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Pittsburgh Provided Real-Life Test of "Non-Lethal" Weapons Solidarity America By John Funicello

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We're in an era of national security that started a few decades ago and has progressed full-speed throughout the country. Now, it's reached down into the cities and suburbs - municipal security.

Soon, it will be complete. Citizens will not be able to walk down a street or do a simple business transaction without being recorded in some way - credit card records, utility company records, retail sales records, bank video cameras, and supermarket cameras and good-customer cards, to name a few.

By now, most young persons don't even know these systems exist and few of them notice or are concerned about the cameras in the banks or retail check-outs. They've been part of daily life, all of their lives.

The obsession with security has made life more like the Truman Show than we'd like to believe. Most of our activities can be - and often are - recorded somewhere.

Certainly, one aspect of our lives that is being closely watched is our expression of our rights under the Bill of Rights - the First Amendment quickly comes to mind, and our rights under that amendment were right up front in the law enforcement practice session that was the G-20 meeting in Pittsburgh recently.

We have had "free speech pens" for several years. At the sites of events like political conventions, at anti-war rallies in Washington D.C. and other places, and at meetings like the recent Pittsburgh G-20, law enforcement authorities set aside chain-link-fenced areas where citizens were "allowed" to rally and protest.

But the pens were located in such places that the objects of the protest or rally (or petition, to be constitutionally correct) never had to even see the gathered protestors, let alone hear them and their complaints against the government.

The use of such pens reached their peak - so far - in the time of the second Bush Administration, when neither George W. Bush, nor Dick Cheney suffered any loud critiques of the rabble citizenry. America had been moving in that direction for many years, but the authoritarianism of that administration was epitomized by those pens, in which you could speak, but you were not allowed to be heard.

Sometimes, the gathering of citizens was too big to contain in such a manner, as at the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle several years ago. Authorities were going to make sure that such an event did not happen again.

Even though the Pittsburgh gathering of citizens was not as large, the government and all of its various law enforcement organizations were not going to take any chances. There had been much "research and development" into so-called non-lethal crowd control since Seattle and they intended to use the various instruments and methods. It would be a good training exercise, even though the crowds of protestors were small and, in some reported incidents, were not even present.

Mike Ferner, president of Veterans for Peace, a Vietnam Navy corpsman and a former Toledo city council member, described a few moments of the Pittsburgh action involving a long range acoustic device (LRAD):

Mounted in the turret of an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC), I saw the LRAD in action twice in the area of 25th, Penn and Liberty Streets of Lawrenceville, an old Pittsburgh neighborhood. Blasting a shrill, piercing noise like a high-pitched police siren on steroids, it quickly swept streets and sidewalks of pedestrians, merchants and journalists and drove residents into their homes, but in neither case were any demonstrators present. The APC, oversized and sinister for a city street, together with lines of police in full riot gear looking like darkly threatening Michelin Men, made for a scene out of a movie you didn't want to be in.

There are many other "non-lethal" devices that are available for use in combat zones and in crowd control for local police or other law enforcement. One of them can make the surface of arms or face or other parts of the body feel as if hot metal had been being applied, and it works at considerable distance.

While these may be non-lethal, there is always the danger that an individual may have a bad reaction and could have permanent damage to hearing, sight, balance, or may suffer emotional or mental distress.

Some non-lethal weapons of the past, such as tear gas, are used as if they are not

capable of doing harm, but for people with respiratory problems or diseases, such an assault on the lungs can be dangerous or lethal. They are still in use, because such a response is considered rare. Besides, the authorities feel that protestors who go to the scene of a rally or speech should consider that they might be endangering their own health by attending - they're putting at least some of the blame on the citizen.

The LRAD is said to be able to bring people to their knees and could cause instant headaches and that one is not protected by covering one's ears. It also can cause permanent hearing damage.

As the national security state becomes more finely tuned, it will be interested in using more of these weapons, because nobody wants to deal with any more Kent States. In that case, during the Vietnam War, one of the victims was just passing by the demonstration on campus and suffered the same fate as the protestors.

In the same manner, today's enforcers will not be able to tell the difference between those involved in a rally or protest and those who are passers-by. Even if the machine can be directed to an individual, how will the user of the weapon know the intent of the citizen?

The pain can be intense and the damage permanent. It amounts to torture and no amount of training can allow the holder of the weapon to know what is in the heart or mind of the targeted citizen, who, until recently, had a right in America to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

In many ways, these weapons are punishment (without arrest, indictment, or trial) for lawful acts, things that every one in America has a constitutional right to engage in: to assemble, protest, march, demand changes in policy or law. The new weapons may not even be lawful for use in crowd control in combat zones, since the international community does not appear to have considered their use in war zones.

One thing is certain. The companies that manufacture these weapons - using the scientific research that comes from some of our finest institutions of higher learning - stand to make millions, if not billions, in selling these "systems" to everyone from the Secret Service to the town constable. You can be sure that a large percentage of the product that is sold in the coming years will be used by people who will have little training in their use. Judgment does not come in the package, either.

Considering the danger of the use of the Taser, another "non-lethal" weapon, and the fatalities and injuries that have resulted from their indiscriminate use, we can look forward to a long period of experimentation in which the American people are used as guinea pigs by authorities who are trying desperately to control them without seriously injuring or killing too many of them.

BlackCommentator.com Columnist, John Funiello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funiello.



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