

# COIN of the Realm: Sprawling Police State Brings the Wars Home

October 3, 2013

Review of *Life During Wartime: Resisting Counterinsurgency*, ed. by Kristian Williams, William Munger and Lara Messersmith-Glavin (AK Press, 2013); and *Enemies Within: Inside the NYPD's Secret Spying Unit and Bin Laden's Final Plot Against America*, by Matt Apuzzo & Adam Goldman (Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2013).

Anyone who spent 10 minutes at an Occupy encampment knows that the police response was intense, invasive, unconstitutional and bordered on the deadly. In New York, Oakland, Boston and in hundreds of other locales nationwide, the police were not there to serve and protect nonviolent protesters, let alone the general public. To quote Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's infamous words during a week-long police riot against anti-war protesters at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, his cops were there "not to create disorder but to preserve disorder." Who can improve on Daley? *Life During Wartime* tries. I think it fails, though the trying is well worth the effort.

A ponderous book that's impossible to read in one sitting, or even 10, it's filled with much-needed information on counterinsurgency efforts at home and abroad. It chronicles mainstream institutions such as the media that serve to legitimize the existing social order and cool out, co-opt or crush dissent. It examines everything from state violence to an Orwellian manipulation of language. It also speaks to the capacity of social movements to act smarter in response. The breadth of its examples and the understanding of its 15 contributors of the depth of manipulation alone makes the book necessary reading. That's where it succeeds.

Where it fails is in its broader thesis, which asserts that every element of the social order is implicated not only in reproducing conformity and compliance and in legitimating its own power but in naming counterinsurgency (or, COIN) as its principal method of social control.

Co-editor Kristian Williams writes that Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's famous maxim, "War is the continuation of politics by other means," can usefully be reversed to read that politics is war — in the present case counterinsurgency — by other means. At the end of this book counterinsurgency is not only treated as political but the preferred and dominant form of class maintenance in the United States.

That's a correction to the standard Disney-like understanding of bourgeois democracy, where all would be right with the democratic system if only more citizen activists and excluded groups engaged in electoral politics. But everyday social controls don't constitute counterinsurgency and dissident work or community cultures absent organization don't in themselves constitute resistance. Using "counterinsurgency" as a circus tent covering every aspect of class rule explains little about the actual nature of the state, the multiple choices an elite has in tactics, the sometimes feral differences elites have among themselves or the numerous ways oppressed groups can fight back.

Using counterinsurgency as the definition of class politics flattens the possibilities not only for a ruling class but for its subalterns, too. Still, given how much material the authors marshal, reading this book is worth the slog. Even if the contributors don't present a seamlessly persuasive master plan, it's better to know what's lurking in the dark.

A book that succeeds, if only because its is so much more theoretically circumscribed, is *Enemies*

Within. There's no master narrative offered by the authors, both Associated Press reporters. And while this book could use one, it manages to tell the necessary story about just how stupidly and thuggishly the New York Police Department operated in its mission creep to ferret out potential terrorists in the years following 9/11.

The villains are clear: Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Police Commissioner Ray Kelly and Deputy Commissioner for Intelligence David Cohen. If there are any "good guys" in this story (and in any other context they would not be mine), they are the FBI agents and state police officers who did not surveil whole communities, including New York's some 700,000 Muslims (a process Cohen called "zone defense").

The FBI's relative restraint did not rub off on the cowboys at the NYPD who routinely treated constitutionally protected speech, whether publicly expressed, written or in casual conversation as a precursor to terrorism.

Despite its aggressive surveillance and a soaring counter terrorism budget, the NYPD failed to net a single legitimate terrorism suspect in the post-9/11 decade. And when the single most dangerous terrorist plot to take shape in that time did crop up, New York's Finest were caught unawares.

This conspiracy — hatched by one Najibullah Zazi, a young Queens resident of Afghani descent who sought to bomb subways in New York in 2009 — is at the center of *Enemies Within* and gives the book its mystery novel quality.

Zazi received explosives training in Pakistan from al-Qaeda and later recruited a pair of former high school friends from Flushing to join him in carrying out his intended "martyrdom operation." Zazi's plans were uncovered by the FBI, which had put him under surveillance. The NYPD's contribution was to come charging into the case at the last minute and unwittingly give away the investigation to an informant at Zazi's mosque in Queens, who they grilled and who in turn alerted Zazi that he was being watched. Zazi fled New York and was subsequently nabbed by the Feds.

In the authors' retelling of this tale, the NYPD emerges as a mendacious band of Keystone Cops. To this day, Bloomberg and Kelly continue to insist that the NYPD remain free of any external oversight lest New York become "a more dangerous place to live." Meanwhile, the Intelligence Division operates with 600 officers on a \$60 million budget, and Muslim residents, even those once favorably disposed to helping the police, are — as one rights attorney said — living in fear. For them, New York is less safe, thanks to the NYPD.

While *Enemies Within* makes clear that the NYPD has and is continuing to pursue its own private "war on terror," the book's narrow scope leaves out what movement activists and civil libertarians already know from experience: the New York police force is not only monitoring Muslim communities but proactively harassing a wide array of left-wing activists in the city, too. If neither book offers a synthetic explanation of the complex relationship between police or military practices and the needs of the capitalist state and the corporate class, their capacity for telling useful stories that contribute to developing that synthesis is invaluable.

[This review first appeared in *The Independent*, Sept. 27, 2013.]