**Black Lives Matter**

A new movement takes shape

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"Black lives matter,” the rallying cry of the new movement against racist police violence, is brilliant in its simplicity. But more striking than the slogan’s ability to express so much in so few words is how painful it is that its message needs to be asserted. What began as a small but fierce rebellion in a St. Louis suburb exploded into a wildfire that has engulfed the whole country.

The movement has done something all too rare in our time: it’s escaped the control of the ruling establishment. Neither police repression nor Democrats have been able to stop the movement. which has confounded the politicians and the news media, accustomed as they are to using the same old scripts to discuss race and protest without challenge. City governments across the country had to accept the disruption of business as usual, as, for example, when activists from the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP 100) occupied Chicago’s City Hall on November 26, and marchers in New York City repeatedly shut down most major bridges and tunnels leading into and out of Manhattan in November, while police appeared powerless.

**Strong at its beginning**
In a matter of weeks, the movement shattered what remained of the notion of a “post-racial” America and reoriented the entire national conversation on anti-Black racism. The movement follows in a tradition of Black struggles in the United States whose impacts far exceed the numbers of people involved and go well beyond their point of origin. The civil rights revolt, for example, cracked open the Cold War conservatism of the McCarthy era and inspired more than a decade of mass social struggle on many other fronts.

The strength of today’s Ferguson-inspired movement can be gauged in a number of ways. For one, the movement has been militant from its inception. One of the movement’s most popular refrains in street protests and social media is “shut it down!” Beyond a rhetorical slogan, this has found expression in the real world as activists in dozens of cities have marched onto highways to disrupt traffic; linked arms across railroad tracks to stop trains; sat down in urban intersections; delayed sporting events; and temporarily occupied shopping malls, major retail stores, police departments, and city halls. Activists have concluded en masse that anti-Black racism is a systemic problem that should be confronted through the disruption of work, commuter travel, commerce, and other circuits of the daily functioning of US society.

The sheer breadth of the movement is another indicator of its power and the chord that it has struck. There have been Black Lives Matter protests in every major city in the country. But there have also been protests in towns with few Black residents, such as a solidarity rally organized by an eleven-year-old white girl on January 7 in Westford, Massachusetts. In fact, though Black activists have been the driving force of the movement since they rebelled in Ferguson, the protests in major cities have been multiracial in character. High school, middle school, and even elementary school students across the country have initiated and participated in protests. College students on campuses of all types have participated, and there has even been a day of action organized specifically by medical students. The “White Coats for Black Lives” protests involved students at more than seventy medical schools nationwide.

The movement quickly connected with and inspired other movements. Palestine solidarity activists have had visible contingents at many of the protests, with organizations highlighting extensive cooperation between US urban police departments and the Israeli state. A discussion with Black activists in the movement was featured prominently at the Students for Justice in Palestine national conference in Boston in the fall. On December 19, there was a Native Lives Matter protest in Rapid City, South Dakota, inspired by Ferguson, which protested police violence against Indigenous people in the United States. Low-wage workers active in the Fight for 15 campaign were present at some of the earliest protests in Ferguson. Solidarity has also extended beyond the United States, from activists in Hong Kong’s prodemocracy marches using the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture to Palestinians sending messages of solidarity to Ferguson via Twitter.

Other notable aspects of the movement have been its sense of its own history, its commitment to connecting police racism with other issues such as economic inequality, and its inclusiveness. The movement has emphasized not only the need for a new generation of leaders to fight for Black liberation, but the crucial leadership role played by women and LGBTQ folks in the movement. Opal Tometi, a cofounder of Black Lives Matter, writing in the *Huffington Post*, explains:

When we founded #BlackLivesMatter in 2013, we wanted to create a political space within and amongst our communities for activism that could stand firmly on the shoulders of movements that have come before us, such as the civil rights movement, while innovating on its strategies, practices and approaches to finally centralize the leadership of those existing at the margins of our economy and our society.

