

“Light ‘Em Up”: Warrior-Cops Are the Law — and Above the Law — as Violence Grips America

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From their front porches, regular citizens watched a cordon of cops sweep down their peaceful street in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Rankled at being filmed, the cops exceeded their authority and demanded that people go inside their houses. When some of them didn't obey quickly enough, the order — one heard so many times in the streets of Iraqi cities and in the villages of Afghanistan — was issued: “[Light ‘em up](#).” And so “disobedient” Americans found themselves on the receiving end of non-lethal rounds for the “crime” of watching the police from those porches.

It's taken years from [Ferguson](#) to this moment, but America's cops have now officially joined the military as “professional” [warriors](#). In the wake of George Floyd's murder on May 25th, those [warrior-cops](#) have taken to the streets across the country wearing combat gear and with attitudes to match. They see [protesters](#), as well as the [reporters](#) covering them, as the enemy and themselves as the “thin blue line” of law and order.

The police take to bashing heads and thrashing bodies, using weaponry so generously [funded](#) by the American taxpayer: rubber bullets, pepper spray (as Congresswoman Joyce Beatty of Ohio [experienced](#) at a protest), tear gas (as Episcopal clergy [experienced](#) at a demonstration in Washington, D.C.), paint canisters, and similar “non-lethal” munitions, together with flash-bang grenades, standard-issue batons, and Tasers, even as they drive military-surplus equipment like Humvees and [MRAPs](#). (Note that such munitions [blinded an eye](#) of one photo-journalist.) A Predator drone even [hovered over](#) at least one protest.

Who needs a military parade, President Trump? Americans are witnessing militarized “parades” across the U.S.A. Their theme: [violent force](#). The result: plenty of wounded and otherwise damaged Americans left in their wake. The detritus of America's foreign wars has finally well and truly found its place on Main Street, U.S.A.

Cops are to blame for much of this mayhem. Video clips [show](#) them wildly out of control, inciting violence and inflicting it, instead of defusing and preventing it. Far too often, “to serve and protect” has become “to shoot and smack down.” It suggests the character of Eric Cartman from the cartoon *South Park*, a boy inflamed by a badge and a chance to inflict physical violence without accountability. “Respect my authoritah!” [cries Cartman](#) as he beats an innocent man for no reason.

So, let's point cameras — and fingers — at these bully-boy cops, let's document their crimes, but let's also state a fact with courage: it's not just their fault.

Who else is to blame? Well, so many of us. How stupid have we been to celebrate cops as

heroes, just as we've been [foolishly doing](#) for so long with the U.S. military? Few people are heroes and fewer still deserve "hero" status while wearing uniforms and shooting bullets, rubber or otherwise, at citizens.

Answer me this: Who granted cops a [specially-modified](#) U.S. flag to celebrate "blue lives matter," and when exactly did that happen, and why the hell do so many people fly these as substitute U.S. flags? Has everyone forgotten American history and the use of police (as well as National Guard units) to suppress organized labor, keep blacks and other minorities in their place, intimidate ordinary citizens protesting for a cleaner environment, or whack hippies and anti-war liberals during the Vietnam War protests?

Or think of what's happening this way: America's violent overseas wars, thriving for almost two decades despite their emptiness, their lack of meaning, have finally and truly come home. An [impoverished empire](#), in which [violence](#) and disease are endemic, is collapsing before our eyes. "When the looting starts, the shooting starts," America's self-styled wartime president [promised](#), channeling a racist Miami police chief from 1967. It was a declaration meant to turn any American who happened to be near a protest into a potential victim.

As such demonstrations proliferate, Americans now face a grim prospect: the chance to be wounded or killed, then dismissed as "collateral damage." In these years, that tried-and-false [military euphemism](#) has been applied so thoughtlessly to innumerable innocents who have suffered grievously from our unending foreign wars and now it's coming home.

How does it feel, America?

