

"Making Police Obsolete"

excerpted from Our Enemies in Blue

There is a question that haunts every critic of police -- namely, the question of crime, and what to do about it. This is a real concern, and it deserves to be taken seriously. The fact is, the police do provide an important community service -- offering protection against crime. They do not do this job well, or fairly, and it is not their chief function, but they do it, and this brings them legitimacy. Even people who dislike and fear them often feel that they need the cops. Maybe we can do without omnipresent surveillance, racial profiling, and institutionalized violence, but most people have been willing to accept these features of policing, if somewhat grudgingly, because they have been packaged together with things we cannot do without -- crime control, security, and public safety. It is not enough, then, to relate to police power only in terms of repression; we must also remember the promise of protection, since this legitimates the institution.

Because the state uses this protective function to justify its own violence, the replacement of the police institution is not only a goal of social change, but also a means of achieving it. The challenge is to create another system that can protect us from crime, and can do so better, more justly, with a respect for human rights, and with a minimum of bullying. What is needed, in short, is a shift in the responsibility for public safety -- away from the state and toward the community. . . .

from Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America by Kristian Williams (Brooklyn, New York: Soft Skull Press, 2004).
www.softskull.com

Author Bio

Kristian Williams is a member of Rose City Copwatch and a resident of northeast Portland. His writing has appeared in the *L.A. Daily Journal*, *Counterpunch*, and *Dissent*, as well as local publications like the *Portland Alliance*, the *Portland Observer*, and the *Vancouver Vanguard*. He is presently at work on a book about torture and U.S. imperialism, due from South End Press next year.