#BlackLivesMatter, a project started by three black women, two of whom are queer women and one who is a Nigerian-American, has opened up the political space for that new leadership, and as a result, a new movement to emerge. Black trans people, Black queer people, Black immigrants, Black incarcerated people and formerly incarcerated people, Black millennials, Black women, low income Black people, and Black people with disabilities are at the front, exercising a new leadership that is bold, innovative, and radical.1

Perhaps the greatest marker of the movement’s strength, and the best indicator that it is the beginning of a new chapter in Black struggle rather than a short-lived phenomenon, is the fact that it has already overcome a series of major obstacles. The first of these, of course, was the brutal state repression against the resistance in Ferguson itself in August 2014. Protests persisted in spite of the presence of multiple local and state police departments, as well as the deployment of the Missouri National Guard. The state’s racism and that of the news media in coverage of the protests, which involved both institutions disparaging Black marchers as “looters” and “gang members,” gave a green light to far-right terrorists. The Ku Klux Klan openly rallied in St. Louis in support of Darren Wilson, the Ferguson officer who murdered Michael Brown, and threatened “lethal force” against Black protesters. Arsonists burned Michael Brown’s makeshift street memorial. In anticipation of the St. Louis grand jury’s decision not to indict Wilson, Missouri governor Jay Nixon declared a state of emergency and mobilized the National Guard again. The FBI put every police department in the country on alert in the lead up to the grand jury decision, warning that protesters would “target critical infrastructure” and law enforcement. The message was clear: police forces should gear up for repression along the lines of what the world witnessed on the streets of Ferguson in August, and if protesters chose to march, they would have to face state violence. Despite all of this, protests erupted in response to the grand jury decision. Moreover, in the face of another grand jury’s failure a week later to indict the NYPD killer of Eric Garner, the protests multiplied and took on an even stronger national character. In those weeks of November, it was the police—not the protesters—who stood down.

The greatest challenge to the movement came in New York City after two police officers were killed in late December by Ismaaiyl Brinsley. A police-led backlash was unleashed against the protest movement. Mayor Bill de Blasio, who postures as sympathetic to the movement, called for a moratorium on protests. His appeal gave credence to the argument put forward by the New York Patrolman’s Benevolent Association (PBA) and right-wing media that the Black Lives Matter movement somehow bore responsibility for the killing of the two officers. “There’s blood on many hands tonight—those that incited violence on the street under the guise of protests, that tried to tear down what New York City police officers did every day. That blood on the hands starts on the steps of City Hall, in the office of the mayor,” ranted PBA president Patrick Lynch.2

In a bizarre twist, the PBA appropriated the language of the new movement against racism by declaring “Blue lives matter.” Lynch defiantly declared that the NYPD would become a “wartime police department” and “act accordingly”—a less than subtle threat to the movement.3 De Blasio’s liberal request was framed in terms of “respect” for a police force that was now publicly threatening and defying anyone who challenged its right to carry on with systematically racist practices.

The intention of the police backlash was clear, as was the intention of activists to not be sidetracked by the backlash. As senior editor, Jamilah Lemieux, wrote in *Ebony*, “There will be no end to the cry of ‘Black lives matter’ and this movement will not take on the responsibility for crimes it did not commit. Period. We don’t have to say that ‘Blue lives matter,’ because neither society nor ‘the system’ has ever suggested otherwise—quite the opposite, in fact.”4

The New York City establishment drew a line in the sand—and the movement for justice resolutely crossed it. Protesters organized a march to demand justice for Akai Gurley on December 27—the very same day of the first of two police funerals. Gurley was an unarmed Black man shot to death by an NYPD officer as he walked down the stairs in his home, the Pink Houses, a public housing complex in Brooklyn. As in New York, protests continued elsewhere in defiance of calls to halt. A sign that the movement had not been cowed was the significant turnout for protests during the official Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. In many cases, protesters attempted to reclaim King’s legacy by interjecting themselves into the more staid traditional celebrations to turn them into protest events.

