



BLACKLASH

The Africana Think Tank

REPORT NO. 1

What Do We Do About Militarized Police Violence?



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INTRODUCTION

While social justice protestors and actors were on the streets, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) issued a significant report titled *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*. Released last week, the report acknowledges a nation “challenged by shifting political, economic, and social forces,” but its call “that we are all in this together” is at odds with the more than 30 recommendations “advancing the interests of this nation.” The AAAS commission that authored the report consists of corporate heads, top academics, and AAAS fellows that spent two years thinking strategically how to get *their* democracy back on track, that is, to “counter rising threats to democratic self-government, and rebuild trust in political institutions.”¹ As Africans were not calculated in the formula, “we the people,” peoples of African ancestry in this nation and elsewhere need their own think tanks to consider their interests, threats to their communities, and tools to rebuild their own self-governing institutions that serve them and the broader African(a) world. To that end, we formed *Blacklash: The Africana Collective*.

Blacklash, or BTAC, does not pretend to be “vanguards of the revolution” (whoever and whatever that’s supposed to mean) but rather is comprised of folks with views toward providing sober, usable and well-informed analyses in further effort of linking our communities across the African world. We use interdisciplinary research to provide analysis and guidance on a range of issues affecting the African(a) world—linked communities with peoples of African ancestry. Using our collective knowledge and skills, as well as our grounding as thinkers, educators, activists, organizers, and parents, our objective is to support and inform action toward safeguarded humane development throughout the African world. We are independent in our funding, research, and directives, allowing us to work decidedly in the best interests of said communities.

Each month, we consider one topical issue as a collective. In the process, we prepare individual statements, meet (virtually) to hammer out our findings, then prepare our report. That report is then shared with the African world via online outlets and through various networks a week prior to a (virtual) town hall meeting, where we invite members of the African world community to join us, debate, (dis)agree, and come away with perspectives that inform collective action. We strongly request that all attendees at the town hall read the report **beforehand**. This way, you are an *active participant* in shaping your own views and subsequent decisions. We encourage you to sign up, or register, for the town hall, so we may keep you abreast of upcoming events, key resources, and ways to translate the reports’ ideas into collective betterment scaled to wherever you are and with whom you have to work.

In this thought paper, report no. 1, we consider the topical issue of policing and militarized state violence from a number of perspectives. Our second topical issue will be this: “Is the category of black/blackness still suitable for organizing and collection action?” Under this we might include ideas usually framed as identity/gender politics and the politics of naming. Join us for the virtual town hall on June 19, at 7 pm EST.

¹ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), iv-v.



PERSPECTIVE 1: DR. IYELLI ICHILE

The experiences of Africana peoples in the colonized western world are tantamount to an ongoing war with multiple battlefronts; even our participation in formalized wars at the behest of these colonial powers necessitated fighting both white racial terror and the “official” enemy in the field. This moment certainly feels like a war; on one front, Africana peoples are battling the ravages of a unique and aggressive virus which has brought medical racial injustice into full relief. The other battleground is our struggle against wanton police brutality, presently intensified by the killing of George Floyd and the white nationalist regimes—in the U.S. and other countries—whose support for the police perpetrators of this type of anti-Black violence is ever increasing. Our responses to these complex problems has been sufficiently varied. There is a great deal of liberatory potential in strategies that involve **particularizing privilege and power**. Particularizing privilege and power does not mean explaining to whites the privileges they have vis-à-vis the police/state/each other. It means calling out the killers and would-be-killers by name, defying the media machines programmed to protect them, and taking direct action to deliver the consequences the “justice” system rejects. It means pushing for consequences for each specific police violator, including bystander bobbies and complacent cops, and then working to defund and dismantle the carceral state agencies which empower them. Most importantly, this means taking inventory of the peoples’ own power, and expanding the conceptualization of power beyond a mere replication of imperialist power-through-violence. What resources do we have which our oppressors do not? What power sources might we access which they cannot destroy or compromise? (Re)defining and particularizing Africana power is key to shifting this fight in our favor.

