

Cops, Cover-ups & Corruption (The Fitrakis F

by Bob Fitrakis

A sample of the opening pages

Police Officers And Prejudice

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Recently, a white suburban woman who refused a lawful request to sign a traffic ticket became a cause célèbre when she threw a fit about being groped by the police. Obviously she's never exercised her First Amendment rights at a Klan rally where groping is the order of the day. Her story is news precisely because it is so unlikely. But what about the more common and constant victims of police abuse like Rashad Grayson, his parents and little sister, who are just a few of many African-American citizens currently suing the Columbus police for abuse?

On August 15, 1993, at nine in the evening, the 13-year- old Rashad was admittedly in front of his house playing with fake nunchakus, a harmless plastic toy with foam-rubber covering. One of Columbus' newest and finest police officers, Samuel Feldman, was out to make perhaps his "first arrest." According to Feldman's deposition on file in Franklin County's Common Pleas Court, he had just finished his probationary "coaching" period. He had already been suspended for 10 days during that probationary period for an "unreported use of force" violation.

Now Feldman was on his own and he knew a criminal when he saw one. Feldman decided to arrest Rashad for "disorderly conduct." Feldman, who admits under oath to having played with real nunchakus himself while a teenager, found Rashad to be "recklessly engaged in some type of turbulent behavior." The white Feldman "considered Rashad a suspicious person" because he was swinging his toy nunchakus in a "proficient manner." He also assumed that there might already be an unseen "possible victim." Officer Feldman explained his theory of probable cause: the black youth "could have used the nunchakus on this person" who didn't exist.

"Bad boys, bad boys, whatchya gonna do when they come for your toy nunchakus?" Rashad did nothing but comply with the officer's deranged prejudices, but his parents made the mistake of questioning Officer Feldman's actions and attempt- ing to videotape the arrest. By the time it was over, Rashad's mother, who was videotaping, was tackled, his sister was Maced, and his father, Samuel Grayson, was beaten with a police baton. The "suspicious" Rashad was quickly forgotten as up to 30 police officers and a helicopter cordoned off the area and his family was dragged off to jail. The police later returned and arrested Rashad for "disorderly conduct."

Rashad was acquitted of this charge and the prosecutor's office refused to bring charges against his parents. This is a far more common scenario in Columbus, but not as sensational as a black

cop arresting a white, middle-class woman.

We live increasingly in a police state as politicians whip up irrational and emotional fears of "bad boys" with black faces. We're convinced we need 100,000 more cops on the street even though per-capita violent crime has declined since the early '70s and is no higher than it was in the early 1930s. The prison industrial complex is involved in promoting a new, de-humanized, all-powerful, all-consuming enemy. And it is disproportionately minorities and the poor that are the victims of overzealous police tactics. A few years ago, a survey showed that two-thirds of Americans didn't think a police officer should have to have a search warrant to enter the home of "a suspected drug dealer." If police officers want to be respected, they ought to respect our Constitution and our fundamental human rights. They ought to be required to continue their education, particularly in liberal arts. A decent Social Problems class might help off-set their authoritarian mindset that has been documented in study after study. Police, whether they like it or not, are the foot soldiers defending American liberties. But now, with the Cold War over, there appears to be an "enemies gap." With no Soviets to hate, we've turned a lot of that savage aggression inward towards our own citizens. The real lesson of Waco is the eerie similarity between the bomber pilot in Vietnam who said, "We had to destroy the village in order to save it," and the militarist in the law-and-order establishment who argued that they had to kill the kids in order to save them from Koresh.

This helps to explain state Attorney General Betty Montgomery's new "air force." You may have seen the blurb a few weeks ago about Betty copping three 1970s-vintage military copters for the War on Drugs, specifically marijuana, the demon weed. There's never been a more stupid, misguided and unwinnable war than the one against pot. And if the cops took my Social Problems course, they would learn that most addiction and drug abuse is legally prescribed or purchased at the liquor store. If Jesus had rolled one up after the Last Supper, sucked it into his lungs and passed it around to his disciples and proclaimed, "This is the breath of my life, this do in remembrance of me," those copters would be out searching for stills instead of hemp stalks. And Betty Boop would be pledging a zero-tolerance policy against alcohol and soliciting campaign contributions at Three-Reefer Power Luncheons.

February 14, 1996

Copwatch

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Put a hundred of "Columbus' finest" in riot gear and you can count on a riot--usually a police riot.