Protests ranged from small die-ins of several dozen to marches of thousands. In Philadelphia, several thousand marched for an end to stop-and-frisk, for more public school funding, and for an increase in the minimum wage; in Seattle, ten thousand marched, with smaller groups engaging in attempts to block highways. In New York, one thousand people marched through Harlem in a spirited protest that was nonetheless considerably smaller than the fifty thousand who turned out on December 13. Many organizations, political leaders like Al Sharpton, and local labor unions that did not want to defy de Blasio’s call for a moratorium or to antagonize the New York City police, did not participate.

**The fuel for the fire**
The police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and the brutal repression against the Ferguson protests that came in response, were sparks to ignite a fire of Black protest that at the time of writing still continues. But the fuel for the fire was stoked well before last summer. Indeed, the rebellion is the beginning of a reckoning with the decades-long racist backlash against the Black revolt of the 1960s. The US ruling class counterattack has involved an array of initiatives to roll back the gains of the era of civil rights and Black power, both materially and ideologically. Among these is the racial resegregation of the country. This has meant a reversal on one of the key initiatives of the civil rights movement: the desegregation of schools. In 2011, 40 percent of Black students attended what radical education activist Jonathan Kozol calls “apartheid schools,” whose students of color comprise a majority of 90 percent or greater. This figure is up from 35 percent in 1991. Affirmative action in hiring and higher education—an institutional remedy to structural discrimination and another key gain of the movement in the 1960s—continues to suffer defeats. The latest of these came in April of last year when the Supreme Court upheld a ban on the practice in Michigan’s public universities. Between 2006—when the ban was passed—and 2012, African American enrollment at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor plummeted by 33 percent while overall student enrollment increased by 10 percent.

Although Hollywood has finally produced a film about the historic struggle in Selma in 1965 that brought about the Voting Rights Act, the Supreme Court has already knocked down some of its provisions—ruling in 2013 to eliminate the provision of the act requiring lawmakers in states with a history of discriminating against minority voters to get federal permission before changing voting rules, on the grounds that in a “post-racial” society such provisions are no longer necessary. Meanwhile, conservative lawmakers around the country have been busily pushing through voter identification laws that are aimed at reducing the number of low-income people, particularly African Americans, who are eligible to vote.

The cutting edge of the racist offensive has been the criminalization of generations of Black people in the United States. Following the successes of the Black struggle in the 1960s, the structures of racism were reconfigured. While the US government employed an incredible level of state violence to crush Black resistance and reassert control, it also required ideology sophisticated enough to demonize the Black population and justify its oppression in ways that were more coded than open. The state found its solution in the so-called War on Drugs.

Over the years since the Black Power struggle, the US prison population has skyrocketed. Although it only has 5 percent of the world’s population, the United States has 25 percent of the global prison population. Between 1970 and 2005, the prison population increased by a historically unprecedented 700 percent. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, roughly half of federal prisoners are incarcerated for drug offenses. Blacks make up 50 percent of inmates in state and local prisons for drug offenses, even though Blacks comprise 13 percent of the US population and whites are more likely to use drugs. Black youth are ten times more likely than white youth to be arrested for drug crimes. These figures betray an array of tools that the state has utilized at every level—from policing to court practices to legislation—to target Black people. It involves a patchwork of legislation state-by-state that comprises a multifaceted racist criminal justice system that disproportionately targets African Americans.

In 1968, a federal commission headed by Illinois governor Otto Kerner pointed to institutional racism as the explanation for the explosion of Black rebellions in cities across the country. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders charged that the country faced a “system of apartheid” in its cities and famously concluded, “Our nation is moving toward two societies—one Black and one white—separate and unequal.”5 Since the Kerner Commission’s admission, there has been a complete reversal in the dominant notions of who is to blame for persistent Black poverty, unemployment, and incarceration. Indeed, the imprisonment of millions of people from Black communities over the decades has been sold with the notion that violent criminality, drug addiction, and laziness are problems endemic to the Black population. An ideological component of the rollback of the civil rights and Black Power movements has been the widespread dissemination and acceptance of the notion that failure to succeed in US society is the result of the shortcomings of Black people. The idea that Black people simply need to “try harder” is voiced by prominent individuals ranging from conservative media pundits to prominent Black figures like Bill Cosby and President Obama.

