

Thugs with Badges: Is America a Failed Police State?

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. History doesn't repeat, but it certainly rhymes. George Floyd is yet another name in a long, tragic list of unarmed black men killed by a police force plagued with endemic racism, a military mentality and zero accountability. To the rest of the world, America today looks like a failed police state. Scott, really glad to have you here on Renegade Inc.

Scott Ritter It's a pleasure to be here.

Ross This mantra that we see in the US when it comes down to the police, which is protect and serve, really what you're getting at when you write is the words oppress and brutalise. What's happened in American public service where protect and serve has become oppress and brutalise?

Scott Ritter Well, I think, you know, this is a concept in transition. I'm gonna be honest that growing up as a kid, I wanted to be two things - I wanted to follow in my father's footsteps and being in the military. But I always fantasised about being a small town cop, being the good guy - the guy who was there to help people fight crime. But you differentiated between, you know, your fellow citizens whom you were there to protect and serve and the criminal element which was preying on these citizens. Somehow, I think through the civil rights movement, through the period of social unrest that took place in the 60s and 70s, the police began to see the citizens they were supposedly there to protect and serve as being the enemy, that when you went into a neighbourhood, you were no longer walking amongst friends, you were walking amongst the enemy. And then we took this even further when we started militarising the police. I mean, the police have always had a element of oppression. I mean, we saw that and how the police departments in the south responded to the civil rights movements. We saw in Chicago how the police responded to the hippie movement. You know, so we know that police departments are fully capable of oppressing people and brutalising them, but they did so as a police force, still wearing the blue. Then they suddenly transformed into a military organisation.

Ross Can you pinpoint a moment when that happened or was it a boiling the frog kind of process where over time suddenly corners got cut, you know, we start to seep into behaviour that isn't befitting. Or was there a very clear switch that was flicked?

Scott Ritter I think in the 70s we started to see terrorist elements in American society, at least what we call terrorist elements - the Symbionese Liberation Army in San Francisco, the Black Panther movement, the Weathermen and other other organisations. And we linked that psychologically with the Red Army Faction, the Baader-Meinhof Gang, overseas. And they became this singular terroristic entity that we were at war with. And I think that's an issue of psychology where we transition from policing the bad elements of our society to being at war with elements that were seeking to destroy our society. And then the police found themselves often under gunned, under matched with these organisations. So they started to acquire superior firepower and they started to bring into their ranks, you know, former military professionals who brought in a military mindset. So I think there's a transition. And then, of course, after 9/11, we just went haywire.

Ross Right. And as a former military man, how do you view bringing that military mindset into a civic role, namely policing?

Scott Ritter It's totally unacceptable. The police are not a military organisation. I always get offended when I hear police officers speak about civilians. Excuse me, mister police officer, you're a civilian.

Ross Right.

Scott Ritter I was in the military. When I wore the uniform, I'm not a civilian. I'm a military officer. But if you're not in the military, you're a civilian. Firefighters are civilians. There might be a paramilitary aspect to it. They might have official duties and responsibilities. But you're not someone. They're fighting a war. You're a civilian who happens to be empowered by local government or state government or federal government to have police powers. But you're a civilian, a citizen. And we have to look back in American history on this one. You know, one of the things that we objected to when your lot were ruling us was the concept of, you know, the ability for military to come in and take over the homes and barrack themselves in the homes - an occupying force. We revolted against that. And yet somehow when we tolerate the militarisation of the police, all we've done is bring that back. If you have a militarised police force, you have a force of occupation, you have a military that is oppressing the people. Now, in this case, it's not a foreign military, it's our own military. But the end result is the same. There should be zero militarisation. Our cops should never look like the military. They should never be equipped like the military. It should never function like the military. And yet today, in almost every police department across the land, you have SWAT teams that are pretty much military hit squads. They have surplus military assault vehicles. They use surplus military body armour, weapons, ammunition. It's an occupation force and it's unacceptable.

Ross It's no surprise, though, is it? Because if there are veterans returning, and let's be really frank about it, one of the big business models in the US is war so endlessly looking for military adventurism in far flung places around the world. With all those veterans returning and needing employment, if they end up in the police force and if the trainers ended up training them have been on those tours, then this is a natural ramification of that process, isn't it?

