

*The defanging of the George Floyd Uprising was not accidental but was rather a deliberate attempt on the part of the amerikan ruling class to regain social control in the wake of the most militant protests in recent memory—and, as a movement, possibly the largest in u.s. history.*



# ANATOMY of a COUNTER- INSURGENCY

by Martin Schoots-  
McAlpine

outline some of the ways that the amerikan ruling class sought to defend itself during the course of one of the largest threats to its own existence in recent years. I have shown how combined and coordinated efforts by: police forces, the military, capitalist media, NGOs, the Democrats, far-right groups, and liberal establishment figures have all combined to undermine the George Floyd Uprising. Thus far these efforts seem to have been rather successful.

The beautiful thing about history, however, is that it is never predetermined. The future is not written. While the establishment has a mind-boggling array of resources and sophisticated counter-insurgency techniques at its disposal, it is not infallible. Indeed, it does (and has!) made mistakes. It is these mistakes that provide openings for revolutionary forces to intervene and change the existing social order. Even the outcome of these protests is not yet decided: they continue, and the protestors become increasingly sophisticated in fighting back. The massive uprising of the past few weeks has shown the degree to which the people do possess power. But the events have also shown the pitfalls into which movements of resistance can fall. By writing this article I hope to have exposed some of these pitfalls, so that liberation struggles now and in the future can avoid them.

is significant overlap and cooperation between police forces and far-right organizations; a now infamous 2006 f.b.i. report details the extent to which white supremacists have infiltrated police departments. For instance, in early June police in Oregon were caught on video coordinating with the far-right Proud Boys to help them avoid arrest after they intimidated George Floyd protestors. Much has also been written about the so-called Boogaloo Movement, which has targeted anti-police brutality protests.

There have been many attacks by the far right on recent protests. Incidents include a mob of armed counter-protestors in Bethel, Ohio which attacked a Black lives matter rally searching for “antifa.” The KKK has also been active in these efforts: they attacked a Black lives matter rally in Nevada, and a local KKK leader in Virginia drove his car into a protest in mid-June. The autonomous zone set up in Seattle has also been a magnet for far-right attacks; on June 15 the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer entered the zone and beat a man, and there have been five shootings directed at the zone in recent weeks, somehow allowed by police. The most recent one resulted in the death of two attackers and injuries to a 14-year-old boy. Far-right groups have also announced a plan to “retake” the zone on July 4.

Police and national guard brutality, police harassment and surveillance, threats of military intervention, and attacks by the far right all serve as the coercive elements to the amerikan establishment’s counter-insurgency efforts against the George Floyd Uprising. Without the threat of violence the “carrot” side of the “carrot and stick” formula would not be as attractive. The end goal however, is the same: the maintenance and defense of an order defined by exploitation and white supremacy.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this article what I have sought to do is

## Introduction

On May 25, 2020, police in Minneapolis, Minnesota murdered George Floyd in cold blood. Responding to allegations of counterfeit money, police arrested Floyd, with one officer kneeling on his neck for nearly nine minutes, ultimately suffocating him. The killing was captured on video and quickly spread across the internet.

Protests soon followed. The first protest organized in Minneapolis was on May 26. By May 28 the protests had spread to the nearby cities of St. Paul and Duluth with riots occurring in Minneapolis that evening. Most notably, the third precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department was besieged and burned. Minnesota activated the National Guard on May 29 in response to the unrest. The amerikan state’s disastrous response to COVID-19, massive unemployment, and indiscriminate police killings that disproportionately target people of colour provided the impetus for an enormous and unprecedented outpouring of rage; protests, many of them violently targeting the police, spread across the united states like wildfire.

While the initial uprising was ferocious in its explosive anger and militancy, within just three weeks the protests seem to have been channeled largely into the decidedly less militant demand of “Defund the police.” What happened? I largely agree with what Kandist Mallett wrote in a brilliant article in *Teen Vogue*, in which she argued that: “those in power...are working tirelessly to destroy this wave of unrest before it becomes a tsunami they cannot control... They are trying to kill this movement.” The defanging of the George Floyd Uprising was not accidental but was rather a deliberate attempt on the part of the amerikan ruling class to regain social control in the wake of the most militant protests in recent memory—and, as a movement, possibly the largest in u.s. history.

What I want to do in this article is to examine the dimensions of how this defanging took place: how, within the space of two weeks, we went from burning down a police station to making small budgetary demands. I argue that the massive effort to defang the George Floyd Uprising should be understood as a deliberate counter-insurgency operation, combining the (sometimes coordinated) efforts of: various police forces, the capitalist media, the amerikan military, NGOs, the Democrats, both state and federal governments, and other liberal establishment figures. What I also want to show is that these efforts were not extraordinary: there was no shadowy conspiracy to intervene. Rather, each of these apparatuses functioned exactly as intended to in order to defend the existing capitalist order. By examining the response to the George Floyd Uprising, the left can gain a better understanding of just how difficult it will be to overthrow capitalism and the capitalist state and potentially avoid pitfalls in the future.

Before continuing, I want to address the initial and most obvious opposition to my argument. If the efforts to defang the protests should be understood as a counter-insurgency, then it stands to reason that the George Floyd Uprising should be considered an insurgency. Is this not hyperbolic? Given the extent of the crisis of legitimacy the protests created for the amerikan state, I do not think it is hyperbolic at all. As Kristian Williams argued in “The other side of the COIN: counterinsurgency and community policing,” insurgency and counter-insurgency is precisely the lens through which the amerikan state views much of its domestic policing activity, from gang-related operations through to protest management.

The uprising truly created a crisis of legitimacy for the amerikan state. It needs to be stated outright that the burning of a police station and the forced retreat, under siege, of the police inside is unprecedented in the history of modern amerikan protest. The vulnerability of the police was put on full display: the following night police were attacked in Los Angeles and New York, among

corpus in New York. There have been numerous documented arrests and attacks on journalists from even liberal platforms such as CNN. To my knowledge there are no up to date figures on the total number of arrests. In terms of the intensity of the police response, over the past month there have been countless scenes of police using tear gas and pepper spray to clear otherwise peaceful protests. An online database has logged over 670 individual incidents of police brutality caught on video. Police have killed at least four protestors over the course of the uprising. Many more have been maimed. As a result there are at least 40 different lawsuits currently underway against police departments for brutality during the George Floyd Uprising.