The front lines of structural racism against Black people are mass incarceration and police killings that take place on average every twenty-eight hours in the United States. This context explains the popularity of Michael Brown’s last words, “My hands are up, don’t shoot,” as a rallying cry in marches across the country. The meaning of the phrase is: We are doing nothing wrong; a system of racism is the aggressor, not us. Movement activists are consciously challenging the ideological consensus that poor Blacks are “responsible” for their conditions. The *New York Times* quoted activist Daniel Camacho, who explained, “We don’t need people shifting the blame to poor black and brown communities for these tragedies. I’ve heard enough people complain about sagging pants, gangster music, fatherlessness, black-on-black crime. Who’s focusing on holding the American state, the police, fully accountable?”6

The activists who are leading the movement are clear that it is not a question of this or that “bad” cop, but the system as a whole. “The energy on the street is about justice and accountability,” wrote [Opal Tometi](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/opal-tometi/) in *Huffington Post.*“The system of policing is what is making us unsafe. With months of protests and organizing, we are finally at a moment where more people are newly open to understanding the institutional and systemic problems with policing that hurt communities of color and disproportionately black people. Policemen and young people who are considering joining the police should understand this too—it’s the system.”

Activists Rachel Gilmer and Ashley Yates,associate director of the African American Policy Forum and cofounder of Millennial Activists United, respectively, underscore this point when they highlighted the ways in which President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper Initiative (MBK), a call by the White House “for local municipalities to improve the well being of men and boys of color,” fails to concretely address the issues facing poor Black communities. “MBK isn’t rooted in a structural analysis,” they write. “Instead, it embodies an individualistic ‘racial uplift program’ that suggests that the violence perpetrated against people of color can be remedied through programs that seek to ‘fix’ the ‘tangled pathology’ of our communities.” Their analysis of the limits of MBK also highlights what a genuine program to challenge racial oppression would look like:

MBK is a pretty good deal for cities like Ferguson looking to shore up their shoddy reputations with racial justice gestures on the cheap. To qualify, a city need not ban stop and frisk procedures, the killing of unarmed people of color, or the use of military-grade weapons on citizens operating within their constitutional rights. It need not eliminate segregation and housing discrimination, or commit to replenishing public services and ensuring a living wage for workers.7

While the greatest target of the post-sixties backlash has been Black people, it was the sharp edge of an attack aimed to push back the US working class as a whole. It is no coincidence that the introduction of neoliberalism, the ruling class response to the last major crisis of capitalism—with its slashing of social welfare, privatization and elimination of public services, rewriting of legislation decidedly in favor of business, and attacks on trade unions—came at the same time as the offensive against the gains of the Black struggle and the emphasis on the ideology of “personal responsibility.”

The decades-long project of dismantling welfare, for example, was sold at its beginning with the demonization and caricature of Black women as “welfare queens.” While the virtual elimination of welfare has had a disproportionate and disastrous impact on poor Black people, it has also been devastating for poor white people, who actually comprise the majority of welfare recipients. There is an irony in the launching of neoliberalism under the banner of “small government” at the same time as the state was massively expanding its policing and prison system—a system that disproportionately ensnares people of color, but in the process also leads to the increase in mass incarceration of poor and working-class whites. The ideology of personal responsibility is pushed to justify all manner of attacks on the living standards of all workers. As Brian Jones explains, for the ruling class, “The political dynamic of the 1960s and ‘70s had to be turned around for the social gains of that era to be taken back.”8

**The roots of the struggle**
This movement also has a more immediate prehistory. The most recent precursor to the movement also centered on a specific case, that of Trayvon Martin, the teenager who racist vigilante George Zimmerman stalked and killed in Sanford, Florida, in February 2012. Though many of the thousands who protested his murder connected his case with broader racial injustice, the movement faded after the failure of the criminal justice system to offer even a pretense of fairness and due process for Martin. The generalizations that activists drew from this experience are informing today’s consciousness and protests.