Scott Ritter Yes and no. I mean natural ramification of the militarisation process. But you've touched on a major problem here, which is training. You know, we today, the American police, now you'll find exceptions. Again you know, the beauty of the United States is that we're not a singularity. You know, we're an amalgam of local state governments that all operate differently and I find that to be an attractive part of the United States. But one of the problems is the approach to training police officers is singularly insufficient. You know, these are people that we entrust with a badge, a symbol of power. We arm them with weapons that they're allowed to use with deadly force against us in hopes that they will police us and ensure that civil society adheres to the rule of law. But the rule of law has become increasingly complicated. Police officers today aren't just hunting down bank robbers or burglars or people who assault, they police domestic violence situations, extraordinarily complicated situations. They police mental health issues. They police economic disparity

issues. These are social workers more than they are police officers and the police, effectively, to be part of your community, you have to have the knowledge base to know what you're up against and how best to respond. This means that we should be hiring very mature people, people with at least a four year degree, preferably an advanced degree and some sort of, not just of criminal justice, but also sociology, social working. And we should pay them very well because we're demanding that they be of a certain standard. They should see money. Instead, we hire cops at borderline poverty payment. We don't demand a college education. We often just say, 'hey, you know, high school's good enough, and oh, yes, you get an extra click if you come in from the military. You get a veteran's bonus'. But the military doesn't provide any of what I just said. The military teaches you how to close with and destroy the enemy through firepower and manoeuvre, which is the last thing you want a cop to be doing. So I find, in fact, that the military service, if we were doing this right, could be a disqualification. And if you're actually in the military, you want to join the police department, you need to be subjected to a board of professional police officers who say, 'why do you want to be a cop'?

Ross Right.

Scott Ritter You have to forget everything you ever learned in the military. We're going to retrain you. You know, Germany spends more time teaching their police officers how not to use their weapons than most American police departments train their police in totality. There's a problem.

Ross Another aspect of the training a lot of Americans talk about which is institutionalised racism within the police force. What's your view on that?

Scott Ritter The American police force does possess a tremendous amount of institutional racism. And it dates back to, you know, in the early days when blacks weren't allowed to be cops. Remember a lot of police departments are staffed by so-called legacy members, meaning that your grandfather was a cop, your father was a cop, I'm a cop, my uncle's a cop, my cousin was a cop, my nephew's a cop and everybody's gonna be a cop. And that means that you trace your policing roots back to the day when only white people were police and the blacks were, you know, either not seen or when they came in, they were viewed as a foreign element. Having blacks in a police department is a recent phenomenon. And not all police departments have adapted well to that. You know, black officers are still treated poorly in many police departments, not given the promotions necessary and if they do they are token promotions. So there is an institutional racism that is prevalent in police, fire and state especially because of the legacy issue.

Ross How many people during all the riots, during the protests, during the calls for obvious inquests etc, how many people in the U.S. are asking to retrain the police trainers? How many people are making that very, very clear request - we need to retrain the trainers?

Scott Ritter Not as many as there should be. You know, there's there's a lot of focus on the brutalisation that took place of Mr. Floyd but not enough focus on why that took place. One of the problems is, again, we put the police on a pedestal in America. We we call them heroes. They're not heroes. Really, the last thing in the world, they are is heroes, just like firefighters aren't heroes. I was a volunteer firefighter. I'd like to believe, you know, hey,

society looks up to us. But, you know, you trained me to do something. And I joined voluntarily. So, you know, if you trained me, equip me to run into a burning building and a building catches on fire and I run into a burning building I'm just doing my job. I'm not a hero. If you train me to be a cop and how to deal with situations and you put me on the street and I deal with those situations, I'm not a hero. I'm just a fellow citizen doing the job I was trained and paid to do. But we tend to view our cops as superheroes. Therefore, when you imbue somebody with superhero status, you don't dig as deep as you need to into, you know, what they're doing, why they're doing and how they're doing it. You just assume that these guys are good because they wear the uniform. We need to ask that question more. A lot of people who are knowledgeable do ask this question, but then they run up against police unions, police associations. And these are very politically powerful organisations that prey upon the predisposition of the public to view the police as heroes and therefore expect the public to be resentful of anybody, especially council members or mayors, who dare raise the question, are our cops trained well enough? The bottom line is no American police officer is trained well enough. They all should be stood down and retrained and if they are not willing to do that they should be told to find another job.

Ross Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about the militarisation of America's police with the former U.S. Marine Corps intelligence officer, Scott Ritter, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc. index. First up from John Sutherland, the former cop: 'Society has every right to expect higher standards of police officers than anyone else for three specific reasons. One, the promises we made, two, the powers we are given, and three, the position that policing occupies in society. Because if you can't trust a cop, who can you trust. Next from NavyVetBolt81: 'I came home, threw my riot gear off in the middle of my living room after the last night I've been ordered to kill democracy. I resigned this morning. I'm too stunned and ashamed to touch it. I just witnessed another murder on TV - the murder of democracy. Next from Mohamad Safa: 'Democracy isn't dying in darkness, it's being murdered in broad daylight'. Finally, as we know, there are many good cops out there and some of them are stepping up and voicing what many of the others really think.

