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Street Report from the G20

Justice Watch

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The G20 in Pittsburgh showed us how pitifully fearful our leaders have become.

What no terrorist could do to us, our own leaders did.

Out of fear of the possibility of a terrorist attack, authorities militarize our towns, scare our people away, stop daily life and quash our constitutional rights.

For days, downtown Pittsburgh, home to the G20, was turned into a militarized people-free ghost town. Sirens screamed day and night. Helicopters crisscrossed the skies. Gunboats sat in the rivers. The skies were defended by Air Force jets. Streets were barricaded by huge cement blocks and fencing. Bridges were closed with National Guard across the entrances. Public transportation was stopped downtown. Amtrak train service was suspended for days.

In many areas, there were armed police every 100 feet. Businesses closed. Schools closed. Tens of thousands were unable to work.

Four thousand police were on duty plus 2500 National Guard plus Coast Guard and Air Force and dozens of other security agencies. A thousand volunteers from other police forces were sworn in to help out.

Police were dressed in battle gear, bulky black ninja turtle outfits - helmets with clear visors, strapped on body armor, shin guards, big boots, batons, and long guns.

In addition to helicopters, the police had hundreds of cars and motorcycles, armored vehicles, monster trucks, small electric go-karts. There were even passenger vans screaming through town so stuffed with heavily armed ninja turtles that the side and rear doors remained open.

No terrorists showed up at the G20.

Since no terrorists showed up, those in charge of the heavily armed security forces chose to deploy their forces around those who were protesting.

Not everyone is delighted that 20 countries control 80% of the world's resources. Several thousand of them chose to express their displeasure by protesting.

Unfortunately, the officials in charge thought that it was more important to create a militarized people-free zone around the G20 people than to allow freedom of speech, freedom of assembly or the freedom to protest.

It took a lawsuit by the Center for Constitutional Rights and the ACLU to get any major protest permitted anywhere near downtown Pittsburgh. Even then, the police "forgot" what was permitted and turned people away from areas of town. Hundreds of police also harassed a bus of people who were giving away free food - repeatedly detaining the bus and searching it and its passengers without warrants.

Then a group of young people decided that they did not need a permit to express their human and constitutional rights to freedom. They announced they were going to hold their own gathering at a city park and go down the deserted city streets to protest the G20. Maybe 200 of these young people were self-described anarchists, dressed in black, many with bandanas across their faces. The police warned everyone these people were very scary. My cab driver said the anarchist spokesperson looked like Harry Potter in a black hoodie. The anarchists were joined in the park by hundreds of other activists of all ages, ultimately one thousand strong, all insisting on exercising their right to protest.

This drove the authorities crazy.

Battle dressed ninja turtles showed up at the park and formed a line across one entrance. Helicopters buzzed overhead. Armored vehicles gathered.

The crowd surged out of the park and up a side street yelling, chanting, drumming, and holding signs. As they exited the park, everyone passed an ice cream truck that was playing "It's a small world after all." Indeed.

Any remaining doubts about the militarization of the police were dispelled shortly after the crowd left the park. A few blocks away the police unveiled their latest high tech anti-protestor toy. It was mounted on the back of a huge black truck. The Pittsburgh-Gazette described it as Long Range Acoustic Device designed to break up crowds with piercing noise. Similar devices have been used in Fallujah, Mosul and Basra Iraq. The

police backed the truck up, told people not to go any further down the street and then blasted them with piercing noise.

The crowd then moved to other streets. Now they were being tracked by helicopters. The police repeatedly tried to block them from re-grouping ultimately firing tear gas into the crowd injuring hundreds including people in the residential neighborhood where the police decided to confront the marchers. I was treated to some of the tear gas myself and I found the Pittsburgh brand to be spiced with a hint of kelbasa. Fortunately I was handed some paper towels soaked in apple cider vinegar which helped fight the tears and cough a bit. Who would have thought?

After the large group broke and ran from the tear gas, smaller groups went into commercial neighborhoods and broke glass at a bank and a couple of other businesses. The police chased and the glass breakers ran. And the police chased and the people ran. For a few hours.

By day the police were menacing, but at night they lost their cool. Around a park by the University of Pittsburgh the ninja turtles pushed and shoved and beat and arrested not just protestors but people passing by. One young woman reported she and her friend watched Grey's Anatomy and were on their way back to their dorm when they were cornered by police. One was bruised by police baton and her friend was arrested. Police shot tear gas, pepper spray, smoke canisters, and rubber bullets. They pushed with big plastic shields and struck with batons.

The biggest march was Friday. Thousands of people from Pittsburgh and other places protested the G20. Since the court had ruled on this march, the police did not confront the marchers. Ninja turtled police showed up in formation sometimes and the helicopters hovered but no confrontations occurred.

Again Friday night, riot clad police fought with students outside of the University of Pittsburgh. To what end was just as unclear as the night before.

Ultimately about 200 were arrested, mostly in clashes with the police around the University.

The G20 leaders left by helicopter and limousine.

Pittsburgh now belongs again to the people of Pittsburgh. The cement barricades were removed, the fences were taken down, the bridges and roads were opened. The gunboats packed up and left. The police packed away their ninja turtle outfits and tear gas and rubber bullets. They don't look like military commandos anymore. No more gunboats on the river. No more sirens all the time. No more armored vehicles and ear splitting machines used in Iraq. On Monday the businesses will open and kids will have to go back to school. Civil society has returned.

It is now probably even safe to exercise constitutional rights in Pittsburgh once again.

The USA really showed those terrorists didn't we?

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