

Police brutality and social inequality in Baltimore: An indictment of the Democratic Party

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The police killing of 25-year-old Freddie Gray in Baltimore provoked angry protests in late April and early May, and the National Guard occupation of the city, just 40 miles from Washington, DC. The eruption of indignation in the city's most impoverished neighborhoods was fueled by decades of chronic unemployment, social service cuts and negligence and abuse from city authorities.

These conditions are an indictment of the Democratic Party, which has long dominated the city's political establishment. From the mid-1970s onward, the shift to the right by the Democrats on a national level was manifested in Baltimore and other big cities by the repudiation of previous social reforms and the embrace of free-market policies and law-and-order repression.

The last major eruption of civil unrest in Baltimore—on a far wider scale—were the riots of April 6–14, 1968 that followed the murder of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Then-Maryland Governor Spiro Agnew ordered thousands of national guard and state troopers into the city, and when that failed to suppress the uprising, President Lyndon Johnson deployed US Army airborne and infantry troops, bringing the total number of soldiers in the city to 11,570. In total six people died, 700 were injured, and 5,800 were arrested.

The riots in Baltimore were part of a wave of urban uprisings that spread across American cities between 1964 and 1968, against police brutality, racial discrimination and the lack of decent jobs. In the aftermath, the Johnson administration's Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders called for massive government spending to stop the country's drift towards racial and economic polarization. In words scorned today by Democrats and Republicans alike, the commission concluded that America needed a "commitment to national action—compassionate, massive and sustained, backed by the resources of the most powerful and the richest nation on this earth."

This commitment was never made and Johnson's Great Society programs ran aground against the cost of the Vietnam War and initial impact of the long-term decline of American capitalism. The Democratic Party would soon abandon any measures to lessen social inequality and replace them with programs, such as Affirmative Action, aimed at incorporating a section of African-American population and other minority groups into the political and corporate establishment.

Black mayors and other officials were brought into Los Angeles, Newark, Detroit, Cleveland and other cities to integrate police forces and finance minority owned businesses with government contracts. While promoting the claim that "black capitalism" would eradicate poverty and police repression, the African-American Democrats

defended the property and wealth of big business just as loyally as their white counterparts. It was not long before newly integrated police forces were breaking strikes and beating and murdering black and white workers and youth alike.

Democrat Kurt L. Schmoke (1987–1999), a former leader of Yale University's Black Student Alliance, was elected as Baltimore's first African-American mayor in 1987. He took office as the deindustrialization of the city was already well-advanced wiping out tens of thousands of jobs in steel, auto, shipbuilding and the docks.

In office until 1999 Schmoke promoted corporate interests while feigning sympathy for inner-city victims of the draconian "War on Drugs" crackdown. According to the 2005 book *"Double Trouble: Black Mayors, Black Communities, and the Call for a Deep Democracy,"* by Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor of urban planning J. Phillip Thompson, Schmoke represented a rising layer of African-American "technopoliticians" who sought to focus on "fashioning closer ties with the business community and keeping bond ratings high" rather than "accountability to the poor."

In line with President Clinton's policy of so-called "school choice," Schmoke initiated an unprecedented policy of school privatization in 1992, leasing out nine "under-performing" schools to Minnesota-based Education Alternatives Inc. for a five-year contract of \$133 million. The contract was terminated in 1995 when the city's education budget reported a \$32 million shortfall and EA refused to renegotiate its highly profitable contract.

The Baltimore city government's web site boasts that under "Mayor Schmoke, Baltimore has been a leader in the national effort to tear down dilapidated, crime-plagued high-rise public housing developments" in order to replace them with "lower density, low-rise communities." He was also at the forefront of the effort "to attract, retain, and expand businesses" in the city.

One initiative, the "Westside Master Plan," demolished over 100 buildings in an effort to clear room for tourist attractions such as Camden Yards, home to the Baltimore Orioles Major League Baseball franchise. Efforts to revitalize decaying neighborhoods, such as Sandtown-Winchester—the home of Freddie Gray—were abandoned, as public money was poured into construction projects to benefit wealthy real estate developers and the most affluent layers of the upper middle class.

Schmoke oversaw the growth of Baltimore's prosperous Harbor East neighborhood, which was developed by John Paterakis Sr., a multimillionaire business-owner in the city. The area was transformed from a group of abandoned industrial lots into rows of office

buildings, restaurants, and upscale shopping centers. This process was aided and abetted by future-Baltimore mayor and now presidential candidate Martin O'Malley, who approved tax-breaks and millions of dollars in loans to private corporate interests in his capacity as Chairman of the Baltimore City Council's Taxation and Finance Committee.

