Ten Days that May Have Changed the World: An Internationalist Perspective

written by Richard Greeman | June 10, 2020

Sparked by the police murder of George Floyd and fueled by Minneapolis authorities' reluctance to arrest and charge the murderer's three police accomplices, mass protests have been sweeping across the United States with an intensity not seen since the 1960s. In over 150 cities, African Americans and their allies have flooded the streets, braving the COVID-19 pandemic, braving police violence, challenging centuries of racial and class inequalities, demanding liberty and justice for all, day after day defying a corrupt, racist power structure based on violent repression.

1. Breaches in the System's Defenses

Today [June 7—ed.], after ten consecutive days in the streets, this outpouring of popular indignation against systematic, historic injustice, has opened a number of breaches in the defensive wall of the system. The legal authorities in the state of Minnesota, where George Floyd was murdered, have been forced to arrest and indict as accomplices the three other policemen who aided and abetted the killer, against whom the charges were raised from third to second degree murder. A split has opened at the summit of power, where the Secretary of Defense and numerous Pentagon officials have broken with their Commander-in-Chief, Donald Trump, who has attempted to mobilize the U.S. Army against the protesters.

This historic uprising is an outpouring of accumulated black anger over decades of unpunished police murders of unarmed African-Americans. It articulates the accumulated grief of families and communities, the sheer outrage over impunity for killer cops in both the North and the South. It reflects anger at capitalist America's betrayal of Martin Luther King's "dream" of non-violent revolution. and horror at the return to the era of public lynchings cheered on by the President of the United States. It impatiently demands that America at long last live up to its proclaimed democratic ideals, here and now. In the words of one African-American protester, William Achukwu, 28, of San Francisco: "Our Declaration of Independence says life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Right now, we are only dealing with the life part here. This is a first step. But liberty is what a lot of people out here are marching for."

2. Violence and Non-Violence

It came as no surprise that local and state officials across the U.S. reacted to largely peaceful, spontaneous mass protests against police brutality and racism by unleashing a maelstrom of militarized police violence.[1] For a generation, the Federal government has been quietly gifting huge stocks of surplus military equipment, including tanks, to local police forces and sheriff's offices

eager to play with lethal new toys designed for counter-insurgency in places like Afghanistan. Under both Democrats (Clinton, Obama) and Republicans (Bush, Trump) the federal state has been arming law enforcement in preparation for a preventive counter-revolution. This is precisely what President Trump is calling for today: "full dominance" by means of military crackdowns, mass arrests and long prison sentences in the name of "law and order." Thanks to the determination of these masses of militant but largely non-violent protesters, the military is divided and Trump will not have his way.

Apropos of violence, it was feared at first that the numerous incidences of setting fires, smashing shop fronts, and looting, especially after dark when the large, orderly crowds of mixed demonstrators had gone home, would in some way "spoil" the uprising and provide a pretext for the violent, military suppression of the whole movement, as called for by Trump, who blamed it all on an imaginary terrorist group called "ANTIFA" (short for "anti-fascism," in fact a loose network). At the same time, reports of gangs of young white racists wearing MAGA ("Make America Great Again") hats committing vandalism, of "Accelerationists" systematically setting fires in black neighborhoods to "provoke revolution," and of violent police *provocateurs* are not entirely to be discounted.

Such actions play into Trump's hands. On the other hand, the more reasonable voices of the hundreds of thousands of angry but nonviolent protesters, might not have been listened to by the authorities if it had not been for the threat of violence from the fringes if their voices were ignored. Instead of burning their own neighborhoods, as has happened in past riots, today's militants are strategically hitting symbols of state repression and capitalism – lighting up and destroying police property, trashing the stores of million-dollar corporations, and even pushing against the gates of the White House. In any case, as far as "looting" is concerned, as the spokeswomen of BLM argued at George Floyd's funeral, white people have been looting Africa and African-Americans for centuries. Payback is long over-due.

3. Black and White Anti-Racist Convergence

What is especially remarkable and heartening to see as we view the impassioned faces of the demonstrators through images on videos, newspaper photos, and TV reports, is the realization that at least half the demonstrators in the crowds proclaiming "Black Lives Matter" are white people! Here again, a serious breach has been opened in the wall of systemic, institutionalized racism that has for centuries enabled the U.S. ruling class to divide and conquer the working masses, pitting slave laborers and their discriminated descendants against relatively "privileged" white wage slaves in a competitive race to the bottom. Today, they are uniting in the fight for justice and equality. Equally remarkable is the continuing. leadership role of women, especially African-American women in the founding of both the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the Women's March against Trump's Inauguration. The participation of young and old, LGBT and physically challenged folks is also to be remarked.

