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From the Selected Works of Michael I Niman Ph.D.

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January, 2012

## This'll Kill Ya: Pepper Spray and the Modern Lexicon of "Less Than Lethal" Oppression.

Michael I Niman, Ph.D., *Buffalo State College*



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JANUARY 2012

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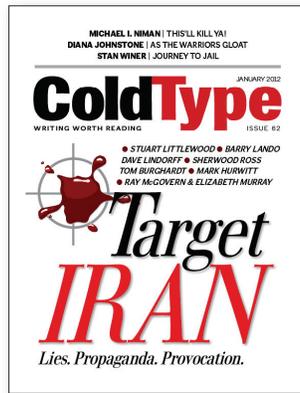
WRITING WORTH READING ISSUE 62

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# Target IRAN

*Lies. Propaganda. Provocation.*



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# ColdType

JANUARY 2012 / ISSUE 62

## EDITOR'S NOTE

THE power of Western propaganda is amazing. And frightening.

Two examples: Iran captures a US drone illegally flying over its territory, after which Washington persuades the media that Iran is the wicked aggressor because it refuses to hand back the captured drone. Then there's Israel, the most belligerent state in the Middle East, armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, passing itself off as a defenceless target of likely Iranian attack, if and when that country gets a nuclear bomb.

Never mind that Iran has never attacked anyone, unlike the US and Israel. Never mind the threat to Iran from the ring of US client-states that surround it, or all the Western-induced regime-changing that has occurred among its neighbours over the past decade.

In the eyes of the Western media, Iran is the Great Satan, poised to attack and destroy our way of life. The reality is the opposite. The propaganda is Orwellian: War is peace. Lies are truth.

Our cover story package this month highlights the deceptions, and searches for reality in this undeclared war . . .

Tony Sutton, Editor

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# This'll kill ya!

**Michael I. Niman** discusses pepper spray and the modern lexicon of 'less than lethal' oppression

It's remarkable what we seem to get used to. By now, most readers will have seen viral YouTube footage of peaceful Californian Occupy protestors being pepper-sprayed by aggressive cops in riot costumes. The words "pepper" and "spray" have come together to form a verb. It's part of our nasty new police state lexicon. Like "kettle," which used to be a comfort noun. (Think of a warm kettle on a hot stove on a cold winter evening.) Now it's a verb, casually thrown around to describe the police action of wrapping orange netting around people, "kettling" them into a twisting, squirming mass.

Think "flash-bang" grenade – a new twist on the old blitzkrieg idea. Think "Taser," as in "You see that guy get tased?" Think "pepper ball gun." The list keeps growing of new words to describe new weapons essentially used to silence dissent, terrorize activists into apathy, and circumvent the maturation of our public political discourse.

There's a long history of such weapons being used on peaceful demonstrators. Schools still teach about racist cops using fire hoses, batons, and German shepherds to terrorize nonviolent voters' rights activists during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, for example. By the early 1990s the weapons had become more refined but no less deadly. Police agencies that use them, and the manufacturers who mark them,

prefer to call them "nonlethal weapons," but weapons such as pepper spray and Tasers have been implicated in the deaths of many hundreds of people. So we now call them "less than lethal weapons," since they are less lethal than armaments we term "lethal weapons," such as guns, bayonets, and mortars.

Now here's where things are getting particularly disturbing.

Pepper spray-type weapons are nasty. There is a huge body of evidence documenting that pepper spray, when used properly, can seriously injure or kill people. It's pretty much a roll of the dice, with one ACLU investigation in the mid 1990s finding a death associated with one out of every 600 police uses of the weapon.

Pepper spray is made from the oily extract of pepper plants in the capsicum family, comprised of "fat soluble phenols" that, when exposed to skin, can cause intense pain, blistering, and inflammation. The oily nature of the extract makes the substance difficult to remove, prolonging symptoms for an extended period. If it gets into the lungs, pepper spray can cause wheezing, shortness of breath, gasping, panic, and, in rare cases, deoxygenation of blood (cyanosis), temporary suspension of breathing (apnea), or respiratory arrest, which is a total cessation of breathing, leading to suffocation. In the nasal passages pepper spray can trigger

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a stroke or heart attack. The odds get worse for someone with an acute respiratory condition such as asthma, which is becoming more common among younger people. Pepper spray, when shot into one's eyes, can lead to abrasions of the cornea and vision impairment.

We've got to stop making jokes about spraying this stuff on pizza and face up to the potentially deadly reality of this weapon.

Weapons manufacturers and police agencies argue in defense of "less than lethal" weapons, saying that deadly as they may be, these weapons save lives, in that they provide a less lethal alternative to the use of deadly force when subduing dangerous and irrational assailants. According to this argument, it's better to pepper spray or tase someone than to shoot them or club them. Following this logic, police policies around the US clearly outline that such weapons can only be deployed as a last-ditch alternative to deadly force, only to be used when an officer's life, or the life of a civilian, is threatened.

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**Last ditch alternative?**

So let's apply this policy to the recent applications of pepper spray as a political weapon. In the case of Occupy protestors sprayed while they were committing nonviolent civil disobedience, such as sitting with their arms linked, or refusing to leave their tents, were they really about to be shot dead? Were Occupiers who were being evicted from public parks, ostensibly over health code violations, about to be bayoneted to death, clubbed to death, or shot with a pistol? Was the use of these weapons a last-ditch alternative to killing the demonstrators?

Let's be serious. There were violent criminals at all of these events, and we know exactly who they were. Only a sociopath can stand there in front of a human being and spray him or her in the face, in the eyes, at close range, with pepper spray

as if they were spraying for cockroaches. Such actions, according to Frank La Rue, the United Nations' special rapporteur for the Protection of Free Expression, are violating the human rights of demonstrators. The problem is cultural. In the US, police often mistake disorder, which is a historic hallmark of political demonstrations, with violence, which it is not. Hence, an officer can see peaceful demonstrators sitting and blocking a sidewalk, for example, as an affront to orderly foot traffic. A poorly trained officer could perceive this threat to order as violence. Once this imagined violence takes root in their minds, they have a rationale, if not an imperative, to confront it with real violence.

Because of this mindset, and a society that seems willing to accept such lunacy, our best patriots, the ones willing to take to the streets as volunteers participating in the democratic process, have been beaten, sprayed, tased, kettled, and gassed. On a bad day one can suffer all of these afflictions. And for years, such abuses dissuaded folks from participating in demonstrations. When people have to bring respirators and swim goggles with them in order to peaceably express their beliefs and frustrations, we can't help but ask ourselves, "Where do we live?" and "What has happened to our country?" People at home, seeing images of demonstrators being abused, would recoil in horror, uncomfortably comforted by the fact that their own bodies were saved by their apathy. The baggage that goes with this, in the form of a feeling of helplessness, is toxic to a democracy.

This year has been different. In Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and finally here in the United States, when people saw the horrific images of brave, nonviolent patriots being beaten, pepper sprayed, and worse, they reacted by asking themselves, "Why wasn't I there?" **CT**

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