Under successive administrations, the term "private-public partnership" came to symbolize corporate handouts from city and state governments and promises of tax exemptions and lax regulation in the hopes of luring attractive business investments.

In 1993, Clinton's Economic Empowerment Act invested \$8 billion in a plan that created over 100 enterprise zones in impoverished sections of cities across the country, including Baltimore. Local business interests, including African-American entrepreneurs, were given the ability to file special petitions to an Interagency Enterprise Board in order to waive federal regulations within the zones that might obstruct business development.

In the upside-down world of the American political establishment it was not the systematic destruction of good-paying jobs by global corporations in pursuit of ever-greater profits, let alone the crisis of American capitalism, that was responsible for unemployment, poverty, crime, drugs and other social ills. Instead, the cause of these problems, according to Republicans and Democrats alike, was welfare, public housing and other programs that produced a "culture of dependency," teenage pregnancy, drugs and crime. This provided the ideological justification for dismantling what was left of the social safety net and funneling even more money into the hands of the financial and corporate elite in the name of "economic growth" and "job creation."

In 1996, Clinton championed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, also known as "welfare reform," which ended the entitlement status of cash-assistance programs for the unemployed and poor. Infamously declaring the measure would "end welfare as we have come to know it," Clinton replaced the New Deal-era Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), which put time limits and job search requirements on welfare payments.

Big business and the political establishment then used this newly available pool of desperate workers to drive down wages and boost profits.

The Housing Opportunity Extension (HOPE) Act of 1996 enshrined Clinton's "One-strike-and-you're-out" policy, under which poor public housing residents who broke the law, including minor drug offenses, were thrown out of their apartments. Clinton's policy served a double-role: facilitating the destruction of public housing and criminalizing poor residents in order to justify further police repression. An article in the *Baltimore Sun* from the period states that "[a]s the high-rise public housing projects are being replaced with more appealing garden apartments, the money will go down the drain unless the units can be protected. Making it easier to remove criminals and other problem tenants will give good and law-abiding tenants a better chance to live in a safe, clean and pleasant environment."

O'Malley's tenure as mayor (1999–2007) saw the implementation of "zero tolerance" policing as the number of arrests soared while city police forcibly apprehended tens of thousands for violations such as littering and loitering. In 2005, arrests in Baltimore reached 108,447, about a sixth of the population. The following year, the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP brought a lawsuit against the city, alleging a trend of pervasive police violence against citizens.

Baltimore settled the suit in 2010 for \$870,000.

O'Malley also continued the wholesale destruction of working-class neighborhoods in the name of "urban renewal." The goals of the demolition plan was essentially ridding areas of unwanted poor people or as the city stated at the time, "deconcentrating poverty, maintaining clean and attractive neighborhoods and retaining middle-income residents and home buyers." One area designated for "development" was the impoverished neighborhood of Harlem Park, where the city government, working in tandem with a for-profit "community development corporation," tore down over 390 row houses, leaving only 160 such homes remaining.

O'Malley's contempt for the victims of his policies was captured in comments he made last December, when he told an audience that conditions for those living in the inner city was "so much better than it was 15 years ago."

This agenda of lucrative corporate giveaways has continued up to the present day. When Mayor Rawlings-Blake assumed office in 2010, she announced her intention to concentrate on "eliminating the deficit, making modern investments, and changing the city's tax structure to make Baltimore more competitive for growth." Her administration has carried out these objectives by implementing a wave of austerity measures, including cuts to public pensions, the closure of recreational centers for youth in West Baltimore, and the downsizing of the city workforce.

That same year, Rawlings-Blake launched her "Vacants to Value" urban revitalization program with the help of the Clinton Foundation, which sought to demolish more than 1,500 of the city's 17,000 vacant properties. Despite the wholesale demolition of working-class neighborhoods, affordable housing is still in high demand. In 2014, after more than a decade, the city opened its public housing lottery, for which over 60,000 people applied in less than a week.

This ruthless policy has reached its apex with Rawlings-Blake's recent announcement that in order to bridge a deficit of more than \$30 million, the city water department would shut water off for over 25,000 residents in the city. The *Baltimore Sun* reported that this policy was occurring even while "big businesses, government offices and nonprofits had run up more than \$10 million in unpaid water bills."

The more social inequality in Baltimore has exploded the more city officials have relied on police repression to control dispossessed workers and youth in the city. The major urban policy of the Democratic Party, from the Obama administration to the state and local level, is enriching those on top, on the one hand, while enforcing austerity with a militarized police force, on the other.



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