The police tactics on Friday, May 17, are simply the latest in a long series of police-instigated rioting and misconduct in the campus area. Last Friday, May 31, I spoke with a dozen students and a lizard exercising their First Amendment rights on the northwest corner of 12th and High. Their demonstration posed a simple question: "Is South Campus a student neighborhood or a

penal colony!?"

Neither. It's condemned and occupied territory, thanks, in part, to the hysteria whipped up by Campus Partners. All that "neighborhood in decay" rhetoric has been taken to heart by the Columbus Police Department.

Tom Vigarino, one of the first arrested on May 17, reports that he was "tackled from behind by a couple undercover cops" that he never saw and who have failed to identify themselves as officers. As they beat him, he recalls one of them warning, "Motherfucker, don't ever come back to 12th again!" Vigarino, who lives two blocks away on 10th, wonders why he can't walk the streets in his neighborhood. He is charged with "rioting" for allegedly throwing a bottle at the police, a charge he and various witnesses vehemently deny.

Other witnesses report that police officers purposely shoved Shammass Jones, a third-year criminal law major, over a chain-enclosed planter. Jones was attempting to videotape police activity, and as he lay defenseless on the pavement he was repeatedly Mace'd and his camera smashed. When police returned his tape, the video had been erased. Another triumph for the Columbus police's interpretation of the First Amendment.

The police then beat, Mace'd and arrested Chris Wisniewski, a fourth-year journalism student, for complaining about Jones' treatment. "I was knocked flat on my ass from behind. We were in back of the police by High Street watching what they were doing on 12th, away from the action, and they just turned on us because Shammass had a camera," recalls Wisniewski.

Wisniewski says he was taken to the Zettler Hardware parking lot near campus and held. When students complained about their treatment, they were met with the flippant comments of officers, including one who encouraged others to "get 'em riled up, so I can Mace 'em again."

Writing in *The Lantern* on May 24, Eric Sims, a senior majoring in journalism, recounts how he and a friend were accosted while walking to a convenience store on May 17 by police who offered helpful hints like "...What the fuck do you think you're doing? Turn around, NOW!"

"They chased the students down, beating the ones they caught, Macing the others. Students were screaming and almost trampling each other to run back to their houses," wrote Sims.

The students all tell the same story. No problems, no fights, prior to the police invasion. In fact, area residents had complied with earlier police requests to use plastic fencing to contain their guests and even made public announcements over a PA system asking residents to cooperate with police. Only after the police actions were bottles thrown and items set on fire. But that must be put in the context of the indiscriminate beatings, excessive Macing and random assault with "knee-knockers"--rubber riot bullets--and other anti-riot devices. Throw in the mounted riot police and cop helicopter and you've got the makings for police-state mayhem. But the students are fighting back.

The demonstrators announced the formation of a new and long-overdue organization: Copwatch.

They plan to monitor police activity and take legal action to prevent what has now become a long stream of abuses.

Let's recall the most obvious. After Ohio State's last big win at home over Michigan, unlike other universities that enjoy victory celebrations, Columbus cops Maced the hell out of celebrating fans attempting to tear down the goalpost. Last spring, riot police Maced and brutally beat Antioch students for holding a peaceful demonstration at the federal building opposing cuts in student loans. And last fall, police fired tear gas canisters and "knee-knockers" indiscriminately into south campus streets and residences making the air in a four-square block area virtually unbreathable, and then beat and arrested students fleeing to fresh air.

The seeds of the problem germinated in bad social policy. First, an asinine decision to raise the drinking age. This only makes sense if raising the drinking age means that the students would comply; they won't. College students always drink alcohol. If the drinking age is 18, they drink it in local bars; if it's 21, they drink at house parties. If you close and burn down the bars, they'll drink in their cars and alcohol-related fatalities will rise. In our society, it's a rite of adult passage. The college and the city should be promoting responsible drinking, not police rioting.

What message was being sent when the police department decided to crack down on "drunk walkers" in the campus area a year or so ago? Again, why not crack down on drunk walkers at Christopher's after the Ohio legislature adjourns on any given day? If the police would contact me, I could gladly give them the names of a few senators and representatives I've never seen sober.

Stop the police repression and brutality. Have the police read the Constitution. And if this is what the Columbus Public Safety Department means by a new policy of "community policing," I wonder about their definition.

