‘To Serve and Protect’ Who?: The History of University Police Departments

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‘To Serve and Protect’ Who?: The History of University Police Departments

In the United States, over 60 percent of all four-year postsecondary institutions enrolling 2,500 or more students have their own police departments.¹ Yet, the phenomenon of colleges employing private police forces began relatively recently: about 50 years ago. Why? An emerging culture of protest on college campuses.

This climate of activism, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, traces back to the civil rights movement, specifically its triggering of an increase in Black student enrollment at primarily white institutions. Accepted into colleges they had historically been excluded from, these students presented a threat to colleges' existing social order and forced them to reckon with their imbued racism. As Black student enrollment increased, Black students began to fight for school desegregation that was pluralist as opposed to colorblind.² In the later 1960s into the 1970s, these students “saw themselves as unmasking U.S. intuitions- including liberal ones like universities- and exposing whiteness disguised as universalism.”³ Washington University was no exception.

This essay will examine two student movements at Washington University in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a microcosm of protest across college campuses nationwide. In 1968, Black student activists at Washington University coalesced to advocate for their rights. Partially

² Biondi, Black Revolution on Campus, 4.
³ Biondi, Black Revolution on Campus, 4.
meeting some of their demands, the administration increased Black student enrollment from 1.8% to 8% by the following school year. Building upon a culture of activism, from 1969 to 1970, students protested the campus ROTC program, which they viewed as a symbol of the school’s support for the Vietnam War. The increasing violence of student movements at the time indicated to the University that their security force could no longer adequately control unrest. Yet, they also disapproved of local police forces responding to student protest. As a result, the institution created its own police department, an act in which they were not alone. Across the country, Universities began to assemble private police forces as a reaction to increased student protest. Yet, these departments, with characteristics similar to municipal police agencies, perpetuated racism on campuses at a time in which they were just beginning to diversify. To this day, campus police respond to student movements by students of color more harshly than those of their white counterparts. Thus, they silence the voices of students of color more often than white students and do not achieve their ostensible aim, to make all students feel safe. The origins of campus police and their prevalent racial bias suggest that they function to quell student unrest and protect white hegemonic order more than to protect the safety of all students.

On December 5, 1968, Washington University campus security allegedly kicked, handcuffed, and beat graduate student Elbert Walton for refusing to present his driver’s license, a request they did not have the authority to make. In response, 30 students from the Association of Black Collegians (ABC) occupied the Campus Police office where officers took Walton. Robert Johnson, president of the ABC, voiced his anger at “what he called the recent incidents of harassment of black students on campus.” Chancellor Eliot joined the sit-in, listening to Johnson’s speech and Walton’s recounting of his encounter with campus police. The ABC

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4 “Student Protest at Washington University: Student Protest at Washington University.”
demanded the immediate suspension of the officer who allegedly assaulted Walten, but Eliot refused to do so without holding a hearing.

The ABC subsequently held an eight-day sit-in at Brookings Hall where they communicated with administrators and the campus community as well as drafted the Black Position Paper, a document outlining their demands of the University. Within the paper, the students wrote, “The matter of the campus police department’s maltreatment of and demeaning attitudes toward black people does not present the total scope of the problem. It simply reflects and points out the unresponsive, in-sensitive, and negative nature of Washington University vis-a-vis the Black people who come into direct and/or indirect contact with it.”

The students saw Washington University as lacking racial sensitivity, equality, and justice, an unsurprising viewpoint considering that, at the time, Black enrollment at the University was at a meager 1.8%. The mistreatment of students by campus security illuminated the racism present at the institution, mirroring similar events occurring across the nation. Expanding on their demands, the group transformed their Black Position Paper into the Black Manifesto, presenting demands including the creation of a Black Studies department, equal treatment of Black university employees, financial aid for Black students, increased Black enrollment, raised racial awareness of the university community, changes to university research studying Black subjects, meeting facilities for the ABC, on and off-campus housing for Black students, and amnesty for student protesters.

In a response letter to the ABC’s demands, Chancellor Eliot stated that the University would increase Black enrollment, establish a Black Studies program, survey working conditions, create “sensitivity seminars,” create a complaint form for housing discrimination, establish on-campus spaces for Black students, form a committee to investigate campus police, and

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7 Black Position Paper, 1.
8 Black Manifesto.
change university rules relating to research on human subjects.\textsuperscript{9} He concluded the letter with a quote explaining that universities are slow to change but that they are “courageous” and respond with “correctness.” His response seemed to be accepting, to an extent, of student demands, indicating a willingness to change, though not drastically.