Towards this end, these compounded crises have caused the African world to look inward, into that deep place of culture and spirit which enabled our ancestors to break many a chain. In this place, there is some much-needed self-criticism; some of us are more open to critical, constructive dialogue about areas of contradiction and disunity. Some of us are taking closer, more nuanced look at our “leaders” and leadership models. We are invoking history—and some of us are actually studying it in the applied fashion our forebears in Africana Studies intended. We are looking at our elders and the traditions of healing and struggle which kept them alive. We are beating COVID-19 across Africa and the Americas with the stuff that grows in grandmother’s backyard. This virus has temporarily blocked some of the economic screeching of Europe and Asia, and African governments are being forced to listen to the people. Others are literally invoking spirits. Ancestral spirits are being called—warlike, protective, and healing ones. Black people who had retreated to religious, cultural and spiritual maroon spaces are attempting to implement those best practices in support of those who march, blog, chant, and tear down racist monuments. This interior space is the space they cannot send drones into. They can hack into Facebook groups and pages, but this is the dialogue they cannot fully grasp or engage. This is a place from which a particular Black power emanates. It is bot-resistant. In this space, women and men fight alongside one another, and occasionally the children join in—as they have in the past. We can see the returned ancestors in their little faces. New life will be breathed into old slogans until we all can breathe freely. This is the space in which nobody really dies because they live in our hearts and on t-shirts and on Black tongues and (undefeated) Black Twitter. These are the inextinguishable flames which will burn hotter each time the enemies of humanity try to put them out. This is the place where core values live, where a new-old ethic is emerging, where plans are made AND



offered up to the community for vetting AND executed. Of course, this is not a conflict-free zone, but it is a zone in which I (hope to) feel a common purpose taking shape. Kwame Ture said we cannot say we have unity simply because we all know what we do not want. We will have unity when we decide what we DO want. Whatever it is, it will come from this place.

PERSPECTIVE 2: DR. JARED BALL

Police are born out of processes of enslavement and colonialism. I like what I hear from sociologist Alex Vitale whose work discusses the police model in this way. In the U.S. there were certainly the poor whites in the south conscripted to police the African property of the rich whites, and in the north poor whites being hired by capitalists to crush labor. But I like what Vitale seems to be saying, that those histories are made invisible by a propagated myth of policing history. Specifically, this entire piece about “our” police force here being modeled after a fantasy of 19th century London professional policing which emerged to take things over from disorganized bands of community-based security forces. But Vitale makes a compelling point about the professionalization policing being about sublimating the role of protection to imperial and colonial purposes. Malcolm X continues to be more right by the day when he said that “the police do locally what the military does internationally.” So as Vitale points out, the London metro police upon which US policing models are based was itself part of the colonizing mission of Ireland. Robert Peele, from whom we get “The Bobbies,” was in charge of crushing the Irish and brought that back home to local policing in London. Vitale also makes the great point that most policing of Black communities takes place in districts controlled by the Democratic Party, so the idea that we should be politically beholden to them is absurd and quite colonial.

Today, much of our discussion of the police is distorted by the more than 1,000 television and films produced over the last two decades by the CIA, FBI, DOD, SS, etc., to promote positive views of US military and police efforts. Our news is shaped equally by those same forces assuring most of the country is exposed to a critique of the police couched in liberal or reactionary interpretations and prescribed solutions. DuVernay’s 13th film is among the best examples of this sophisticated process: an apparent criticism of mass incarceration is presented with the discussion of solutions held entirely between Hillary Clinton and the Koch Brothers. Similarly, today, as was the case after nearly every historical uprising precipitated by police violence, the media narrative becomes almost exclusively about protestor behavior and which vapid slogan of “stop police violence” or “end white supremacy” will be echoed and then directed for redress right back to Biden or some other Democrat. This is encouraged by an imposition of compliant punditry, which is happy to focus on those slogans but offer nothing new or challenging regarding policy or organizational platform. Movements, which I support, which call for police abolition versus reform find it difficult to find footing in conversations much less actual follow through into policy. What the film *Do Not Resist* and others glimpses into the real police force demonstrate is their clarity of mission—saving America, saving property, keeping savages separated, etc. So, reform and training are not options. Police response to protests, regardless of cop identity, shows them as an institution adhering to their “ancestral” origins.



