do it well,” Obama said in South Carolina. “They do it fairly, and they do it heroically.”

Obama’s paeans to the “heroic” police in America notwithstanding, the actions detailed in the Ferguson report are not an aberration. Indeed, the Justice Department itself found similar misconduct in reports on police in Albuquerque and Cleveland over the past year.

In the past two years alone, there have been nearly two thousand police killings in the US. All over the country, people in poor and working-class communities live in fear of the police, who are given legal immunity to harass and brutalize the population in service of the ruling elite.

Obama’s comments followed earlier remarks by Attorney General Eric Holder in announcing the report. Holder declared that the findings showed that the concerns of demonstrators “were all too real.” As he put it, “Some of those protesters were right.”

A serious reporter, if such a thing existed in the White House press corps, would have asked Holder: “If the protestors were in fact right, why did you go to Ferguson during the height of the police crackdown against peaceful protestors against the killing of Brown and stage a photo op where you embraced Ron Johnson, who was coordinating the crackdown on peaceful demonstrators?”

This was, after all, the same White House that worked with Missouri Governor Jay Nixon to mobilize the National Guard against protestors, and sent over a hundred FBI agents to spy on those involved.

The White House combined its empty acknowledgment that protestors “were right” with its absolute defense of the decision not to bring charges against Darren Wilson for gunning down Brown in broad daylight. Obama made it a point Friday of explicitly defending the decision of the Justice Department not to charge Wilson—which followed a sham grand jury proceeding last year—as if the actions of the killer cop were not entirely of a piece with the outrageous conditions described in the Ferguson report released the very same day.

The criminality of the police in the US is of a piece with the operation of the state as a whole, and of the corporate and financial aristocracy that runs the country. As for the response of the Obama administration, it follows a definite playbook. Whenever the criminality of the American state comes bubbling to the surface and is revealed before the public, Obama admits the crimes while making sure that the people responsible for them go unpunished and acting as if the White House itself had no hand in the matter.

In May 2013, Obama gave a speech in which he declared, “I do not believe it would be constitutional for the government to target and kill any US citizen—with a drone or with a shotgun—without due process. Nor should any president deploy armed drones over US soil.”

This was after the president had already carried out the drone murders of multiple American citizens, and only two months after Holder had declared the right of the president to carry out drone assassinations “within the territory of the United States.”

Then there is the question of the government’s complicity in torture. In August of last year, Obama declared that over the past decade and a half, “We tortured some folks... We did some things that were contrary to our values.” And yet, none of the torturers, whose activities were exhaustively documented in the Senate Intelligence Committee report released last year, have been punished. Only a few months later, the corporate-controlled media now acts as if the report never existed.

The same pattern is evident in numerous revelations of outright criminality on the part of the banks and financial speculators. The US Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations’ 2011 report on the Wall Street crash proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that individual executives at major banks, including Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank and others, have committed crimes mandating prison sentences. The Senate turned over the report to the Justice Department, but no one was charged, much less prosecuted.

In all of these scandals, the entire political establishment works to ensure that no one will be held accountable. In relation to the Ferguson report, despite its damning revelations, it concludes with only a few empty and toothless proposals for “reform.”

No one can be held accountable because all of these great crimes are part of an even greater criminal conspiracy by the financial oligarchy to exploit and oppress the great mass of the population.



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