This convergence of these freedom struggles across deeply rooted racial divides promises to open new paths as U.S. social movements emerge from the COVID confinement. Even more remarkable, albeit limited, are incidents, also recorded on citizen video, of individual cops apologizing for police violence, hugging victims, and taking the knee with demonstrators. Public officials, like the Mayor of Los Angeles, have also been obliged to meet with the protesters and to apologize for their previous racist remarks. Moreover, as we shall see below, serious cracks have emerged in the unity of the U.S. military, both among the ranks, which are 40 percent people of color, and even among top officers. Such is the power of this massive, self-organized, inter-racial movement demanding "freedom and justice for all."

4. Cracks Within the Regime

Today, after ten days during which the protests have continued to increase numerically and to deepen in radical content, cracks have opened in the defenses of the ruling corporate billionaire class and have reached the White House, where Donald J. Trump, the self-deluded, ignorant bully and pathological liar supposedly in charge, has finally been challenged by his own appointed security officials.

It must be said that in Trump, today's billionaire ruling class has the representative it deserves, and the Donald's ineptitude, visible to all, is symbolic of its historic incapacity to retain the right to rule. Trump's flawed, self-centered personality incarnates the narrow class interests of the 0.01 percent who own more than the bottom 70 percent of the population. His obvious selfishness exemplifies that of the billionaires he represents (and pretends to be one of). Out of his willful ignorance, Trump speaks for a corporate capitalist class indifferent to the global ecological and social consequences of its ruthless drive to accumulate, indifferent to truth and justice, indifferent indeed to human life itself.

Trump's clownish misrule has embarrassed the state itself. First came the childish spectacle of the most powerful man in the world hunkering down in his basement bunker and ordering the White House lights turned off (so the demonstrators outside couldn't see in?). Then came the order to assault peaceful protesters with chemical weapons to clear the way for President Trump to walk to the nearby "Presidents' Church" (which he never attends and whose pastor he didn't bother to consult) in order to have himself photographed brandishing a huge white Bible (which he has most likely never read) like a club.

Trump, who's only earned success in life was his long-running reality-TV show "The Apprentice," apparently devised this bizarre publicity stunt to rally his political base of right-wing Christians and show how "religious" he is. But it backfired when the Bishop of Washington pointed out that Jesus preached love and peace, not war and vengeance. The next day, even demagogues like Pat Robinson of the far-right wing Christian Coalition spoke out against him, while the anti-Trump *New York Times* triumphantly headlined: *"Trump's Approval Slips Where He Can't Afford to Lose It: Among Evangelicals."*

Let us pause to note that American Christianity, like every other aspect of American civilization, is a knot of contradictions all rooted in the fundamental problem of "the color line." Although the racist, conservative, pro-Israel, Christian right has been the core of Trump's support, liberation theology and the black church have long been the base of the civil rights movement for equality. Indeed, George Floyd (known as "Big Floyd" and "the Gentle Giant") was himself a religiously motivated community peacemaker. So are many of the demonstrators, white and black, chanting "No Justice, No Peace."

Trump's phony populist act may have helped catapult him into office in 2016 (thanks to Republican-rigged electoral system and despite losing the popular vote by three million votes), but as Abraham Lincoln is often supposed to have said of the American public, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." Today, Trump's time is up.

5. Police: The Vicious Dogs of the Bourgeoisie

To me, the most emblematic image of the moment is that of a self-deluded Donald Trump, huddled (like Hitler) in his underground bunker with the White House lights turned off, shivering with fear and rage at the demonstrators outside, and threatening to sick (purely imaginary) "vicious dogs" on

them. Trump has the Doberman mentality of the junkyard owner from Queens he incarnates; he is the spiritual descendant of the slave-catcher Simon Legree chasing the escaped slave Eliza with his dogs (see *Uncle Tom's Cabin*).

Vicious dogs of the bourgeoisie—that's what the police are paid to be (even if a few of them may turn out to be basically friendly German Shepherds underneath, like those who took the knee with the protesters). Their canines are the sharp teeth of the American state. Along with the Army, cops are the essence of the actual deep state which Marx defined as "special bodies of armed men, courts, prisons etc." (as opposed to "the people armed" in democratically-run popular militias).

Although subservient to the bourgeois state, this police apparatus, like the Mafia with which it is sometimes entwined, has a corporate identity of its own based on *omertà* or strict group loyalty. This unwritten rule is the notorious "Blue Wall of Silence," which prevents cops who see their "brothers" committing graft and violent abuses from speaking out or testifying against them. The blue wall assures police impunity, and it is organized through police "unions" that, although affiliated with the AFL-CIO, are violently reactionary, anti-labor and pro-Trump. The President of the International Police Union has been filmed wearing a red "Make America Great Again" hat and shaking hands with Trump at a political rally, while protesters in Minneapolis have been calling for the ousting of Bob Kroll, the local police union president who has been widely criticized for his unwavering support of officers accused of wrongdoing.