Building upon a culture of activism present at the University, the student group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began to protest the campus’ ROTC program. The group formed in 1965 in opposition to the war in Vietnam, aiming to promote democracy and the rights of students within the University.\textsuperscript{11}

The formal dismantling of the campus ROTC program began shortly after the publication of the Black Manifesto. Before the 1968 sit-in, SDS and the ABC’s relationship could be

\textsuperscript{9} Letter from Chancellor Eliot.
\textsuperscript{10} “Student Protest at Washington University: Student Protest at Washington University.”
\textsuperscript{11} Thomas, “Birds of Passage : Student Activism at Washington University, 1965-1972,” 22.
characterized as “cordial,” though it began to weaken over time as it became clear that SDS advocated for more radical changes than the ABC’s goal of formal equality. Additionally, Black students saw structural racial equality as a more pressing concern than anti-war initiatives, further dividing the two groups. Nonetheless, the ABC’s sit-in indirectly aided in the advancement of anti-ROTC protest. Excluded from the ABC sit-in, SDS hosted their own sit-in and also released a list of demands. These demands echoed those of the ABC but added that the campus ROTC program should be abolished. Shortly after, “On December 7, 1968, two days after the Walton incident, the faculty of Arts and Sciences voted to eliminate academic credit for ROTC programs.”

In 1969, the University Council examined the campus ROTC program, determining recommendations for its future. A referendum inquiring whether ROTC should in any form remain on the Washington University campus resulted from this process, garnering a 69% vote in support of ROTC remaining on campus. A minority in their opposition to the program, SDS students viewed the Vietnam war as “a manifestation of the dominant elites in America pursuing their own goals by manipulating national policy.” In conjunction with their protest of ROTC, SDS also protested the “Cop Institute” on campus. They saw this program as a manifestation of elite interests as well, stating that cops “serve a handful of businessmen by protecting their profits and property.”

Given their viewpoint, the SDS turned their attention to the elite interests on campus: the Board of Trustees. They disliked that members of the University’s board were a part of corporations that monetarily benefited from the war. To them, this participation placed

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12 Thomas, “Birds of Passage: Student Activism at Washington University, 1965-1972,” 47.
13 Watson, “Background to the ROTC Burning.”
15 Abolish ROTC Cops Off Campus: Build a Worker-Student Alliance, 5.
16 Abolish ROTC Cops Off Campus: Build a Worker-Student Alliance, 3.
Washington University in the category of the elite. As a result, three students disturbed a March 1969 Board of Trustees meeting, attacking the director of alumni relations. According to Watson, “The disruption of the Board of Trustees was symbolic of what was becoming a more confrontational and violent relationship between the students and the administration.”17

Drawing from SDS’s pamphlet *Abolish ROTC Cops Off Campus: Build a Worker-Student Alliance.*18

As violence escalated and administrative fears rose, a series of confrontations between police and students ensued, leaving all campus ROTC buildings burned. On February 23, 1970, arsonists leveled the Army ROTC building. Afterward, Chancellor Eliot worried that the Air Force ROTC building would also be burned, writing in a letter to the Board of Trustees that the building would be impossible to protect without “a very sharp increase in the size of our campus

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17 Watson, Brendan. “Background to the ROTC Burning.”
18 *Abolish ROTC Cops Off Campus: Build a Worker-Student Alliance.*
This moment indicated the administration’s growing desire for an alteration to the campus police force.

A series of confrontations between students and police followed. In March of that year, students broke into Brookings Hall to look through corporation files from the Board of Trustees, later throwing rocks at the Air Force ROTC building. Officers responded to the conflict, clubbing Student Robert Zeffert, leaving him with head injuries. Later that month, students returned to the remaining ROTC building, nailing boards to doors and windows. They then traveled to the residential area of campus, the South 40, shouting anti-war slogans. Meanwhile, county police formed a police line and arrested 10 students for their roles in the protest.

Following the incident, Chancellor Eliot admonished both students and police, forcing police off campus and calling police Chief Colonel DiGrazia “absurd.” The Chief retorted, “Next time we come back, your fucking building will already be burning down.” On April 25, the Chancellor stated that the campus’ ROTC program would stay intact. Though, the Chief’s warning came to fruition on May 6, 1970, when, in response to the Kent State Massacre, protesters burned the Air Force ROTC building on campus.

Ironically, these two student movements, both of which in some form protested police, led to a permanent police department on these students’ homefront. The newfound violent protest at Washington University suggested to the administration a need for alterations in law enforcement response mechanisms. The Chancellor noted after the burning of the campus’ Army ROTC building that growing student unrest necessitated more police power. Yet, he also criticized the conduct of the local police force. This contradiction gave rise to the idea of a private police force on the Washington University campus.

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19 Watson, Brendan. “Background to the ROTC Burning.”
20 Watson, Brendan. “Background to the ROTC Burning.”
According to Executive Vice Chancellor for Civic Affairs and Strategic Planning Hank Webber, Washington University Police Department (WUPD) “was first established in 1969 as a kind of security department. It’s now about 57/58 employees, 37 officers… In the mid 70s, they became deputized so that they had police powers on campus.”