Before the national outpouring of anger around Trayvon Martin’s murder, there was the movement around Troy Davis, a Black man who was framed for killing a police officer and executed on Georgia’s death row in 2011. Davis’s case galvanized relatively small but resolute protests in the face of Georgia’s intransigence and President Obama’s indifference. The struggle for Troy Davis, and his execution, coincided with the emergence of Occupy Wall Street. A march of a thousand people in memory of Davis that ended up at Zuccotti Park when Occupy was in its early stages was one of the events that helped energize the movement and give it legs. While the Occupy movement never took up fighting racism as a central cause, it nonetheless made a contribution to a years-long dynamic whose expression today is Black Lives Matter. Occupy brought to the fore the greatest feature of life in the United States—largely ignored before the takeover of Zuccotti Park—economic and class inequality. Moreover, with vicious repression, first by the NYPD and then by the Oakland, California, police department, and then in a coordinated fashion by police departments in cities in between, the Occupy movement forced a new conversation about the militarization of the police and their repression of protest.

As significant as these recent developments were, it is worth considering a history that stretches even further back to understand today’s events. A mass challenge to rampant police killing of Black people emerged in New York City in the late 1990s. The case of Amadou Diallo, a West African immigrant who was gunned down by four NYPD cops in front of his apartment building in 1999, became a lightning rod for resistance to the NYPD. This coincided with the growth of the struggle demanding justice for Mumia Abu Jamal, the former Black Panther who was accused of, and sentenced to death for, killing a Philadelphia police officer. In 2001, the Cincinnati police killing of Timothy Thomas, an unarmed Black teenager, sparked a days-long rebellion in the city’s Black community. These protests made an impact. In 1999, 59 percent of Americans said they believed that police used racial profiling, and 81 percent thought that the practice was wrong.

This trajectory was dramatically halted in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. The NYPD, which had been rightly associated with racist torture and killing, became the most popular police force in the country overnight. With the launching of its War on Terror, the United States rehabilitated the legitimacy of racial profiling with a vengeance, targeting Arabs and Muslims with impunity. The effect was a reinvigoration of racist policing against Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians, as well as against Blacks and Latinos. It was also in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks that Washington took the opportunity to arm local police departments with billions of dollars worth of military grade weaponry—a program whose bitter fruits were on full display in Ferguson.

The actions of the US state and local police departments after September 11 were devastating for the movement against racist policing, but could only paper over its causes, and the inevitable resistance to it, for so long. In fact, the brutal police repression in the post-9/11 era laid the basis for a more explosive bitterness later. Preceding the explosion though were spectacular reminders in the early 2000s that racism is a persistent, central feature of US society. The first of these was the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The Black population of New Orleans, isolated by a lack of mass transportation and located in the areas more prone to flooding, had to face the cataclysm alone. After abandoning the city’s Black residents, the government finally responded by deploying the National Guard in a police action rather than a relief effort. Surviving Blacks were targeted as criminal “looters,” shot at by police and racist vigilantes, and rounded up in nightmarish conditions in the Superdome sports arena. Though the catastrophe never produced a mass protest response, it had a major impact on Black consciousness.

The nightmare of Hurricane Katrina was quickly followed by the case of the Jena Six. The story that unfolded in the Louisiana town of Jena in 2006 involved white high school students hanging nooses from a tree on their campus, and repeated confrontations between white and Black students. When a fight ultimately took place resulting in the beating of a white student, six Black teenagers were railroaded through the court system to prison. The case was a stark example of the persistence of Jim Crow-era racism in the twenty-first century. It inspired solidarity from around the country, including a mass protest mobilization to Jena.

The economic devastation of the financial crisis is also an important part of the backdrop to the emergent new movement. The Great Recession had a disproportionately disastrous effect on African Americans, causing the single greatest destruction of Black wealth in US history. Encouraged during the boom to take on expensive, risky mortgages, Blacks were consequently hardest hit by housing foreclosures, the largest share of their wealth. [A 2011 study by the Center for Responsible Lending](http://www.dsnews.com/articles/minority-communities-disproportionately-damaged-by-foreclosure-crisis-2010-07-09) predicted that the depreciation of property values because of proximity to foreclosed homes would drain another $194 billion from African American neighborhoods.9 The recession doubled the median wealth gap between Blacks and whites. On top of the astronomic levels of Black unemployment brought about by the financial crisis, the drastic cuts in the public sector that followed led to a dramatic drop in well-paying public union jobs, an area of employment where Blacks have been traditionally well represented.

