Time to Stop Messing Around and Strike at the Root of Police Violence

Protests quickly broke out nationwide following the May 25 killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, which was caught on video and quickly went viral.

Yes, Chauvin has been arrested and charged with murder.

Yes, the usual "voices of reason" are issuing a new round of calls for "police reform," just as they do after every police murder of an unarmed, non-violent civilian.

No, murder charges and "police reform" aren't going to fix the problem. Long hot summer, here we come.

It's tempting to believe that protest marches, violent confrontations, looting, burning, and riots can change police behavior, or perhaps that they COULD change that behavior if applied frequently and vigorously enough.

That kind of widespread delusion is, as Thoreau put it, "a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root," with predictable results.

If protest marches, violent confrontations, looting, burning, and riots followed every police murder of an unarmed, non-violent civilian, we wouldn't see fewer police murders of unarmed, non-violent civilians. We'd just see bigger police overtime budgets.

The root of police violence isn't racism, nor is it the presence of "a few bad apples" on police forces, nor is it the absence of sufficient safeguards such as body cameras and civilian review boards.

The root of police violence is the modern conception of policing itself: The creation of "police forces" as state institutions separate from the populace and dedicated to suppressing that populace on command.

"Police departments" as we know them were just coming into existence in England at the time the United States declared itself independent. They didn't establish themselves in major American cities until the mid-19th century, or in smaller cities and towns until the 20th.

At one time, a handful of state and federal agencies, a sheriff in each county, and an ad hoc system of volunteer posses and local watchmen handled "law enforcement" in America.

Now more than 18,000 "law enforcement" organizations lord it over the American public, stealing their salaries from that public's earnings, padding their budgets with literal highway robbery ("asset forfeiture" and so forth), and usually protected by "qualified immunity" when they kill.

If the goal is to "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity," police as we know them are at best a failed experiment.

How do we wind that experiment down?

Step one would be ending qualified immunity and holding law enforcement personnel as responsible for their actions and as liable for the consequences of those actions as regular Americans are.

Steps two and three would be, respectively, standing down "police departments" entirely in favor of unpaid volunteers for most "law enforcement" duties, and ultimately abolishing the state itself.

Steps two and three, while inevitable in the long term, don't seem very likely in the short term.

Step one, on the other hand, could be accomplished by Independence Day if the right incentives were applied.

Let's give the politicians a choice: End qualified immunity or burn, baby, burn.