As if the level of direct repression was not enough, there has also been an increase in surveillance of activists. A recent leak, titled “Blue Leaks,” has revealed that the f.b.i. monitored social media extensively during the protests and forward information it thought relevant to local police departments. f.b.i. agents have also harassed activists after they attended recent protests against police brutality. The goal of f.b.i. harassment in general is to intimidate protestors and organizers into inactivity as a means of disorganizing movements. These most recent incidents are reminiscent of f.b.i. surveillance and intimidation of the anti-war movement and COINTELPRO.

The extraordinary level of police terror was not enough to contain the uprising. The National Guard was deployed to 31 states and Washington D.C. This involved over 62,000 soldiers. The National Guard was itself involved in the violent repression of the protests. Over 200 cities imposed a curfew, which affected more than 60 million people. Trump went as far as to threaten to use the amerikan military to impose order on cities where the protests could not be contained by conventional repression.

One final aspect to overt repression of protests which needs to be included is the role of far-right organizations and militia groups. While these are ostensibly distinct from the state, there

or not the police exist. This is something that already happens; consider, for instance, the racist terror that child welfare services across kanada (not armed, not police) put Indigenous people through for years. The George Floyd Uprising opened the space for discussions about the fundamental nature of society, about capitalism, imperialism, and racial inequality in amerika. Liberals shifted the overton window to exclude visions of radical transformation, instead focusing on the degree to which police should be defunded. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's now viral Instagram post which stated that police abolition looks like white suburbia, an atomized capitalist dystopia, makes total sense in this context.

The liberal invasion resulted in a defanging of protest tactics, results, and even the demands themselves. This process, which was aided by the police, the media, and “legitimate” community leaders, was nothing less than the political side of a counter-insurgency campaign by the amerikan ruling class directed against the George Floyd Uprising. Thus a movement which began with the burning of a police station has been transformed into one of requesting minor amendments to municipal budgets.

## ...And the Stick

The majority of the article has focused on the less-obvious methods that the amerikan ruling class has used in its counter-insurgency efforts against the George Floyd Uprising. However, while counter-insurgency is more effective if it involves elements of soft power, no counter-insurgency effort is complete without open repression. The efforts against the George Floyd Uprising are no exception.

It is hard to overstate the scale of the police operation against protestors over the past month. For instance, by June 2 there already been over 11,000 arrests of protestors. The volume of arrests was used as an excuse to temporarily suspend habeus

other locations. The National Guard was deployed throughout the united states. While not as historically unprecedented for dealing with dissent, there were concerns, at least in Minnesota, that the National Guard would be insufficient to quell the uprising. Governor Tim Walz on May 30 in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*: “We do not have the numbers... We cannot arrest people when we are trying to hold ground.” Three days later, a Senior Airman in the Minnesota National Guard said in an interview that he was “waiting for the scales to tip” with regards to the “riot purgatory” that existed; the National Guard had, as of June 2, been unable to gain control of the city. Trump was even rushed to his White House bunker in response to protests in Washington D.C.; the last time those bunkers were used was during the September 11 attacks. Transit workers used their collective power to refuse to transport arrested protestors. Inspired by the protests, longshore workers of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union struck and shut down ports across the West Coast in mid-June. And in terms of putting numbers to the crisis of legitimacy faced by the amerikan state, on June 3 a Monmouth University survey reported that 54% of amerikans thought that the burning of the precinct was justified, higher than the level of support enjoyed by either Biden or Trump.

## Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency

The united states military, in *Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency*, defines an insurgency as: “The organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region.” Counter-insurgency then is defined as “Comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes.”

It is worth quoting from the manual at length to demonstrate the sophistication with which the u.s. military approaches counter-

insurgency operations.

Highlighting the specificity of counter-insurgency operations, the manual argues that:

COIN [counter-insurgency] is distinguished from traditional warfare due to the focus of its operations—a relevant population—and its strategic purpose—to gain or maintain control or influence over—and the support of that relevant population through political, psychological, and economic methods.

Central to how the u.s. Military sees insurgency is the question of political legitimacy:

The struggle for legitimacy with the relevant population is typically a central theme of the conflict between the insurgency and the HN [host nation] government. The HN government generally needs some level of legitimacy among the population to retain the confidence of the populace and an acknowledgment of governing power. The insurgency will attack the legitimacy of the HN government while attempting to develop its own legitimacy with the population. COIN should reduce the credibility of the insurgency while strengthening the legitimacy of the HN government.

And in turn, central to the question of legitimacy is the task of building and controlling narratives:

COIN planners should compose a unifying message (the COIN narrative) that is consistent with the overarching USG narrative, which is coupled to the USG [u.s. government] objective. Narrative is a structure of planned themes from which both messages and actions are developed. Narrative provides a common thread of communicative influence. The objective speaks to desired outcome; narrative communicates the story of the how and

Third, the influx of liberals into the movement had an effect on defanging the demands of the movement. Black Lives Matter was quick to issue the demand to defund the police in the early days of the George Floyd Uprising: they explicitly pushed for a defunding of the police, without going into detail as to what that would entail. Other activists seized on the space this opened up and stated that “defund” meant “defund everything.” They argued that the police were not reformable and therefore had to be abolished. What followed was a discussion in the media about whether or not “defund” actually meant “defund.” There was no shortage of liberals assuring other concerned liberals that defunding didn’t actually mean that there would be no police. While Minneapolis has since begun steps to disband their police force, demands in other locations seem to ask for a portion of police budgets to be re-allocated to community resources, in line with the Movement for Black Lives policy demands.

The conceptual slippage of “defund” has not gone unnoticed by the police themselves. In a June 18 article on *Police One*, Mike Walker, a police officer for 27 years, wrote that “defunding is really just a way of saying reduced funding.” In the same article he offers assurance to worried police officers by noting that budget cuts were already on the agenda due to COVID-19, and that most municipalities legally cannot function without police due to their municipal charters.