PERSPECTIVE 3: DR. KWASI KONADU

Our planet has 197 countries. Less than 20 have unarmed police forces. Any talk of disarming police must first confront two facts: 80 percent of the world police with deadly force but 90 percent were shaped by colonial slavery. What's the connection? Let's start with Africa. European colonial laws in Africa replaced internalized law and order, enforced by community sanctions and councils of elders. Much of Africa felt the blunt trauma of these laws because they were enforced by paramilitary police forces which colonists created—for force/slave labor, the business of exploitation, quelling protest and rebellion. Except Botswana and Malawi, where police are unarmed, post-independent states continue the colonial approach to law enforcement yet politicizing them so that they suppress oppositional parties and protect the interests of elites. Police forces in Africa are less well-trained, equipped or visible, especially in rural areas, but because of their ambivalent social position—belonging to one class while serving another—are less reliable as a means for social control. Like Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America inherited colonial policing and its authoritarian verve—protecting and serving the property and safety of colonists. Arising out of slavery, heads of police are approved by cabinets or prime ministers/presidents, who virtually governed the police. Brazil's police are controlled mainly by state governors, while Colombia's national police fall under the Ministry of Defense. In all, overwhelmingly male police forces prioritize state over citizen protection, abstract law and order over (the ruse of) crime control, coercive force to ensure compliance on behalf of the state, and often in competition with, if not moonlighting as, private security contractors. The colonial slavery producing these police forces did the same elsewhere.

Policing in the United States evolved from informal, volunteer or conscripted men forming community watches to warn of impending danger. These were augmented by unarmed and unpaid (except fees from warrants served) constables without uniform. In urban areas, centralized police forces, now publicly funded and full-time bureaucracies, were created to ensure social rather than crime control; private business had transferred the cost of their protection to the state, which paid for policing. Rural, southern areas used "slave patrols" as their model—to apprehend, deter revolt, maintain order, enforce racist laws. Together, rural and urban police were corrupt and brutal, operating under the control of politicians, who were beholden to economic elites. Political and economic elites who created the venues for public drinking, prostitution and workers to strike, then criminalized those behaviors, assigning them to an identifiable "class" dangerous to social order. Protests or strikes were termed "riots" and police were legally authorized to use force under the guise of rule of law, to patrol and surveil, to wear uniforms to signal a clear difference between them and the "dangerous" elements. Police departments armed officers *after* they had informally armed themselves. This is where the 2nd Amendment comes in. People were armed in the U.S. long before centralized police forces. The police is only



one of several “militia, being necessary to the security of a free state.”² State police, say, in Pennsylvania, imitated US occupying forces in the Philippines and the vigilante Texas Rangers suppressed Mexicans and ousted indigenous folks from their land. The central problem that led to policing was never crime, but political and economic power. To disarm police, as they become more militarized, requires more than taking away their guns—and that’s a much bigger, protracted, and literal fight.

PERSPECTIVE 4: DR. MJIBA FREHIWOT

The militarization of the police in the United States is a consequence and reinforcement of the capitalist system. A system in which profit is more important than people and institutions are created to protect profit and property. The police and military as institutions are tasked with defending the ruling class in America and the global interests of U.S. Imperialism. As an arm of the state they operate from an ideological perspective that reinforces the ruling classes position. This enables the ruling class and corporations to continue to exploit the labor of people of African descent and to keep them mentally, physically, and economically oppressed. This oppression is manifested through the race and class-based discrimination that focuses on cities with majority Black and Brown people. The lack of access to basic human rights in education, employment, health care, quality housing, and freedom of speech is a byproduct of capitalism. This by-product of capitalism is evident in the United States, Latin America, the Caribbean, and many parts of the African Continent.

Police Violence in the U.S. is part and parcel of the militarization of globalization as we see an intensive push towards the AFRICOM (United States Africa Command) model. The police in America use similar tactics as the U.S. military in war settings. While at war these institutions use all available resources to subdue their target: whoever challenges the status quo. This ultimately translates to the use of deadly force against Black and Brown people who dare to challenge the position of the police or military or to question the government or capitalism. This is evident in places like Brazil where Afro-Brazilians are disproportionately targeted and killed by the police force. Or in African countries where the police and military are often trained by AFRICOM. This training is laced with an American/Western ideology that promotes profit over people and positions anyone who challenges the system as an enemy combatant. The solution to the militarization of the police is not something that will occur until the capitalist system is torn down and Pan-Africanism is achieved. Until then, there are reform efforts that will hold back the brutality for a period until, like clockwork, it will rise again and again.

² “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed,” reads the second amendment, which depart from its counterpart in the English Bill of Rights, which concerns a fight between Protestants and Catholics using arms. Virginian slaveholder James Madison, who was integral in crafting the U.S. Bill of Rights and the Constitution, proposed well-armed and regulated militia to secure the country with religious exemptions. His proposal informed the House and Senate versions (1789) ratified as the 2nd amendment (1791).



