



**CONFRONTING POLICE KILLINGS:
SECURING PROTECTION AGAINST THE “PROTECTORS”**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

No matter how it's explained away, layed out and juggled around in a language of legal justification or as an urgent public plea to understand and empathize with the precarious position of the police, working at risk in a war zone or worst, we must never get used to official killings. The state gives its guardians, under the color and cover of law, the right to erase lives, to kill with sanction and support, and to suppress anything considered or contrived on the spot to be a menace to them or the larger society. It is an awesome power that should be controlled and restrained by a healthy respect for human life, training and retraining of police, strict oversight, independent monitoring and an accountability that requires stringent disciplinary measures that match the severity of the abuse of the power. But obviously there is a need for a more effective policy, protocol and practice of respect and restraint.

The police killing of Marcus Smith, an African American, by an Inglewood police officer, marks the fifth person killed by police there in the past two years, suggesting a problem not only with Inglewood, but also with society itself and how it views Africans and other people of color. A century ago in *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois identified in the U.S. a “double system of justice which erred on the White side by undue leniency and the practical immunity of red-handed criminals, and erred on the Black side by undue severity, injustice and lack of discrimination”. Here DuBois means by the “lack of discrimination” the lack of respecting difference and lumping all of us together as criminals and worthy of the most severe and savage suppression. This is the origins of the racialization of crime, the criminalization of the race and the exemption and exoneration of Whites who kill Blacks, especially in official

capacities, but also in other socially-sanctioned uses of deadly force.

At a news conference last year, calling for a federal probe of prior police killings in Inglewood, Congresswoman Maxine Waters (CA-D-35) called the problem a national crisis. “The community is outraged and it's not only in Inglewood”, she said, “Throughout the country African American men are being killed”. Thus, these shootings and killings take place in the context of a constantly expanding thrust to racialize crime, criminalize race and mercilessly punish and suppress the stigmatized. It is especially directed toward young Black and Brown urban youth who are thought of and approached as suspects or real criminal threats that must be managed, contained and incapacitated. Although, these are billed as increased punitive measures against crime, given the racialized character and focus of the discourse, it is revealed as a result of cultivated fear and loathing of youth of color.

Thus, we must remember with Paul Robeson; “the battlefield is everywhere there is no sheltered rear”— in the street, our homes and the neighborhoods in which we are located, live, work, worship and build futures for our children. So we must struggle against these official crimes—defined as “justifiable homicide”, “within policy”, “understandable”, and other convenient categories of acceptance of official killing. Especially must we struggle against acceptance of these killings as normal and necessary, for they are neither normal nor necessary and our acceptance of them as such insures their repetition and relentless expansion.

Indeed, one of the greatest threats to our welfare and security is how many of us and the larger society have learned to live with our expected deaths and the assumption of too

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many of us that there is little or nothing we can do to stop it. Certainly, there is something wrong not only with the police department, but also with society itself, when the history of the police in our neighborhood bears the image and indictment of an occupying army, and when our concept of protection involves the need for protection from the “protectors”, themselves.

Clearly, this reckless and often depraved disregard for our lives will not be halted by a fortunate turn of history. For as Marcus Garvey taught, “Chance has never yet satisfied the hope of a suffering people. Action, self-reliance, the vision of self and the future have been the only means by which the oppressed have seen and realized the light of their own freedom”. Moreover, this means, as Frederick Douglass reminds us, that “Without struggle, there is no progress”. And it also means we must in waging struggle systematically and in a sustained and courageous manner, constantly practice: political education; mobilization, organization, confrontation and transformation.

To politically educate is to inform and be informed by the people, to discuss critical issues from our own perspective, and to produce new understandings of ourselves and the oppressor thru conversations, collaboration and ultimately cooperation in the struggle to transform the established order of things. We must raise questions about how we break thru the catechism of impotence and impossibility the dominant society teaches. And we must dare think in audacious and outrageous ways,

knowing as Malcolm taught us, we must choose to be responsible to the oppressor or responsible to and for our people. And for the self-respecting, the choice is obvious and unavoidable.

To mobilize is to call together the people to a sustained activism in their own interests, to work with them to develop ways to pursue their interests and to remain active on the battlefield for a better society and world. To organize is to put into position permanent structures of solidarity among our people which harness our energies, direct our efforts and sustain our unity thru cooperative planning and practice, especially the struggle itself and all the sacrifice and hard work it requires. Marcus Garvey taught that it is our vulnerability and weakness thru disorganization or lack of it that invite our oppression and exploitation. Thus, he said, “point me to a weak nation and I will show you a people oppressed, abused, taken advantage of by others”. But “show me a well-organized nation and I will show you a people and nation respected by the world”.

To dare confront is to do battle everywhere there is injustice and support for injustice. It means to resist, demonstrate, disrupt and bring discomfort and focused concern in the midst of societal bloody business as usual. For to do this without laxity or let-up, with courage and commitment is to open paths to real transformation, not only of patterns and practices of the police and the society that sanctions and supports them, but also true transformation of ourselves.

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