That at least some police are fine with temporarily defunding the police speaks to the heart of just how defanged a demand “defund the police” actually is. But “abolish the police” as a slogan absent a critique of the conditions that give rise to the police is itself a demand that does not cut to the heart of the matter. The police exist because capitalism requires force to defend inequality and exploitation. Without ending exploitation, there will still need to be some form of coercive apparatus to ensure the continued existence of exploitation. Thus the coercive functions of the police will be offloaded to other state apparatuses; there will still be violent, racist coercion whether

benefiting from that same unjust racial hierarchy. That major politicians like Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and former Governor of Massachusetts and presidential candidate Mitt Romney joined the protests—both politicians with significant power to change the conditions against which they protested—signals only that the political message of the uprising had shifted in the popular consciousness away from “dismantle white supremacy” to the base level of “Black people are human.” That nearly one third of *amerika* could not even support such a basic affirmation of humanity is telling.

Internally to the protests, liberal protestors acted like “peace police,” disrupting the activities of militants. Examples included liberals in Washington D.C. turning over a “rioter” to the police (at an anti-police march!) at the end of May, as well as the doxxing by liberal activists of Rayshard Brook’s girlfriend, pegged as an outside agitator. She is accused of setting fire to the Wendy’s outside of which her partner was murdered by police. Another high-profile example of the liberalization of the protests on the tactical level is Al Sharpton’s call for a march on Washington in August, which took place at the height of militant protests occurring in Washington D.C. Such a call, not to support the existing protests but to postpone them, was a calculated attempt to de-escalate the uprising.

Second, the influx of liberals into the movement has paved the way for false victories. By this I mean superficial gains that ultimately leave the underlying power structure which gave rise to the protests unchallenged. Included here is the “Black Lives Matter” street mural in Washington D.C., various corporate black-washing campaigns, the changing of band names, and the cancelling of shows like COPS. One notes the irony of the mayor of New York ordering that “Black Lives Matter” be painted outside of Trump Towers while overseeing a police department which brutalizes black people and while also opposing efforts to defund the NYPD.

why of an operation. Common themes within a COIN narrative may be: reinforcing the credibility and perception of legitimacy of the HN and USG COIN operation, exploiting the negative aspects of the insurgent efforts, and preemptively presenting the expected insurgent argument along with counter-arguments. ... The COIN narrative should be the result of meticulous target-audience analysis conducted by cultural and language subject matter experts ... The COIN narrative should provide the guidance from which themes, actions, and messages can be planned in support of the COIN objectives.

Narrative construction and control is reiterated in practical terms later in the *Manual*:

In COIN, the information flow can be roughly divided into information which the USG requires to guide its political-military approach (i.e., knowledge of local conditions) and information which the USG wishes to disseminate to influence populations. At the same time, counter-insurgents also seek to impede the information flow of insurgent groups—both their intelligence collection and their ability to influence the relevant population.

One of the tactics emphasized to impede the ability of insurgents to influence the target population is working with local authorities—especially non-governmental ones like religious leaders, and NGOs—to coopt the message of the insurgency and explicitly to moderate it. This latter point is extremely important; while moderate movements may enjoy more popular support, they are also far less successful at winning their demands. It is therefore in the interest of those defend the existing order to support the moderate elements of a movement.

All this is to say then that the u.s. military understands insurgency and counter-insurgency as being not just a military

question, but rather a question of politics. To this end, the *Manual* heavily emphasizes the importance of political action in counter-insurgency operations:

To be effective, officials involved in COIN should address two imperatives—political action and security—with equal urgency, recognizing that insurgency is fundamentally an armed political competition. ... COIN functions, therefore, include informational, security, political, economic, and development components, all of which are designed to support the overall objective of establishing and consolidating control by the HN government. ... This is the core of COIN, because it provides a framework around which all other programs and activities are organized. As described above, depending on the root causes of the insurgency, the strategy may involve elements of political reform, reconciliation, popular mobilization, and governmental capacity building.

If we understand insurgency and counter-insurgency as involving both a military and political aspect, in which the political is primary, with insurgency being primarily about building a counter-legitimacy to the state and counter-insurgency being primarily about the political isolation of insurgents through the creation of narratives, we can begin to see how such an understanding is useful to apply to amerikan domestic politics. The George Floyd Uprising saw insurgents directly undermine the legitimacy of the existing state, especially the police, through both armed and political action. In turn, the state and establishment responded with both armed and political actions, the latter in the form of co-optation and narrative control.

But the connections between amerikan counter-insurgency and domestic politics are not just on the discursive level. In “The other side of the COIN: counterinsurgency and community policing,” Kristian Williams provides an excellent overview of

at first inventing this category out of almost thin air; the line it was drawing was an artificial one. But by putting forward this ideological pole, the media called into action people who had hitherto not been involved. The media, alongside notable liberal politicians and other establishment figures, created a group of liberal protestors out of inactive liberals who now saw themselves and their own political predilections reflected in the ongoing uprising. Included in these efforts by the media and liberal establishment figures is a now-famous essay by former president Barack Obama, posted to Medium on June 1, in which he said he supported the protests, condemned violence, and urged reform efforts to be focused on institutional channels.

The flip side of the liberal “call to action” is that it also acts as a safeguard against radicalization. When reality confronts ideology, it is often ideology that is changed. Reality forces a rupture in one’s worldview which can lead to radicalization. In this case it became difficult to substantiate the story of a good, neutral, and protective state in the face of ubiquitous police violence against even peaceful protestors. If reality can be changed or if powerful narratives can reinforce ideology, ideology is cemented rather than discarded. In this case, liberalism as a worldview was able to escape challenge due to the emergence of establishment liberals in support of the protests.

The result of the liberalization of the protests on public opinion is interesting. By mid-June, 67% of americans reportedly supported the ongoing protests. The racial breakdown was more stark: 60% of white people supported the protests, whereas 86% of Black people supported them. Despite this, 59% of americans (including 62% of white americans compared with 43% of Black people) believed that the protests were spurred on at least in part as a means for people to engage in criminal behavior. Thus the liberalization of the protests resulted in a situation in which the majority of a country deeply enmeshed in white supremacy supported protests proclaiming the value of Black lives, despite the majority of the country materially

helped to make the police a “protected class,” and also contributed to the militarization of police through the 1033 program.