The national trend of student activism on college campuses closely aligned with that of Washington University. As unrest proliferated, colleges lobbied for their own police departments to avoid the local police or the national guard responding to student protest. According to John Sloan, a University of Alabama Birmingham professor of criminology and sociology, “as protests became more national in scope, so did the specter of local police (and even National Guard troops) in full riot gear coming on campus to quell them. The presence of state or local police on campus was untenable for many faculty members and most students.” The visual of outside forces invading campuses pushed colleges to “lobby state legislatures for the right to create their own police departments.” In the 1960s and 1970s, colleges began to establish their own police departments. In the 1990s, forces became professionalized, altering the recruitment and training of officers. As opposed to recruiting retired police officers, as they did previously, colleges actively recruited recent graduates. Training became identical to that of municipal police officers and screenings for hiring became very similar. Thus, campus police closely resembled their municipal counterparts. Currently, “at least 44 states now have laws allowing colleges to form their own police force. Virtually all public colleges with more than 2,500 students, as well 91 percent of private colleges of that size, have done so.”

21 Danner, ““Police presence usually is less about students’ security and more about quelling unrest’: a limited history of Washington University in St. Louis student activism directed at University police.”


23 Nelson, “Why nearly all colleges have an armed police force”.

24 Nelson, “Why nearly all colleges have an armed police force”. 
Similarities between campus police and municipal police agencies give rise to the prevalence of racial bias in both agencies. Professor Sloan describes that the two categories of departments both “are relatively complex bureaucracies with high levels of specialization, are paramilitary organizations relying on a system of ranks and chain of command, serve similar functions, and have officers who are part of an occupational culture that values the “blue wall of silence” which proscribes them from “turning on their own.”” Thus, the structure of each type of agency supports a culture that perpetuates and conceals racial bias in their ranks. Though, racial bias within campus police could go unchecked more often, because their status as private law enforcement agencies places them outside the scope of state and federal law enforcement mandates. Additionally, campus police departments generally employ more white officers. In 2011-2012, “among campus agencies with sworn officers, 33 percent of them had no sworn officers of color.”

Racial bias in campus police presents itself in differing responses to disturbances committed by Black vs White students, including protest. Daniel Hodge recounts one such instance in his chapter *Policing College Campuses: Race, Social Control, and the Securitizing of College Campuses*. “White students on a Cal State Los Angeles campus threw bottles at police, broke several campus windows, and vandalized several administrators vehicles, and only one arrest was made, with the charges later being dropped for "lack of evidence." While Black and Brown students across the way at another Cal State campus were pepper sprayed, beaten, and arrested as a result of a rally against police brutality.” These differing responses can be directly

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tied to factors such as a misrepresentation of Black and Brown men in media as well as a lack of diversity in police forces and a lack of racial bias training.29

Employing the framework of SDS students from the 1970s, campus police serve to protect the elite interests of the institution while quelling student unrest. Given that SDS saw the University as an elite institution, especially due to its board, their statement that police protect elite business interests can be applied to the University. In one of their pamphlets, the SDS wrote “The large corporate owners realize that Black working people are leading the struggles of the entire working class in the shops for better living and working conditions.”30 Given this statement, it seems inevitable that Black student protest would be policed more heavily than white student protest, as they represent the voices of a highly marginalized student group. As a result of their identity, the protest of these students is more challenging to the primarily white, elite University system, warranting a more harsh response.

What is more, since 9/11, campus police have gained more discretion in surveilling students, further contributing to a threatening environment for students of color. The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001, “drastically reduced limitations placed on law enforcement officials who may want to monitor on-campus activity.”31 This piece of legislation broadened the definition of terrorism, gave officers access at-will to students’ educational records, allowed secret officer searches of dorms, permitted at-will government monitoring of internet and email records, and gave rights to the expansive collection of information on student political and religious meetings.32 As a result, an increasing number of student groups have been branded terrorist organizations. One such example is “the Anti- Racist Action group, which protests neo-Nazism

30 Abolish ROTC Cops Off Campus: Build a Worker-Student Alliance, 11.
and white supremacism.”\textsuperscript{33} Perhaps due to existing stereotypes, especially following 9/11, Muslim students faced some of the harshest attacks as a result of this legislation. Many Muslim student groups disbanded preemptively to avoid being labeled terrorist organizations. What is more, Shafiqa Ahmdi asserts that “intrusive security measures are being used to deny visas and prevent significant numbers of Muslim students and scholars from coming to the US.”\textsuperscript{34} The disproportionate impact of this legislation enacted by campus police on students of color further enforces white supremacy at universities. By suppressing the voices of students of color and even excluding these students from enrollment altogether, they prevent change to the traditional, white power structures at these institutions. Given that campus police departments arose in response to diversifying of college campuses and that they infringe upon the rights of students of color, they seem to promote white hegemonic order more so than to promote student safety.

Presently, at Washington University, a new wave of student activism has risen to protest aspects of the institution including but not limited to greek life, campus police, and workers’ rights. Though students frequently cycle through the University, seemingly taking with them their activism, these movements do not exist in a vacuum; they build upon a long tradition of protest. Amid national movements to reform and abolish police departments, students have called to do the same with the Washington University Police Department. The history of these private departments and their impact necessitates a critical rethinking of their role on campus. Do they bring the University closer to fulfilling its mission: ‘to strive to enhance the lives and livelihoods of students, the people of the greater St. Louis community, the country, and the world’?

\textsuperscript{34} Lewis, “CHAPTER TEN: The College Campus as Panopticon: How Security and Surveillance Are Undermining Free Inquiry,” 141.
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