

US Justice Department finds that police provoked unrest in Ferguson

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On Monday, the US Justice Department released a report detailing the official police response to the protests last year in Ferguson, Missouri following the police killing of Michael Brown. According to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the report documents how inappropriate military and police tactics alienated and provoked the crowd of peaceful protesters into violent confrontation. The limited rioting and looting, universally denounced and vilified in the corporate media, was in effect, incited by the police.

The summary of the report states, “Had law enforcement released information on the officer-involved shooting in a timely manner and continued the information flow as it became available, community distrust and media skepticism would most likely have been lessened.” The report documents the 16 days following the August 9, 2014 shooting of Brown by police officer Darren Wilson and the “highly elevated tactical response” on the part of 50 different police departments. The findings hardly justify the disproportionate use of paramilitary tactics against unarmed civilians exercising their First Amendment rights to free speech and assembly.

The report stated that the use of police dogs “exacerbated tensions by unnecessarily inciting fear and anger among amassing crowds.” Tear gas was used inappropriately, “without proper warning, without sufficient attention paid to egress, and without consideration given to environmental conditions.”

Throughout the ensuing protests, citizens were told to “keep moving” by police. According to the report, these “vague and arbitrary” orders “violated citizens’ rights to assembly and free speech, as determined by a U.S. federal court injunction.”

From the standpoint of the Obama administration, which was coordinating the crackdown in Ferguson

from the beginning, the report serves as a guidebook to preparing for unrest in the future. That is why, despite the brazen, unconstitutional tactics deployed by Ferguson police, there will be no accountability for the actions taken. Nevertheless, the report is a damning indictment of the authorities.

The report states that the various police agencies who responded to the protests were trained “on operational and tactical skills without appropriate balance of de-escalation and problem-solving training.” Snipers who fixed their scopes on unarmed civilians “exacerbate(d) tensions between protesters and police.” Moreover the military show of force was “not justified and served to escalate rather than de-escalate the overall situation.”

The lack of citizen complaints during the time period assessed by the report was “misleading” because, “a lack of confidence in the complaint process likely deterred citizens from filing complaints about police behavior.”

The report was addressed to the 50 police departments that were involved in repressing protesters in Ferguson. St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson declined to comment as did the Missouri Department of Public Safety, which oversees the Highway Patrol. Dotson told the *Post-Dispatch* that he had asked officials from the Justice Department’s Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) what was the best way to handle such protests. “I was told, ‘There are none, you are forging new ground.’”

The report is addressed to inappropriate actions and not individuals and stresses the need for law enforcement to better coordinate in the future as well as provide recommendations that better suppress social opposition while utilizing military gear in a more effective way. Thus it faults the “ineffective” training given to police and the failure in traffic control which

supposedly presented “tactical advantages to the protesters and activists and safety hazards to the deployed officers.”

Further, the police “underestimated” social media and hacks of police computers which led to threats and the theft of some officers’ identities. This, in turn, led to some officers removing their name tags at the protests, which, the report says, “defeated an essential level of on-scene accountability that is fundamental to the perception of procedural justice and legitimacy.”

Many of the recommendations included in the report are significant in that they change nothing aside from placing the paramilitary SWAT teams in a somewhat lower profile. These include: possible color-coding of non-lethal weapons for officer and civilian clarification, “officers wearing defensive and tactical equipment should be staged out of sight during peaceful demonstrations,” and “armored vehicles should not be visible to protesters except in narrowly defined circumstances, for example when shots are fired and in some active shooter situations.”

Despite the Obama administration’s feigned appearance of sympathy, or at least neutrality, when it came to the protests in Ferguson and Baltimore, it has been complicit in the whole affair. Much of the military equipment used by Ferguson police was paid for by federal counterterrorism grants, which have been freely given to police nationwide since the start of the so-called war on terror.

Moreover, this is the third Justice Department report which, despite documenting rampant criminal behavior on the part of police, metes out absolutely zero punishments. The first report was the decision not to bring federal civil rights charges against Darren Wilson for murdering Michael Brown, and the second was a review of the Ferguson Police Department, which was found to have systematically violated its citizens constitutional and human rights on a daily basis.



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