Despite the lack of success of the official Democrat cooptation attempt of the George Floyd Uprising, I want to point out one of the more insidious ways that the Democrats are attempting to coopt outrage against police murders through social movements themselves. It is worth first pointing out that Alicia Garza, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, is a supporter of the centrist wing of the Democrats, specifically Elizabeth Warren. Black Lives Matter has recently launched a campaign called #WhatMatters2020. The goal of the campaign is to bring “BLM supporters and allies to the polls in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election to build collective power and ensure candidates are held accountable for the issues that systematically and disproportionately impact Black and under-served communities across the nation.” A campaign video calls on people to vote for an amerika where “police are held accountable” and “where we have access to quality healthcare.” The problem with this campaign, of course, is that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans are even pretending to deliver on promises like this. Biden does not support medicare for all, and was an architect of the current racist criminal justice system. The #WhatMatters2020 campaign is a cynical sheepdog campaign, bringing Black people angry at the current injustices of amerikan white-supremacist capitalism back into the Democrats.

## Invasion of the Liberals

Earlier in this article, I mentioned that the media was attempting to call into existence a group of “good,” peaceful protestors. I want to spend more time now talking about this process. Ideology is both produced by practice, but also exists as a way of calling particular types of people into activity. When the media began focusing almost exclusively on “good” protestors, it was

the material relationship between amerikan military counter-insurgency programs and amerikan policing. This is specifically evident with regard to trends towards the militarization of the police and so-called “Community Policing” initiatives. Williams demonstrates how, in a modern example of the “imperial boomerang,” many of the methods employed by modern police forces were developed and refined by the amerikan military, including during its occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. In turn, the military partnered with police forces to learn how to better control conquered populations, be they Black people living in amerikan cities or Iraqis living under amerikan occupation in Iraq.

Of particular interest is the role that NGOs play in this process. As was noted earlier, the u.s. military makes special mention of NGOs in the process of counter-insurgency. An earlier version of the *Manual*, published in 2006 and authored by David Petraeus, is more explicit, remarking that “some of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot” and referring to NGOs as “force-multipliers.” Williams is able to show how NGOs were directly involved in de-escalating responses of the community to murders committed by amerikan police in Oakland, as well as involved in anti-gang activities in Boston. Both of these separate efforts fall under the playbook of counter-insurgency.

Before going in depth into the George Floyd Uprising, it is worthwhile looking at the “why” of counter-insurgency. Why is it that the police and military have developed a comprehensive strategy intended to undermine threats to the existing order? Fundamentally, the modern state exists to protect the interests of the capitalist class—namely the continuation of capital accumulation and exploitation—against the interests of everyone else. In turn, specific states exist to protect the specific interests of their specific capitalist classes. Thus anything that attempts to undermine capitalism, or the ability of capitalists to exploit, must be itself undermined.

The state has a myriad of tools at its disposal to help with this process. Some are ideological (they convince people exploitation is in their own interest) whereas others, like the police, are repressive. Insofar as the goal of counter-insurgency is ultimately to protect the accumulation of capital, we should understand counter-insurgency as extending beyond just the actions of the repressive apparatuses of the state. What I will explore below is that in this case, counter-insurgency was a joint effort of the entire amerikan ruling class, both inside and outside the state, to defang the George Floyd Uprising. The amerikan ruling class used both violent and non-violent means to defang the uprising: they deployed what could be called a carrot-and-stick approach in order to protect the social order.

## **The Carrot...**

### **The Media Narrative**

In the days following the murder of George Floyd, the media worked tirelessly to defang the George Floyd Uprising. They did this not by creating reality through discourse, but by selectively and pointedly reporting on certain aspects of reality. As a result, they encouraged people to think about the uprising in specific ways, and in turn called them into action in specific ways. I will focus primarily on the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*; the narrative trends developed there were later repeated in media across the united states.

Initial media reaction to the uprising directly condemned property destruction. After a Target was looted on the night of May 27, the *Star Tribune* spent the following day reporting on the impact that riots would have on small businesses. True to form, the *Star Tribune* printed a call for peace from the family and partner of George Floyd as well as from “political, faith, community leaders” calling for an “end to riots.” The latter

the uprising.

At the beginning of the uprising, the Democratic Party machine jumped into motion but was unsure how to act. While top Democrat strategists spoke to media about how the uprising could affect the election (indicating that they were in fact working on a response), there was little in the way of official high-level statement or actions for almost a week. Then on June 2 two fairly major events occurred. First, Biden publicly brought Julian Castro into his campaign; Castro had been a vocal proponent of liberal police reforms during his bid to become the Democratic nominee for president. Second, Pelosi, the multi-millionaire Speaker of the House, asked the Congressional Black Caucus to draft a series of police reforms.

On June 8, following a ridiculous display in which Pelosi and other top Democrats took a knee wearing Ghanaian kente cloths, the Justice in Policing Act was revealed. The act is fairly milquetoast—far behind the nebulous demands of the uprising—and includes provisions for more easily prosecuting police in cases of brutality, mandatory body cameras, as well as a ban on chokeholds. The Act does absolutely nothing to abolish or even defund police departments. Nor is the act likely to become law; even if the act was to pass the Republican-majority Senate, Trump has announced his intention to veto it.

Rather than an accident, the unlikelihood of the bill passing is a feature, one of the ways in which so-called “checks and balances” help protect the current order. The Democrats know this; had it been likely to pass the bill would have been even more muted. The inaction of the Democrats in the face of the George Floyd Uprising is not surprising; they are one of the two parties that have overseen the construction and maintenance of the white-supremacist order in the united states. Biden is himself a career segregationist and author of a 1994 crime bill which was a cornerstone in the construction of the modern for-profit prison behemoth. The Congressional Black Caucus has itself

Unsurprisingly he emphasizes the humanity of the police, and he sees the solution as being community policing informed by predictive behavior technology.