The End of Citizen-Soldiers, the End of Citizen-Cops

I joined the military in 1981, signing up in college for the Reserve Officer Training Corps, or ROTC. I went on active duty in 1985 and served for 20 years, retiring as a lieutenant colonel. I come from a family of firefighters and cops. My dad and older brother were firefighters, together with my brother-in-law and nephew. My niece and her husband are cops and my sister worked for her local police department for years. My oldest friend, a great guy I've known for half a century, recently retired as a deputy sheriff. I know these people because they're my people.

Many cops — I'd say most — are decent people. But dress almost any cop in combat gear, cover him or her in armor like a stormtrooper out of *Star Wars*, then set all of them loose on the streets with a mandate to restore "LAW & ORDER," as our president tweeted, and you're going to get stormtrooper-like behavior.

Sure, I'd wager that more than a few cops enjoy it, or at least it seems that way in the videos captured by so many. But let's remind ourselves that the cops, like the rest of America's systems of authority, are a product of a sociopolitical structure that's inherently violent, openly racist, deeply flawed, and thoroughly corrupted by money, power, greed, and privilege. In such a system, why should we expect them to be paragons of virtue and restraint? We don't recruit them that way. We [don't train](#) them that way. Indeed, we salute them as "warriors" when they respond to risky situations in aggressive ways.

Here's my point: When I put on a military uniform in 1985, I underwent a subtle but meaningful change from a citizen to a citizen-airman. (Note how "citizen" still came first

then.) Soon after, however, the U.S. military began telling me I was something more than that: I was a [warrior](#). And that was a distinct and new identity for me, evidently a tougher, more worthy one than simply being a citizen-airman. That new “warrior” image and the mystique that grew up around it was integral to, and illustrative of, the beginning of a wider [militarization](#) of American culture and society, which exploded after the 9/11 attacks amid the “[big-boy pants](#)” braggadocio of the administration of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney as they set out to remake the world as an American possession.

Why all the “warrior” BS? Why “[Generation Kill](#)” (one of those memorable phrases of the post-9/11 era)? Was it to give us a bit more spine or something to rally around after the calamity of those attacks on iconic American targets, or perhaps something to take pride in after so many disastrous wars over the last 75 years? It took me a while to answer such questions. Indeed, it took me a while to grasp that such questions were almost beside the point. Because all this warrior talk, whether applied to the military or the cops, is truly meant to separate us from the American people, to link us instead to wider systems of impersonal authority, such as the military-industrial-congressional complex.

By “elevating” us as warriors, the elites conspired to reduce us as citizens, detaching us from a citizen’s code of civics and moral behavior. By accepting the conceit of such an identity, we warriors and former warriors became, in a sense, foreign to democracy and ever more divorced from the citizenry. We came to form [foreign legions](#), readily exploitable in America’s endless imperial-corporate wars, whether overseas or now here.

(Notice, by the way, how, in the preceding paragraphs, I use “we” and “us,” continuing to identify with the military, though I’ve been retired for 15 years. On rereading it, I thought about revising that passage, until I realized that was precisely the point: a career military officer is, in some way, always in the military. The ethos is that strong. The same is true of cops.)

In 2009, [I first asked](#) if the U.S. military had become an imperial police force. In 2020, we need to ask if our police are now just another branch of that military, with our “homeland” serving as the empire to be conquered and exploited. That said, let’s turn to America’s cops. They’re now likely to identify as warriors, too, and indeed many of them have served in America’s violent and endless wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. These days, they’re ever more likely to identify as well with authority, as defined and exercised by the elites for whom they serve as hired guns.

In the aftermath of George Floyd’s [murder](#), the warrior-mercenary mindset of the police has been fully exposed. For what was Floyd’s great “crime”? At worst, if true, an attempt at petty theft through forgery. He’d lost his job due to the Covid-19 crisis and, like most of us, was lucky if he saw a one-time check for \$1,200, even as the rich and powerful enjoyed [trillions of dollars](#) in relief.