Video clip (US police officer) And I'm about to verbalise a message which I hope is echoed by my colleagues throughout the country. It's been four days since the tragic and unnecessary death of Mr. George Floyd in Minneapolis. Those weren't officers and that was not police work. I need more of my law enforcement colleagues to get on social media and condemn the actions of those officers, especially the thug in the uniform who has his knee right on the neck of Mr. Floyd causing his ultimate death. That was tragic. That was horrible. It was criminal. And you guys know it. And I know it. And anybody who watches the video knows this. We've gone to this line of work because we believe in values, personal values like justice and dignity, respect and courage and compassion. If you really believe that and I know you're out there and I know you do, get on social media, condemn those actions and demand that there's justice for Mr. Floyd.

Ross Scott in that first half we touched on this idea that people aren't really talking about that the military skills that you and others who are veterans will learn, aren't transferable when you want to do civic duty as a police officer. Very few people are saying that. I'm not letting the military veterans off the hook here who come into the police and, you know, commit crimes fundamentally, but can you blame a lot of military types who have either got PTSD or

they've been on tours and they haven't been told that those skills aren't transferable? Can you blame them for getting it wrong when they're policing?

Scott Ritter Well, yes and no. I mean, ultimately, the responsibility for behaving in a manner which is incompatible with the law is wrong.

Ross Right.

Scott Ritter And there are laws out there on how you treat people. As a cop, you're not allowed to sit down and get in a bar fight. I mean, if you take a look at a lot of these videos, cops are just pummeling the hell out of citizens. This isn't occupied Baghdad where, you know, everybody in the street is a potential terrorist ready to set off a car bomb. And yet when you come back from Baghdad, that's how you view it. I mean, to be honest with you, we have guys who can't drive down the street and see a bag of trash on the side of the road without going into cold sweat thinking that might be an IED. And yet we put a badge on them, give them a gun and put them out in society where there's, you know, inherently a lot of friction. They will overreact, et cetera. Can I blame them? As I said, yes. But also no, because if you are brought into an organisation that a) encourages your military background, gives you a veterans cheque on the box to give you an up in terms of being hired, people who will say this is good, you were a sergeant in the marines. Let's bring that hard charging attitude over here into this police force. You know, who encourages the violence? I mean, one of my big problems with the American police is the culture of violence.

Video clip (US newscasters) And obviously, an ongoing confrontation happening right now. Oh no now they are swinging batons again on her.

Scott Ritter I don't blame the veterans per se, although they should know better. But when you're uneducated to begin with, and many of the guys who go into the military barely have a high school degree, when you don't have the highest IQ in the world, meaning that even if you have graduated high school, your ability to absorb complex problem solving skills is limited. And then you've been trained to be violent, to close with and destroy. And then you actually did it and you tasted blood. And maybe you liked the taste of that blood. You don't want to admit it. Now you're a cop. I don't want that on my streets.

Ross And when we talked in that first half about retraining the trainers, should trainers be talking about ego, self-management, the ability for humility, empathy, all the - as they are called wrongly - soft skills? Because all you've just talked about are so-called hard skills. But that's only one side really of this coin, isn't it?

Scott Ritter But it's not even a side. It should be a fraction of one side of a coin. The majority of what a cop should be trained in are the soft skills. Policing is not an inherently violent profession. It's a profession of social interaction. That's the most important. So you need to develop those social interaction skills. We need college graduates, preferably people with advanced degrees in sociology, people who understand the socio economic reality and how it impacts the daily existence. We need people that empathise with the people that they're policing, not people that view them as the enemy. So our training is all wrong, one hundred percent focused on the wrong thing and we basically need to recognise that we don't have police officers today, legitimate police officers. We have thugs with badges. Some of

those thugs might be good guys, but they're trained to behave as thugs, not trained to behave as neighbours trying to help neighbours.

Ross The American war machine, the military industrial complex, has gone around the world and it has said to basically all troops, fear of another, brutalisation of another. What you've just depicted their, isn't fear of another when you're back in your homeland. And nor should it be - you'd know better than this to me when you're on active duty. Actually, when these people have come back and they are policing and they are going about their business, what they're doing is enacting that fear of that other once again. But again, no one's having that conversation are they? No one's saying, actually, that is not the right way to go. However, that's the default mechanism.