The Blue Wall of silence extends up the repressive food chain to prosecutors, District Attorneys and even progressive mayors, like New York's Bill de Blasio, who defended N.Y. police driving their SUVs straight into a crowd of demonstrators, although his own mixed-race daughter was arrested as a Black Lives Matter demonstrator! De Blasio—like his reactionary predecessor, Rudy Giuliani, former "law and order" District Attorney and current Trump advisor—knows that his political future is dependent on the good will of the Police Union. (Even junkyard owners are afraid of their own vicious dogs.)

This customary coddling of the police even extended to the *New York Times* initial coverage of violent police attacks on members of the press in Minneapolis and elsewhere. In its report, the *Times* hid behind a twisted notion of "objectivity" (blame both sides) to avoid pointing fingers at cops, thus observing the "blue wall of silence" even when reporters are victims. (At this writing over a thousand such attacks have been recorded). Using passive voice rather than naming the actual assailants (brutal racist cops), the *NYT* report conflated a single isolated incident where a crowd attacked news people from Trump's FOX network, with systematic, nationwide police attacks on members of the media.[2]

A week later, that sacrosanct Blue Wall is beginning to crumble. Not only have the D.A. and Governor of Minnesota been forced to escalate the charges against Derek Chauvin, George Floyd's killer, to second degree murder and arrest his three police accomplices, the latter have begun to rat each other out. Facing 40 years in prison and a bail of at least $750,000, Thomas Lane and J. Alexander Kueng, both rookies, are blaming Chauvin, the senior officer at the scene and a training officer, while Tou Thao, the other former officer charged in the case, had reportedly cooperated with investigators before they arrested Chauvin.

6. Cracks in the Military Wall

Such is the power of today's mass Black Lives Matter uprising, that it has opened a breach in U.S. capitalism's most important defense wall: the military. For if the police are American capitalism's junkyard Dobermans, the Armed Forces are the basis of its domination over the world. And if the cry for equal justice has opened a tiny crack in the Blue Wall of Silence, the breach in the ranks of the

U.S. military, which is 40 percent people of color and recruited from the poorest classes of American society, is more like a gulf.

The rank and file in today's U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force are a reflection of American society, of a population of mainly poor and minority people for whom the military provides one possible solution to unemployment and discrimination. The mood of the troops reflects that of the communities they are recruited from, and their officers, who are responsible for their morale, discipline, and loyalty, must be sensitive to their feelings. This situation is epitomized by the following quotations from the *New York Times:*

'"The Navy's top officer, Adm. Michael M. Gilday, said in a message on Wednesday to all sailors: "I think we need to listen. We have black Americans in our Navy and in our communities that are in deep pain right now. They are hurting."

'And Chief Master Sgt. Kaleth O. Wright of the Air Force, who is black, wrote an extraordinary Twitter thread declaring, "I am George Floyd."'

Although Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, released a message to top military commanders on Wednesday, June 3 affirming that every member of the armed forces swears an oath to defend the Constitution, which he said "gives Americans the right to freedom of speech," the Generals and Admirals, retired and active, who have been speaking out for racial justice and the rights of demonstrating citizens this week are not all sudden converts to the cause of peace and justice. Rather, the American officer class is sharply focused on its global mission, which is to protect American domination around the world by leading these troops to kill and be killed in bloody civil war situations in mainly non-white countries.

The *New York Times* article cited above also quotes an email from Adm. Sandy Winnefeld, a retired vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

"We are at the most dangerous time for civil-military relations I've seen in my lifetime. It is especially important to reserve the use of federal forces for only the most dire circumstances that actually threaten the survival of the nation. Our senior-most military leaders need to ensure their political chain of command understands these things."

For the troops, policing the world for capitalism is an endless, incomprehensible and demoralizing mission of violent counter-insurrection from which they return physically and psychologically damaged, often haunted by guilt, only to face unemployment and lack of support from the public and the underfunded Veterans' Authority. As for the officers, it is a question of maintaining discipline and morale. The top brass know that deploying troops trained in counter-insurrection to control civil disturbances on U.S. soil would inevitably have one of two negative results (if not both): 1. unacceptable violence against civilians and/or 2. fraternization with the protesters, mutiny, and disobedience among the ranks. Hence the Pentagon's open break with their "law and order" Commander-in-Chief. The danger of fraternization is especially real in National Guard regiments, whose troops are drawn from the populations of the states their families live in. As another *Times* article noted:

'Senior Pentagon leaders worry that a militarized and heavy-handed response to the protests, Mr. Trump's stated wish, will turn the American public against the troops, like what happened in the waning years of the Vietnam War, when National Guard troops in combat fatigues battled antiwar protesters at Kent State… Adm. Mike Mullen, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, denounced the use of the military to support the political acts of a president who had "laid bare his disdain for the rights of peaceful protest in this country."'