Rarely are the police sent to prosecute scofflaws in high places. I haven’t seen any bankers being choked to death on the street under an officer’s knee. Nor have I seen any corporate “citizens” being choked to death by cops. It’s so much easier to hassle and arrest the little people for whom, if they’re black or otherwise vulnerable, arrest may even end in death.

By standing apart from us, militarized, a thin blue line, the police no longer stand with us.

A friend of mine, an Air Force retired colonel, nailed it in a recent email to me: “I used to —

maybe not enjoy but — not mind talking to the police. It was the whole ‘community partners’ thing. Growing up and through college, you just waved at cops on patrol (they’d wave back!). Over the last five years, all I get is cops staring back in what I imagine they think is an intimidating grimace. They say nothing when you say hello. They are all in full ‘battle rattle’ even when directing traffic.”

When military “battle rattle” becomes the standard gear for street cops, should we be that surprised to hear the death rattle of black men like George Floyd?

Speaking Truth to Power Isn’t Nearly Enough

Perhaps you’ve heard the saying “speaking truth to power.” It’s meant as a form of praise. But a rejoinder I once read captures its inherent limitations: power already knows the truth — and I’d add that the powerful are all too happy with their monopoly on their version of the truth, thank you very much.

It’s not enough to say that the police are too violent, or racist, or detached from society. Powerful people already know this perfectly well. Indeed, they’re counting on it. They’re counting on cops being violent to protect elite interests; nor is racism the worst thing in the world, they believe, as long as it’s not hurting their financial bottom lines. If it divides people, making them all the more exploitable, so much the better. And who cares if cops are detached from the interests of the working and lower middle classes from which they’ve come? Again, all the better, since that means they can be sicked on protesters and, if things get out of hand, those very protesters can then be blamed. If push comes to shove, a few cops might have to be fired, or prosecuted, or otherwise sacrificed, but that hardly matters as long as the powerful get off [scot-free](#).

President Trump knows this. He talks about “dominating” the protesters. He insists that they must be arrested and jailed for long periods of time. After all, they are the “other,” the enemy. He’s willing to have them tear gassed and shot with rubber bullets just so [he can pose](#) in front of a church holding a Bible. Amazingly, the one amendment he mentioned defending in his “law and order” [speech](#) just before he walked to that church was the Second Amendment.

And this highlights Trump’s skill as a wall-builder. No, I don’t mean that “[big, fat, beautiful wall](#)” along the U.S. border with Mexico. He’s proven himself a master at building walls to divide people within America — [to separate](#) Republicans from Democrats, blacks and other peoples of color from whites, Christians from non-Christians, fervid gun owners from gun-control advocates, and cops from the little people. Divide and conquer, the oldest trick in the authoritarian handbook, and Donald Trump is good at it.

But he’s also a dangerous fool in a moment when we need bridges, not walls to unite these divided states of ours. And that starts with the cops. We need to change the way many of them think. No more “thin blue line” BS. No more cops as warriors. No more special flags for how much their lives matter. We need but a single flag for how much all our lives matter, black or white, rich or poor, the powerless as well as the powerful.

How about that old-fashioned American flag I served under as a military officer for 20 years? How about the stars and stripes that draped my father’s casket after his more than 30 years of fighting fires, whether in the forests of Oregon or the urban tenements of Massachusetts? It was good enough for him and me (and untold millions of others). It should still be good

enough for everyone.

But let me be clear: my dad knew how to put out fires, but once a house was “fully involved,” he used to tell me, there’s little you can do but stand back and watch it burn while keeping the fire from spreading.

America’s forever wars in distant lands have now come home big time. Our house is lit up and on fire. Alarms are being sounded over and over again. If we fail to come together to fight the fire until our house is fully involved, we will find ourselves — and what’s left of our democracy — burning with it.

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