



## What does a police state look like?

Violence, arrests of Occupy protestors and stop-and-frisk. Plus: a worshipful media

By David Sirota February 12, 2013

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What does a police state look like? Police officers reach into a crowd of protestors to arrest an Occupy protestor in New York (Credit: Reuters/Jessica Rinaldi)

What does a police state really look like in practice in America? Is it the cartoonish dystopia of sci-fi books? Is it like 1998's "The Siege" which predicted a wholesale instatement of martial law? Or in the age of the drone-wielding police department, is it something more mundane and subtle yet nonetheless pernicious? From this city in the middle of middle America, it looks like the latter.

When people think of Denver, many think of skiing and, since the last election, marijuana. But from here in the Mile High City, things seem a bit different. In the day to day operation of the city, we aren't as much defined by snow and pot as we are by the fact that we live under the rule of an increasingly brutal police force. It is a police force that our political leaders are more than happy to deploy to punish undesirables, and worse, that the most powerful media organ is more than happy to defend.

We have become, in short, a national cautionary tale – one that no doubt epitomizes similar trends throughout the country.

This sad situation has been long in the making. Over the last decade, while then-mayor John Hickenlooper was gaining national plaudits for his geek-scientist charm, he was overseeing a police department that has become so violent toward citizens, that the U.S. Department of Justice is now considering a formal civil rights investigation. In all, a Cato Institute study shows that in terms of official misconduct, Denver's police force is the sixth worst in the entire country.

The highest profile incidents tell the bigger story.

For instance, after the 2008 Democratic Convention, Hickenlooper's administration was forced to settle a lawsuit showing evidence that he ordered his police force to engage in "indiscriminate arrests."

In 2011, new mayor Michael Hancock joined with now-Gov. Hickenlooper to become the first government officials to sic riot-gear-clad police on peaceful Occupy Denver protestors, thus turning the State Capitol grounds into the visual definition of the term "police state." The episode included firing tear gas and rubber bullets at unarmed citizens.

As a followup, rather than initiating a formal investigation into the police, the Denver City Council then passed an ordinance empowering police to arrest homeless people, effectively criminalizing poverty in the middle of a recession and foreclosure crisis. Meanwhile, as the police department continues to reinstate officers who have been caught brutally beating citizens, the department's independent oversight office is so flooded with brutality charges that it cannot even process them all.

Considering this, you might think that the state's largest newspaper, The Denver Post, would be sounding the alarm. But quite the opposite has happened – it has used its monopoly power to cheer on the police state.

That's not entirely surprising, of course. The paper is owned by archconservative Dean Singleton who, as I showed in a recent Harper's magazine report, is a 21st century caricature of Citizen Kane. In recent years, his editorial page has been so over the top in its vilification of his political enemies that an outsider couldn't be faulted for assuming the paper is an Onion-esque satire.

For instance, there was the infamous front-page editorial vilifying then-Gov. Bill Ritter as Jimmy Hoffa for merely allowing public employees to unionize. There was the editorial insisting that the criminalization of homelessness was designed to help the homeless. And there was the constant attacks on Occupy movement culminating in one editorial praising police for forcibly crushing the protest and then another telling those who want to protest government policy to simply "go home."

This weekend, however, was perhaps the shining example of what the propaganda of a police state really looks like. Next to a hysterical screed railing on a state proposal to guarantee firefighters' workplace rights, the Post published an editorial opposing legislation to prevent municipal police departments from using armed drones. That's right, in response to an initiative that would prevent "police from outfitting

drones with devices such as Tasers and teargas,” the newspaper of record in a city already plagued by police violence says such an idea is s “a step too far.”

If you don't live in Denver but this nonetheless all sounds familiar, that's not surprising. As the recession has caused more social foment across the country, and as media has consolidated into the hands of fewer and fewer status-quo-loving plutocrats, the collective response from the power establishment has been authoritarian in nature. We see it in New York City, where surveillance and stop-and-frisk tactics are running rampant – and yet where billionaire media mogul Michael Bloomberg is regularly portrayed in the media as a great “freedom mayor,” thanks, in part, to the fact that reporters fear he will be their boss one day. And we see it in other cities where police are trying to prevent citizens from even documenting acts of police brutality.

Taken together, whether in Denver or anywhere else, the trend is clear. “Police state” is no longer a hyperbolic term, nor should it imply some fictional fantasy world. It is already here, and it operates in an insipid way whereby its worst atrocities are deftly normalized by power-crazed politicians and power-worshipping media outlets. In that, it is less “1984” than “Brave New World” – less blatantly horrific than subtly pernicious. Either way, though, the result is the same – a police state that turns the word “liberty” into a meaningless political slogan, and not much more.