**Black lives and the Black president**
When Obama was elected in 2008, 80 percent of Americans polled believed that his terms in office would benefit “minorities and the poor.” When he was still on the campaign trail in March 2008, Obama devoted an entire speech in Philadelphia to the subject of race in the United States. Far from radical, its main purpose was distancing Obama from his fiery pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Nonetheless, the Obama who gave that speech is virtually unrecognizable today. Obama acknowledged the structural nature of racist disparities, saying “We do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African American community and the larger American community today can be traced directly to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.”10

Once in office, however, Obama has had little to say about the plight of the majority of Black people in the United States, and even less to offer. In a decisive shift away from the notion that the Black president should play some role in working to ameliorate persistent racism, media pundits and academics used Obama’s ascendency as evidence that the United States had overcome racism and entered a “post-racial” era. Obama has only commented on issues involving racism when he felt it unavoidable. His initial statement on the rebellion and repression were characteristically cautionary and condescending. Dealing with the problems exposed in Ferguson, he urged, “requires we listen, and not just shout. That’s how we’re going to move forward together—by trying to unite each other and understand each other, and not simply divide ourselves from one another.”

As Keeanga-Yamahtta Tayor writes,

That Obama and Holder have launched initiatives to address policing in Black communities, and yet phrases like “racial inequality,” “mass incarceration,” and “racial profiling” are never invoked, raises questions as to whether this is a serious inquiry or a stalling mechanism designed to give the impression that action is being taken, when in reality, they are simply buying time in the hopes that Black Americans will cool off.11

The truth of Taylor’s assessment was underscored by the fact that, as of the writing of this article, the Obama administration was reportedly poised to recommend that no federal civil rights charges be brought against officer Darren Wilson in the murder of Michael Brown.12

There has yet to be a visible schism between Obama and his most loyal—and most betrayed—demographic: African Americans. The movement, however, is beginning to expose and expand fissures between new emerging young leadership of the struggle and traditional Black leaders. In a confrontation August 22 that was captured on video, for example, protesters in a Ferguson McDonald’s parking lot confronted Jesse Jackson, demanding, “When are you going to stop selling us out?” The bitterness toward Jackson and others like him flows from the lack of any consistent or meaningful response to the problems of poverty, unemployment, and criminal injustice facing the majority of African Americans in the United States. Many prominent Black officials are more interested in folding any energy toward racial justice into electoral support for the Democratic Party, and shaming Blacks for failing to succeed. As Taylor writes, “In the Obama-led Democratic Party, most Black elected officials and the ossified leadership of many existing civil rights organizations help to articulate and legitimize a perverse politics that blames most Blacks for their own condition.”13

Al Sharpton, who has played an important role in organizing protests, has close corporate and Democratic Party ties. So while he often initiates and supports protests, he also works to ensure they remain within safe political channels.

The gap between the new movement’s sensibilities and the Black political establishment has material roots. One of the results of the 1960s struggles has been the ascendency of a small but significant Black middle class who have been able to achieve economic and political success. Though it is small relative to the Black population, this Black elite that has formed over the past several decades has more of a stake in American capitalism, and its most vocal leaders have taken up the role of policing the majority of Blacks who continue to be left out. As Ahmed Shawki writes, “the Black middle class necessarily has a contradictory relation to the Black struggle. On one hand, they will support certain kinds of struggle as long as it advances their interests. . . . But this appreciation of Black militancy is sharply curtailed if it threatens the Black businessman’s or businesswoman’s own position, *or the system itself.*”14(emphasis in original).