June 5, 1996

Call Him Mace Ventura

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Channel 4's investigative series "Trouble on 12th Avenue" aired last week. Producer Joel Chow and investigative reporter Rich Skidmore provided viewers with some of the year's most provocative video footage. Despite the standard denials, obfuscations and wild tales told by police officials, their own videotapes tell a different story. Still even more damning is the Internal Affairs paper trail left by the officers accused of "excessive use of force" on May 18.

The series' first segment focused on an incident involving Kevin Lennon. Lieutenant David Wood, who investigated Lennon's complaint against Officer Robert Coffman, wrote in his June 7, 1996, memo to Chief James Jackson that, "When I first viewed the film it appeared that Officer Coffman's strike to the subject's back was improper. After careful review, this investigation it is obvious [sic] that his actions were necessary and proper. I recommend no

further action necessary." No surprise.

The police tapes, obtained by Channel 4, clearly show Coffman coming in and punching Lennon as he's being carried away by other cops. You can hear the words, "Enough, Bob," from a fellow officer, which brings what appears to be a swipe from Coffman towards the cop advocating professional behavior.

Coffman is not always keen on professionalism. On February 9, 1994, Coffman ran a license tag number for a Sergeant Watkins for "personal use." He was "counseled." Perhaps the police should have spoken with Becky West, who on April 17, 1993, was injured in Coffman's custody. That was ruled an "accidental injury." Or they could have talked with Tony Delpra who filed a complaint for an incident on May 13, 1991, when he was "struck in jaw" by Coffman. This was, of course, "justified." Or they could have talked to three different mothers on two different occasions who charged that Coffman pointed his gun at kids during raids on their homes. And the list goes on.

Officer Michael Stalnaker knees Lennon on the tape. Another of Columbus' finest, Stalnaker has, since 1987, either Maceo or had 13 "excessive use of force" complaints. Whether it was an "unfounded" shove against Paul Collier "causing him to hit his head," or the "justified" use of a "flash-light" against Robert Walker, or the "justified" kicking of Tim Hemmert in the stomach, for some reason citizens seem to unfairly single out Stalnaker. With all the "justified" force being used by the officer, it's no wonder it slipped his mind to report he kicked Hemmert. His "written reprimand" was, no doubt, unwarranted. So many unruly citizens, so little time.

The second segment shows that there's always time to take a young lad--in this case, George Sandrock--to "the whipping post." Different officers; same pattern of behavior. Sandrock suffered contusions on his nose and upper left eye and a laceration over his right eye that required stitches. This, for not dispersing quickly enough while on a private porch behind party fencing per police instructions. According to police reports, Sandrock's a real ass-kicker. He stood his ground, cussing out cops, despite "two verbal orders" directed at him by Officer Jimmie Barnes. After Macing Sandrock, in Barnes' version, the youngster attacked his riot shield with his fist and head. Yes, indeed, Sandrock swung his "fist so hard at Officer Barnes that he lost his balance and fell into the riot shield."

Just ask Officer Eric Moore, who attempted "to restrain Mr. Sandrock's arms and legs while he was kicking and swinging his fist at the officers." And Officer Martin Malone also saw Sandrock "resisting." Now, anyone who saw the video saw the officers push Sandrock over the railing, hold him there and beat the hell out of him. The Allman Brothers' classic "Whipping Post" would have been appropriate background music. But who's going to believe a lying punk like Sandrock when you have three officers like Barnes, Moore and Malone. Since 1990, six citizens have complained after Barnes Maceo them; three persons "accidentally injured" themselves in his custody in the last year and a half.

At least Moore "accidentally shot himself in the leg" and was reprimanded on April 1, 1990. Add to that nine Moore Macings--including Macing a man in Florida while Moore was on vacation. A written reprimand resulted from Moore's Florida adventure. Stir in seven citizen complaints, all very similar, all found to be "unfounded" allegations. These involved "rude and obnoxious behavior," "alleged theft" and forcefully pulling police out of their cars. Toss in seven more force complaints, including pulling Joseph Cook from his car and putting a gun to his head and three--including Sandrocks--"accidentally injured" prisoner complaints in the last three years.

There's still more with Malone: 17 complaints since 1987 for Macing, excessive use of force, and an injured prisoner. And the third and final segment dealt with Criminal Justice student Shammias Jones who was videotaping the police activity away from the fray and was allegedly attacked by Officer David Dennison. Dennison's attack on Jones was "justified." Just like his 10 Macings since March 1993.

End of sample

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