Scott Ritter Muscle memory, muscle memory. I mean, in the Marine Corps, they trained you hard to do hard things. You know, counter ambush drill. What's the first thing that happens when you take fire from enemy head on and Marines start falling? You want to hit the ground and go into the foetal position and die. But no, you're in the kill zone. You don't even back out of it. You're taught to immediately assault forward, run towards the bullets push suppressing fire down, push through the ambush because that's your best chance of survival. Well, that's about as nonsensical as it gets, except we're trained. That's our muscle memory. And so, you know, even today, if I hear a gunshot, I'm going to it because that's how I've been trained to operate. So that when there's a confrontation with a citizen, instead of saying, 'woh!', how do I de-escalate'? It's immediately, run to the problem, assault through the problem. That's not policing, that's brutalisation. And that's why I use that word.

Ross The word culture comes up here, doesn't it? And we all know how brutally difficult it is to change a culture. With all the political will in the world, with all the leadership in the world, changing cultures, as you know, whether it be in business or the police or the military, is nearly impossible. How do you begin the conversation to begin changing the culture? Because ultimately, culture is where things grow and what we're seeing on the streets of the US, are things that have grown that are pretty distasteful.

Scott Ritter Yeah, it's tough. First of all, you need to recruit your cops from the community that you're operating in. But even then, that doesn't work. A little war story. In 1994, I was in the marines stationed in New Orleans. The New Orleans police department at that time had a horrible problem so much so that the FBI came in and took over the department. And Marine officers - because we were viewed as professionals, the consummate professionals, etc - we were encouraged to mentor New Orleans police, and we mentored them by riding along and seeing their work and talking to them about leadership and the culture of leadership, et cetera. I did one ride along. The guy explained that when he joined the police department, he came in on poverty wages, that he couldn't support his family with the wages they gave him. The first day his sergeant took him around to the different bars where he collected protection money. He had to collect that protection money to survive. So basically, the police became, not just a policing force, but part of a culture of underground criminality just to survive. And this is the least of their problems. Now, I could go on and on. But the bottom line is, I walked away from that saying there's nothing that can fix the New Orleans Police Department until you address that very issue. You can't talk about training people until you make the police secure economically. So the first thing that has to happen, culturally, is we have to pay these cops more. But then we have to demand more of them. And this is where the police push

back. Because the police, like firefighters, culturally, take the easiest way out. When you join the police department, you pass a rigorous physical fitness test, etc. Once you become a cop, you have to take that test again. You become a fat, no good piece of doughnut-eating garbage. Your uniform doesn't fit. You don't care about how you look. You're just a cop. No, if you're going to be a police officer, you need to be a professional. You need a physical fitness exams. You need to take professional requalification exams. You need to be tested continuously to the highest standards possible. And the police don't want that. It's a job. They want more police so they have more jobs, more numbers, not because society needs them, but because politically it's an empowering thing for police unions. We've not just got to retrain the police, we have to retrain society to demand more of their police. If you want to fix the police, you have to go all the way through the spectrum and start with prisons and say, 'how many people do we want to imprison and why'? Do we really want to put low-level offenders behind bars and build this massive prison complex which costs billions of dollars? Because if we do so, then we need more cops on the street. If you say less police, if we have courts instead of imprisoning people, fine, but then if we have police that issue citations instead of arresting, we've now diminished the job load on the police department. We don't need as many cops. We can take these resources to recruit better police and they do a better job of policing. But it's a societal problem. We need society to redefine criminal justice so that we can redefine the police department.

Ross So to my next question, cui bono, who really benefits from all of this because it's certainly not society, is it?

Scott Ritter It's politicians. Politicians benefit from this. This is all about political empowerment. Politicians want to take the path of least resistance towards being elected or being re-elected. And that means, you know, I was taught this by a general one. So when I was standing tall in front of them for an alleged infraction and trying to explain to him how I was right, he shut me up. He said, Ritter, when you're explaining, you're losing. End of story. The fact you're here in front of me, explain something means you've already lost. Politicians don't want to be explaining things to their constituents. They want to keep it as simple as possible. And one of the best ways to keep a population dumbed down to the point where they aren't continuously asking questions is to make them afraid. And fear is a weapon. And so we create the notion of the criminal element, the need for a policing society, the need for prisons that society has to pay this to protect itself from, you know, from being preyed on by this rampant, rabid criminal element. Once you infuse that into thinking of society, you don't have to explain anything. You just had to say 'tough on crime' and everybody goes, 'oh, yeah, you got my vote'.

Ross Scott Ritter, thank you very much for your time.

Scott Ritter Thank you for having me.

Ross Finally, on a more hopeful note, there are police officers out there that are making really good leadership calls and genuinely serving their community. Here's one of them.

Video clip (US police officer) We want to be with you all for real. So I took my helmet off and laid the batons down. I want to make this a parade not a protest. You've got little ones

here. You've got dogs. So listen, I'm just telling you, these cops love you. That Cop over there, hugs people. So you tell us what you need to do. Let's go. Let's walk. Let's walk.