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## How the Militarization of Police Has Turned Law Enforcement Officers Into Terrorists

Posted by [Enrique](#) on 12.07.2011

### They're here to help

A lot of well-meaning people on the right who claim to care about limited government have an unfortunate blind spot when it comes to law enforcement. For whatever reason, the suspicion conservatives have about government attempts to regulate education and healthcare goes out the window when it comes to government agents carrying guns – rightwingers seem to think those folks can do no wrong.

It's not entirely an issue with conservatives – plenty of liberals are willing to give the police the benefit of doubt rather than being perceived as soft on crime. The result of this left-right alliance is that police departments have gradually become aggressive and militaristic, like soldiers fighting a war. In fact, tactics such as SWAT raids have become so common that they are frequently used against non-violent suspects. There's a word to describe the actions of armed men are using overwhelming and violent force against harmless individuals. When enemies of the U.S. do it, we call it terrorism.

### The story so far...

#### Public servants

As you may be aware, the pathetic failure that is the American war on drugs is a major hobbyhorse of libertarian-type folks, not only because it denies responsible adults the freedom to intoxicate themselves however they see fit, but also because of the – wait, you're not going to believe what comes next – unintended consequences.

One is an incarceration rate that would embarrass most totalitarian regimes. Another is how police forces across the country have developed the characteristics of military units, with some even purchasing armored vehicles from the U.S. Department of Defense. While most folks continue to admire the U.S. armed forces, the role of the military is different than the role of law enforcement. Police officers are supposed to investigate crimes. Soldiers are supposed to kill people and break things. The fact that the police now routinely kill people and break things is not something anyone should be proud of.

For whatever reason there have been no fewer than three articles in mainstream news outlets about the militarization of the police this week – in the [NYT](#), [HuffPo](#), and the iPad-friendly [The Daily](#) (couldn't think of a clever abbreviation for that one, sorry). Could this be an indication that libertarian interests are finally gaining wider acceptance?

Almost certainly not. But it is curious and refreshing that more folks are recognizing this police militarization issue. I would guess it has something to do with those nice Occupy Wall Street protestors. Despite allegations of violence at some of the Occupy gatherings, it appeared that nearly all the Occupiers were harmless (even if misguided). And yet there were a number of cases of police responding with disproportionate force. Probably the most infamous was the pepper-spraying of some California university students who were causing social unrest by...sitting there.

As much as I don't particularly sympathize with the Occupiers' anti-capitalist rhetoric, that's a disturbing video. Here you've got men in riot helmets armed with batons and guns using aggressive force against a group of people who are barely blocking a sidewalk. Any of us could easily have walked over that sit-in. What was so threatening about these folks that required an antagonistic response?

The most disturbing aspect of the video is how blasé the officer is about using pepper spray on people who pose no danger to him. It's as if using severe force against non-threatening individuals doesn't phase him in the slightest. The dispassionate application of violence is something you would think only happened in totalitarian regimes.

Unfortunately, such behavior has become routine in America, with routinely tragic consequences. That HuffPo piece is written by Radley Balko, who has reported on the militarization of police for years. In his article, he cites several examples of what happens when police use extreme force as a first resort:

Dress cops up as soldiers, give them military equipment, train them in military tactics, tell them they're fighting a "war," and the consequences are predictable. These policies have taken a toll. [Among the victims](#) of increasingly aggressive and militaristic police tactics: Cheye Calvo, the mayor of Berwyn Heights, Md., whose dogs were killed when Prince George's County police [mistakenly raided his home](#); 92-year-old Katherine Johnston, who was [gunned down by narcotics cops](#) in Atlanta in 2006; 11-year-old Alberto Sepulveda, who was killed by Modesto, Calif., police [during a drug raid in September 2000](#); 80-year-old Isaac Singletary, who was [shot by undercover narcotics police](#) in 2007 who were attempting to sell drugs from his yard; Jonathan Ayers, a Georgia pastor [shot as he tried to flee](#) a gang of narcotics cops who jumped him at a gas station in 2009; Clayton Helriggle, a 23-year-old college student [killed during a marijuana raid](#) in Ohio in 2002; and Alberta Spruill, [who died of a heart attack](#) after police deployed a flash grenade during a mistaken raid on her Harlem apartment in 2003. [...]

But paramilitary creep has also spread well beyond the drug war. In recent years, SWAT teams have been used to break up neighborhood [poker games](#), including one [at an American Legion Hall](#) in Dallas. In 2006, [Virginia optometrist Sal Culosi was killed](#) when the Fairfax County Police Department sent a SWAT team to arrest him for gambling on football games. SWAT teams are also now used to arrest people suspected of [downloading child pornography](#). Last year, an Austin, Texas, SWAT team [broke down a man's door](#) because he was suspected of stealing koi fish from a botanical garden.

Balko further points out that SWAT teams and tactical units have been used in cases of suspected underage drinking, occupational license inspections, copyright violations, and student loan defaults.

Balko makes another point that's worth emphasizing: If overwhelming force is going to be deployed without regard to how dangerous the suspect is or what law is being enforced, it is going to be used to send messages rather than protect the public. Using a SWAT team to raid a medical marijuana clinic isn't meant to eliminate a threat to public welfare – it's meant to terrorize those who operate medical marijuana clinics. If breaking down the door of some non-violent pothead's home and pointing a gun in his face isn't terrorism, then the word "terrorism" has no meaning.

There's an in-joke among libertarians about how any case of excessive force by police like those described above are frequently written off as "isolated incidents" by police defenders. It's amazing how common these isolated incidents have become. For further evidence of the frequency of extreme tactics by law enforcement, the Cato Institute provides [this handy interactive map](#) of botched SWAT raids through the years that have resulted in deaths and injuries to civilians and police officers.