Movement activists are acutely aware of the gap. At the December 13 Washington, DC, protest called by Sharpton’s National Action Network (NAN), Ferguson activists were excluded from the program and informed that they would need VIP passes to even approach the stage. They finally took the stage and seized the microphone, briefly speaking before being escorted off. Sharpton then denounced them as “provocateurs.”

Activists in the movement have good reason to question Sharpton’s leadership. He skipped the New York Black Lives Matter MLK protest in Harlem to lay wreaths where the two cops were shot and where Eric Garner was shot in Staten Island. He, along with elected officials, met earlier in the day at the NAN headquarters where de Blasio invoked Martin Luther King Jr. in a speech calling for the protests to cease, saying, “We are looking for mutual respect between police and community. Martin Luther King would want us to move forward toward unity.” Sharpton also spoke, saying, “We are not anti-police. We respect the police who put their lives on the line for us.”15

Writing in *Socialist Worker*, Lee Sustar analyzed Sharpton’s historically contradictory and inconsistent role in the movement: “Can a man so dependent on Corporate America for financial support—not to mention his ties to the White House—be a consistent ally in the fight against racism?”16

**Eyes on the prize**
Going forward, the movement faces opportunities and new challenges. While the resistance has inspired a new radicalization, it has also polarized society. Racist forces are beginning their own mobilization in response to the protests. Chief among these are police organizations, such as the St. Louis Police Officers Association, which has defended Darren Wilson and the cops’ actions repressing protest in the streets of Ferguson. More ominous are the activities of the New York City Patrolman’s Benevolent Association. The PBA orchestrated officers’ turning their backs en masse when Mayor de Blasio spoke at the funerals of the two slain officers. The symbolism is unmistakable: the NYPD is prepared to defy the sensibilities of City Hall and act as a rogue force. These more official institutions of anti-Black violence will necessarily inspire (and indeed, coordinate with) less official racist vigilantes. The new year has brought with it the bombing of a NAACP office in Colorado Springs.

In addition to those who we know to be the movement’s enemies, the struggle will need to be wary of some of the forces purporting to be its friends. Already, some of the larger, more established nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have become connected to some of the protests in major cities. A broad movement will necessarily involve a wide range of organizations, which is a good thing. But the nonprofit world is driven by the grant funding of major foundations. As anyone who has experience in this universe knows, foundation money usually comes with strings attached. While a mood of suspicion against all organizations is the last thing the movement needs, we should be aware that the Democratic Party and major liberal foundations will try to do one of the things they do best: identify talented movement leaders and incorporate them into the establishment, and away from resisting it.

What provides hope is that the enthusiastic embrace of the revolt in Ferguson by thousands across the country who have made the struggle their own bodes well for its growth. At the moment, the numbers of people who sympathize with the movement well exceed those who have actually attended protests. Moreover, new forms of organization are emerging and developing wide-ranging demands—such as demilitarizing the police, ending stop and frisk, and banning racial profiling—and will need to come together on a nationwide level to challenge the national problem of institutional racism. The wave of sit-ins in 1960 was the context for the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC’s founding launched a new era of civil rights struggle, drawing, fostering, and training a generation of radicals who led the dismantling of Jim Crow. The sooner this movement realizes its potential of forging a new generation to take on the new Jim Crow, the better.

Movements have their ups and downs, and we cannot predict where this one is going. The civil rights movement had great moments of upsurge and mass protest followed by periods of relative calm where it was not clear if the movement had any more momentum. But one thing is already clear—this is already the single most sustained period of antiracist protest in decades; it has pierced a big hole in the ideology of a post-racial America and exposed the deep and persistent patterns of racism in the United States; it has revealed the limitations of the Democratic Party and the traditional Black establishment’s inability to respond to the crisis that affects predominately working class and poor Blacks, from deep poverty, inadequate housing, and high unemployment to police brutality and the entire racist structure of the judicial system. Finally, it has begun to produce self-organization of a new layer of young, African American antiracist activists committed to more sustained efforts of combating racial injustice. It is this development that will ensure that whatever forms the struggles ahead take, a new cadre of activists and militants is beginning to take shape that can provide the basis for new, more sustained social struggles.

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