

Police Power Run Amuck

continued ▲ from page 13

peated arrests of such a small number of people is mind-boggling.

While MOVE's leader John Africa may well have intended to provoke the escalating confrontations that followed over a period of 13 years, one marvels at the failure of city leaders to wonder for even a moment about what in the life experience of these African Americans would make the movement's philosophy so appealing. It's a stunning example of people in power failing utterly to recognize their own roles in creating a community with so little to lose.

Conflicts between police and MOVE culminated in an exchange of fire that resulted in a police officer's death in 1978. Bafflingly, nine MOVE members were convicted of shooting that one officer (they insist he was killed by friendly fire) and received long sentences which they are still serving. The rest of the group set up a new headquarters after being evicted from their first house, and they proceeded to antagonize their mostly African-American neighbors by broadcasting profanity-laced rhetoric at all hours, creating sanitation problems, and leaving their children to run wild. The city's first black mayor was elected in 1983, but lacked either the skill or wisdom to deescalate the conflict that had been set in motion under Rizzo's administration.

In this retelling, the tragedy seems inexorable. Although one official commends the police for their "admirable restraint" in the 1978 confrontation, footage had captured several officers savagely beating one MOVE member. The particularly repellant police commissioner

narrates how police were required to "outgun" the group as though he is describing a large guerilla army.

In that final 1985 confrontation, in which a handful of MOVE members including women and children were holed up in a row house while police unleashed tear gas and fired 10 thousand rounds of ammunition into the house, the commissioner suggests that children might have fired on police and opines that the group was in an "enviable position" that necessitated the police response. One wonders whether he would have traded places with them.

The film's most powerful moments involve Birdie Africa, the one child who survived the bombing and who was deposed in connection with the inquiry that followed. He describes his experiences growing up in the commune, including how he rebelled against the group's raw food diet and wanted to run away so that he could ride bikes and watch TV like other children. His plain-spoken description of how he and the other children huddled under wet blankets during the 1985 siege and their desperate attempts to escape stands in contrast to officers' nonsensical accounts.

Birdie, with burn scars visible on his face, is asked at the beginning of his deposition what happens to people who don't tell the truth, and he responds that they will be hurt. One is struck by the irony of that response as one listens to officers deny having shot at MOVE members, including children, as they emerged from the house and then ran back inside. When an admirably restrained minister expresses incredulity at the description of people running back into a burning house,

an officer's response conveys the inhumanity that the government had allowed itself: "How could you [understand]? They're MOVE members."

Without voiceover or commentary beyond limited screen descriptions of some key facts, the film wisely allows participants in this tragedy—including Birdie and a small handful of MOVE members, but also police and city officials—to describe what happened from their perspective. Most of the government witnesses (not one of whom was ever criminally charged for the actions that led to the deaths of so many civilians) damn themselves, particularly from this 30 years' distance.

Only one officer took actions protective of the people inside, and his testimony is particularly poignant. Visibly agonized, he describes how he was restrained by a superior officer from assisting Birdie as the boy attempted to escape the burning house. The officer finally assisted the boy—and later found his locker decorated with the words "N----- Lover." He eventually left the force suffering from PTSD.

Filmmaker Osder's careful compilation of this history—so recent and yet already so neglected—is an important lens on how drastically government power can assume the characteristics it ascribes to its errant citizens.

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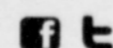
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