PERSPECTIVE 5: DR. TODD BURROUGHS

Even in its last days, President Trump's sanity is refreshing. His reverse-perp walk to the closed church where he was not invited—holding the Bible upside down in an iron pose—is a semiotic scholar's dream. His clearing of the District of Columbia park of rabble-rousers for the walk from the White House, his tough-talk with some of the nation's governors (a subconscious search for an **analog[ue] spectre**, [Frank Rizzo?](#)), is not just posturing; it's a serial liars' search for a public space for his most literally brutal visual honesty. He is sane and others are insane because he is clear on what it takes to control society—colonial might. The documentary *Do Not Resist*, an exploration of *police-meets-military* thinking, was acted out in real time in the national public sphere these past 10 days. Trump showed enormous clarity about identifying his enemies and friends and openly declaring the proper action needed to protect the latter from the former. Others continue the insanity by cyclizing, pretending they have not understood for at least half a century what needs to be done—the dismantling of the police as a military force.

On the one side of the sanity-insanity divide is optimism: The police don't *have* to have just one type of interaction. The police don't *have* to act as if every Black and Brown community is America is Fallujah. There are *choices* here, and all we must do is to ask the right questions, be optimistic that folks will see and understand, if the right dreamers march long enough, the right moderates voted in office. America will evolve toward sanity through civic numbers, concludes the liberal thought, ever bordered by the comforting tones of National Public Radio at the top of the hour.

On the other side is silence and numbers not civil. **The silence: MSNBC unsuccessfully attempted to ask Republican Senators' reaction to Trump's park clearing as they went to lunch.** The Blue-Suited Wall of Silence. The numbers: 10,000 citizen arrests in eight days to get four murder charges. Seventeen thousand National Guard members, activated, ready as of June 2—as many as there are active duty troops in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. So why can't police provide services to people—assist communities in a day-to-day function, help develop society? Why can't their unlimited budgets be used to deliver food to the hungry like Amazon Prime? The way these types of questions immediately fall to the floor, banished from the editorial borders, reveal the obvious truth that the insane majority must keep ever at bay: the police *are* the military and power creates and maintains it. It has consistently served ancient power in ancient, time-proven ways. **Although there seems to be some backing off from the establishment as these words are written, it must be said that [no knock](#) pre-dates the door.**



KEY TAKEAWAYS, TOWN HALL, RESOURCES

Key Takeaways

- The experiences of African peoples in the colonized western world are tantamount to an ongoing war with multiple battlefronts. This war has caused us to look inward—at the self, at contradiction and disunity, at our “leaders” and leadership models, at history—Into that deep place of culture and spirit which enabled our ancestors to break many a chain. From there a particular Black power emanates.
- Most policing of Black communities takes place in districts controlled by the Democratic Party, so the idea that we should be politically beholden to them is absurd. Research into the police force demonstrates their clarity of mission: saving America, property, etc. Reform and training are not options.
- Police departments armed officers *after* they had already armed themselves. Whites were armed in the U.S. long before (joining) centralized police forces. The central problem that led to policing was never crime, but political and economic power. The 2nd amendment is at stake and power which maintains it.
- The solution to the militarization of the police is not something that will occur until the capitalist system is torn down and Pan-Africanism is achieved. Until then, there are reform efforts that will hold back the brutality for a period until, like clockwork, it will rise again and again.
- The way critical questions about policing instantly fall to the floor, banished from the editorial borders, reveal the obvious truth that the insane majority must keep ever at bay: the police *are* the military and power creates and maintains it. It has consistently served ancient power in ancient, time-proven ways.

Town Hall

June 19, 2020 at 7 pm: <https://www.crowdcast.io/e/blacklash-think-tank>

Resources

Books

Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishing, 2017)

Alex Vitale, *The End of Policing* (New York and London: Verso. 2017)

Articles

<https://plsonline.eku.edu/sites/plsonline.eku.edu/files/the-history-of-policing-in-us.pdf>

<https://sfbayview.com/2013/02/dorner-case-echoes-californias-black-panther-past/>;

<https://theintercept.com/2020/06/05/pentagon-war-game-gen-z/>

Films: *The Seven Five* (2015); *Do Not Resist* (2016); *Queen & Slim* (2019)