Although the eternal showman Trump apparently appointed Mark Milley as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the basis of the General's physical resemblance to John Wayne, Milley happens to be a serious military historian. So is Secretary of Defense Esper. Both are aware that revolutions can only happen when there is a split in the ranks of the soldiers. In their West Point courses on counterinsurgency, they have certainly read of the classic example of Russia in 1917 when the Cossacks were sent to block the demonstrators in St. Petersburg. These fierce cavalry men sat passively still on their horses as the strikers dove between their legs, leading Trotsky to famously remark that "the revolution passes underneath the belly of a Cossack's horse." And indeed, not long after this incident the Russian soldiers formed "soviets" (councils) and joined the workers' and peasants in overthrowing the Czar.

Of course, in 1917 Russia was in the middle of a social crisis, ruled by an inept, self-deluded autocrat and an outdated, parasitical aristocracy, heedlessly bleeding lives and treasure into an endless, pointless, unpopular foreign war. Nothing even vaguely similar could ever happen in optimistic, triumphant, happy, America under the firm leadership and uniting presence of our loveable President, Donald J. Trump.

7. Race and Class in U.S. History

American society has been riddled with contradictions since its beginnings, and these contradictions, rooted in race and class, are still being played out today in the streets of over 150 U.S. cities. Today's uprisings, interracial from the beginning, express popular frustration that after centuries of struggle against slavery, after a bloody fratricidal Civil War in the 1860s and after the "second American revolution" of Reconstruction, after the Civil Rights movement and the urban riots of the 1960s, the lives of the descendants of black slaves are still not safe in the land that first proclaimed the human right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The murder of George Floyd is said to be the "straw that broke the camel's back." It was the straw that set fire to the haystack of anger and frustration that was smoldering for generations. Will this blaze be yet another fire of straw, fated to die out? I think not. The context has changed. U.S. society, like the whole capitalist world, is in crisis. The economy, with productivity declining, with inequality and unemployment increasing, with debt and speculation ballooning was already in crisis. The pandemic pushed it over the top, and the resulting recession has only just begun. Thirty years after the post-Cold War "new world order" of democracy, peace and un-ending grown was proclaimed, few Americans believe that their lives and those of their children likely to improve, what with social and ecological doom impending. The system has little to promise them and its leaders little to inspire confidence in them. In other words, they are no longer politically and socially 'hegemonic' and must depend on coercion to hold power. Today, the credibility and legitimacy of that coercive power, the cops and army, is being called into question by the masses, white and colored, demanding justice and equality.

The police may well continue to attack the demonstrators and while Trump and his followers call for militarization of the country in the name of protecting property, law and order, it is clear that a breach has been opened in the Blue Wall of Silence protecting the privileges of the billionaire class against the power of the working masses who today face not only a political crisis but also the crisis of an ongoing pandemic, the crisis of poverty and mass unemployment, and the impending climate crisis of which COVID is a symptomatic forerunner.

Throughout U.S. history, from the white Abolitionists, to the Yankee Civil War volunteers, to the Northern "carpet-baggers" who worked for Reconstruction, to the white Civil Rights marchers of the 1960s to the millions of whites in the streets proclaiming Black Lives Matter today, the unity in struggle of America's racialized peoples has brought about whatever progress in freedom and

democracy this race-benighted Republic as ever known.

Today's "privileged" white demonstrators—themselves victims to a lesser degree of American capitalism—know in their hearts that they can "never be free" and never be safe from state violence until black lives really do matter. They know that "Black and White Unite and Fight" is the only possible way to block authoritarian government, prevent fascism, establish democracy, institute class equality, and face the future with a modicum of hope.

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[1] "Facing Protests Over Use of Force, Police Respond With More Force" https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/police-tactics-floyd-protests.html. Videos showed officers using batons, tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets on protesters and bystanders.

[2] "A Reporter's Cry on Live TV: 'I'm Getting Shot! I'm Getting Shot!" https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/30/us/minneapolis-protests-press.html. See the following phrases in italics: "From a television crew assaulted by protesters to a photographer struck in the eye, journalists have *found themselves* targeted on the streets of America. Linda Tirado, a freelance photographer, activist and author, *was shot* in the left eye Friday while covering the street protests in Minneapolis. Ms. Tirado is one of a number of journalists around the country who *were attacked, arrested or otherwise harassed—sometimes by police and sometimes by protesters*—during their coverage of the uprisings that have erupted nationwide after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis… With trust in the news media lagging, journalists have *found themselves* targeted."