The organizational and interpersonal links between NGO managers, politicians, police leadership, “community leaders,” and the board members of large capitalist firms points to the existence of a ruling capitalist class. The above is just a small illustration of how the ruling class rules in Minneapolis.

To summarize all of this: Pillsbury United Communities is an established, well-respected local NGO. It is part of the non-profit industrial complex, relying on philanthropic intermediaries for much of its funding, which in turn are funded by massive corporations. It came out very vocally in the early stages of the George Floyd Uprising, urging a more liberal and institutional approach to activism as opposed to the riots. And, it has close ties to the Minneapolis Police Department and state police through community policing programs. It is just one textbook example of many of how NGOs act as elements of a counter-insurgency strategy.

## The Democrats

The Democrats have been referred to as the “graveyard of social movements” insofar as they absorb, coopt, and disorganize them. Their approach to the George Floyd Uprising is no different. What the Democratic Party sought to do in the wake of the George Floyd Uprising was a combination of repression (in those places in which it exercised power, such as Minneapolis, New York, L.A., etc.) and coopt its energies into the Biden 2020 campaign. Given the unpopularity of Biden and the overall increasing disinterest in electoral politics by much of the left the attempt to coopt the movement, at least ostensibly, has been unsuccessful. It is, however, still worth examining in order to paint a full picture of the counter-insurgency campaign against

story was particularly interesting insofar as the group was called together for a conference by Minnesota governor Tim Walz, and included both church leaders and NGO managers. Here is an example of a top state official picking and choosing who counts as a “community leader” without direct input from the community. In turn, the *Star Tribune* reported on the meeting treating these externally hand-picked “community leaders” as though their legitimacy derived from the community itself.

In the following days, the *Star Tribune* shifted focus to the human cost of the riots to the local community. The publication blamed the riots for creating a food desert due to the closing of large corporate grocery stores. Rioters were also blamed for the lack of access to medicine now faced by the local community due to the closure of pharmacies. Rioters were alleged to have burned down nearly 200 units of affordable housing, thus exacerbating the housing crisis. The riots were also allegedly responsible for devastating Minneapolis’ famed Lake Street, home to immigrant-owned business and a hub, according to the *Star Tribune*, of multi-culturalism.

In its discussion of the immediate impact of the uprising on the local community, not once did the *Star Tribune* go beyond surface-level condemnations of the rioters. Suddenly concerned with access to food and medication, the stories did not include discussions as to why the closure of a few grocery stores could create a food desert. There was no discussion on the increased price of food and wealth-disparity. There was no discussion on the monopolization of food sources by large chains. There was no discussion on the effects of for-profit healthcare on access to medicine. No discussions on gentrification and stagnant wages leading to the necessity of specifically designated “affordable” housing. No discussions on the context of the riots: namely 40 million unemployed amerikans staring down a pandemic with minuscule government relief. No discussion of looting as a means of getting necessities such as medicine, food, and clothing; no discussion as to

why Target and pharmacies became targets. Instead the riots were presented largely without context, as simply an irrational outburst of anger, alone causing problems to the community. Those fighting back against the existing order were blamed for the worst effects of the very order they fought against.

In addition to direct condemnation, the *Star Tribune* also took a more nuanced approach to the riots. Instead of the riots being an organic expression of community anger, they were presented—both by the media, and the government—as being the work of (usually white) “outside agitators.” Rioting was purported to be the work of secret white-supremacists that had infiltrated the protests in order to cause mayhem. In that same meeting of community leaders called together by Tim Walz on May 30, the executive director of the Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage put it succinctly: “White people from other communities are coming into my community, our communities as some kind of perverse poetry, as if it wasn’t bad enough already. ...Go home now. The fascists on the plan right now, turn around.” The *Star Tribune* reported on an Illinois man who had been arrested with explosives in Minneapolis, who had specifically traveled there to riot. The mayor of St Paul and the governor of Minnesota had each tweeted that the vast majority—80% to all—of the arrestees in the week preceding June 6 had been from out-of-state despite the fact that there was no evidence to back up such claims. The claims were so ludicrous that the *Star Tribune* ran a story walking back many of the claims about outside agitators; well after the damage had been done to the protests.

The goal of these various media narratives—first, condemning the riots; second, emphasizing the damage to the community; and third, blaming outside agitators—was to drive a dual process of bifurcation within the protest movement. The goal of the ruling class was on the one hand to separate “peaceful” liberal protestors from the more radical element, both to avoid radicalization of the moderate protestors but also to

militarization tactics (weed) and community policing tactics (seed) employed in counter-insurgency efforts. In December 2014, the f.b.i. gave Pillsbury United Communities its “Director’s Community Leadership Award,” an annual award given to groups for crime prevention efforts. Then-president and chief executive, Chanda Smith Baker, accepted the award. Coincidentally, Chanda Smith Baker—now working for the Minneapolis Foundation—also sits on the Minnesota Department of Public Safety’s newspeak titled “Working Group on Police-Involved Deadly Force Encounters.” The goal of the working group was to “identify ways to reduce deadly force encounters with law enforcement.” Members of the group included the Minneapolis Police Chief Medaria Arradondo, the Minnesota Attorney General, Philando Castile’s (killed by police in Minnesota in 2016) uncle, and other judges, academics, politicians, and NGO managers. Tragically and ironically, the working group released its findings in February 2020; that George Floyd was murdered, just a few months later in a “police-involved deadly force encounter,” demonstrates the extent to which so-called community policing is useful to the community.

One final interesting link between NGOs and the police in Minneapolis: as mentioned earlier, Chanda Smith Baker, after working for Pillsbury United Communities, went on to work as the Senior Vice President, Impact for The Minneapolis Foundation. The current president and CEO of the Minneapolis Foundation is R.T. Rybak, who was also the former mayor of Minneapolis. R.T. Rybak also sits on the board of a company called Benchmark Analytics: an IT company which has designed a system capable of predicting when officers will become problematically violent. Rybak therefore has a direct material interest in “reforming” the police. In an article written on June 2, titled “I Was the Mayor of Minneapolis and I Know Our Cops Have a Problem,” Rybak recalls surveying the damage to Minneapolis after the riots with Chanda Smith Baker, before advertising his firm’s solution to police violence.

calls for peaceful protests, but generally did not condemn the riots. A peaceful rally followed. Thus at the height of the militant protests, people were asked by “legitimate” community leaders to temper their anger and engage in traditionally and easily ignored protests. These calls were amplified by liberals outside the community and the media.

