

## **Police Brutality—But No Outrage\***

by

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Selma, Alabama, 1965: Blacks trying to register to vote are stopped at the courthouse steps by police using billy clubs and cattle prods to beat the non-violent demonstrators into submission and retreat. The brutality of the confrontation reaches its climax with the first attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery, a march that is aborted when state troopers charge the marchers, swinging billy clubs and firing canisters of tear gas into the fleeing crowd. Soon mounted police armed with bullwhips, ropes and barbed wire wrapped in rubber join in the unprovoked attack. Hosea Williams is among the first knocked down by excessive police force.

Martin Luther King Jr. begins sending telegrams from his office in Atlanta before the day is through. He calls the event a “vicious maltreatment of defenseless citizens of Selma, where old women and young children were gassed and clubbed at random.”

### **Horrifying images**

The news media quickly convey the images to a horrified American people. The Department of Justice is pressed to investigate, and to send federal marshals to Alabama to protect the marchers. Within two weeks, President Lyndon Johnson introduces legislation later known as the Voting Rights Act. Within a month, a full-scale march to Montgomery, under the protection of federal officers and a nationalized Alabama national guard, is conducted peacefully, and the tactic of peaceful demonstration is firmly secured in the American conscience.

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Washington, D.C., 1984: Scores of people—including several high-ranking government officials—protesting the apartheid policies of the South African government block the doors of the South African Embassy. The protestors are gingerly arrested, released on their own recognizance. The national media cover the protests extensively, and for more than two years similar demonstrations occur throughout the country, with hardly a single act of excessive force on the part of the police.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1989: 121 members of the group Operation Rescue are arrested while peacefully protesting outside an abortion clinic. The group is trained in the same type of passive resistance techniques employed by the civil rights protests a generation ago. Police, who had removed their badges and name plates, respond with “pain compliance” techniques—twisting the protesters’ ears, bending the hands backwards to the wrist, and carrying the protesters off by inserting billy clubs between their handcuffed hands and the small of the back—are employed to force the protesters into submission.

Women—from college age to grandmothers—are dragged by the bottoms of their

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\* Published in *AFA Journal* (American Family Association) (October 1989): 14-15, and in the *Wall Street Journal* (August 18, 1989)

blouses, their breasts exposed to hooting male prisoners. One affidavit reads: “He grabbed me between my breasts and dragged me up the stairs by my wire-rimmed bra. My breasts were fully exposed as I was being dragged up the stairs.” Complaints are filed with an assistant district attorney, who does not process them, allegedly on orders from her superiors. Several of the protestors report that other attempts to file complaints with city, county and federal officials are similarly unsuccessful.

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West Hartford, Connecticut, 1989: Nonviolent Operation Rescue protestors and several reporters are arrested outside an abortion clinic. The film and notes of reporters are confiscated by police. “Pain compliance” techniques are once again used, and again by police who do not wear identifying name plates or badges.

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Los Angeles, California, 1989: This time, the police use “nunchakus,” as well as “pain compliance” techniques, upon the nonviolent Operation Rescue protestors. The nunchakus, a weapon consisting of two night sticks connected by a chain, is wrapped around the protestor’s wrist and arms. The great pain that follows when pressure is applied forces the protestor to walk. One man’s arm is grotesquely snapped in two by a police hold.

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These are but a few, and not the most ghastly, of the stories from the nearly 50 cities throughout the country where allegations of police brutality have been made by members of Operation Rescue. Hosea Williams, one of the civil rights leaders who witnessed firsthand the brutalities in Selma, participated in a news conference in Pittsburgh to decry the brutality of the police there. To date, no national news organization has deemed the allegations worthy of coverage.

The U.S. Department of Justice found that the Pittsburgh allegations I transmitted to them “lack the indicia of prosecutive merit necessary to warrant further investigation,” though it did agree to investigate some of the charges and did acknowledge that the use of excessive force by police would violate federal civil rights laws. The head of the section in charge of the investigations stated that the group was violating a court injunction, as if such a violation made perfectly reasonable the kind of treatment to which the anti-abortion protesters have been subject.

In July, I placed on the agenda of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights a resolution to recommend to the president that he direct the Department of Justice to undertake an investigation of these allegations at the earliest possible moment. My resolution did not condone the illegality of Operation Rescue’s actions. Nor did I associate myself with their cause. Rather, I sought to affirm the continued support of the government and the people of the U.S. for the rights of all protesters. After lengthy and sometimes hostile scrutiny, my resolution was dropped from the agenda.

My colleagues argued that the resolution was a “back door” way to discuss abortion, as if the subject matter of the protest determined the legitimate police response. Rep. Don Edwards (D., CA), chairman of the commission’s oversight committee in the House of Representatives, joined in—not coincidentally during the middle of the debate over

reauthorization of the commission—with a direct threat: “Consideration of this issue,” which “appears to violate the Commission’s authorizing statute” prohibiting “the Commission from studying issues relating to abortion,” would “seriously erode Congressional confidence in the Commission.”

Neither has any committee in Congress decided to take up the matter. No hearings have been held, or scheduled, and the likelihood of any hearings being scheduled in the future is slim. The same zealous advocates for civil rights who criticized the officers stationed outside the Naval Weapons Station for their treatment of anti-nuke protesters, or who themselves participated in the South African Embassy protests without so much as an unkind word from police, have not uttered a syllable about these allegations.

### **Courageous Congressmen**

Meanwhile, the courageous few congressmen—Bob Walker (R.; PA), Clyde Holloway (R., LA), Chris Smith (R., NJ), Guy Molinari (R., NY), Bob Dornan (R., CA) and Bob Traxler (D., MI)—who have spoken out have gone largely unnoticed by the press.

In the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s *Webster* decision—which substantially returns the abortion debate to the states—we can expect more anti-abortion demonstrations. We ought to guarantee that we will not also see more police violence in the handling of them. It is imperative that we as a nation assert our commitment to equal treatment before the law. Nonviolent protestors should all be accorded the same treatment no matter what the subject of protest. To do less is to destroy the most prized achievement of the civil rights movement—the recognition of the rights of everyone. And we will have destroyed that achievement, not just for Operation Rescue, but for all.