

Baltimore, Maryland police chief fired under pressure from police union

Tom Hall
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On Wednesday, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake announced the firing of police commissioner Anthony Batts, who organized the police crackdown on the Freddie Gray protests this April. Batts was replaced on an interim basis by deputy chief Kevin Davis.

The firing, far from responding to popular anger over the murder of Gray or the military-police occupation of the city during the protests, was a response to mounting criticism that Batts had not responded to the Freddie Gray protests with sufficient brutality. This campaign has been largely led by the local Fraternal Order of Police, who have attacked Batt's supposed "passive stance" in April's mass protests.

Hours before Batts' firing, the Fraternal Order of Police released a report attacking the "weak" police-military response to the Freddie Gray protests. The report was provocatively sub-titled "We also gave those who wished to destroy space to do that," a quote from Rawlings-Blake purporting to show indecision on the part of the local government.

The 32-page report contains a laundry list of complaints by largely anonymous police officers criticizing the alleged orders from local government and police headquarters "not to engage protesters." The highly-charged tone of the report is indicated by an officer's claim that Batts "led us officers to slaughter," during the protests, turning reality on its head. Among other things, the report criticizes the supposed civilian interference in arrests, specifically citing two instances in which a journalist and a blogger covering the protests were ordered to be released, and the delay in the decision to call in the National Guard.

In fact, the response to the Freddie Gray protests was an extraordinary attack on democratic rights, which from the beginning bore all the hallmarks of a

deliberate provocation. Hundreds were arbitrarily detained without charge, crammed into tiny holding cells and denied access to a lawyer. Despite the alleged orders "not to engage protesters," riot police ran roughshod through impoverished working-class neighborhoods attacking people on sight, a state of emergency was declared by Governor Lawrence Hogan, and once again the military was deployed to patrol a major American city, mere months after the occupation of Ferguson, Missouri in response to the Michael Brown protests.

At the time, the entire political establishment, including Rawlings-Blake and Batts, rallied behind the police and demonized the protesters as "thugs," while supporting the police version of Freddie Gray's death for as long as possible. At the same time, proponents of identity politics were called upon to portray the death of Freddie Gray purely in racial terms, despite the fact that the majority of the city's political establishment, including Rawlings-Blake and Batts, as well as three of the six officers who killed him, are black. The events in Baltimore demonstrated that preparations for police state forms of rule are well advanced and enjoy the unanimous support of both Democrats and Republicans.

Broad sections of the Baltimore political establishment have now rallied behind the FOP's criticisms of Batts. At the time of Rawlings-Blake's announcement, the city council was preparing to write a letter calling for Batt's resignation. Meanwhile, the FOP itself was preparing a vote of no confidence in Batts later this week.

"It's very clear that the coach has lost the locker room," councilman Brandon M. Scott declared, referring to the FOP's campaign. "Once the coach has lost the locker room, it's up to the manager to make the

decision that either the coach goes or the locker room goes.”

Local clergy supported the firing as the beginning of a “healing process” between ... the police and the commissioner’s office. “His officers have lost confidence in him,” Reverend Andrew Foster Connors said. “The faith community, business leaders and residents have lost confidence in him. He is a leader without a following. And the community is suffering.”

Rawlings-Blake at first denounced the FOP’s report, calling it a “disservice to our officers who acted so courageously during the unrest.” However, within hours she suddenly reversed herself and announced Batts’ firing. “Recent events have placed an intense focus on our police leadership, distracting many from what needs to be our main focus, the fight against crime,” Rawlings-Blake told a press conference.

In other words, Batts was considered to be a hindrance to whipping up an atmosphere of law and order, especially under conditions of a growing rift between Batts and Baltimore police officers.

Batts himself has a prior history of directing crackdowns on protests. He was the Oakland police chief when protests broke out after a judge reduced an already lenient sentence for the officer who shot and killed Oscar Grant, an unarmed black man, at close range. Oakland police responded to the largely peaceful protests by “kettling” crowds and arresting dozens of protesters, most of whom were released without being charged.

Batts resigned from the Oakland Police Department in October 2011, two days after a court-appointed monitor released a report excoriating the department for its tolerance of disproportionate use of force. A random sample of 80 cases from the first quarter of 2011 found 215 instances of police drawing their firearms, and that at least 28 percent of these instances were “unnecessary.” Despite this, none of the officers involved received any scrutiny after filing their reports. Indicating the gang mentality prevailing in the Oakland Police Department, one sting operation targeting probation and parole violators was code-named “Operation Tuneup,” police slang for the beating of suspects.

Batts nevertheless has enjoyed significant clout nationwide. He briefly took a research job at Harvard University after his tenure in Oakland, and was placed

on the short-list for the Baltimore job by the Police Executive Research Forum, an influential DC think tank. “Tony Batts is one of the best there is in American policing today,” New York City police chief Bill Bratton gushed when Batts was made the Baltimore police commissioner in 2012.

The fact that this figure is now being attacked as “too soft” on crime is an indication of the sharp lurch to the right of the political establishment, as well as the character of the response being prepared for the next mass protests.



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