A few days after the rally, Pillsbury United Communities used George Floyd’s death to issue a fundraising call; it is unclear from their website how the money will be used to ensure “Justice for George Floyd.” But individual donations are not the only way that Pillsbury United Communities raises funds. It also receives donations from massive foundations such as the Greater Twin Cities United Way, the Minneapolis Foundation, and the St. Paul & Minnesota Foundation. The United Way, for instance, acts as a “philanthropic intermediary,” collecting donations from large corporations, and then granting money to non-profits. In this specific case, the money given to Pillsbury United Communities comes from sources such as 3M, u.s. Bank, Cargill, and Target. The latter, notably, also provides hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations to police foundations. One can see the issue of an organization fighting for justice against the police having similar funding sources to the police themselves. It is also unlikely that the capitalist class would fund those capable of truly undermining it.

That an NGO intervened in a mass struggle to both channel the movement in a more liberal direction while monopolizing resources is not particularly surprising. What is particularly interesting though is Pillsbury United Communities’ connection to community policing. A 2006 report by the Minneapolis Department of Health & Family Support lists Waite House, a Pillsbury United Communities site, as a “Weed & Seed Safe Haven.” Weed and Seed programs, for context, gained prominence in 1992 after the Rodney King riots as a way to connect police and community leaders in order to ostensibly combat gang violence; they made cohesive the

isolate the radicals within the movement. Second, the goal was to lump the radical protestors together with apolitical opportunist looters, whether or not the latter group actually existed, and in turn ignore the radical critiques of both policing and society as a whole that the radicals put forward. Thus the establishment attempted to call into being two groups: a group of good, peaceful, moderate protestors; and a second group of opportunist, violent protestors who did not care about the injustice the protests were about. The tactics and message of the first group was to be lauded, whereas the tactics and message of the second group was to be condemned.

Meanwhile, seemingly out of nowhere, another narrative appeared in the media. Across both social and traditional media outlets, stories appeared showing police supporting the protests. Most famous were the images of police (and sometimes National Guard) kneeling with the protestors. Often times this was displayed as the result of a request from the “good protestors,” who were then portrayed as applauding police initiative. However, in this case reality cut through the media spin: the amerikan police were simply too vicious for their “spontaneous” (more on this below) outpouring of empathy to be taken seriously. There were abundant accounts of the same police transitioning from kneeling to attacking protestors within the space of hours.

As the protests spread in the early weeks of June, it was no longer possible for the media to rely on the “outside agitator” platitude. Indeed, with protests in literally every major city in the united states, there was no “outside” for the agitators to come from. And with the utter inhumanity of the police on full display, stories of police taking a knee simply didn’t hold water. The media then turned to focusing almost exclusively on the efforts of liberal NGOs engaged in “rebuilding” efforts, and the activities of the “good” protestors. The degree to which the “good” protestors were signal-boosted by the media is evident in the speed at which the “Defund the Police” slogan,

itself a moderated version of the already moderate “abolish the police” demand, became the public rallying cry of the movement as a whole. Finally, towards mid-June, with the protests now largely contained and the radical element isolated, the media began largely ignoring the massive protests that are still occurring, instead only providing local coverage of incidental events.

While I have focused largely on the narrative created in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, the same pattern (from demonization, to outside agitators, to focusing on the community cost, the good/bad protestor division, the police sympathy, to NGOs and liberals, to ultimately ignoring the movement) was a pattern that was repeated more-or-less within all major media sources in north amerika. Why was this the case? The similarity in editorial line between media companies does not indicate direct coordination between media onwers nor does it point to state intervention or censorship. Rather, insofar as media in north amerika is either owned by large corporations or run by the state, the commonality of interests that exists between rich owners and rich state managers is inevitably reflected in the editorial line of the media which they run. It makes total sense then that the media would relay a narrative which had as its effect the defanging of the George Floyd Uprising; such an action was absolutely within the interests of the large capitalists which control the media. The capitalist class, by owning the media and therefore controlling its content, was able to utilize media narratives as part of the counter-insurgency effort against the George Floyd Uprising.

In the case of the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, the connection between ownership and editorial line could not be clearer. Glen Taylor, the billionaire former state senator, admitted as much when he bought the newspaper in 2014. In an interview with *MinnPost*, he stated that his ownership of the paper would result in the editorial line being less liberal. It is unsurprising then that the overall editorial position of the paper reflects

to fail.

The founders of Black Lives Matter were first introduced to each other through an NGO known as Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD). The board of directors of BOLD, those who decide its political direction, is made up of managers of other NGOs. BOLD also receives an immense sum of money from private donors, such as through the “philanthropic intermediary” known as Borealis Philanthropy and through Funders for Justice. This latter group, also created in response to the Ferguson Uprising, in turn receives funding from The Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations; hardly groups interested in a radical transformation of the social order or the end of exploitation. I don’t bring this up to allege a conspiracy that Black Lives Matter is being secretly run by The Ford Foundation, but rather to show that even Black Lives Matter has its origins within the non-profit industrial complex milieu, which in turn effects its politics. Turning back to the George Floyd Uprising, it is unsurprising that in a recent Reddit Ask-Me-Anything, Kailee Scales, the Managing Director for Black Lives Matter, condemned the riots and announced efforts to channel the George Floyd Uprising into voter registration and “civic engagement” through the #WhatMatters2020 campaign.

