

The urgent need for deep changes in American policing

Are the police meant to protect people? Or to fight them?

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Protest in downtown Washington, DC. Koshu Kunii, Unsplash,

This spring, anti-lockdown protesters threw around phrases like “authoritarian police state” as they asserted a right to ignore public health orders during a pandemic. By late May, we got a glimpse of what such an explosive term really means, as African Americans and allies stood up once again for their right to not be killed by police for no reason.

The killing of George Floyd—and Breonna Taylor and so many others—demonstrates a persistent malady within the culture of American law enforcement: an oppositional, authoritarian stance toward people of color. In the unrest since Floyd’s death, we’ve seen this malady again and again. Police in riot gear have instigated violent confrontations with protesters and bystanders. Even journalists have been targeted for unprovoked assault, intimidation, and arrest. Along with the old trick of hiding name badges, some cops have worn uniforms that don’t even identify their

employer. The US attorney general—the nation’s chief law enforcement officer—personally directed police to violently disperse protesters so his boss, the president, could pose for photos after threatening to quell protests with military force.

Researchers and advocates distinguish between a *guardian* model of policing and a *warrior* model. Fundamentally, are the police meant to protect people or to fight them? Many individual officers take their vocation to serve and protect quite seriously. But a dominant strain of police culture emphasizes war: bad guys to fight and heavy weaponry to fight them with (see [“Militarized policing,” September 17, 2014](#)). At a protest, a guardian approach would mean protecting people’s safety as they exercise their rights and, secondarily, protecting people’s property from destruction and theft. Recently we’ve seen a lot of the opposite, as police in multiple cities gave looters free rein while escalating conflict with protesters.

It’s not easy to shift police culture in a less combative and authoritarian direction. The warrior model is deeply ingrained. Thoroughgoing change is needed—to how police are trained, to the rules that govern their encounters with citizens, to the relationship between their unions and elected officials. Cities have to stop asking police (and paying them) to do the job of social workers—a project a few cities now appear to be pursuing. Police departments must be accountable to civilian review with real teeth. The Pentagon needs to stop sending combat gear to local police. All Americans deserve to be seen by police as citizens to serve, not threats to subdue—at protests as well as in day-to-day encounters.

In the meantime, it is possible to hold police accountable for their most egregious offenses. Floyd’s killers are in custody and await trial. Several violent policing incidents at recent protests have been swiftly punished. Federal oversight of certain police departments with a history of racist violence has led to some meaningful reforms—and while President Trump has halted this oversight, a future administration can resume it.

But until deeper change comes, protest is the appropriate response. For many Americans, it’s the only available one—the only way to be heard by a largely unaccountable power.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Deadly force.”