The ways in which non-profits have attempted to moderate explosions of rage during the George Floyd Uprising are too many to list. One example I want to focus on, however, is particularly telling. On May 30, two days after the burning of the Third Precinct in Minneapolis, a local non-profit called Pillsbury United Communities had a press conference. Pillsbury United Communities is an incredibly well-established NGO; founded in 1879, it runs a number of outreach and education programs, community programs (such as free COVID-19 testing), as well as “social enterprises” including a grocery store. The press conference on May 30 brought together Jamie Foxx, Stephen Jackson, BLM activist Tamika Mallory, alongside George Floyd’s family. Speakers were explicit in their

The uprising in 2014 in Ferguson saw a similar process play itself out. There the NGO influence was given an organizational existence in the form of Black Lives Matter. I want to be clear here; when speaking of Black Lives Matter I am talking about the official organization and not the broader movement of the same name. Black Lives Matter, while first conceived of in 2013, organized its first major action in 2014 with the Black Lives Matter Freedom Ride in response to the killing of Michael Brown by the Ferguson police. Black Lives Matter became the public face of the movement. Despite the Ferguson uprising originating in riots, Black Lives Matter and other organizations planned a series of actions over the course of the summer of 2014 that channeled local activism into safer and less rebellious avenues.

Following the Ferguson uprising, moderate elements of the Black Lives Matter movement became a relatively safe outlet for liberals to support and into which the capitalist class could channel outrage. Black Lives Matter and the constellation of new organizations and networks around it received an absolutely immense amount of donations from larger donors like The Ford Foundation and George Soros. The more liberal elements of the movement, able to secure donations, were able to take centre-stage. For instance, one recipient, the Organization for Black Struggle, used some of its funding to create the Hands Up Coalition. This coalition popularized the “hands up, don’t shoot” slogan used by protestors; this ran against slogans by more militant black power activists such as “arms up, shoot back” and “fists up, fight back.” More radical yet equally active groups, such as the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, received no funding. In 2016, Black Lives Matter and 27 other organizations, as part of the Movement for Black Lives, issued a platform of demands titled *A Vision for Black Lives*. Rather than a comprehensive plan and program to mobilize the masses to fight for their own liberation, the document is a set of policy guidelines. The effect is that efforts are taken off the streets and channeled into traditional power structures where they are ultimately destined

Taylor’s public position, namely that the problem is not specifically law enforcement and that protests are only legitimate if they are peaceful. Insofar as the George Floyd Uprising threatened the existing order in Minneapolis, an order that Glen Taylor benefitted from, the *Star Tribune* would come out against the uprising. This same process played out across the united states over the course of the uprising.

## **The Copaganda Machine**

No account of how the media treated the George Floyd Uprising would be complete without a discussion of something that is often overlooked in accounts of reactionary media spin: the absolutely massive public relations machine employed by the police themselves. While it is possible that the speed with which stories of police “taking a knee” with protestors went viral was entirely natural, it is far more likely that in the wake of the largest anti-police protests in a generation that the police PR machine jumped into overdrive.

The goal of police public relations (PR) is, like any public relations campaign, to influence how the public views the police. In one article written for *Police One*, the largest English-language online community of police boasting literally tens of thousands of members, the point of police PR is described as “to establish a positive relationship with the community before an incident occurs.” The point of PR is directly contextualized to counteract the public’s reactions to racist police terror: “Events dating back to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ‘60s, Rodney King, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray and others have been covered extensively in the media and have tarnished the reputation of many agencies. The public relations team must establish or repair the image of the agency within the community.” In another article on the same website, another officer describes the utility of “branding” (using a PR campaign to build a police “brand”) insofar as it allows police departments to control

messaging and make clear a department's "value proposition." The goal of branding is to build preconceptions about the role of police, thus filtering any observations through the preconceived image of how police should act. This allows the police to have greater impunity in their actions, as anything they do is seen immediately through the lens of police being good and necessary protectors.

On the surface this seems fairly obvious and innocuous. All firms employ PR strategies in one form or another, in which the firm seeks to use the media to influence public reaction to the firm. However if we consider the social role of police, namely a repressive apparatus of the capitalist state designed to protect the conditions which allow for exploitation, the police use of PR becomes more sinister. Police directly attempt to manipulate public perceptions of their actions in their favour, including racist murder.

How widespread is the police use of PR? It is difficult to say. An examination of several police budgets over the past years of cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Toronto turned up little information; the police are remarkably good at concealing precisely what they spend their money on. There is some scattered information though that suggests that the police spend a staggering amount on PR. For instance, in 2016 the Denver Police Department was revealed to have spent \$1.3 million over three years on its "media relations unit." The Metropolitan Police in the u.k. had, in 2015, a 10 million pound annual PR budget that employed 100 communications staff, with a police across the u.k. spending 36 million pounds annually on PR. The LAPD, rather than just employing a Public Information Officer (PIO), has an entire Public Relations Unit. In Toronto, the 2019 police budget requested an additional \$7.9 million to be partially used on nine new positions in the Corporate Communications Unit, increasing the total staff from 16 to 25, to be used to "help increase capabilities in public relations, internal communication and digital strategy." And in 2020, the

their interests. In turn, NGOs knowingly moderate themselves in order to better secure resources. Furthermore respectable NGOs can become the public face of a movement, effectively forcing the more radical organizations out of the public eye.

The Civil Rights and anti-police movements are full of examples of the moderating effects of NGOs. For instance, in the 1960s white philanthropist Stephen Currier set up the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership in order to channel foundation funding to Civil Rights groups. The so-called 'Big Six' were brought together; of the six, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the most radical of the groups, received the least amount of funding. More radical groups, such as the Nation of Islam, were completely excluded. In 1963 Malcolm X specifically criticized the Big Six and the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership in his famous 'Message to the Grass Roots' speech in which he reflected on the March on Washington which had taken place earlier that year. The goal of these maneuvers by white philanthropists was clear: fund the more moderate element of the Civil Rights movement to avoid the movement taking a radical turn and undermining the ability for amerikan capitalism to operate.

Fast forward 50 years, and the same pattern reoccurs. In Oakland in 2009, non-profits directly intervened to deradicalize the response to the killing of Oscar Grant. Ahead of a major rally in January 2009, the Oakland police arranged meetings with various non-profit and church leaders in order to defang the protests before they even began. Religious leaders asked their congregations to not attend the protests. A coalition of NGOs came together and formed the Coalition Against Police Execution (CAPE). CAPE explicitly called for a lack of militancy in their protests, and stood as a physical barrier between police and protestors. In turn, CAPE became the public, legitimate face of the protests, which was reinforced through media coverage.

the moderates within the movement.

## The Non-Profit Industrial Complex

As noted earlier, the u.s. military considers NGO partnerships to be a vital part of counter-insurgency efforts. Much has been written about the negative effects of non-profits on social movements. In the classic collection of essays titled *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, Andrea Smith argues that capital and the capitalist state use non-profits to: monitor and control social movements, divert public resources into private hands, manage and control dissent, redirect activist efforts towards careerism and away from mass-based modes of organizing, allow corporations to mask exploitation through philanthropy, and encourage social movements to model themselves in terms of structure and politics after capitalist models. For the purposes of this essay, I want to focus on two areas: first, how NGOs have a moderating effect on the politics of a movement. Second, I will talk about how NGOs frequently work with the police to protect the current social order under the guise of changing it.

How is it that non-profits are able to moderate social movements? The capitalist class is well aware of their own interests and spends an inordinate amount of money defending them. In the process, they create philanthropic foundations. These philanthropic foundations not only allow capitalists to transfer wealth inter-generationally without taxation (giving their children positions in the foundations) but also fund charitable activities, such as non-profits. There is a catch though: the capitalists will not fund anything that does not fit their interests, namely the continuation of exploitation. They are happy, for instance, to fund affordable housing initiatives insofar as those initiatives do not tackle the root causes of homelessness, namely private property. Capitalist foundations therefore provide resources to NGOs which act in line with

NYPD allotted \$3.2 million for public relations, in order to tell their “side of the story.”

Direct police department expenses on PR are just one of the PR avenues available to police. Police unions also hire PR firms to improve the image of their officers or to advance specific goals. Individual police officers can also hire PR firms to represent them in times of need. One such service, Cop PProtect, allows officers to pay \$50 per month for guaranteed representation if something should go wrong. In a story placed in *Police Magazine*, the need for such a service is related directly to the Ferguson Uprising:

Cops today are completely at the mercy of activists who don't care about the truth...Darren Wilson was nearly murdered and now lives in hiding, while the man who tried to kill him is declared a hero by activists. Cop PProtect gives cops like Darren Wilson a trusted friend to tell their stories in ways agency information officers, union representatives and the media cannot or will not.

In this case, the firm was created directly to mitigate community blowback against individual officers in the wake of racist police terror.

While the amount that is spent on pro-police PR is hard to find, the indirect effects make it more obvious. Indeed, there exists an entire parasitic cottage industry of pro-police PR firms and consulting services, which exist solely to increase public perceptions in the police. For instance, a quick search turned up John Guilfoil Public Relations which specializes in the public sector, including the police. A testimonial from the chief of the Massachusetts Police Department states that the firm “provides an extremely valuable service to those agencies that want to be proactive in...getting out a positive message to the community.” PolicePR in Indiana offers a Public Information Officer boot camp, in partnership with the Greenwood Police

Department. Melissa Agnes, a crisis management strategist who has been featured on *Police One*, has a whole series of articles and talks dealing specifically with police misconduct, ranging from “Discussing the Divide Between Police and Their Communities” to “Discussing The #Ferguson Crisis with Tim Burrows.” None of these firms or services would exist if the police were not paying for them.

Police PR strategies are not limited to traditional media. To give the strategies a more organic feel, police forces and their hired PR firms make frequent use of social media in order to help control the narrative around their actions. *Police Chief Magazine* warns officers that “Hiding and Hoping Is Not a PR Strategy”; police forces not only need to monitor social media to see what perception of the police force is after an incident, but must also build “a social media presence.” This latter point can include spreading information about a suspect in the event that video showing police misconduct spreads. As part of the U.S. Department of Justice’s ‘Community Oriented Policing Services’ (COPS) *Strategic Communication Practices* guide, there is an entire section on the importance of social media. Another article on *Police One* suggests that police departments send officers onto Reddit, both to get ahead of a story, but also to intervene in the discussions as police. These efforts can be bolstered by using “community outreach programs” to “build an online army of supporters.”

Lest anyone think that the police simply use social media to inform their audience about their activities, the police consciously use social media to manipulate public opinion during moments of crisis. Taken from another *Police One* article (a fantastic resource for those wanting to understand the mindset of police), this one published ominously on May 28, 2020, titled “12 things every police department’s civil unrest plan needs,” there is an entire section on social media. Departments are instructed to be aware that protestors can use social media to amplify and coordinate their activity;

departments should also be aware and be ready to counter those that would “lower the perception of [their] department.” If that fails, there’s always the National Guard. *Force Science News* published an article/advertisement featuring Melissa Agnes in 2018, which advised departments to have prepared a ‘Communications Bible’ to help navigate crises such as “officer-involved shootings.” In a mid-June *Police One* leadership briefing, after weeks of anti-police protests, authors mockingly reflected: “Now do you recognize the power of social media?” arguing that police “must start viewing...social media as an integral tool in policing.”

All this is to say there exists a massive and highly coordinated police PR machine, which the police use to try and directly control media narratives in their favour. They do this as part of a broader effort to maintain the current social order. While it is impossible to prove this soon, I strongly suspect that it was this machine which was responsible for the flood of sympathetic stories about the police that featured prominently across traditional and social media in early June. Despite the best efforts of the police, their unions, and their employed PR firms, they were unable to shift the broader media narrative for more than a few days; the brutal actions of police across the United States spoke for themselves and undermined attempts to portray the police in a positive light.

While ultimately unsuccessful, the wave of pro-police media in early June gave credibility to the more moderate argument that the institution of policing itself is not the problem, but rather that it is only some “bad apples” amidst an otherwise salvageable police force. This in turn gave more ideological power to moderate and liberal elements, the so-called “good protestors,” within the broader protest movement. To tie this back into counter-insurgency, control over information in the form of both narrative construction and information dissemination is one of the main tools of counter-insurgency strategies. The police consciously did just this, and in the process strengthened